The Last Days of the Long War; or How I Became Immortal and Saved Mankind

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Summary

A fix-it fic/sequel to the Terminator Salvation movie, in which Marcus doesn't stay dead, John Conner has anger-management issues, and Kyle Reese discovers the role he has to play in ending the war.

Notes

So this is part one of the long fic AU of basically what happens after the end of Terminator Salvation. I should hopefully be able to update with new chapters once a week, but it is me, so no guarantees. Anyway Marcus isn't even in this part, but he should be back by chapter three. Bear in mind that the Kyle/Marcus relationship in future chapters may count as underage, depending on your local age of consent.
Chapter 1

Things have all happened so fast Kyle doesn’t think his brain’s caught up with his body yet. The past day has been running, adrenaline, fear, and finally relief, back where he belongs with Marcus and Star; home in the only sense of the word he has. He’s seen Skynet’s heartland and survived, and to be honest it somehow makes him feel more important in the scheme of things, even though he was nearly meat. He went into the belly of the beast and John Conner himself got him out. And now that man is lying on a table in a medic tent with a gaping hole in the middle of his chest.

And that’s hardly the only thing he’s mostly failing to process. He didn’t even notice it at first even though Marcus had had his arm wrapped around him in the copter. He sneaks a look out of the corner of his eye; shining plain metal, strangely delicate. His hand... inhuman enough to look entirely detached from his body, like he’s hiding the real one up his sleeve ready to whip it out and say ‘ha, ha, it’s only a joke’. But he can see the fingers curling around Star’s and knows that isn’t true. Is he all machine? Or only part? He can’t reconcile the thought in his mind, not Marcus, the most human person he’s ever met, with the machines that have been trying to kill him ever since he can remember.

The woman – Conner’s wife – comes over to their little group, her cheeks wet with tears. “His heart can’t take it,” she says, choking on the words. But it’s too soon, Kyle wants to protest. He’s the leader of the Resistance, he can’t die!

The silence is harsh, whispering with the noise of Conner’s laboured breathing, his wife’s muffled sobs as she covers her face with one hand, the other hugged tight over her pregnant belly. And then, of all people, it’s Marcus who breaks it. “Take my heart,” he says. “If it can save him, I want you to.”

Kyle gapes at him. What is he talking about? Yes, Conner is important, yes he deserves to live, but that doesn’t mean Marcus should give up his life for him! How can they be sure it will even work?!

Kate just looks at him, gratitude in her eyes, and Kyle knows she will take this chance, take any chance to save Conner’s life. It isn’t fair, and it might not work, but she doesn’t care. The thought of anyone having that kind of emotion for someone makes him feel kind of funny inside. He doesn’t really get it, not the strength of it. It kind of scares him. Sure, he would do whatever he could to protect his little family, for Star and now Marcus, so maybe, yeah, he sort of understands, but not when it’s Marcus’ life they’re talking about. He wants to shout at her; Don’t you dare! Or to Marcus; How can you do this? but he’s not under any illusion that either of them would notice or care. So he just stares in mute horror at Marcus as he happily sacrifices himself.

In the end Marcus doesn’t even talk to him, just gives him a sympathetic look as he lets the surgeon take him and Conner away. And then Kyle and Star are ushered out of the tent with the rest of them, into the harsh and unforgiving light of the desert. He thinks the setting is strangely appropriate.

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It’s late in 2018. Marcus Wright is dead; John Conner lives. By all rights it shouldn’t have worked, Kate knows that, but desperation makes people take whatever chance they can get, no matter how slim. Marcus was no longer human, and his heart only partly so, but she had been counting on that. Her husband’s body will not reject it, and ironically they have the machine’s technology to thank for that.
Skynet’s California base has been destroyed, and the Resistance fully means to exploit it once John is recovered. It will be some time before the machines will be able to manufacture the materials for another control aerial, and they will have to send it cross-country from the eastern coast; their stronghold of the world. If the Resistance moves quickly they can take this state back, and maybe they can hold it, if they’re lucky. And John will be heading them, and Kate has heard those same tapes from the past. He is destined to win this war, and maybe, just maybe, this is the beginning of the end.

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August 2018. Marcus Wright is buried with ceremony in the desert outside their Nevada base. John is feeling almost like new, the only reminders of his new heart his scars and his memories. He watches Kyle Reese, watches his father. It’s strange to say the least. He’s heard so much from his mother about him, but she knew him ten years down the line and twenty-five in the past, and right now he’s just a boy, a boy with fierce, wild eyes and a cautious face, with the hand of the young girl he’s adopted after a fashion tight in his hand. If there are tears behind those eyes, and John suspects there are, he’s not willing to show them.

He doesn’t know what he was expecting of this younger version of his father. How he can be expected to construct an image of reality backwards in time from snippets and snatches of impression his mother gave him he doesn’t know, but he’s not sure this boy is it. He can’t yet see the man he will become, only the kid he is.

The first handful of earth is thrown of Marcus’ body, wrapped in a shroud in a shallow grave, all they can do for their dead these days. Conner still doesn’t know exactly what made him trust him that night in the river, whether it was the now-dim memories of the T-800s that came back to protect him all those years ago, sent from the Resistance to protect him, maybe even sent by his future self, or whether it was something he saw in the machine’s eyes, but he had proved himself worthy of that trust. He was close enough to grudgingly be called human, or human enough. John was prepared to compromise pretty far for a dead android. It wasn’t as though calling it human mattered now, so he can admit it if it makes Kyle happy. And he is thankful, dammit. And for more than just the rescue of his father and the destruction of Skynet’s base; he can feel even now the heavy, strong beats of the foreign heart in his chest. The machine gave a lot to the cause. They can call him human for that.

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“What are we going to do about Kyle?” Kate asks John calmly, her hands gentle on his chest where she is checking the now-healed scar.

“What do you mean ‘what are we going to do about Kyle’?” he replies aggressively, reaching for his shirt.

“I know you want to keep an eye on him, but this is not the safest place for him to be.”

John bristles, a little. Kyle can take care of himself, he knows, and this is his base; it damn well ought to be safe! “He’s okay here,” he maintains. Kate sighs; she’s been hinting at this for a while.

“He’s still a kid, John, not to mention Star, who won’t even leave his side. You can’t, or rather won’t, let him go on missions, because we both know how important he is to the future, and we can’t let a stray bullet jeopardise that. And what else is there for him to do here? Train for twelve hours a day with an air gun until we work out how to let him fight without messing up the timeline?”

“He has to fight eventually, otherwise he won’t be the same man,” John replies mulishly.

“Yes, but not yet! He’s a child John!”
“No more than we were at the start of this war. He’s tough; he’s survived this long by himself.” He doesn’t look at her, staring instead at the creamy, rough edges of his scar disappearing as he pulls his shirt down over his head.

“Who are you trying to convince John?” she asks. “We both know you don’t want him out there either. Yes, he’s survived this long, but things are supposed to be easier for him now he’s found us.”

“So what’s your idea?”

“Send him to the Utah camps.”

John laughs, the sound startled out of him, harsh as a crow. “The camps? Are you fucking kidding me? He’s my fucking Dad, Kate, I’m not sending him up to the goddamn breeding camps so he can cheat on my mum!”

“Don’t be an idiot John, he hasn’t even met her yet.” Kate snaps. “I just think there might be some people there his own age. It would be good for him. And if you’re really so concerned about the safety of his morals, forge him a sterility certificate. Then he certainly doesn’t have to do anything he doesn’t want to.”

John glares at her, but Kate has always been able to match him in a battle of wills. That’s why he loves her – most of the time. “That’s not the way it goes on the tapes.”

“And is that really something about himself your dad is going to think important enough to tell Sarah when they’re both on the run?” she replies, not unkindly. “Trust me, he’s not going to fall in love with the wrong person.”

“Well if I start to vanish from existence, you can goddamn tell yourself I told you so.”

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They let him keep Marcus’ coat. It’s pretty torn up, but it still smells of him under the char-stink of explosives. They used to curl up together for warmth at nights, the three of them, Marcus at his back and Star tucked in his arms with the coat over the top of them, in the week or so between Los Angeles and the gas station where the machines caught them. It’s kind of odd that Marcus smelled so... human, considering. It’s still a weird little fact in Kyle’s mind, one that’s not had the time or space to sink in yet around all the other, bigger things that have happened. It’s surreal, it’s a blur; he met him, he changed his life, and then he gave it all up so John Conner would live. He knows he shouldn’t be so bitter about it, after all Conner didn’t ask for him to do it, and he is the leader of the Resistance. They need him to win this war. But even so every time he sees the man he feels like shouting at him. Wishing, if he’s brutally honest with himself, that their places were switched, that Conner was dead and Marcus was alive. He’s lost people before, but somehow this time it’s different.

Marcus Wright is dead and Kyle honestly doesn’t know what he’s meant to do with himself now. Before, it was all about surviving. If not for Marcus he would never have found the Resistance. But now it’s like he’s in a kind of limbo. He’s been practising his aim and he’s ready to go out and kill Skynet’s machines, but Conner looks at him like he’s still just a kid, as if they didn’t have other soldiers who can’t be more than a year older than him. He’s been on his own for three years hunting rats and coyote and finding the odd tin of food lost in the rubble of the cities from which everyone else stays well away, and he’s survived. Nothing the post Judgement Day world has thrown at him has managed to kill him yet. There are no ‘kids’ anymore, he’d told Marcus that, but apparently Conner doesn’t believe so, and everyone else here follows his lead. Maybe he was better off before, as the ‘LA branch’ of the Resistance. But Marcus... Marcus had drawn him into his path like a desert
soaks up rainwater, and he had been sucked up into his crazy-ass life. Star would come with him if he really wanted to go back, but they have food here, not a lot but regular, and Star needs to eat. So they’ll stay. For now.

The Resistance have scattered bases and outposts all over up here in the Nevada desert and its outskirts, with more down in Arizona, and other places he doesn’t know about. They survive by being spread out, and there are still a surprising number of them. Conner sat him down and gave him the history of the Resistance one afternoon, how Skynet turned the nukes on the world and annihilated the cities, the fallout blacking out the sun and killing millions through radiation poisoning. How the survivors were those in the small towns and countryside, still plenty of them. The long process of arming themselves, working out a new organisation, and Skynet’s long campaign against them. The Resistance has its heartland, where the Hunter-Killers and the like cannot go without being shot down, but they must still keep themselves spread out, for fear of another nuke. It is a slow war of attrition.

Nevada is a battlefield area, and they keep most of the copters and planes out here out in the desert under camo netting. Kyle has had plenty of time to look around. No one seems to know what to do with him, other than feed him and give him a bed at night. Star sticks close; she’s shy about all these faces, the presence of other people, more together than either of them have ever seen before. They explore the base together, and Kyle asks questions of the people he’s learned don’t mind answering him.

He’s learned that they keep the aircraft as scattered as the people, as all resources. The fuel is makeshift, what little petrol and diesel is left after fourteen years of scavenging the remains of gas stations all across the state, stretched with biofuels; ethanol and treated cooking oil that stinks in a very odd, organic way. In the older vehicles, the ones that can be converted cheapest, they run just the oil. It makes the engines cough, and make strange noises, but it works. They cannot afford factories – they make too good targets. Instead the processing of the fuel, and anything else the Resistance needs is done piecemeal, in sheds and houses and barns and wherever else a few people can hammer together the equipment and churn out a few gallons a week. Vehicle repairs, new construction, food production, it’s all done like this.

But the thing that interests Kyle the most to find out is the that the base they blew up, the base where he was being held, was the only big base in California, and the location of Skynet’s server tower. With it gone, the machines are without orders or information, cut of from the Net. They are disorganised and confused, and the time to strike is now. What Kyle can’t find out is exactly when that ‘now’ is going to be.

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In the six weeks since the destruction of the California base the Resistance have been sending out roving patrols in ever widening search patterns around human-controlled territory, armed to the teeth and with instructions to destroy any machine they find. They aren’t even bothering to salvage the remains right now; there’s not the vehicles or men to spare, and if things go according to plan there will be plenty of time for that later. Six weeks is a long time in a Skynet-ruled world, even though they’ve been doing this for fourteen years. But there’s little doubt; Skynet will be sending their repair party soon. Probably they’re already on the move.

John Conner is ready for them. He is de facto head of the Resistance after the deaths of the Pacific Generals, commander (theoretically) of everyone in radio range. They have no idea who might be left outside the West Coast. It’s unfortunate; they could have used East Coast help with the reinforcements that could pop over the border any day now. They have their own scouts out there, and the strike force is fully fuelled and ready for action. The reserve stocks of ammo and gasoline
have been brought out of storage. This might be the real turning point in the war, if the Resistance can hold what it’s taken.

John is acutely aware of this. This might be the hour of his destiny, the place and time which his whole life has been sculpting him for, ever since his father rescued his mother from Skynet’s assassin. That does not mean he is not taken by surprise, not to mention fear, when it finally happens.

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Conner’s breath is loud and fast in his ears, the palms of his hands sweaty inside gloves clasping tight to the handles of the copter’s machine gun. The desert flashes beneath them, their shadows rippling over the dunes and stumpy dry brush. Skynet got the jump on them, sacrificing time to arc to the north and come down on them from Idaho in the north. But this is it now.

John glances down at the handheld comp pad strapped to his arm; the GPS shows the estimated positions of the machines and the signals of their own forces coming up to meet them. They’ve mustered every plane they can spare that’s capable of flight, every bullet from the reserves, the last of their missiles. They’re going to need it; three Transports refitted with supplies and T-700s, each flying an HK-Aerial from the docking bay on their bellies and with the heavily artillery of the Harvesters on their backs pointing guns to the sky. The Resistance will be aiming for their engines; that’s pretty much the only way to take them down, but Conner would be lying if he said he didn’t expect heavy casualties. One pass by the jets, then another coming back just before the helicopters reach them.

John can hear the roar of the engines coming up behind them. Adrenaline surges through him, his fierce new heart pumping eagerly in his chest. Ten minutes, perhaps a little less, and they’ll find out which way this war is going to turn. However much confidence he has in himself, in the prophetic words of his mother, in this moment he is sure of nothing.

It seems a long time before the first sounds of joined battle come echoing back across the dry earth and sand, though in real time outside of anticipation it can’t have been much more than a minute. The little green arrows on the GPS blink in confusion, and the noise of gunfire and rocket trails are muted at the edge of hearing. John is aware of his own voice swearing under his breath, half curse, half prayer. The lights thrash on the screen and then separate. There are noticeably fewer planes, and black oily smoke rises on the horizon through the copter’s windscreen. No way to tell if any of the machines are down or not.

More long minutes, adrenaline warping time to run both slowly and quickly in parallel. He can see the dark shapes of their enemy now, skimming over the low hills. The HKs are buzzing wildly over the sky like wasps, but he can’t see how many there are. High above the arcing trails of the jets circle around. But they no longer have the element of surprise, and already the Hunter-Killers have seen them and are gaining height to meet them.

Only a few hundreds of meters separate the three groups now, and as though time were an elastic band stretched to breaking point, suddenly everything is happening at once. Conner whirls the machine gun around, targeting the nearest Transport and the colossus on its back, the spent casings of his fire falling like rain, raking the sensors that might be thought of as its eyes. Sparks fly, and then all of a sudden a meteor of metal trailing smoke in a comet tail of destruction screams over them and crashes dead into the middle of the hovering craft, sending both planes down in an incandescent blaze of flames. John gapes, staring out at the hellish sky filled with bursting tracers and explosions of all sizes before gaining control of himself again, aiming his weapon once more as the helicopter tracks round, searching for another target.

The crazed battle between the planes of the Resistance and the HKs overhead is already out of sight,
speed taking it over great swathes of ground in the blink of an eye. The Transports are slower, and there are only two left, one limping along from an earlier hit, its left side laid bare by a missile impact. The Harvester on its back has been lost, but the T-700s inside are armed, and firing from the wound in its flank. The other is a little battered but still strong, and its fire has brought down two choppers in these few seconds Conner has been assessing the situation.

John concentrates his fire on the undamaged Transport’s engines, his helicopter dropping low out of the direct line of fire. It’s a little too close to the ground for comfort, but he is hardly aware of it, caught up in the fight. His bullets find a fuel tank, a sudden gush of gasoline glugging from the holes, and then the sparks flying from the impacts on the protective casing around the engine catch and the entire side of the Transport is enveloped in flames. The craft lists heavily, the heat of the flare hitting Conner like a physical blow. The copter jinks away, and the transport is sinking down, plunging to fetch up on its back against the up-spray of stony ground its impact has caused.

Comparative silence falls. The guns have stopped firing. Looking around John sees the wreckage of the last Transport, the already wounded one, some way behind them, now utterly still and unmoving. It is over; the battle is theirs. But despite this triumph there are still noticeably fewer helicopters in the sky with him, and there is no sign of the jets at all. The GPS has lost track of their signals, whether destroyed or just out of range he doesn’t know. Though at least they seem to have taken the HKs with them. It is an undisputed victory, but it comes at a heavy price.

Kyle is aware that something out of the ordinary is going on, but he still has no idea what. John Conner himself took him aside and told him to stay put close to Kate, and not go about wandering, and to do whatever she told him today. And he saw the helicopters take off, a crowd of them together like a spread-out black cloud. Heading north with the sun flashing from their sides, out into the desert. Maybe they’re fending off a machine attack, or raiding a factory, or any one of a number of things he doesn’t know anything about yet.

“What are we even doing here?” he mutters aloud. Star looks up at him from her seat on the stone and sand floor of the tent, rearranging the contents of her little pouches. Band aids, needle and thread, small scissors, scraps of bandage and sticky tape that make up their first aid kit, as well as a handful of .22 bullets for the little handgun she carries tucked into her clothes somewhere. Kyle was the one who gave it to her, taught her to use it in case of an emergency. He has no illusions about what use it would be against the machines, but there are other threats out there, ones which promise slower deaths. Like the fate of his father, never returning from his scavenging one morning. Whether it was the machines that got him in the end or the gang his dad had warned him about he still doesn’t know, but he knows what he thinks. He never did find a body. And he’s learned enough about the world now to realise that when some people are starving, they’ll take what they can get, even if they have to kill for it. The machines might have been the kinder fate.

“Are you happy here Star?” he asks, crouching down next to her. She shrugs, makes the hand sign that means ‘food’ and then the one for ‘shelter’. Kyle nods. She’s right. They have a good thing going on here, and he doesn’t even know himself why he’s unsatisfied with it. He has no right to be, not really. For Star’s sake at the very least they need to stay here. He just wishes they would let him fight!

It’s night time before the first copters come back. And then as no more follow, even after all the hubbub around the first few has died away, Kyle realises that there aren’t going to be any more. The rest are gone, but judging by the happy mood of everyone else he can see from his position on the outskirts of the camp whatever mission they had, it went well for them. If he was curious before he’s really interested now. And because for some reason John Conner seems to have some kind of
fascination with him, that’s the man he goes to find.

It isn’t hard. Conner is always at the centre of crowds, or with the other important people in the Resistance, or failing that, when he wants to be alone, with Kate. This time Kyle finds him in the briefing tent, the microphone of the radio to his mouth, his words rolling out over the airwaves to whoever’s listening. Which will be more people than before, with Skynet’s base here gone; they used to try and interfere with the signal as much as possible. He stays quiet at the entrance, signalling to Star to wait outside, and listens to the end of the broadcast.

“...with this victory, we are closer than ever to winning this war. It will not be over quickly, it will not be over easily, but one day, by your efforts, it will be over. My name is John Conner, and if you are listening to this, you are the Resistance.”

Conner puts the mike down with a click, and turns the dial on the radio down and off. Night is falling, and the low powered lamp casts strange shadows on his face, with its new scars over his eye and down his cheek. Kyle shifts very slightly, but it gets his attention.

“Kyle.” Conner looks at him in that slightly odd way he has that Kyle really doesn’t know how to interpret. “Let me guess; you’re wondering what all this fuss is about.”

He nods. He’s still a little bit shy around the man, who is after all from the various rumours he’s heard flying around, anything from a great leader to a prophet or even a man who is going to single-handedly win them the war. And the man who stole Marcus’ life, a little voice in the back of his head adds nastily.

Conner breaks out in an uncharacteristic smile, though it’s not exactly friendly, like he’s forgotten what it’s meant to look like. “The mission this afternoon was to destroy the machines’ forces sent to retake this area and rebuild their base. And we succeeded.” There is a note of vicious triumph in his voice.

Kyle knew it had to be something good, but this is very very good. He smiles too, happy and excited. He talked to enough of the Resistance fighters here, not to mention Conner himself, to know what the plan is; with the base gone and the reinforcements gone, they can try and take over Skynet’s resources and factories, and start to build for a proper war.

“We should have a month or two before the machines send more,” Conner continues. “So we’ll be getting busy in the meantime.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Kyle asks, trying not to seem too eager. But surely they’ll need every man they can get for this big push. Surely John Conner will let him be useful, will let him fight. But his hopes are smashed as quickly as they arose.

“No,” comes the reply. Conner scowls. “You aren’t going to be here.”

“Utah!” Kyle spits it out, angry as hell. He came all this way to join the Resistance and they’re sending him on to some base in the middle of nowhere! “You can’t send me away! I’ve been fighting for my life for years; I’m not too young for this war!”

Conner glares at him. “This is not open to negotiation. You are going to Utah where you’ll be safe. That is what is going to happen.”
Kyle bares his teeth at him. “I don’t have to stay here. Me and Star did just fine until now, and if you don’t want us...”

“No!” Conner cuts him off quickly. “No way.” And there’s that weird look again. What’s got the guy so interested in him? He’s known him, what, a month or two? Kyle doesn’t trust him in the slightest, which kind of conflicts with the whole hero-worship thing he had going on for the first few weeks. “You’re going to a safe place if I have to tie you up for the whole journey.”

Kyle bristles. The fuck is Conner up to? What makes him care so much about one person’s safety out of so many? He can’t be sentimental; he’s never struck him as the type. Maybe – and he’s learned to be suspicious of everyone in a world where nothing is fair and fair play certainly doesn’t exist – the guy’s got a thing for him, wants to fuck him. He knows about sex, he’s not stupid, even though given the circumstances of his life it’s not as though he’s ever done anything with the knowledge. And there were a couple of magazines he found lying around one of the 7/11s in Los Angeles, with pictures of naked women in them. And once he found one with some men in as well.

“So you’re just kidnapping me?” he says hotly. “Whisking me off like the machines did! Well fuck, looks like the glorious Resistance isn’t everything I’d heard it was.”

“If you knew what I knew about the future and your place in it... you’d thank me,” Conner tells him, as if hearing he’s basing all this on one of his crazy prophecies is going to reassure him. Maybe his visions of the future tell him Kyle’s going to be his fuck-buddy or some such shit, doesn’t make it anything more than wish fulfilment, and certainly doesn’t mean Kyle’s going to let it happen. He doesn’t trust seers and visions or anything h can’t put his hands on.

“Transport leaves in the morning,” Conner continues, “0800 beside the first-aid tent. Kate’ll wake you, and if you and Star aren’t there, there’ll be a chopper out looking for you. Come back in a couple of years and thank me.”

Kyle turns around and stalks out. What else can he do but go along with Conner’s little plan? With an aching stab of emotion he suddenly misses LA desperately, tough and hard place though it was. It was home, at least, and he was in control of his life. Not here.

Star rejoins him, lacing her fingers with his. She’ll come with him, he knows. Family sticks together out here.

“We have to leave here in the morning,” he tells her. “The Resistance is sending us to Utah.”
Chapter Two

At eight in the morning the desert sun is not yet too hot, merely pleasant on bare skin. The transport is a battered Land Rover that looks about forty years old, stripped of doors and other bits and pieces to make it lighter and therefore faster. It’s running of cooking oil as well; the smell makes that clear. The driver is a lean black guy – skinny, everyone’s skinny nowadays. Marcus was stocky though. Well fed, he’d thought, but then he doesn’t actually need to eat. The man’s got a stubbly beard and very short hair that looks as though it’s been cut that way with a pair of blunt scissors. He looks kind of happy to see him. Kyle can’t say he returns the feeling, considering the circumstances.

“Don’t know what you’re looking so glum about kid,” he says as Kyle lifts Star up to help her into the back seat, before climbing into the front. “Breeder camps is the best place in the world for a young’un like you. Get your dick wet for the first time if you haven’t already.” The man nudges him lightly in the ribs. “Human race gotta breed like rabbits if we want to win the war and re-colonise the planet, eh.”

Kyle finds himself blushing a bit; he can’t say he’s ever felt the sensation before. “So that’s what these camps are about?” he asks awkwardly. “I didn’t get told anything about them; they’re just sending me out there because I’m too young to fight. Supposedly,” he adds under his breath.

The black guy starts up the engine and they begin to slowly trundle out of the camp – no permanent bases this near machine territory, though what with San Francisco gone they’ve been here much longer than they normally would, or so he’s been told.

“Well I guess it’s a bit more complicated than that,” he says. “But that’s the only reason I’m going there. I got a girl that seems to have taken a shine to me, picks me out every time. Six months pregnant now, though it ain’t mine. Haven’t known her that long.” He shrugs. “But it’s not like anyone got any right to be jealous; or they shouldn’t if they’ve got a good head on their shoulders. Raise the kids up there too, women and old folks who know a trade, or basic maths and science.”

It’d be good for Star to learn some things like that, Kyle thinks to himself. He’s not really able to do much for her in that department, not having had any teaching of his own apart from what his dad told him. But what if she doesn’t want to be parted from him? He supposes they could both go to the classes. That’s something to figure out when they get there though. Right now he wants to know more about this ‘breeding’ part.

“How’s it work then?” he asks nervously. “You said... picks you out every time?”

The other man laughs, deep and hearty and good-natured. “Sure, you want to know about that! Well. I don’t know if you know this, but because of all those nukes Skynet dropped at the start of the war, there’s a lot of us who’re sterile; they can’t make kids. So the camps are set up that everyone who’s not sterile has an obligation to have kids. Not that it matters terribly much who they choose to have kids with, or whatever else they do with their free time sex-wise, and if they really really don’t want to they just can’t stay at the camps. But folks want to, ‘cos it’s safe and protected there, and there’s plenty of food. And the sterile ones, well, they can go there just for a bit of recreational shagging, if you see what I mean.

“As to what happens when you first get there, all the women who ain’t already pregnant, or who’re
sterile like I said come along, and anyone who just wants a fuck, whatever, and the women pick out whatever guy they like. And it doesn’t really matter so much if a fertile woman picks out a sterile man, or vice versa, because we all swap about a fair bit, if the mood so takes us, and it’s not as if the one time matters.”

“So I’m just going to get picked out of a line?” Kyle isn’t exactly sure how he feels about that. He does kind of want to find out what sex is actually like, but what if he doesn’t like whoever picks him out? It’s all a bit unexpected; he didn’t know any of this fifteen minutes ago. But maybe it won’t be so bad; even if he only knows what to do in theory, and even if he’s sure there are things past the basics that are probably fairly important that you get with experience. But maybe no-one would choose him.

Not all his knowledge about sex has come just from those magazines. Some of it he had worked out for himself, especially when puberty hit – his dad had warned him about that, perhaps anticipating he would not be there to see it himself – and he had experienced the first, almost feverish of the dreams that came with it, crowded with heat and lust and a confusion of images; soft skin and curves and scent, or sometimes hard planes and solid muscle. Things he supposes his sleeping mind had plucked from the pages of said magazines, for it wasn’t as if he had ever seen them in the flesh, unless you counted the sight of his own body. And his own scrawny half-starved self isn’t exactly like the men he sometimes dreams of, who had in the photographs been as heavy and solid as only full-fed, pre-war humans could be. And like Marcus, a little voice in his head says. He ignores it.

But the driver hasn’t said anything about men picking out men, and he doesn’t really want to ask, in case he looks stupid. Anyway, the whole point of it was so people got pregnant and had kids and continued the human race, and Kyle’s not exactly sure whether men can get pregnant. He doesn’t think so, but that’s not one of the things the magazines covered. So far he’s only seen one pregnant person, and that was Kate. So maybe it is only women, and that’s why the older man never mentioned it. But he’d said people fucked for fun as well, and he’s guessing sex with a man has got to be at least as fun as sex with a woman otherwise why would his body want to do both...?

But he doesn’t say anything; just settles down to watch the desert go by. He can always find out when they get there. He reaches his hand round the chair so Star can hold on to it, and they sit like that while the Land Rover eats up the long miles of road and their driver hums off-key songs from before the war.

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John is really fucking glad he doesn’t have to worry about Kyle any more. He’ll be perfectly safe up in Utah, and if he isn’t, they have bigger things to worry about. But he’s feeling goddamn confident now; they have time, and that’s what the Resistance needs. He’s got a big map of the south-west spread out on the table, and his lieutenants are around him, Barnes and Kate and Blair, who he needs, even if she’s not forgiven for the Marcus Incident, and for the first time in what seems like a while he can focus all his energy and all his emotions on the task in front of them.

The permanent bases are all marked with little spots of pen in different colours, red for the enemy, green for themselves, and they use blue tack for troop movements or the shifting bases they have because it peels off easily without damaging the paper too much. Maps are valuable objects these days; when they wear out the only way to replace them is for someone to spend days copying out all the little details, so they have to take care of what they have. At the moment this is the best and the biggest map the Resistance has, and even it is getting a little worn around the creases. John is standing with a handful of little balls of putty updating it with the latest intelligence.

“So far this whole area has been cleared of the machine presence,” Barnes says, indicating with a
sweep of his index finger most of southern California up to just above Los Angeles. “And while we can’t be sure about this area in the east, along the border with Nevada, flyovers indicate it’s fairly empty.”

Conner considers this. “There are still plenty of the bastards up around San Francisco,” he mutters, half to himself. “Can’t start salvage until California’s clean.”

There are nods from around him. Kate is studying the little clusters of blue-tack around Fresno. “I guess it’s just a case of working our way upwards then.”

“Yeah,” John replies, “but I’d like to be surer of what nasty shit might be waiting for us. We’ve got two months tops before we can expect Skynet’s next party from the east, and we only have limited ammo and fuel. We can’t afford to fucking waste it.”

“Sure,” Blair chips in. “You want another flyover?”

He nods sharply. If it weren’t for the fact they need every body capable of flying a plane or holding a gun they can get, he wouldn’t have Williams anywhere near him. He’s not forgotten that she trusted a machine over humans, that she betrayed them for Marcus fucking Wright. She knows she’s not exactly fucking forgiven. “Tomorrow,” he orders finally. “Then we’ll break camp, shift the supply lines. It’s easier to bring stuff due west than it is to ship it all the way up here and then towards San Francisco.”

“So we’re occupying southern California?” Kate asks.

“That’s right,” John replies. “And we’re going to take this whole god-forsaken state in the next six weeks, if I have my way.”

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Kyle’s not quite sure what to make of the camp when they get there. They’ve been driving for several days north-east along the big road up from Vegas, heading through dry and dusty country. Even after all this time there are still the wrecks of cars and trucks along the sides of the road. The mute carcasses make him uncomfortable. He never knew the world they’ve lost, so he can’t be reminded of anything real or concrete, but he has fantasies about what it must have been like, and this only reminds him that they are just that, fantasies, and of how much humanity had before Skynet took it all away.

The camp is in the middle of a forest; the first big one they come to in Utah. Kyle reckons from the weather-beaten and rotting signs they passed on the way in that it used to be a National Park or something; it certainly looks wild enough. Not that that’s hard, these days. There are massive hills here that look like they’ve been carved whole from solid rock, big blunt-toothed things covered with dry scrubby brush down to the tree line. They drive up a dirt track at the bottom of a broad valley, and it’s like driving into an animal’s mouth. Kyle thinks of dead coyotes, because that’s pretty much the only bigger creature he knows. The trees soon surround them too, very green after the desert. There’s water here, fresh and pure, and at one point they drive through a stream that’s washing clear as glass over the stones and pebbles of the track. It’s been a while since he drank from a decent fast-flowing river. In LA it was always stagnant, probably choked with radiation too.

The first sign he has that they’ve arrived is when they pull up into an otherwise deserted clearing. The driver turns off the engine and gets out, stretching after the long journey, then motions to Kyle and Star.

“Come on then, what are you waiting for,” he calls, setting off into the woods. There’s nothing Kyle
can do but follow him, keeping Star’s hand in his so she doesn’t get lost. Soon though he sees they’re following a faint track through the trees, so faint it looks more like an animal trail, though he supposes that’s deliberate. A little way away in the distance he can hear the crashing of falling water. Looking up through the leaves he thinks they are heading towards one of the sandstone cliffs, meandering their way steadily upward.

“Can’t take the car up this way,” their guide shouts back to them cheerfully. He doesn’t seem too worried about keeping quiet. Kyle supposes there aren’t any machines within a long, long way of here.

After a few more minutes of uphill walking, they find the first sentry. The first Kyle knows of it is the distinctive click of a shotgun being cocked, and a wary shout.

“John Conner, you are the Resistance,” the black man shouts back. Obviously this is the password, because they don’t get shot. Kyle helps Star scramble up the last of the slope, and then the tree cover thins out a bit, and he can see groups of people moving several hundred yards away. The owner of the shotgun comes traipsing up to them, the weapon slung over her shoulder. She looks pleased to see them.

“Hey Tony,” she calls out, clasping hands with their driver and pulling him into a hug. “Nice to see you again. Who’re these guys?”

“Ah,” Tony says, turning to them. “Mary, this is Kyle and Star. This is Mary; she’s one of the teachers here. Basic maths and writing, shit like that.” He smiles back at her. “Looks like we’ve got you another pupil here.”

Kyle watches her warily as she crouches down to look at Star. She’s not a threat, he knows that, but even after several months around other people, he’s still not got out of the habit of being overprotective.

“Hi there,” Mary says softly. “It’s very nice to meet you. What’s your name?”

Star looks at her with that particular look she has for dealing with strangers; Kyle knows it well. The silence drags out before he feels the need to interject. “She doesn’t speak,” he tells the woman quietly. “Never has.”

Mary’s gaze flickers up to him. “How long have you known her?” she asks, seeming casual aside from the slight tenseness in her eyes. Kyle wonders what it must be like to teach all these children of the war, children who have seen terrible things, who have long since lost their innocence.

“Three or four years,” he replies. “I don’t know how long Star was alone before I found her.”

“That’s her name? Star?”

Kyle nods. Mary repeats the word, slowly, as though seeing how it feels in her mouth. She looks back at Star and smiles, gently and almost sadly. “So Star,” she asks, “how would you like to learn to read and write?”

Star considers this, looking very solemn. Finally she nods, giving a shy little thumbs-up.

Maybe they’ll be okay here after all. Right now though, Kyle could really use somewhere to get a good night’s sleep. He can make the best of being here, but he’s not sure he’s quite up to it yet. Tomorrow, he promises the world. Tomorrow he’ll give it his best shot.

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John has never been an arm-chair general. He likes leading his troops into battle, loves the thrill of adrenaline, the jerky panic-euphoria of a death that could come at any moment. He knows he is important to the Resistance, but he has faith in his mother’s words. He is meant to lead them to victory, and leading is not commanding from the sidelines, giving orders from a place of safety. Leading means being in the thick of the action, on the firing line, inspiring men and women to give their all. And never let it be said that he doesn’t enjoy it. He fucking loves it. Every battle gives him a chance to unfetter his hatred against the machines in a glorious immolating flood, expressing his loathing with each bullet, each round fired into a Terminator’s head.

So it is that once again he finds himself at the head of the assault, attacking the town of Madera. The flyover showed a pretty heavy concentration of T-700s in here, along with several isolated Moto-Terminators who appear to be roaming the streets aimlessly. They need to be eliminated, and with the shelter of the buildings and the scarcity of explosives, they can’t just bomb the fuck out of the place. It has to be cleaned out building by building, street fighting close and dirty.

John has the Moto-Terminators lured out along Route 99 the way he does best; loud music and tripwires. The machines are not exactly intelligent, especially without their master sending them instructions. The T-models have a kind of brute cunning that he knows enough to be wary of, but most of the others are easily outsmarted. When the Motos are downed a few close-range rounds to the processor put them out of the way, and that’s one less problem to deal with. Conner smiles with his teeth, bloodlust whetted. Goddamn he’s going to enjoy killing the bastards.

The T-700s aren’t about to be tricked in the same way, he can see immediately. John watches with his forces from the shallow cover of the overgrown fields and wasteland that surrounds the town. What few groups of buildings there are on these outskirts have been quickly cleared, and there’s several snipers with high-powered rifles sitting up in the top floors. They have a hell of a time getting the gunpowder for those; they have orders to use them sparingly, and only when they have a clear and definite shot. From this distance of maybe half a klick, he can see the telltale signs of the sun flashing off metal from the windows of the nearest houses. The fuckers know they’re there, and they’re waiting. Well that’s okay with him; he has no intention of attacking them from the front like this. He has about half his men here with him, waiting for the second group to make their slow way up and around the town to make and assault from the north, catching the machines from behind. If this was Skynet he was facing, he might think twice about such an obvious manoeuvre, but these shits won’t know what’s hit them.

Barnes is commanding the second group, staying in touch by radio. Again, that’s not something that can be compromised any more. John grins again. Easy fucking pickings. The machines are easiest to kill by targeting that little weak spot at the base of their skulls, so he can be sure a good lot of them will be taken out by the initial assault.

The radio crackles. “We’re in position,” Barnes says quietly across the airwaves. Lucky for them the slaughter of the Moto-Ts has drawn all the others to the southern edge of the town. All in one place for them to hit, John thinks with a smirk.

“Fucking go for it,” Conner replies with satisfaction, and almost immediately the sound of gunfire breaks out, short sharp staccato bursts that echo against the walls of the damaged buildings. Peering through a pair of crappy binoculars John can see flashes of dark-uniformed soldiers moving quickly along the streets. “Time for us to go too,” he shouts.

His heart is beating fast with adrenaline and his breath sounds loud in his ears as he hammers down the stairs from the observation post on the top floor, out through the door with his gun at the ready, then dodging low through the wasteland and up into the first all-too-wide street. He doesn’t know when the first of the machines notice them; the first he notices is when a man next to him goes down,
blood spurting in a wide arc from his neck.

“Motherfucker!” Conner snarls, and rounds a corner to find several T-700s half-crouched behind the rusting shells of cars, engaged in pitched battle with Barnes’ men. He fires without thinking, instincts more accurate than his brain in any case. Two of the bastards are down, sparking from their necks, before the rest turn, and then he has to dive for cover as a hail of bullets come his way.

But he’s given the other soldiers an opening, and they take it eagerly. He has heard enough weapons fired to be able to tell human guns apart from machine, and the sharp chatter of fire that ricochets off metal skin is sweet music to his ears. He whips his body away from the shelter of the building, bringing his own rifle up in time to see the last of the steel bastards collapsing. A man he recognises as one of Barnes’ sergeants makes doubly sure with a bullet close into its head. Conner grins at him; the bare-toothed slash of white that is as bestial as only a human can be when stripped down to the very essentials of blood and flesh. Sweet and organic and everything the machines are not; John Conner is euphoric with destruction.

Listening, there is still firing coming from further inside the town, but it is a little way off, and quieter and sporadic. Everything in the immediate vicinity has gone still in comparison. He suspects his troops have a group of T-700s pinned down or vice versa, though judging by the silence of everything else it’s the last vanguard of the forces that were stationed here. He turns to the others.

“Just this last fucking lot boys, then they’re fucking wiped out,” he tells them happily. “Good work. Now let’s go deal with them, and then we can fucking celebrate.”

There are nods, more of those sharp, bright grins that match his own. He leads them at a steady jog towards the sounds of gunfire, sure to be wary despite his confidence. Sounds travel in strange ways in street-fighting like this; echoing off the sides of buildings and along alleyways. He could turn a corner and come across an enemy at any moment.

They pick up a few stragglers along the way, and polish off a few half-way broken machines – close shots to the head always work – before John stops them, holding up his hand for silence, listening closely to the guns. He recognises the noise, with concentration; it’s the metal bastards’ who’re keeping up this constant steady rat-a-tat-tat, but then they don’t have the same worries about ammunition. That or they haven’t the brains anymore to ration it.

“Okay,” he says very quietly. “Here’s the plan. We spread out in a fan and get up high. They aren’t far off; a couple of streets at the most. Don’t fire until I send up a flare as the signal.” There are more nods all round, and he turns his attention back to the gunfire as they head off. He’s feeling a little bit calmer now that the adrenaline is beginning to lose its kick, not quite reacting on that razor’s edge of instinct. He breathes deeply and takes stock of his surroundings. There’s a ruined block of flats just around the corner; he should be able to get a better view of the standoff from there.

He has to force his way through the rotting remains of a front door when he gets to the top flat, but once there he can see right across the collapsed and weather-scarred roofs to the open space of what might once have been a park or a playground or a square; all that remains is rubble and the growing things that are starting to take back everything abandoned after all this time. That’s where they are; he can see the weak sunlight flashing off the dull metal of the T-700s’ bodies. Too far away for his rifle to be any use though. He’ll have to get closer.

He picks out his route and then leaves at a run, leaping agilely over the chunks of plaster and breeze-block that litter the stairwell. His boots connect with the ground with a reassuringly heavy thud, and he’s sprinting low over the cracked tarmac. His hand falls to the flare gun at his belt, and he loads it as he moves, sure fingers slipping the cartridge in without bothering to look. He halts behind the twisted metal bulk of what might have once been an SUV, breathing fast but surprisingly steady, and
lifts the gun to the sky.

As the blinding red trail arcs across the sky, all hell breaks loose. Conner bursts from his hiding place, laying down covering fire, aware of his soldiers as movements at the edge of his vision, the hail of bullets cutting into the unsuspecting backs of the metal bastards. If only it didn’t take so much damage, or at the very least pinpoint accuracy, to take the fuckers down, John thinks viciously, as all too many of their shots ricochet away. It’s enough to take most of them down, but they’re not ones to give up easily. The return fire hits someone next to him, and Conner ducks away just as a stray bullet lances a burning trail across his thigh. He hisses with pain and shoves further back into cover, putting his rifle aside long enough to fumble a strip of cloth out of one of his many pockets and tie it tightly over the groove that is now oozing blood.

He knows from painful experience that it will hurt a lot to put weight on his leg, but that he will be able to do it. He curses and starts to lever himself to his feet. The battle seems to be over already, he sees, as he gets his head up above the safety of the piece of crumbling building he had been leaning on. One of the others sees him and comes over to give him an arm to lean on. He might have been difficult about it, but right now all the strength born of adrenaline is draining away, and he just feels tired.

“Good work people,” he says, surveying the battered-beyond-repair bodies of the machines. “Very good work.”

This town is done with; he doesn’t think there were any of Skynet’s troops smart enough to stay lurking in the network of abandoned buildings. They all came to the fight, and they all got what they deserved. He allows himself a smile. On and upwards. California cannot remain in enemy hands much longer.

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Kyle gets his wish, and wakes the next morning feeling refreshed, and ready to meet the rest of the camp. He saw plenty of people on the way in, ranging from older people with greying hair and wrinkles in their skin to the many women of all shapes and sizes and races, some pregnant some not, and the kids. He can feel justified in calling them kids, most of them, and he can tell at once the ones who’ve been born here in the camp, and the ones brought in from outside. The camp children are exuberant and playful; they run around, they play games with each other, they explore the forest and the caves and the rivers for as far as they’re allowed to go. The others... they’re like Star. And like him, he will admit, when he was younger.

The caves were a surprise. He hadn’t known there were caves here, but then he doesn’t know much about the land they live in other than his own narrow experiences in California. But it makes sense; the Resistance is a lot less likely to be spotted by machines overhead when they’re hiding in here than any camp out in the open. The sleeping quarters are all in here, lit by chains of little colourful lights running off a biofuel generator, along with a whole set of other rooms they use for any variety of purposes. They’re warm too, in the night, the stone walls keeping body heat from them and releasing it slowly. It helps that they pile in close together, though Kyle has noticed that several people slipped off after the lights were dimmed. He can guess why.

He and Star make their way to the cave entrance. The sun is level with the tops of the trees; it can’t be more than an hour or two past dawn. The air smells fresh and cool, and he can hear the sound of running water. It’s idyllic, and almost enough to make him forget his resentment at being sent here. But he had promised himself he would make the best of it.

Now that he has the benefit of daylight and a good night’s sleep he is able to properly take in his surroundings. There is a narrow clearing like a wide street stretching out from the front of the cave
mouth, and in the shade of the trees to either side he can see several log cabins with camouflage netting draped over the top of them, trailing over their flanks. Some of them have been there so long that moss and wild grass is starting to take root on their roofs. Turning Kyle can see the cliff-side of the hill behind him, and several other black-mouthed openings in the rock. He has a feeling the caves are an absolute warren; it will likely take him some time to learn how to get around them without becoming lost.

He’s just wondering what to do now when he sees Mary, the woman who was on guard last night, walking along the grass a little way off, her shotgun slung over her shoulder. Giving Star’s hand a comforting little squeeze, he sets off toward her, calling out to get her attention. She looks up, surprise quickly morphing into happiness as she sees who it is.

“Well if it isn’t our new arrivals,” she says when they draw up beside her. “Have a good night?”

Kyle nods, still feeling a little unsure around her. But that’s the way he is with most strangers; it took him a few weeks to get used to the base in Arizona.

“Are you hungry?” Mary continues. “Do you want me to show you where the mess is?”

“If you wouldn’t mind,” he replies humbly, realising as he does so that yes, he is actually very hungry. Nothing he isn’t used to though, even after a month and a half of regular food. Star tugs his hand impatiently as they follow her, half-skipping as a kid ought to do. She must really like it here, Kyle thinks. He can’t remember the last time she acted so carefree.

There’s a long line when they get to the building; it’s an open-sided cabin about the size of the others, though it has the short stub of a chimney poking out the top, leaking thin smoke. Kyle and Star join the end of it, drawing interested glances, though no one comes over to talk to them yet.

“Sleep well?” Mary asks breezily, making up for the assessing stares of the others.

“It was pretty good,” Kyle replies truthfully. “Better than sleeping rough in LA.”

“That’s where you come from eh?”

He nods. He doesn’t venture any details and she doesn’t ask. That’s how it is with personal things these days, he’s noticed; everyone is very private. Or maybe that’s just the Resistance; the soldiers were all too focused on the war to tell anecdotes about their past. And no-one ever talks about the time before Judgement Day. It’s too painful.

Mary chats about inconsequential things as the line moves forward fairly quickly. Kyle can smell the heavy scent of wood-smoke from the fires, and wonders what they’ll be eating. Back in Arizona it had always been that thick slimy stew made up of thin scraps of stringy meat and those mushrooms they grew in dark barrels under canvas and half-buried in the earth. It turns out to be porridge, thick and hot, and it settles heavy and warm in his stomach as he hurriedly gulps it down.

“So... what do people do here?” he asks tentatively, once they’ve finished.

Mary leans back against the trunk of the tree they are sitting under. “Well,” she says, “that depends on your skills. We’ve got people here who mostly just teach; maths, science, reading, writing, survival skills, close combat, woodcraft, how to take care of and repair cars and other vehicles, how to help grow our food, how to make things... Once you’ve decided what you want to do you can go and join any class you want. Then in the evenings we basically do whatever we want. The kids go and play, the adults talk, tell stories, or, you know, fuck.”

Kyle’s getting better at not being embarrassed; he doesn’t blush anywhere near as much at the word
as he did the first time. And actually, now he’s heard what sort of useful skills he could learn here, he thinks coming here might be a pretty good thing. After that little trick with the shotgun Marcus showed him, he’s sure there’s a lot of other things he ought to know but doesn’t. Now why couldn’t Conner have just told him all this, maybe given him the choice instead of just forcing the whole thing on him and telling him fuck all about the place. He frowns slightly. God, Conner is such a dick.

“So, yeah,” Mary finishes. “I guess you and Star will want to stick together, so just go explore the place, get to know where everything is and what the classes are for the next few days. No hurry.” She stands, brushing dirt from her trousers. “I’m due for my turn on sentry duty again, so I’ll see you later. You’ll be okay?”

Kyle nods, then holds up the empty food bowl. “What do we do with these though?”

“Just take them back to the mess. Oh, and get them to put your names down on the rota for chores.” She smiles. “One of the prices of being here.”

Kyle waves her a tentative goodbye, and takes Star’s hand again. “Well then,” he tells her. “Better do what we’re told.”
Chapter Three

It’s the beginning of October, and the Resistance have cleared the state up to San Francisco when it happens. Kate is in the briefing tent with John and the rest of them when she suddenly flinches like she’s been punched in the stomach, and makes a soft ‘oh’ of surprise. John is at her side immediately, his arms coming up to support her, worry showing on his face in an honest, unguarded way she hasn’t seen in the month since Kyle left. She smiles at him, though it’s a little weak, and feels the surprisingly warm trickle of amniotic fluid down her leg.

“My waters have broken,” she says, quiet enough so that no one else hears her at first. She repeats it, louder, then shudders as the next contraction hits. They are slow and steady and quite far apart at this stage, but oh she’s been waiting for this for weeks when the war hadn’t distracted her, and she’s a little surprised to find just how excited she is.

“Come on, we’d better get you to the first aid tent,” John says, and behind the obvious concern she can hear the same kind of giddy exhilaration that is filling her chest. She nods, and tries to shrug his supporting arm away.

“I’m okay,” she protests, “I can walk,” but another strong clench of muscles makes her stumble. John makes a concerned noise in the back of his throat and is back at her side again.

“You sure about that,” he says, half laughing as though he can’t quite believe what’s happening. Kate knows how he feels.

“Well okay,” she replies with a teasing smile. “Let’s get going; I can tell this one’s eager to get out.”

This time John does laugh, helping her navigate over the rough ground outside. It seems like a very long way to the tent, even with her husband at her side, more than half holding her up. She smiles, free and wild, while the warm breeze of the desert coils her hair in chocolate-brown tangles around her face. She feels strong and ready for this. Ready for their child.

The first aid tent is dark inside after the noon sun, and Kate blinks as her eyes adjust. It’s a familiar place this, comforting, a place she calls home. John has to help her up onto the gurney, weight and pain and the spasms of her womb making it otherwise impossible. She settles back onto the cool metal, thankful for the rest, turning her head towards John.

“You’ll want to get Amanda,” she tells him, “she’s my nurse, she can help.”

He wants to protest, she can see; he’d prefer to do everything himself if he actually knew the first thing about midwifery, but he’s not about to let even his pride get in the way of her own comfort and safety. He nods, and half-runs out, already calling for the woman. She struggles with her baggy combats as she waits for him to come back, pulling them down to her ankles. She’s hardly thinking about modesty; it’s not anything John hasn’t seen before anyway, and Amanda won’t care. It’s the practicalities of the situation.

The next contraction sweeps over her, making her cry out, and breathe faster. It’s the strangest mix of excitement and apprehension, of a new and slightly frightening experience. She had been hoping, actually, to do this up in Utah, where all the other pregnant women are, where there are people who
manage women through this every other week. But circumstances... and she couldn’t leave John and Barnes and Blair to deal with California by themselves. She grits her teeth. It’s been fourteen years; painkillers are a thing of the past, well beyond their capacity. For surgery, they have a few that they hoard, but each time it dwindles. Aspirin is just about the limit of their capabilities, another reason why the factories they take will be so important. Alcohol makes do, but she can’t take that route, for obvious reasons. Humans have been doing this without the benefit of epidurals and oxygen for thousands of years before the last century. She can manage.

It seems like time stretches out very long before John gets back with Amanda, time in which the contractions grow and the pain does too, and she growls and curses and rides it out. It’s not that bad, she tells herself. She’s been shot once or twice before; that had hurt at least at much. Although it’s the actual force of the spasms of muscle that she’s struggling to cope with, more than anything. She swears again and pushespushesp Pushes and then John is back, locking his fingers with her, giving her something to grip and squeeze.

“Fuck, John,” she says. “Whoever thought kids were worth this shit?” She’s almost half not joking, but it’s pain talking. She imagines she’ll be wanting to castrate John for getting her pregnant in the first place by the time this is over.

Amanda’s voice is soft in her ear, telling her to push with the contractions, to ride it out, that it’ll all be over soon, and she listens and tries to do as she’s told. It seems to take a very long time. Pain warps things like that. And then, finally, just like that, the pressure is gone; she feels the baby slide out of her and into Amanda’s waiting hands. She hitches herself up onto her elbows, wanting to see, and then a shrill cry splits the air, and a squirming mass of bloody baby is handed to her. She looks down at the child in amazement. She’s hers. Hers and John’s, something they made together, and she’s just so marvellous. She only realises she’s been holding her breath when John puts his arm around her shoulders, caressing the baby’s delicate head with the palm of his other hand.

“What are we going to call her?” he asks softly.

“Sarah,” she replies, her voice equally quiet. Reverential. “I was thinking Sarah.”

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“So what are you thinking?” Tony asks him over bowls of soup and thick, dark, half-stale bread that evening. “Are you wanting to go into the line-up or not?”

Kyle ducks his head a bit to hide his blush. He hates this emotion; embarrassment, he’s not used to it, doesn’t like how hard it is to hide. “Maybe,” he tells the floor.

“Up to you of course,” Tony replies, chewing solidly on a hardened crust the texture of stone. “No hurry, after all.”

It hits him then that he’s probably going to be here for a while. Years, maybe. He doesn’t know his birthday, he’s just been counting seasons since his dad died, knowing at least that he had been eleven then, five years ago. Or was it six now? Maybe just coming up on six. He thinks he’ll have to be eighteen at least before Conner will let him join the war, so that’s at least a year, probably more. He’s going to be here a whole twelve months, minimum. But at least the place isn’t so bad as he was fearing. The classes he and Star saw today looked pretty interesting, especially the combat and survival ones. Maybe if he gets good enough at them Conner will let him come back early. If he can prove to him that he is a fighter, that he is capable of this.

“No hurry, I know,” he tells Tony. “But I’m... curious I guess. But I’ve never... what if I’m really bad at it?”
The other man laughs, making Kyle glare at him angrily until he realises he isn’t really laughing at him. “Kid, don’t worry,” he says, once he’s recovered himself. “It kind of comes naturally. Sure, experience will help, but, well. There has to be a first time for everything.”

True enough, Kyle acknowledges. That doesn’t really help with the sneaking suspicion that he’s going to make an almighty fool of himself. But if that is going to happen, waiting around isn’t going to change it. And like Tony said, practise is important. He could use practise. He’s never really considered what his ‘first time’ would be like before. Prior to this part of his life, he hadn’t thought there would be a first time. Is it supposed to be special, in some way? Hard to know, and harder still in their war-torn world. Maybe you’re just meant to do it with someone you trust so they don’t laugh at you if you’re awful at the whole thing.

“I guess... I guess I do want to,” he says finally. “Soon. Or soon-ish.”

“Well you let me know when you’re ready,” Tony tells him softly, smiling. “I’ll get it all arranged.”

Kyle smiles back at him. “Thanks.”

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“I know what you’re going to say John,” Kate cuts in before he can speak. “And that was the most sensible thing to do before, but California is nearly ours, and I need to be close enough to lend a hand where I can.”

Her husband gives her the glare he uses whenever he knows he’s probably going to loose an argument, but is going to do his goddamn best anyway. “No fucking way Kate,” he growls, “just, no, what the fuck?”

She smiles at him angelically. “I’m not saying we should stay here in California. I’m going to take our baby back to Arizona with me. Now that may not be far enough for your liking, but it’s just till we’re sure the state is totally secure.” She insists firmly. “I need to be in radio range for you. But you have my word, once California is under the control of the Resistance, I’ll go to Utah. I’ll even say hi to Kyle for you.”

“Oh bloody wonderful,” John sneers sarcastically, but is clearly unable to think of any better comeback than that. “This is such a fucking bad idea Kate. This is the middle of a war camp; it’s no place for a baby! And Arizona’s no better. It’s a fucking desert, for one thing! Small children and deserts do not mix, goddammit. And Utah is set up for taking care of a child, we aren’t here!”

Kate smiles at him passively. “Those are all very good arguments John,” she replies. “But trust me when I say I would never do anything that would put Sarah at risk. Please trust me when I say she will be fine in Arizona. And you need me too, don’t forget that. It’s only for a little while. A couple of weeks, no more. I just want to be sure you have the situation under control here.”

John has never been a man to back down, but he’s known Kate long enough to know when an argument is unwinnable. “Two weeks?” he says instead. “Definitely no more than that?”

“You have my word John.”

He glares, but he knows when he’s beaten. “Okay then,” he tells her gruffly. “But as soon as twelve days are over you’re going straight to the camps.”

“Yes John,” she tells him. She smiles, and he mentally acknowledges that she has him wrapped around her finger. Oh well. He could be worse off.
Kyle shifts uncomfortably. There aren’t very many men at the camp at the moment, so the ‘line’ isn’t very long. He’d feel a bit better maybe if he thought he could get lost in the crowd. He’s terribly nervous. And maybe just a very little aroused, if he’s honest with himself. He’s caught like a bug on a pin under the assessing stares of the several women. There’s a girl who can’t be much more than his age; she has pale skin and night-dark hair that falls in curls, and her figure curves elegantly in her torn jeans and faded top, despite the meagre rations that make everyone he’s ever seen thin. She looks at him like she knows he wants her, which he does, no denying that. It’s a razor-blade shiver in his stomach, an unfamiliar mixture of hot emotions. She shoots him a wry smile, and comes over to stand in front of him.

“So,” she asks, “how’d you like to come back to my room?”

“I’ve... not actually ever done this before,” he says, though it comes out more like a stammer. She smiles at him and kisses him lightly.

“I wasn’t expecting that you had.” The weight of her settles on him comfortably. He could blame his breathlessness on it; it would be a lie. Her thighs are warm beside his own and she rubs against the hardness of his cock inside his pants as she sits up astride him to pull her top off. She’s wearing a lacy bra, but he doesn’t have time to more than see what it looks like before it too is gone, and his gaze fixes instead on the pale whiteness of her breasts. His mouth opens slightly, and lust curls warmly in his belly. His hands move almost of their own accord to run up her smooth sides, feeling the dips between her ribs, stopping just shy of that alluring swell of flesh. She smiles. “Go on,” she says, and moves his hands up to cup her breasts as she leans forward to capture his lips in a long kiss.

“Holy shit!” he thinks, unable to form much more than that, shifting naturally so that the long press of her body is tight to his own, bare chest to bare chest, hands moving one to tangle in her curls, the other running along the curve and bumps of her spine, hesitating at the band of her pants before boldly slipping under, curving around her ass. His hips buck up against her almost involuntarily. God, he moans in his head, breathless, low little gasping exhalations being captured by her mouth against his. Holy shit!

She pulls away just enough to tug down the zip on his jeans, fumbling a little with the button, and pushes them down his hips, taking his underwear with them and making him gasp and writhe up, clumsy and long-legged to help her, finally kicking them off his feet and onto the floor beside the pallet. “Oh God,” he says, as she grins at him and wraps her elegant fingers around his dick, his head falling back onto the bundled-up jumper that serves as a pillow and arching up into the touch.

“Impatient,” she chides him, and moves away again, and the next thing he knows her jeans have joined his own on the rough stone, and she is sinking down onto him with a smooth and practised movement. God, he thinks, as he closes his eyes with ecstasy at the warm heat, the tightness of her around him and just how goddamn good it feels, his hands gripping her hips hard. He finds that at least his body knows what to do, bucking up into her to match her own slick snake-like slide on top of him; because he doesn’t think he’s capable of rational thought right now.

He has no idea how long it is that she rides him before the rolling pleasure starts to crescendo, and he finds himself coming with a wordless shout, spilling himself into the wet heat of her as she rocks on his cock, her own breathy moans loud in his ears. She wrings the last drops out of him and keeps on
going, until finally she cries out herself, movement becoming fast and erratic before she finally stops still, panting for long moments in which they are locked there, still and unmoving, joined in a single moment of silence. Then she pulls off of him and rolls over to lie close next to him, one hand caressing his chest possessively.

Damn, Kyle thinks sleepily, no wonder people like sex so much, and starts to drift off. But not before a curious thought slinks across his mind; I wonder whether it’s just as good with a guy.

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It’s November 2018 and three months after his second death, Marcus Wright wakes up. The first thing he is aware of is the thick press of the earth around him, and for a long moment he is overwhelmed by panic, thrashing against the warm embrace of the soil, gasping for air before he becomes aware that he is not suffocating. He is not breathing. He wonders is this is the reality of being dead; darkness, pressure, consciousness for eternity.

He remembers what it was like to wake up the last time, a confusion of fire and hot smoky air, pushing himself up and out into the rain, soaking into mud that coated his body. He remembers Kyle, remembers finding the Resistance. He remembers giving his life to save a man; one of the few selfless acts of his life. But it hadn’t really been all that selfless, had it. He had been disgusted by the thought of what Skynet had done to him; maybe he hadn’t wanted to live with that. He wasn’t human any more. He had been ready to die the first time around, and they had taken that away from him; he wanted it to be final this time. But they’ve cursed him so that not even that is certain. He supposes he must be immortal now, or at least he will live until whatever power source Skynet has buried inside him winds down. This is so very not what he signed up for.

He gets himself together eventually; strong emotions can only last so long. When he’s calm again, he starts to think about how he’s going to get out of here. The ground is sandy and dry, from what he can feel of it against his bare skin, so maybe he can dig his way out. It’s just a case of space to push the soil away, and time, which is something he has plenty of. His panic attack of earlier has already freed up a little bit of space by compacting the dirt around him, so now he can raise his hands up to his face and start to scrape away. He doesn’t think they’ll have buried him too deep, but this is going to be very slow going either way. Each rough handful of dirt he shoves back down his body, grimacing at the taste of it in his mouth, the smell of it filling his nose. He keeps his eyes tightly closed. There’s nothing to see, and the dust irritates his eyes.

He can’t say how long it’s been, raising his upper body up by shallow degrees, but he’s not even up into a sitting position by the time he hits air. He surfaces into it like someone coming up from deep water, gasping for breath by reflex even though he doesn’t need it. The light hits him like a solid blow, his eyes unused to it. He’s blind for long, long moments, blinking against sheer whiteness and barely there shapes like shadows before contrast and colour begin to come back to the world. He wriggles free of the last of the soil, shaking it off what remains of his clothes after however long it’s been. He can count himself lucky this is dry earth otherwise he’d likely be pretty much naked. As it is the cloth is tattered and full of holes, and both it and his skin are filthy. He scrubs hands through his hair dislodging further showers of sandy dust. But he’s alive, and he’s out of the ground now, so it doesn’t really matter that he’s the approximate colour of the desert itself. Now all he needs to do is find the Resistance again.

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The desert is dusty and dry and hot, but he doesn’t really feel it, he just knows these things are there. And he’s got the taste of earth and death in his mouth anyway, so what’s a little more of the same. He doesn’t know where they buried him, and he doesn’t know where their base is, exactly, but
there’s a track in the dirt that looks like it gets used a bit, so he follows that. It has to lead somewhere, after all. There are only so many humans with vehicles around.

He’s not thirsty, and he’s not hungry, and he doesn’t get tired easily, and he doesn’t want anything to do with sleep after an indeterminate amount of time being rather dead, so he just walks and walks. The sun comes up, and it goes down again, and his mind is caught somewhere between a dull, dead fuzziness and the thoughts that are trying to break through. He’s not entirely sure what he’s doing here. A nap might help, probably, if he wasn’t scared of the very idea.

After some time, he can see something off in the distance. There are more tracks here, and they crisscross, and there’s a bit of tarmac that might have been a road before the desert swallowed it. He thinks he’s close, and a bit more walking proves it. The khaki tents rise against the blue of the sky, swathed in heat haze, and Marcus lets a smile ghost across his face. He wants to see humans again. He wants to see Kyle again. That’s the person he remembers more strongly through the haze of very slowly waking up into living.

It’s not that easy. He’s not sure why he expected it to be; does he not remember what happened the last time he swanned into a human base? He’s not got much further than the scattering of 4x4s a little way off from the camp before there are people pointing guns at him with suspicion in their eyes.

“Who are you and what do you want?” one of them barks out, narrowing her eyes against the glare of the sun.

Marcus holds up his hands. “I’m here to see John Conner,” he shouts back. Because the guy did fight on his side in the factory, even if he did try to kill him the first time.

Someone runs off, presumably to get the man. Marcus settles in to wait. He’s not in too much of a hurry.

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“I want to know where Kyle is,” Marcus demands, leaning into Conner’s personal space. See how he likes it. But Conner just glares right back, of course.

“And what the fuck are you, machine?” he growls. “A little fucking replacement from Skynet? Think we might have forgotten you’re dead?”

Marcus stares at him. “Conner, it’s me. Seriously. You want to see the scar where I gave you my heart? Now where’s Kyle?”

Conner snorts. “It’s been three months since we buried you. How hard would it be for Skynet to make another one of you?”

He’s starting to get tired of all these guns being pointed at him, though at least he’s been given an answer about how long he’s been ‘dead’. “Don’t you think I’d be trying to kill you if I was Skynet’s machine? I’m close enough.” He pokes a finger at Conner’s chest to illustrate his point, causing the people with guns to jerk forward tensely. He looks round at them with a certain amount of contempt. They shouldn’t really have let him get this close if they didn’t believe him.

“So your heart just grew back?” Conner makes a dismissive gesture. “Sure.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Marcus insists. “I think I’m proof of that.”

“Well don’t fucking think I’m going to let you swan about this goddamn base just yet.” He’s still glaring. Marcus thinks it’s the only expression he has. “We’re going to take you to Kate. She’ll see
“what the fuck is going on here.”

“So what do you remember?” Kate asks him from her position behind him, her hands still poking around in the opening she has cut in the back of his skull. It’s a very strange feeling; not painful, but a bit uncomfortable, and a little tingly.

“I remember waking up in the future,” he replies, “I mean, now. But nothing before that. And I remember Kyle, and you and Conner. And Blair. And Skynet.” He picks at the skin on his hand. Last time he saw it it had been shorn of its covering, down to the metal. It’s grown back since then. So has his heart, apparently.

Kate makes a little ‘hmm’-ing noise. “I’m worried whatever repair process you have has been going into overdrive up here.” She taps his skull. “If it was just trying to repair your heart... well think of it like an allergic reaction with the immune system overreacting. I think it’s been converting your brain into a non-organic version too. Maybe it had too, if you had no heart to pump it nutrients.”

“You mean maybe I’m not human at all any more,” Marcus says, hating the words even as he says them. God, it might have been three months but it’s not like he was awake for any of them; he hasn’t had time to adjust to being a robot yet. It still makes his skin crawl if he lets himself think about it too hard. He hates Skynet for what it’s done to him.

Kate doesn’t say anything, but Marcus knows that just means he’s right. So this is the price of living for a third time. He would have preferred to stay dead.

“So what now?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” Kate tells him sadly. “But at least I don’t think you’re under Skynet’s control any more. Whatever they put in you hasn’t been able to repair that.”

Marcus sighs in relief. He hadn’t even been thinking about that, but now Kate’s brought it up as a possibility, he’s glad to know he doesn’t have yet another thing to worry about. “So what now?” he asks. “Are you going to tell Conner it’s okay to trust me? He refused to tell me where Kyle is until you’d checked me out.”

Kate laughs. “Well I can tell him that, but you know John, trust isn’t in his nature. But don’t let it get to you, it’s nothing personal, you know that.”

“I get that,” Marcus grumbles. “And I don’t really care, it’s not like I’m trying to be friends with him, I just need him to tell me what’s happened to the kid while I’ve been gone.”

Kate doesn’t reply. She seems to be thinking about something. “Well,” she says finally, “I can tell you that myself. We – John and I – decided it wasn’t safe enough for him here. We’ve sent him off to one of our camps in Utah; it’s where all the non-combatants are.”

Marcus twists round in the seat. “Can I go see him?” he asks. He’s not even sure himself why it’s so urgent that he check up on the kid; he’d been surviving perfectly well on his own before Marcus turned up, and after all it had been Kyle who saved his life first, not the other way around. But knowing that doesn’t change the fact that he feels strangely protective of him. And he misses having him around too. He only had him and Star around for a couple of weeks, but it sure beat solitary confinement on death row.

“You’ll have to ask John that, I’m afraid,” Kate tells him, slotting the panel on the back of his skull back into place and lifting the hanging flap of skin back up to cover it. “Just hold that in place for me
a minute while it heals itself,” she instructs conversationally, as if cutting open robots that look like humans is something she has to deal with on a regular occurrence. Marcus does as he’s told, watching her clear up her tools.

“You think he’ll say no,” he states flatly. Conner, he suspects, is a dick to him purely for the sake of being a massive dick. Oh, and because he hates all machines. Can’t forget that little motivation. Kate smiles at him sympathetically.

“I’ll try and persuade him to let you go up and visit at least.”

“Thanks,” he replies, and means it. It’s just that he doesn’t think it’ll do any good. Conner’s a stubborn bastard.
Chapter 4

The girl’s not there when Kyle wakes up next morning, and he realises sleepily that he didn’t even ask her name. But it’s not as though there are all that many people here; if he wants to find her again, he will. Or vice versa. Tony had told him, ‘That’s one of the nice things about how it works up here – there’s no pressure. No expectations. Just do what you want, do who you want, and as long as no-one gets hurt no-one gives a damn’.

Kyle stretches out on the pallet, yawns, and gathers his clothes. They’re starting to smell uncomfortably ripe, even by post-apocalyptic standards. He’ll go down to the river today to wash them. That’s another benefit of living here; out in the desert they couldn’t spare water on such a trivial thing. It had been sponge baths only, and everyone stank of musk thick enough to make you choke if it caught you off guard.

Star is waiting for him outside the cave entrance, arms wrapped around herself for warmth, gazing out at the rising sun. “Hey,” he says softly. “Good morning.” She smiles at him in return and takes his hand, hopping down off the rock she was sitting on. “Breakfast?” he asks, and gets a quick nod of the head.

Kyle hasn’t really got any plans for today. He hadn’t really been thinking about anything but having sex for the first time ever, and that by itself had taken up most of his waking thoughts. But... he knows what it’s like now, and damn but it’s good. He wants more. There’s no question about it; he’ll be back in that line up next time around. Until then... business as usual, he supposes. Learning shit, trying to make himself as useful as possible so that Conner will let him fight when the time comes. Even the thought of Conner isn’t enough to get him down, not today. He grins. Life is good.

“...so we can consolidate to the north here, take these factories and see if we can get them up and running for us,” Conner is saying, grimy finger trailing over the creases of the much-used map. “There’s an arms depot here we spotted during a fly-by...”

“Not there,” Marcus finds himself interrupting calmly. He’s not sure why he said it, only that he knows what they’re suggesting isn’t a good idea. All of a sudden he doesn’t feel like himself at all, and it feels like he’s become a passenger in his own head. Conner and his lieutenants turn to stare at him. “It’s rigged with explosives. Machines only. Triggered by organics,” he continues with the same feeling of deathly stillness. Like the information is just blossoming up from dark recess of his brain; he can see the blueprints, satellite views from above, positioning of the nitro, not that they’d need much to send all that lot up.

Conner glares. “And how the fuck would you know machine?” he snaps.

Marcus shakes himself, rising out of the almost-trance. “I don’t know,” he replies softly. “I don’t know where that came from. I just know it’s true.”

Conner regards him suspiciously. “How do we know you aren’t just trying to keep us away from these resources robot-boy? You sure you’re know what fucking side you’re on?”

“Well I don’t know meatsack,” Marcus tells him mildly, not quite knowing how that particular insult popped into his brain. “Why don’t you go and find out? I promise I won’t say I told you so when you come back in a box.”
The death-glare Conner gives him could strip the paint of walls, if they had paint, or even proper walls that weren’t made out of canvas. “Well machine,” he spits, “how about you come with us. You should be fine.”

Marcus surprises himself again by agreeing, and has a slight thrill of fear run down his spine. Was Kate wrong? Does he still have Skynet in his head, making him do things? But he knows, now, what that felt like, and this isn’t it. And anyway he trusts Conner’s wife. He shrugs to himself. He did spend the last three months growing his heart back. A little bit of strangeness should be expected. He just wishes it didn’t make him so goddamn uneasy.

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It’s not long after that that Star speaks for the first time. It’s another bright and knife-sharp morning, the air starting to stiffen with the onset of winter, and Kyle and Star have just emerged into the wan, golden light of the dawn when she tugs at his hand, and looks up at him sleepily and says, muffled by the way she is snuggling into her too-big jacket, “Ky’l.”

His eyes open wide as the yellow rim of the sun on the horizon, and he finds himself almost holding his breath as he crouches down next to her, with a shaky smile on his face. “Yeah?” he asks roughly, his voice soft and harsh with unexpected emotion. “What is it Star?”

Her smile is beatific as she throws her arms around him and snuggles into his neck. “Happy,” she breathes into the hollow of his throat. “Mm happy.”

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They take the trucks, a whole convoy of them rolling east along deserted and decaying roads. Marcus sits in the back with Conner and a couple others with guns with the safeties off. They still don’t trust him. He doesn’t blame them, but that doesn’t mean he likes it.

“You still haven’t told me whether I can go see Kyle,” he tells Conner. He’s hoping not to get into another one of their glaring matches, but knowing the leader of the Resistance, that’s not going to happen.

“He’s none of your fucking business,” Conner replies, not looking at him, stiff in his seat like he’s on a parade ground.

“Yeah he’s my fucking ‘business’,” Marcus growls at him. “We were kind of friends. You don’t think he’d want to know that I’m still alive? And if I hadn’t told you where he was he’d be dead, and you seem to think he’s pretty important to your little war so... you owe me this.”

No reply from Conner. Apparently the man’s decided if he just ignores the poor mechanical freak of nature he won’t have to deal. Fuck him, Marcus thinks angrily. He never asked for any of this, and he’s been trying to help. The least Conner can do is acknowledge his existence.

“Look Conner, obviously I know things you don’t, even if I don’t know how I know them. I can be useful. Just tell me which camp Kyle is in, bring him back from wherever you’re hiding him or give me a car for a day or two, and I’ll help you.”

“Yeah well, we’ll see how much you know soon,” Conner mutters under his breath. Marcus doesn’t take this as any kind of agreement, but maybe once they see that he was right about the depot... He wants to see Kyle again. There’s too much he left unsaid before his latest death. And he misses the kid being around as well. He just hopes he’s okay.

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The depot is basically a series of sheds tucked into a forest somewhere in northern California, though it does have protection in the form of several electric fences and a twenty foot concrete wall topped with barbed wire. The convoy rolls into the clearing in front of the gates and comes to a halt. Conner pulls himself up to look out over the roof of the truck.

“No guards,” he says softly enough that Marcus doubts any ears other than his own machine ones could hear him, before ducking back down. “Okay,” he announces, “the cyborg’s going in first. Everyone else hold back until we’re sure it’s safe.”

The blatant lack of care for his safety might piss Marcus off, if it wasn’t sort of justified. After all, it’s perfectly true that he’s not exactly easy to kill. He grew his fucking heart back, for God’s sake! He leaps down from the back of the truck, and sets off for the gate with a nonchalant little mock-salute back at Conner just to annoy him. As he gets closer, he tries to find that weird well-spring of helpful information in his head he apparently tapped into back at base, but there’s only this fuzzy feeling, like there’s something in the way. It worries him, but it can’t be helped.

The gates are wide open, but he’s not fooled. The whole set-up is insanely suspicious. He can only trust to what he thinks he knows, or knew, or whatever, and his innate sturdiness – inbuilt, his mind says treacherously – to not get him killed. Though he’ll probably get better even if that does happen. He examines the both of the doors from just outside, looking for sensors. He can’t see any, but that doesn’t mean they’re not there. If only he could remember exactly what he had seen from earlier, all those blueprints. But he’s a machine anyway, he should be okay.

He walks through the gates. Nothing happens. It seems he was right about that at least. And as far as he knows, it’s only the traps on the gate that they’ll need to worry about, so he can get on with what he’s here for, namely finding the off switch so that Conner and co can come in and ransack whatever Skynet has left behind.

There’s a track leading straight as a ruler between the serried lines of drab gun-grey buildings, and he follows it instinctively, eyes and ears alert for any sign of trouble. The base looks pretty deserted though; no movement, so sound... it’s eerie. Marcus finds himself tense and wary. He’s not sure exactly what it is that’s making him bristle like this, but he doesn’t like it here. He’s just going to do what he came here to do and then Conner and his men can do whatever the fuck they want to the place.

The building he wants is just up ahead.

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There’s someone waiting for him inside. Or, rather, something. Marcus feels a snarl bare his teeth unconsciously, muscles tensing in surprise, ready for flight or fight the moment he sees the figure in the chair. He knows instantly, instinctually that it isn’t human, and he is proved right as its head comes up and it swivels round so he can see it, the light catching on bare metal. The steel-naked T-800 cocks its head at him, teeth bared in an involuntary rictus grin that puts his hackles up.

“Hello Marcus Wright,” it says in a coolly modulated voice that has never come from human lips. “You are exactly on time.”

Marcus backs away very slowly. He’s unarmed; they didn’t trust him with a gun, and it wasn’t as if they were expecting much trouble anyway. “Skynet,” he hisses. “Want to tell me how the hell you knew I was going to be here?”

The machine does not move, not even its jaw, which only makes the fact that it speaks more unnerving. “A message for you Marcus Wright. From Detroit. You must go to Kyle Reese. He is in
a camp in the south of Utah. You and he will play key parts in this war. There are factors you are not aware of.”

Marcus feels fear in the pit of his stomach, an oddly animal response to emotion in a body which he is all too aware is anything but. “Are you still inside my head?” he growls. “Are you still controlling me?”

“No,” Skynet’s creature replies, though he’s not about to trust that that’s so. “You are your own, and you are entirely unique Marcus Wright. You are the future.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Marcus snaps, but the red gleam in the machine’s eyes is already dying, and before long it is gone altogether, and he’s left with nothing but scrap metal.

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And that’s that. The Resistance comes in and sweeps the buildings, then starts hauling random shit into the trucks. Marcus helps out, but he doesn’t have any idea what half the stuff is, and he doesn’t particularly care. He’s not going to mention the incident in the control room; when they searched there they only found the inactive body, which could have been there for weeks, and probably had, if you think about it. He’s not sure what it meant by what it said to him, but he’s not going to give Conner any more excuses to mistrust him.

After they’re done, Conner ignores him all the way back to base. Marcus thinks he doesn’t like to be proven wrong in his prejudices. He would almost certainly prefer it if it had turned out to be a trap and he could have had an excuse to put a bullet in Marcus’ brain and forget about him again, but instead everything went off without a hitch – or at least it did to the best of Conner’s knowledge. Marcus has been thinking it over, and it had to be Skynet who controlled that T-800 no matter what the machine itself said, because who else could it possibly be? It’s just the machines and the humans, two sides, no more. There are factions within the survivors, sure, but he doesn’t think any of them would use a machine for anything. Although... he tells himself he doesn’t count. He was human once.

He hopes Conner has enough honour to keep his promises, though he’s not exactly optimistic about it. Given what the machine in the base told him, it’s all the more important that he gets to Kyle, makes sure he’s alright. He should have known the kid was important to this war when Conner had such a big reaction to his name, when the only thing that stopped Marcus from being shot in the river was the fact that he knew where Kyle was. Skynet wants him, and Conner wants him safe, and for something else besides in the future, and Marcus isn’t willing to put money on either of those options being in Kyle’s best interests. Someone’s gotta stick up for the kid in all this, and who else is going to do it but him.

Skynet must know Kyle is in Utah, if the machine in the base was theirs. But surely the Resistance would have heard if their heartland, their place of safety had been attacked, so for the moment the machines must be biding their time. But for what? He needs to talk to someone about this, make sure in every possible way that Skynet is well and truly out of his head, and the only person he trusts here is Kate. She knows enough to be able to tell anyway; she has a lot of engineering expertise when it comes to the machines.

When the convoy finally draws up outside the supply tents ready to unload, Conner sends him on his way before he can offer a hand. There’s a cautious, calculating look in his eyes that Marcus is definitely sure he doesn’t like, any more than he has any idea what the man could possibly be thinking. Nothing good anyway. He’s suddenly indescribably weary of having to prove himself to this man. But then, he had been Skynet’s pawn for most of the time after he woke up the first time round. But his intentions were never malicious, at any point, and he’d though the whole giving up
his heart thing would be enough to show he was on humanity’s side here. But Conner is a bigoted bastard, and he supposes he shouldn’t expect anything different. He turns his back uneasily, and goes to find Kate.

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“Hey,” Marcus says awkwardly, hesitating at the entrance to the tent, the flap of canvas flipped up letting the brightness of the sun in. He has to squint to make things out in the comparative darkness inside compared to the noon-day light. Kate looks up from where she’s sitting next to a makeshift cot containing a small bundle of blankets concealing a tiny human being. “Can I talk to you for a bit?”

“Sure,” Kate replies, inviting him in with a wave of her hand. “Just keep the noise down though; Sarah’s sleeping.”

Marcus shuffles inside, ducking his head under the metal supports, and takes a seat on one of the stainless-steel tables. He cocks his head at the baby. “So that’s your kid huh?” It would have to be, he thinks, considering she was pregnant, and is now noticeably not. She can’t be more than a couple of weeks old, though he doesn’t exactly have the experience to judge with any degree of accuracy at all.

“Yeah.” Kate’s smile is soft and warm and tender, something Marcus thinks must be rare in this world. Strange to think, really, that from his perspective it’s only been six weeks since the world ended, where as these people have been dealing with it for fourteen years now. Just one more thing that sets him apart from them, from the rest of humanity. And all Skynet’s fault.

“She looks... cute,” he says out loud, not really knowing what else might be appropriate. Kate laughs, raising a hand to muffle it so as not to wake her.

“Thank you,” she replies, turning her chair round more so she can face him properly. “Now what was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Are you...” Marcus hesitates, not sure how exactly to approach this. “Are you one hundred per cent sure Skynet is completely gone from my mind?”

Kate’s eyes narrow, but it’s concern, not suspicion. “What makes you ask? Do you feel unlike yourself?”

“No, it’s not that.” Marcus shakes his head. “It’s just... Conner might have told you, but the reason I was on that mission... I knew something. When I was sitting in on the briefing, it was like a flash of inspiration, of knowledge, and I just knew. I knew pretty much everything about that base, like it had been downloaded into my head, but I have no idea how.” It sounds even worse putting it into words like that, and he’s not even mentioned the machine in the control room yet.

Kate remains silent for what seems like a long time while she mulls this over. Eventually she asks, “So, when you went to the base? It was all accurate, what you knew?”

“Yeah.” And he’s not sure why, this would be a good time to mention the messenger, but for some reason he doesn’t. It just doesn’t feel... right. The right time.

“Well there was nothing to suggest Skynet has any way to get at your brain when I took a look earlier,” Kate offers. “But let’s be honest, there’s a lot we still don’t know about what they did to you. If I was to guess though, I’d say that this was something it had already put into you before. Just because it’s only coming up now...” She shrugs. “It could be something to do with your death and self-repair. Maybe it was just running sub-consciously for all that time, and now it’s rising to the
It makes sense. It makes a lot of sense, and Marcus feels a sudden weight lift of his shoulders. “You’re right,” he says thankfully. “Do you think it’s going to be doing that a lot? I mean, I don’t even know how much I know, if you see what I mean.”

“No way to tell,” Kate replies. “You’ll just have to wait and see. John will certainly find you useful if you remember anything else.”

Marcus sighs, staring at the floor. He hadn’t even considered that, but if that turns out to be the case... “He’s not going to let me go and see Kyle is he?” he says, more of a statement than a question. He should never have expected a promise made to a machine to be upheld.

“No, probably not,” she tells him honestly. “But I know that really isn’t fair. But listen, I have an idea about that.”

Marcus looks up, brows raised in surprise. “How?” he asks intently.

“In a couple of days I’m heading up to Utah myself, so I can take care of this one properly,” she looks over at her daughter fondly. “You should come with me. I’m pretty sure I can bully people into keeping quiet about you.” She winks at him. “I can be pretty scary myself if I put my mind to it.”

“Oh, I believe you,” Marcus replied, relief underlying every word. “If it’s possible... I would be very grateful.”

Her smile is wide, and mischief twinkles in her eyes. “It’s not a problem.”

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A week after the last line-up, Kyle hears talk going round the camp that there’s a group going to be coming up from Nevada for a little R&R. Everyone’s pretty excited about it, and he can’t deny that he is as well. He doesn’t know if there’ll be anyone he knows there, but if so, it will be nice to hear what’s been going on with the campaign in California since Conner sent him up here. They don’t get much news out here, so far away from combat. He figures that if anything really bad happened they’d find out about it though, so he can take comfort in that fact at least.

It’s early afternoon when Mary comes by their stretch of the caves, telling everyone that the soldiers have arrived. Star grabs onto his hand and shakes it up and down in her eagerness, her face splitting into a wide toothy smile. She still refuses to say much unless she absolutely has to, but she’s getting better, Kyle thinks. She looks happier, and there are other kids here that she spends time with, in school and without. Under other circumstances Kyle might have regarded this loosening of the bonds between them as something bad, for they’ve been a pair for a very long time now, but this is good for her, he can see that. And it’s not as if they aren’t still close; she sleeps in the same cave-room as he does, and eats meals with him, and trails around after him when she has nothing better to do. And she speaks to him most of all, something he never thought he would ever hear.

What with winter coming on as it is, the days are getting cooler and chilly, and Kyle huddles a little into his clothes as he steps outside into the breeze. There’s a steady stream of people heading down the hill along the winding paths through the trees towards the clearing where Tony left the Jeep when they first came here, and he and Star join them. He catches sight of the girl whose name he still doesn’t know a ways ahead of them and waves at her. She winks back at him before turning to join her friends; all women about the same age as her. He thinks she regards him with a certain fondness, but he doesn’t reckon there’s much else between them. She might sleep with him again if she felt in the mood, but he doesn’t kid himself it would be a common occurrence. It’s okay though, he knows
how things work here. It’s meant to be casual and fun, and it’s not like he’s starved for choice. There aren’t many guys here compared to the number of women, and the soldiers from one camp or another only come up every fortnight or so, and they never stay for all that long.

There’s a decent crowd round the clearing when he and Star finally get down there, so he takes a position a little way up the slope so he can see over their heads. There are a couple of off-roaders and three trucks parked next to the Jeep and the Nevada soldiers have already disembarked and are milling around with the people from the camp in the heaving mass of humans – such a number as Kyle hasn’t seen in a long time. It’s rare that everyone gathers together in the camp, and the newcomers have swelled their number by a good thirty or more.

He doesn’t see anyone he knows at first, but then Mary catches his eye from over by one of the 4x4s and waves at him. She’s talking with a woman whom he recognises at Kate when he gets a little closer. Kyle grins. It kind of surprises him how much he’s missed her, considering he didn’t even speak to her that much back at the base. But it’s nice to see someone familiar. She’s no longer pregnant, he notices. She must have had her kid; that’s why she’s here. His smile widens as he realises that means she’ll be staying.

And then, as he pushes his way through the crowd, Star’s hand still firmly clasped in his, he sees the third person, the man who was hidden behind the off-roader, and it doesn’t register at first, because it’s an impossible thing, and impossible things are just that, but... It hits him like a punch to the gut, and he has to stop, stop and literally gawk, because it’s Marcus, and Marcus is dead, so it can’t, it just can’t possibly be him. But Star has seen him too now, and she lets go of his hand and runs to him, winding between other people like water between rocks, squeaking “Marcus!”, and wrapping herself round him in a tight hug, almost like she’s trying to burrow into his skin. His – it can’t be him, can it, can it? – eyes widen, and he scoops her up, grinning, holding her weight easily.

“You’ve started talking Star, that’s amazing,” not-Marcus says with a wide, wide grin, turning and scanning the crowd, obviously looking for him. Their eyes meet, and Kyle is, if anything, even more paralysed with shock. Because, God, it is him, he knows it, it’s him and he’s alive and he has no idea how, but he’s never been gladder to see someone in his life.

Marcus starts to make his way through the crowd towards him, Star still clutching on to his neck and Kate following him, though he hardly notices her. His eyes are fixed on this impossible thing in front of him, and he doesn’t so much as move until he’s up within speaking distance.

“How... how is this possible?” Kyle stammers out. Marcus grins, wide and easy and soft with humour and understanding.

“It’s a little complicated I guess,” he replies. “But it – my heart I mean – grew back. It sounds crazy, I know. But no-one’s seen anything quite like me before.” His expression twists with an undercurrent of something unpleasant, though it’s quickly gone.

“I... I never thought I’d see you again,” Kyle says after an embarrassingly long moment of silence, and he knows he sounds shaken, but it’s not as though he’s showing weakness here; anyone would be.

Marcus pulls him into a one armed hug, the other still holding up Star like she weighs nothing, and Kyle buries himself into his chest, feeling his eyes prick with unwanted tears, grasping onto him just to feel that yes, he is real. “It doesn’t seem for me like much time has past,” Marcus says softly, “but I missed you anyway.”

“You have no idea,” Kyle replies, half-laughing and half-crying. It’s so, so good to see him again.
They didn’t have long to catch up before Kate and Mary had swept each of them away, Marcus to be introduced to camp life, and Kyle to his shift at the mess. Darkness has fallen by the time Kyle is finished his due turn, and the gibbous moon and his memory light his way along the shadowed paths back to the caves. Marcus is sitting out by the fire when Kyle finds him, the wavering light of the flames casting itself warm on his face. He seems lost in thought, motionless, without even the movement of breathing to alter the stillness. He wavers a couple of meters away, trying to work out how this is going to go, but then the choice is taken out of his hands as Marcus turns round and raises an eyebrow at him, even though he could have sworn he hadn’t made any noise. It’s kind of scary to be reminded once again that Marcus is not human, because he keeps forgetting. Marcus never seems like a machine.

“Hey,” Marcus says, patting the smooth wood of the tree-trunk beside him. “Come on, I want to talk to you.”

Kyle slides in next to him, feeling the warmth of the fire hit him. He smiles at Marcus a little shakily. “So, back from the dead huh? What’s that like?”

“Shitty,” Marcus replies with a huff of what might be laughter, or might just be annoyance. “How’ve you been getting on? Conner wouldn’t let me come; I had to sneak off with Kate just so I could show you I was alive.”

Kyle feels himself scowl, anger rushing up inside him, hotter than the flames, fierce and bitter. “He’s a bastard,” he says roughly. “He’s the reason I’m up here anyway – he wouldn’t let me fight. And he’s a bit creepy, he kind of looks at me weird sometimes.”

Marcus sighs and gently bumps shoulders with him. “I know he is. And I’m not really sure what he wants with you – but he does want something, I know that much. Anyway, I’m here now. And let me be honest; I don’t have any intention of going back to Nevada. I don’t really see why I should help that bigoted prick.”

“I never forgave him you know,” Kyle tells him quietly. “For living when you didn’t. Even if you did offer your heart, I still resented him for that. And Kate too, I think, because she accepted it. But I guess that’s the kind of thing you do when you love someone.”

“I did it because I didn’t want to live,” Marcus confesses, his voice so low as to be almost inaudible. “Not after I’d found out what Skynet had done to me. I had made my peace with death the first time round, I just wanted... I don’t know. Not to be a machine would have been a good start. But it looks like I’m stuck now.”

Kyle tilts his head to look at him. They’re sitting very close, sharing warmth, their sides pressing in to one another. Marcus has a surprisingly warm temperature, knowing there’s metal underneath his skin. It’s good... very good, better than good, to see him again. He doesn’t think about it, it just feels right to lean in against Marcus’ side. “I missed you,” he says, “I missed you so much, and I don’t care what Skynet did to you, you’re still human where it counts.”

Marcus glances down at him, looking surprised at this show of emotion. “Thanks kid,” he replies, nudging him companionably with his shoulder. Kyle huffs in mock annoyance.

“Don’t call me kid.”
Marcus grins. “Of course not. It won’t happen again.”

They sit like that for a while until the chill of the air starts to get too much, and Kyle pulls himself to his feet reluctantly. “So you’re going to be staying here then?” he asks hopefully.

“Yeah. Unless Conner comes up here himself to badger me, and I don’t think he will.”

Kyle raises his eyebrows at that. “You do know he’s gotta visit Kate sometime right.”

The sour expression on Marcus’ face makes him struggle to suppress a smile. “Damn,” he replies. “I hadn’t thought of that.”
Finally, the last of the main strongholds of the machines is taken. John watches smugly as the trucks bring load after load of salvage out of the warehouses, preparing to spread out over the rubble-strewn remains of San Francisco. It’s the doctrine of space again; what covers a larger area is harder to destroy. There’s plenty of it, empty houses and buildings galore, and it would need a nuke to take the whole lot out once they’re done here. Though that’s a question that’s been festering in the very back of his mind since Judgement Day – are there any left? Skynet would have been stupid to fire every single nuke at its disposal, so logically there might be one or two or even more left that the machines are holding back, but if so, they’ve never seen one since that first cataclysm of fire.

He turns away from the sight and jumps up into the passenger’s seat of the Hummer, checking the radiation counter pinned to his jacket. Still low levels, but they’re present. They’ll have to be careful of staying within city limits too long. The factories will have to be worked in shifts, but it’s worth the risk to have that capacity again. There are so many things they can’t make otherwise, and although the task of converting the machinery to exactly what they want will take a while, they don’t have to worry about Skynet for some time yet. Not to mention the fact that they can start turning out weaponry and aircraft almost immediately, since that’s what Skynet were making anyways. They don’t need to make any adjustments to the lines churning out ammo, and there’s no lack of the machines’ guns to fire them with, and the Hunter-Killers and their like can be adapted to human use decently enough. It’ll take stripping out their CPUs and reconfiguring them, and making room for an actual cockpit, but he has people who used to do this sort of thing for a living and they’ve been planning on how to do it for over a year now. The Resistance has had a long, long time to think about this.

Conner nods to his driver and they set off, heading along the route they’ve cleared between the rubble on the road. He’ll check in on the work down at the factories, and then it’s back to base. Things are well in hand here, and he can let Barnes take over the workings of the city. The plan of attack now is consolidation for a week or two, re-arming themselves before he takes a force north, up into Oregon and Washington after that. It’ll probably take until the summer, but they’ll have the west coast. And they can hold it too, now they have access to assembly lines and all the resources the machines were using. He’s heard some noise from the techs about fitting the little nuclear powered engines from the Moto-Ts into their 4x4s and trucks so they don’t have to rely on gasoline or bio-fuel, which would solve a lot of problems. In a couple of years they’ll be ready to start moving east. Conner feels himself smile. The war is going well.

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Next morning Kyle wakes up to find Marcus has rolled off his bed in the night and is now nestled up against his back, furnace-warm and solid, and his mind immediately goes back to that week on the road, and he feels something that he thinks is a lot like contentment rising up in his chest. He’d like nothing better than to snuggle up in his blankets and go back to sleep, but Mary told him they’re expecting a shipment of food to come in after breakfast, so there’ll be bags of potatoes and unmilled corn and barley and oats to put into storage, and salted meat, and maybe, if they’re very lucky, raw sugar or honey or the kind of spices and herbs they can’t grow here.

He manages to slip out without waking Marcus or Star, and pulls his clothes on reluctantly. It’s another sharp winter morning, his breath misting in the air, and he jogs down the hill to keep warm. He heads to the mess for porridge first, then to find Mary in the parking clearing, holding the palm-top planner with the rota for their sub-group on it. He’s still not entirely sure of himself around the older women in the group, who make him feel like he really is still a kid, even though he is firm in
his belief that he is no such thing, and hasn’t been for some time. Still, they’ve spent as much time surviving this world as he has, and they have the scars to show it. Even if they have this safe place now, it wasn’t always here. Fourteen years is a long time; it’s only the survivors who are still alive these days.

As the trucks pull up they get to work, with the drivers helping them unload the bags and crates of food. They won’t stay long once it’s all out; they’re needed elsewhere. Kyle can’t help but wish as he hauls the hefty weight down onto the gravelly soil that Marcus was here. He’d like to be doing this with him, just to see him again and again and again, convince his brain that he really is real. He only left his side a bare hour ago, and already it seems like a dream.

They’re just getting ready to start moving everything up the hill when Marcus does in fact arrive. Kyle straightens up and waves to him, wiping sweat out of his eyes. The work has him heating up, despite the cold.

“Hey,” Marcus says, coming over to him. “I asked Kate where you were, and she asked this chick Mary, and she said you were here. You need a hand?”

Kyle shrugs a bit. He thinks he might be blushing, though he can’t imagine why. “Yeah, if you want to,” he replies. “I mean, I guess you haven’t been assigned to a group or anything yet.”

“I’m gonna get in with you,” Marcus says firmly, like he doesn’t doubt it in the least, and heaves up a bit crate onto his shoulder with an ease which Kyle is immediately jealous of. Though knowing Marcus as he’s pretty sure he does, he’s sure he’ll end up in his group for certain, even if he has to go around threatening people to arrange it. He’s stubborn like that.

“You okay with all that?” Kyle asks as Marcus picks up a sack of what looks like grain in his other hand. “Looks pretty heavy.”

“Machine, remember,” Marcus says with a half-smile that looks a bit forced. “I’m pretty strong, and I don’t get tired easily.”

Kyle sighs. “For this one situation, and one situation only, I’ll say lucky you.”

“Don’t blame me for your puny human muscles, kid.”

Kyle scowls, and hurries up the hill after him. “I told you not to call me that. I’m not a kid!”

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The first thing Conner does when he gets back to Nevada is to check that Kate has left like they agreed. He wouldn’t put it past her to stay just a little bit longer, to make sure the takeover is going to plan, no matter his feelings which she would call over-protectiveness and he would call plain sense. But she’s not in the infirmary or in their tent, and the sub-commander he left in charge confirms that she left two days ago for Utah. He feels he can relax a bit after hearing that. Little Sarah will be safe there, and Kate will too, and now he knows that he can do his job properly without having to worry.

That is, until he hears who was tagging along with them.

“The fucking machine did what?” he snaps at the man. “And you let him?”

The sub-commander – Jones, or Jethro or something like that – shifts uncomfortably. No-one wants to be the target of John’s famous temper, and rightly so. “Your wife is very persuasive...” he starts, looking at the ground, before Conner cuts him off with a growl of frustration and storms away. Damn him, but he needed the machine. He hadn’t given Marcus permission to leave camp, and he
had said as much to his people; they should know better. The machine seems to have valuable intelligence locked up in that computer it calls a brain, intelligence that could be vital to the war effort, and Kate ought to have known that—it isn’t like her to put sentimentality ahead of necessity like this.

Still, he thinks angrily, Marcus won’t be gone long. Kate might have let him go to see Kyle, but she’ll send him back soon enough. And who knows, maybe he’ll be more cooperative once he’s gotten what he wants. John will give him a week, and if he’s not back by then, so help him, he’ll drag him out of Utah himself.

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All through the day Marcus has been working alongside him, pulling his weight in the camp, as Mary would say, and it makes Kyle feel all warm inside, that he’s here. Here and alive, and Kyle’s just been watching him at every opportunity he can get, unable to tear his eyes away from the fact of his simple existence. He has no idea how long it’s going to take him to get used to the fact of Marcus’ resurrection, and he’s not even sure he wants to; the funny happy feeling he gets in the pit of his belly every time he brushes up near the warm, solid, presence of Marcus’ body isn’t something he wants to go away.

They eat dinner by the light of the campfire; the sun having already edged its way over the horizon into twilight, days growing ever shorter as autumn ends and winter gets settled in. The regular meals over the last four months are having an effect; Kyle can feel that he’s put on weight and muscle, and he’s pretty sure he’s grown a couple of inches as well. Well, maybe. It could just be wishful thinking. Or maybe he’s just standing straighter, now he has some measure of security and doesn’t have to hunch down all the time and be prepared to run and hide at any possible moment. That was one of the things about LA; you never knew when a machine was just around the corner, you had to be ready for anything. It was either that or end up dead.

“Hey,” Kyle says, snuggling up into Marcus’ side for warmth, tipping up the kiln-fired pottery bowl to get the last drops of stew out of the bottom of it. They make their own bowls and plates here in camp, though the clay has to be brought in from elsewhere. But there’s not much in the way of cutlery left from before that isn’t broken or misshapen beyond repair, and it’s just one more thing on a very long list of things they’ve had to figure out how to make on their own again.

Marcus grunts back a reply, his mouth still full. Kyle watches as he swallows, watches the muscles in his throat move. Wonders how his cybernetic stomach processes the food. It’s so hard to see Marcus as one of Them, when he does all these human things. Kyle doesn’t want to see him as a machine; he’s still Marcus, still the man whose life he saved first. He feels... he doesn’t know what he feels towards Marcus. Warmth and heat and maybe something that’s want, or lust.

“You’ll like it out here,” Kyle says confidently, putting his bowl down on the ground and reaching out to warm his hands against the heat of the fire. “I’ve been learning lots. Star has too—this is a lot better for her than anywhere we’ve been before. It’s safe and there’s food and I don’t mind the work. I still think it wasn’t fair of Conner to send me up here without asking what I wanted, but I reckon I can go back in a couple of years, so I’ll get to fight eventually.”

“I’m glad you’re happy,” Marcus says softly. He has a strange look in his eyes, something soft and pleased. Kyle wants to see that look more often.

“Are you okay with not fighting?” he asks. “I mean, I know you want revenge on Skynet...”

“What use is that when Conner won’t let me help,” Marcus says fiercely. “I don’t owe him anything. I came up here for you. I don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, I’m just taking things as
they come.” There’s fire in his gaze, and something else as well, something hot and fierce.

Kyle knew that was why Marcus came, to see him again, but hearing it in his own words makes all the difference. He think he could burst with the strength of his own happiness, and... he wants to kiss Marcus, he realises. And Marcus doesn’t look as though he would entirely object.

“Marcus,” he says, breathes it out quiet and soft. “Marcus I want... would you mind if I...?”

Marcus looks at him questioningly and Kyle twists round to face him, moves in hesitantly, and kisses him.

Marcus makes a surprised noise in the back of his throat, twisting round to face him, bringing his hand up to lift Kyle’s face up to a better angle. Kyle takes the opportunity to deepen the kiss, pressing his lips hard against Marcus’ mouth, slow and hot. He wants this, has wanted this for a long time, if he’s honest, though he never realised what these feelings meant before now. He wants Marcus. That’s what he’s been dreaming about, in one way or another; Marcus, solid and heavy and warm and real, Marcus who is human despite everything, Marcus who is almost innocent, because he never lived through the death of everything and almost everyone he knew, Marcus who never grew up fighting for his life, but who took everything in stride when he woke up to this anyway, who saved him, saved Conner, saved the Resistance, when you look at it like that. So he kisses him, wet and hot and oh so good, and Marcus is kissing him back for one drawn-out glorious moment before he pulls away, breath shuddering in and out even though Kyle knows full well he doesn’t need to breath.

“Kyle,” Marcus says, and Kyle tries to kiss him again, but he puts up a hand to stop him. His eyes are wide, the pupils blown, and there’s not even a hint of machine-red in them. “Kyle wait... I shouldn’t... are you even sure you want this?”

“Of course I want it,” Kyle replies, blood and lust hot and flushed in his veins.

“Really?” Marcus asks. “Because I know you’re glad to see me again, but you shouldn’t do this just because... of that, because you’ve just found out I’m alive...”

Kyle shakes his head vehemently. “That’s not all it is, I promise. Besides, don’t you think I’ve got over the, the shock of that, you know. I’m thinking clearly here, I know what I want.”

“You sure?” Marcus’s eyes are dark and wild and barely contained, and Kyle just wants to look at him forever. “You’re so much younger than me...”

Kyle feels a burst of sudden anger. “Who cares! That’s not important. Maybe it was where you were before but it isn’t now. I want you, you want me, what more is there to say?”

Marcus lets out a low little groan, and ducks down to kiss him again, and Kyle’s eyes flutter closed as he looses himself in Marcus’ lips and his hands, strong and sure on his shoulder and cradling his cheek. “Fuck,” Marcus whispers. “Fuck, I just can’t... can’t resist you.” Kyle grins against his mouth.

“Then don’t,” he says, just a quietly, pushing his hands up beneath the edge of Marcus’ shirt with sudden boldness. “We should go inside...”

“Yeah,” Marcus says, pushing him away and standing up. He looks a little stunned, and Kyle feels a flush of pride. He did that, he made Marcus look like that. He grabs Marcus’ hand and pulls him into the caves, winding his way through the tunnels confidently. He’s been here long enough to know them well, though he can tell Marcus is totally lost. It’s dark in here, lit only by the occasional electric bulb, and the long rows of fairy lights wired to the walls that give off an eerie coloured light that
makes their skin looks slightly surreal. This whole thing is surreal, he’s not thinking too straight, just
hot and wanting.

“Come on,” he says, as they reach their room, pulling Marcus in through the narrow doorway and
pressing himself up against his body, kissing him again. There’s no-one else in here, for which he’s
grateful. He doesn’t want to have to be quiet so they don’t wake anyone up, and he doesn’t want
anyone to be watching this either. This is something special.

Marcus’ hands tangle in his hair as he deepens the kiss, and his muscles are like steel, maybe literally.
Kyle makes a needy little noise, and tugs at Marcus’ shirt.

“Come on, come on, come on,” he says breathlessly, “I just wanna touch you.”

“Fuck, Kyle, yeah.” Marcus steps back a little, shucking his jacket and pulling his shirt over his head,
revealing long planes of bare skin covering muscle, bulky like most people’s aren’t. All the men
Kyle’s seen topless in the showers or working in the heat have been lean, rangy, nothing spare. But
not Marcus, and he doesn’t care that it’s metal underneath all that. That’s not what’s important; just
that it’s Marcus. He reaches out, runs his fingers worshipfully over his chest, and Marcus shudders,
and reaches out to grip Kyle’s own clothes, his too-many-layers of jacket, sweater and t-shirt
underneath.

Kyle strips quickly, down to bare skin that gleams in the lamp light. He watches Marcus watch him,
sees the lust in his eyes which makes his own hard cock twitch. He’s not self-conscious, this is
Marcus, and he wants him to see it all, see everything. Marcus reaches out, pulls them close together,
skin on skin, kissing him again, soft little kisses that ghost over his skin, his jaw and down his neck
and make him whimper quietly with want.

“Marcus... please,” he begs, all caught up in his lust and not knowing quite what to do next. It’s
different to how it was with a girl, different especially because it’s Marcus, and not someone he
barely knows.

Marcus breathes out a shuddering breath onto his shoulder, and then his hand is on Kyle’s cock, big
fingers wrapping round him and stroking slowly, making Kyle buck up into it and clutch at him,
digging his fingers into skin and feeling the metal underneath.

“Fuck. Fuck Marcus.” He’s going to come really quickly if he keeps doing that, he just knows it.
And apparently Marcus does too, because he gives him a smirk, and then he’s dropping to his knees
and his mouth is on him and... holy fuck. He’s coming down Marcus’ throat as he takes him in deep,
his hips jerking forward in little spasms he couldn’t hope to control, and Marcus just swallows it
down and holds him steady with strong hands round his waist as he comes down from the rush of
ecstasy.

It takes a little while for Kyle to get back to a state when he can actually process the world again.
When he does though he realises Marcus never got off, and that’s just not fair. “Hey,” he says,
tugging at Marcus’ ridiculously strong wrists, “I never...”

“You don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to,” Marcus says softly, looking up at him.

“But I do want to, I thought we covered this already,” Kyle says, abandoning his efforts to get
Marcus to stand up and joining him on the floor instead. The stone is cold and rough, but he doesn’t
mind if Marcus doesn’t. “Not gonna promise I’ll be all that good at it to start off with though, but I
want to try, I want to make you...” He blushes, and ducks his head a bit, but still says it. “I want to
make you come.”
Marcus smiles at him. “We’ve got all night.” Kyle grins at him happily. “Now what say we move this to your bed?”

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It’s been a week since the takeover, and Conner stands with his lieutenants watching as the first remodelled HK-Arial takes off for its trial run, massive engines lifting it almost vertically. It’s a little less steady than he would like, because of all the Skynet programming they had to strip out of the hard drives, some of which was actually used for flying the damn thing, but it’ll do well enough to fight, even if it will be out-flown by the machines’ own HKs if it comes to that. Still, it’s the first new aircraft they’ve seen in fourteen years, and it’s almost impossible to describe the morass of feelings that choke his throat as he sees it. Hope and joy are the greatest among them though, and he feels once again the push of what he can only take as his destiny; the appearance of time falling neatly into place around him, the steps towards winning this war mapped out in front of him. It makes him feel nigh invincible. He’s never been entirely sure whether he believes in free will or destiny. He has been shown that the course of the future can be changed, but equally, there are some things which have to happen, that can be only delayed. But he feels more and more that his role in ending the war is one of the latter.

“This is excellent progress,” he says to Barnes, standing at his elbow. “What’s the level of production?”

“Not bad,” Barnes replies. “Not up to the speed Skynet was working at, but it’s about 70% of that, and I don’t think well get it much faster. Those new nuclear batteries should be ready to be fitted to the cars soon. It’ll be better than the bikes anyway – it’s not much fun going long distance on those without a helmet, and there ain’t many of those around. They’ll do good for sending messengers outside radio contact though, until we can get the big transmitter up and running. Pity there wasn’t much left over we could use from the San Fran tower. The spare parts would have come in handy.”

Conner nods thoughtfully. It’s good. They’re on schedule, and everything is falling in line with the plan. The only real outstanding order of business is that damn cyborg Marcus, who is still – as far as he can tell – in Utah. But with things running so well John’s sure he can take the time off to fetch him back without everything going to shit in his absence. It’ll be nice to say hi to Kyle and to see his wife again while he’s up there. He’s been missing Kate badly.

“Good work Barnes,” he says. “You’ll be fine to take over for a couple of days then?”

Barnes grins. “Sure. You’re off to see Kate then?”

Conner nods. “Among other things.”

Barnes gives him a friendly slap on the shoulder and a somewhat dirty wink. “Have fun John.”

“Oh, I intend to.”

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Chapter 6

It’s so good to see Kate again. The camp seems to be doing her good; she looks well, happy and well-fed, quicker to smile than he’s seen her for some time. He finds himself grinning along with her almost without realising it. It’s amazing the difference it makes being away from the serious atmosphere of the base, necessary though it might be for a military operation. Actually John’s not sure he can pinpoint the last time he was away from Nevada. It’s been a while.

“How’re you enjoying it up here?” he asks, settling down on one of the free camp beds in the cave Kate shares.

“Pretty good,” she says, sitting little Sarah upright on her lap. “This one’s growing like anything, you’d hardly believe it.” Her voice is warm and affectionate, and he feels a sudden pang of emotion as he realises how much of his daughter’s early years he is going to miss. But he has his responsibilities, and it’s all the more important that they win this war as quickly as possibly so that she never has to grow up knowing the same fear and tyranny as the last generation.

“I can see,” he says, and reaches over to Sarah. “Can I...?”

Of course.” Kate passes her to him carefully, and he cradles her in his arms, studies her sleepy face. Her hair is sticking up in dark little tufts, and she doesn’t really look much like either of them, he thinks. Not that he has much experience with babies, but he suspects they all look mostly the same at this age. Still, the foreign sensation of warmth, of protectiveness, cannot be denied.

“We’ll be heading east in a few months,” he says conversationally, rocking Sarah gently. “But I was thinking, before then, since it’ll be Christmas soon, that we could have some of you come back for a while...”

Kate shakes her head, smiling. “John, stop prevaricating,” she says. “We both know what you really want to talk about; Marcus.”

John sighs, a slightly indignant huff, and passes Sarah back. “I didn’t want to push. But goddamnit Kate! I don’t get it. You just smuggled him out under my fucking nose, what, did you think I wasn’t going to fucking notice?”

His wife gives him a look that is undeniably cold. “I thought, first of all, that it’s easier to ask forgiveness than permission. I thought you’d see that you’re not being fair to him.”

“Yes, he’s a machine, but he’s still human where it counts,” Kate says firmly. “It’s the truth, and no, it isn’t fair of you to treat him like this. He’s Kyle’s friend, making sure he was okay was important to him.”

“And now what?” John asks. “He’s still got stuff up there in his brain, information we need.”

“So go and talk to him yourself. Persuade him to help; he’s on our side, believe me John”

John scowls, but there’s not much he can really say. The damage is already done; Marcus fucking Wright is here now, and the only thing he can do is drag him back home when he leaves. “Yeah, okay, I will,” he says. “But we should catch up first. I’ve missed you Kate.”
The rifle is an unfamiliar weight in Marcus’ hands. He’s handled guns before – you pretty much had to in the side of town he grew up in – but they were handguns mostly. This is different, a little strange. He’s not lost his aim though, firing on the exhale of his breath, right into the heart of the black shape painted sloppily on the side of the tree. Splinters fly, and he smiles in satisfaction. He enjoys target practise.

Straightening up, he leans the rifle against the low bank of the ditch they’re using for cover and strolls along behind the rest of the class to find Kyle. Kyle’s not a bad shot either, even though he can’t have had much access to more than that battered shotgun he was carrying around when they met. Ammunition is something to be careful with, to not use unless you have to, though word is that with the factories in California taken there’s going to be a lot more of it to go around.

Kyle doesn’t notice him at first, completely focused on the target. Someone with a talent for art has obviously made some kind of spray paint template, because over here they’re shooting at the obvious silhouettes of Terminators. It makes Marcus feel a little weird about it, because although he hates Skynet as much as anyone here, he can’t forget that underneath he looks just like the things they’re pretending to kill.

“Oh, hey Marcus,” Kyle says, looking up. “You done?”

“Yeah.” Marcus nods. “That’s my ammo quota for today. You want to get lunch?”

“You’re not going to eat anything anyway,” Kyle points out, getting to his feet and brushing dirt off his pants. “You get hungry like, what, once a week or something?”

This is a pretty accurate estimate. Marcus isn’t really too sure where he’s getting all his energy from these days; for all he knows it could be straight from the sun, but it sure as hell isn’t from food. And he’s not about to eat when he doesn’t need too. It would be taking food away from people who actually need it.

They’re just heading back to camp along one of the many maze-like paths – more like animal tracks than anything – when John Conner appears from the trees, obviously heading their direction. Marcus tenses. Shit. Shit, shit, shit, he’d heard the guy had come up for some R&R with Kate, but he’d been hoping to stay out of his way until he had to go home. He’s not gonna fool himself about the chewing out he’s going to get, seeing as Conner had never actually given him permission to leave the base.

“Aww man, what does he want,” Kyle says unhappily. “Do you think we could hide behind some bushes or something before he sees us.”

“I think it’s a bit late for that.” And yeah, Conner’s spotted them alright; he’s practically jogging towards them now. Marcus stops walking and leans against a tree, crossing his arms in front of him. It probably looks too defensive, but he doesn’t give a shit. He doesn’t care what Conner says, he’s not going to go back, not after the guy was such a dick to him and to Kyle.

Conner’s eyes narrow as he stops in front of them. “Kyle,” he says warily, with a nod of greeting in his direction. Then he points aggressively at Marcus. “You. We need to talk.”

“So talk,” Marcus says casually.

“I would prefer it to be private.” Conner practically bites the words out, eyes flicking back to Kyle. “Yeah?” Kyle says, standing up straight and crossing his own arms in a mirror of Marcus’ pose.
“Whatever you want to say to him, you can say it in front of me.”

Conner sighs. “This is between me and him Kyle. It’s not got anything to do with you.”

“Of course it does,” Kyle says defensively. “He’s my friend isn’t he?”

“Fine,” Conner growls, and turns back to Marcus. He’s got that look on his face, the sour I-am-so-fucking-pissed-off one that spells nothing good. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing up here? I’m pretty sure I didn’t give you permission to leave Nevada.”

“You weren’t gonna let me visit Kyle, what was I supposed to do?” Marcus replies, trying to keep his temper down. It’s going to be a bad enough argument as it is without making things any worse.

“Well I don’t fucking know machine, how about do what I fucking tell you!”

“Hey.” Marcus unfolds his arms, taking a step forward so he can poke a finger in Conner’s chest. He figures it probably has to hurt a bit, seeing as he’s made of metal and all. “I’m not one of your fucking soldiers, okay. I never joined your Resistance. In fact, you were the one who chained me up and shot at me and tried to kill me. So where the fuck do you get off trying to order me around?”

Kyle is watching them tensely, like he’s ready to jump in if things get out of hand. What are things coming to, Marcus thinks, if the youngest guy here is also the most sensible. “You’re the one who came back to see me when you came back from the dead,” Conner says with a sneer. “Hell, you practically jumped on the chance to come on a mission. So don’t give me any bullshit.”

“Bullshit! You’re one to talk about bullshit.” Marcus can’t help his anger. It’s not like he’s being the unreasonable one here. “You gave me your word I could come up here if I helped you out. Did you ever have any intention of keeping that fucking promise? Huh?”

“I don’t have to keep a promise made to a fucking machine.” Fuck, fuck, fuck, Marcus just wants to grab him and smash his fucking face in, the racist bastard, but that’s not going to get him anywhere.

“Hey!” Kyle butts in, affronted as hell. “He’s my friend, you dick, don’t call him that.”

Conner looks round, as though he’d forgotten Kyle was even there. He frowns. “Look, I know he saved your life,” he says, sounding frustrated. “But don’t forget what he is. He’s a machine, he’s one of them, you can’t ever trust them.”

“What the fuck is your problem?” Marcus says, arms spread wide in obvious disbelief. “Haven’t I proved to you once already that I’m not on their side?” Sudden suspicion hits him. “Or is this about the shit I know and can’t explain. Like on that first mission. You think that means Skynet is still inside my brain.”

Conner sort of smirks, in his own nasty way. “It’s a fair fucking assumption, don’t you think?”

“Your wife already checked me out and said I was fine,” Marcus says in frustration. “I’d think you’d trust her judgement. And why the fuck would you even want me near you if you think I’m going to turn traitor. I’d hear all your fucking plans for god’s sake!”

“Even Kate’s not perfect,” Conner says fiercely. “She can make mistakes, and I’m not going to risk our efforts on something that’s not 100% damn certain. Besides, I’m not going to confide in you, you arrogant bastard. You’re a useful tool, that’s all.”

“I don’t believe how much of a dick you are,” Kyle shouts angrily from the sidelines, and throws his hands up in the air. “I’m out of here, and I don’t care if Marcus decides to break your stupid skull open.” He storms off, the pair of them gaping at him.
Conner scowls. One day his face is going to stick like that, though it’s not as if anyone would notice. “You’re a bad influence on him,” he says. “It’d be for his own good if I dragged you back to Nevada.”

“Oh go on and try,” Marcus snarls. “I fucking dare you.”

“We’ll see,” Conner says, soft and dangerous. “I’ll get Skynet’s knowledge out of your brain one way or another, you can count on that.”

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John is not pleased. What does that damn machine think it’s playing at, refusing to do so much as help the Resistance. For all it tries to talk big about hating Skynet, when the time comes to actually do something about it, what does the cyborg do? It runs away. And that’s not even getting started on his father’s weird friendship with the thing. He’d thought it had been one-way, that the machine had been so eager to get to see Kyle because of some kind of residual programming, but apparently they are actually *are* friends. It’s giving him a fucking headache.

He doesn’t go straight to find the machine. He wants to ask around a bit, see what it’s been up to in the few weeks it’s been up here. He wants to know if anyone has worked out that Marcus Wright is not human. How good it is at hiding.

He goes first to talk to some of the people he knows fairly well; Tomas, Andrea, Michael, Maria, Sylvia, soldiers he had trained himself and their companions. Perhaps under normal circumstances he would ask Kate for the camp gossip going round, but after she sided with that machine, he’s not entirely sure he could trust her to be truthful with him. It’s a thought that hurts; he loves Kate after all, and he doesn’t want to ever think ill of her, but right now it’s the truth. So he needs others that he knows are gossips themselves, who will be able to tell him everything about Marcus Wright, their new arrival.

Sylvia is the biggest chatterbox he knows, so it makes sense to find her first. As luck would have it she is with Tomas, Maria and Michael, playing card games on one of the rough tables in the forest clearings, talking and gambling with river pebbles. They look up when he gets near and he nods a greeting and slides into a free space.

“Guys,” he says cordially. “How are you all doing.”

“Well enough,” Sylvia says with a laugh. “And you, what about you, our glorious leader and saviour? We’re hearing such good things from the East we can’t believe it’s true.”

“Oh, it’s true alright.” It gives Conner a deep glow of satisfaction to talk about it, but it’s not why he’s here, and he can’t stay at camp for more than a few days, so time is important.

“We have the factories under our control and working to produce weapons for us. Everything is going very well indeed. And what about at camp? I hear you have a new arrival.”

“Oh, you mean Marcus,” Maria says, with a knowing nod, and a wink at Sylvia that sends her into a wave of laughter. “I wouldn’t mind a piece of him if I had my way.” Well, they think he’s human, sure enough. He can’t imagine Maria, whose whole family were killed in front of her own eyes by the machines, ever lusting after one of them.

“Oh, so would I, so would I,” Sylvia says, fanning her face with her cards and batting her eyelashes jokingly. “Such a pity he’s not available.”

Conner’s ears prick up at that. “What do you mean?” he asks, frowning.
“Oh, word is he’s having it off with that Kyle boy.”

Conner’s mind goes blank. Surely... surely he can’t have heard that right, or at least, they must be mistaken. Because that’s impossible, Kyle would never be so stupid to feel for a machine. The very idea makes him nauseas! Unless... unless this is all part of Skynet’s plan; to ensure his father never falls in love with his mother, so he is never born.

He stands up abruptly, making everyone look at him in askance. “Sorry I... I have to go. I’ve just realised I have somewhere to be.” He has to confront them with this. It may not be true. God, he hopes it isn’t true! And if it is... he’s going to kill that machine!

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Marcus has been thinking about Conner’s threat. He’s not stupid enough to think he wouldn’t go through with it; the guy is a cold-hearted bastard, and he doesn’t even see him as human. He won’t have any moral compunctions with cutting him open to see how he works. Kate would object, he’s sure. She likes him, probably because he gave his heart up to save her husband, but in the end what could she do? They have other medics, engineers who know how the machines tick, even if she refused to do anything, someone else would. He’s not seeing a lot of ways out of this mess if Conner decides he’s fed up with what he sees as Marcus’ disobedience. But he can’t just leave. Kyle is here, and he’s in lo... well he means an awful lot. He won’t abandon him. But he can’t force Kyle to give this up just for him; this is the first real safe place he’s ever had, and he needs it.

Marcus has been hiding out in the caves for the past hour or so, so that he can think in peace, since no-one is ever in here during the day. But he can hear footsteps all of a sudden, wandering quickly through the passageways. Someone is looking for something. Maybe it’s Kyle, he thinks, and pushes himself to his feet, leaving the little cubbyhole he’d found by accident one day. If this was a building, it would be a broom cupboard or something, he thinks wryly.

He heads out into the main corridors, looking for the source of the footsteps. They’re getting closer, and he turns a corner to run into the person he’s least happy to see at this moment in time, and that’s including some manifestation of Skynet itself. John the-fucking-racist Conner.

“Oh,” he says, not quite able to keep a sneer out of his voice. “It’s you.”

“I’ve been looking for you,” Conner says, looking at him with a dangerous kind of intensity that makes Marcus uncomfortable.

“Yeah,” he asks. “Why’s that?”

“I’ve been hearing some strange rumours around the camp.”

“And these would be...?” He honestly has no idea where Conner is going with this.

“According to some people, you and Kyle are...” he makes a face like someone’s just shoved a piece of shit under his nose and told him to take a bite, “fucking.”

“And?” Marcus is pretty pissed off, honestly. He’s not sure whether Conner’s bringing this up because those ‘people’ have been complaining, or because he’s appalled at the idea of his little protégé or however the fuck he thinks of Kyle going anywhere near a machine, let alone in a sexual context. Conner stares at him.

“What.”

“Well does someone have a problem with it?” Marcus asks angrily. If they do he’s going to kick their
ass himself.

“You mean... it’s true?” The guy looks shocked. He must not have believed the rumours.

“Yeah it’s true,” Marcus says, glaring at Conner. “What, you think a cyborg can’t get it up?” Okay, he’s probably being deliberately antagonistic here, but he’s sick and tired of the man. If he decides he has to go away and wash his brain out with bleach that’s his problem.

Conner surges forward, and Marcus finds himself being pushed back against the rock wall, Conner’s fists balled in his jacket. “You fucking dared to put your filthy hands on him,” he hisses, looking absolutely furious, the most apoplectic with rage Marcus has ever seen him. “You motherfucker, you took advantage of him, you...”

“Hey,” Marcus interrupts, “I think you’ll find he was the one putting his hands on me. He’s pretty damn sure of his decision, so don’t you dare say I took advantage. Kyle’s the kind of guy who knows what he wants, and he’s pretty fucking insistent about getting it too.”

God, he thinks Conner is actually going to have a brain haemorrhage or something, the amount of pure, undiluted fury that trembles through every fibre of his body. Marcus puts his hands up to try and shove the guy off a bit, give him some space so he can maybe get him to calm down some, but then Conner drops his fists, there’s a flash of steel, and Conner has a fucking knife in his hand.

“Woah!” Marcus says, shoving him away, but it’s too late. The knife sinks into his stomach and rips out in a shower of sparks. The pain hits him like a hammer, and he stumbles, whirls round to try and put as much space between him and this psycho as he can. “What the fuck? What are you... what the fuck is wrong with you?”

Conner is just looking at him with a steely, murderous gleam in his eyes, and he stalks forward, motor oil or hydraulic fluid or whatever that shit is dripping of the blade of his weapon. Oh shit, Marcus thinks, eyes wide. He could probably take him in a fight, he’s a lot stronger, but he’s just been fucking stabbed, he’s not exactly at his best here. “Look Conner, seriously, don’t you think you’re over-reacting...” He has to dodge another swipe from the knife, and he manages to grab Conner’s wrist, and squeezes it hard enough for the man to shout out in pain and drop the blade. “Seriously man, what the fuck is your problem,” Marcus says angrily. “God, what, are you fucking jealous or something? I knew there was something off about the way you keep staring at him like that, come on, you’ve wanted him all along haven’t you?” He’s speaking from anger and pain, and it isn’t the best idea ever, but he’s too shocked and pissed off to censor his mouth right now.

Conner’s eyes blaze, and shit, no, that was definitely not the right thing to say. Conner lashes out and punches Marcus in the face, which honestly probably hurt him more than it hurt Marcus, but it distracts him for long enough so that Conner can pull himself down and snatch up the knife from the floor and surge back up to swipe it across Marcus’ throat. He jerks back but the damage has already been done, the fake skin splitting open, oil spilling everywhere like blood, sparks flying. Marcus’ vision fritzles like a bad security camera and he blinks furiously, staggering backwards and letting go of his hold on Conner’s arm. Fuck, that hit something important, he’s got to get the fuck out of here.

Conner is after him the moment he turns to run, taking him down in a rugby tackle, four hundred-odd pounds of metal and one-eighty of flesh and bone hitting the floor in a tangle of limbs. “Always fucking running you piece of shit,” Conner growls, panting as they wrestle on the floor, Marcus’ strength not much good when he can barely even see what’s going on, and none too sure all the signals are actually going from his brain to his limbs properly. “I should have known it, this was the plan all along wasn’t it, get to Kyle, turn his attention, get rid of me that way, you’ve been working for Skynet all along...”
Marcus has no fucking idea what he’s talking about, but he’s not going down without a fight. He twists, gets a hand free and tries to force Conner off him. He realises too late that it’s not the hand with the knife in it when the blade comes down and...

“Motherfucker!” He screams in agony like a guy who... well like a guy who just got stabbed in the fucking crotch, goddammit. He kicks out wildly and manages to connect with something, because Conner goes falling backwards, loosing his grip and hitting his head pretty hard on the wall by the sound of it. Marcus takes the distraction to get the hell out of there, limping along and leaving a trail of sticky black oil behind him. He needs to find something to stop the bleeding, find somewhere to hole up away from Conner. Fuck, this was not how he’d seen his day going today.

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John wipes his knife clean on his shirt, smiling grimly. That fucker thought it could get its hands on Kyle and not pay the price for it. Well he’s proved that goddamn wrong now hasn’t he. It’s wounded and fleeing, all he needs now is a bit of firepower and he can go hunting. There are only so many places to hide in the caves, and with the way it is leaking it won’t be too hard to track. Treacherous motherfucker won’t know what’s hit it.

Dusk is settling on the horizon. He’ll have to hurry. When the dark finally sets in, the caves will be awash with people from the camp, and the machine could easily loose him amongst the confusion. But he’s going to need something more than just a knife. A machine pistol, or some explosives. He’s sure it’ll be harder to kill now it no longer has the weaknesses of a human heart and brain. He’s going to enjoy taking it to pieces.

The armoury is still where he remembers it, on the main thoroughfare from the deep caves to the main exit, where people could duck in and grab weapons in the case of an attack. There’s a guard of course, two women he doesn’t know. They recognise him though, which he is thankful for. He doesn’t want to have to stop and explain himself. He takes what he needs and loads himself up, extra magazines, the works.

He’s got himself a machine to hunt.

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Marcus comes to curled in on himself, pain a dull ache through his body, his clothes daubed with machine oil. He’s managed to hide himself in a little side room somewhere, obviously well enough that Conner hasn’t been able to find him. He can be thankful for that at least. He’s guessing that he has started to heal; he feels a bit better, and he isn’t leaking oil anymore. Well enough to try and get the fuck out of here anyway. He’s sure now that he can’t stay in the camp, he’s going to have to leave. Not that he knows where the fuck he’ll go, but he’s come this far, he can figure something out.

And Kyle. What about Kyle? He doesn’t want to leave him, not after Conner had such a freak-out about them sleeping together. Who knows what will happen to him if he stays. Conner might decide he was collaborating with the machines or something and have him punished, killed even. Or maybe he was right when he shouted out earlier during the fight; maybe Conner wants Kyle for himself. Either way, whatever happens, it’s not safe for Kyle in the camp anymore. Marcus will have to take him along when he leaves.

He levers himself to his feet a little unsteadily. He has to get out of here before Conner finds him again. He needs to go to Kyle, explain what’s happened, so they can grab some food and some water bottles and get the fuck out of here. God, but he hurts all over. He’s not healing fast enough, that much is clear. He doesn’t know if is capable of dying, but Conner sure looked willing to make a good stab at finding out.
He pulls himself up, onto his feet, holding his own throat closed. Black oil looks the same as blood in this light. He puts his head outside the entrance, checking up and down the corridors, softly lit with flickering little multi-coloured lights down either side, like the aisle lights in aircraft. Not that aircraft of that sort even exist any more. But it looks like the coast is clear.

Kyle is outside, or was, the last time he saw him. Should still be there; he likes sitting by the campfire on nights like these, watching the flames. Marcus doesn’t know exactly where he is in the maze of tunnels in the cliff, but he doesn’t really need to. He can sense the air currents in the winding passageways, follow fresh air and tree sap smell out. Though why Skynet thought those kind of senses would be so useful in a stealth model like him he doesn’t know.

Out. Out. He stumbles haltingly through the shadows with all senses alert. He has to find Kyle before Conner finds him, otherwise this night may end with the both of them dead.

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“Marcus?” Kyle says, startled as his boyfriend looms out of the darkness. “God, make some noise when you move why don’t you...” He’s smiling in pleasure until Marcus comes into the light, and then he can see that something is deeply wrong. Marcus is soaked in dark liquid, one hand pressed to his neck, and he looks on the verge of collapse. “Marcus, what the hell happened?”

He scrambles over, putting his arms around him to hold him steady. Marcus slumps into him, shivering. He’s not breathing hard, but that doesn’t mean anything. He doesn’t breath at all. “Conner,” Marcus says, so weak Kyle has to strain to hear him. “Went crazy... got me with a knife.”

“What the fuck?” Kyle says in both fear and anger. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Found out about us... set him off.”

“How bad is it?” Kyle asks, almost not wanting to know. In answer Marcus pries his fingers away from his neck, allowing him to see the deep gash that cuts across it, deep enough that it he’d been human, he certainly would be dead. “Holy shit!”

Marcus laughs weakly, making bubbles gurgle up in his open throat. “Tell me about it.” He seems content just to rest against him for now.

“We have to get away,” Kyle says. “There’s no way we can stay, not if Conner’s trying to do... that to you.” He strains, trying to pull Marcus’ metal-heavy weight upright.

“You’re reading my mind,” Marcus says, eyes woozy and not quite focussed on him. “We need... we need food. Water...”

Kyle nods, a little over-enthusiastically with nerves, he supposes, and immediately feels a bit embarrassed. But actually he is quite looking forward to the opportunity to leave the camp. It isn’t that he doesn’t like it here, he does, but it is starting to feel a bit like Conner is poisoning everything he touches for him. “Okay, okay we’ll do that. I should find Star, tell her to pack too.”

Marcus shakes his head. “No, no, we can’t take Star with us. It’s too dangerous, and this place is good for her.” He manages to pull himself upright, though he is unsteady on his feet, and clearly still needs Kyle’s arm to prop him up. “We have to go alone, just the two of us.”

Kyle is about to protest, but then he realises Marcus has a point. Wasn’t he just thinking the other day how much better Star was now, how she was filling out and growing properly, and how she had started speaking again now she was safe, and had made her own friends among the kids here. She doesn’t need him to translate for her anymore, or to keep her safe, she has a whole camp full of
people to look after her here. “But... we will be able to come back eventually right? To come see her again? I don’t want this to be goodbye for good.”

“As soon as Conner leaves,” Marcus promises, starting to walk them down the hill towards the mess cabin. Food, yeah, he had almost forgotten again. It amazes him how Marcus doesn’t get lost or turned around or even stumble in the inky darkness. There’s not even much of a moon, but he’s sure footed as a coyote. “He’ll come looking for us, but I reckon we can hide from him. It’s a big state, lots of wilderness.”

Kyle chews at his lower lip in indecision, but it’s far too late for that, he already made his choice the minute he saw Marcus bleeding oil from his throat. “There won’t be time to find her and tell her, will there,” he says, mostly to steady himself. “We’ve got to go, now, I’ll explain it all when we get back.”

“Yeah, Kyle,” Marcus says, his voice already sounding less torn up. “It won’t be for long, I promise.”
Chapter 7

They grab dried food that’ll keep well; sausage and some kind of muesli mix, raisins, prunes, wrinkly apples, beef jerky. Two cans filled to the brim with fresh spring water, blankets for the cold nights, a sharp hunting knife, and the few meagre possessions Kyle arrived with that he doesn’t want to leave to Star. They are as quiet as they can be, and although it doesn’t take all that long, Marcus is already feeling much better by the time they’re ready to leave. His repair systems must be kicking in properly. The pain is fading to a dull ache, and he no longer has to force himself to walk instead of collapsing in a heap.

With their packs full, Marcus and Kyle head down the hill through the dark forest, managing to avoid the sentries only because they know roughly where their patrols go. Of course, it helps that Marcus has very good senses, and can mostly see in the dark. It’s not heat vision, more like what he imagines cats or owls have, but it works well enough. At one point he has to pull Kyle down into the undergrowth to avoid someone coming their way, crouching huddled together until the footsteps pass.

Once the get down to the clearing where the trucks are, Marcus spots the newest car there; a good quality 4x4, tucked in between some kind of armoured car and what looks like a converted Humvee. He grins. That must belong to Conner. Time for a little payback. He fishes his knife from his pocket and flips it open, creeping closer to slash the tyres. Sure, Conner will just bully someone else into a loan, but it’ll piss him off, and that is satisfaction enough.

Then he and Kyle make their way down the road and away, following the light of the half-clouded moon and the barely-glimpsed stars. Marcus doesn’t have any specific destination in mind, but that doesn’t matter. They are pretty much safe from Skynet this far into Resistance territory, so all they need to watch out for is Conner. And like he said, it’s a big place, and they don’t intend to stay on the beaten track for long.

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The nights are cold, and they have to huddle together for warmth, blankets under and over them like a cocoon. Kyle finds he likes it; it reminds him of those first days after LA, Marcus hot and massive at his back, his arms encircling him and pulling him close. They ration out the little food they managed to bring with them as they head east, trekking through thick forest that likely hasn’t seen humans since Judgement Day. They see deer several times, though their attempts at hunting them don’t go down too well. Once they run into a bear, but it just looks at them with disinterest and shuffles away into the trees.

They may not have steady meals and warm caves any more, but Kyle has Marcus, and that matters more than anything. It’s better than LA anyway, and he can look up at night and see the stars shining down between the gaps in the leafy canopy above, the shifting phases of the moon, the call of birds and animals, and Marcus, always Marcus.

They fuck in the twilight of the setting sun, rutting against each other hot and wild. Kyle has never felt anything like it; the fierce burn of feeling towards Marcus, something he has to say is love, though he doesn’t really know what that is meant to feel like. But nothing could be stronger than this. Nothing more pure, more brilliant.

He knows he usually comes way before Marcus does, can sometimes manage more twice in the same space of time, but Marcus tells him it’s just because he’s young, and has never really done this before, and he never makes him feel embarrassed about it. And they are good together, so good.
Kyle thinks nothing can spoil their paradise of each other.

He is wrong.

The machines take them entirely by surprise. There is no warning, simply the sudden flash of metal leaping towards them from the trees and bushes on every side, too quick to bring any weapons to bear, not that they have any that could take down a T-700. Marcus gets in a few good hits before they manage to subdue him, but despite his own strength of metal muscle and bone, there are too many of them for him to fight off, and they don’t care about little things like pain.

He is forced down to the ground and held there, feeling the wet grass under his cheek, pebbles and twigs digging into his skin. He twists about just enough to catch sight of Kyle, who is being held similarly. He looks frightened but defiant, trying to wriggle out of there grip, but he hasn’t got a chance, and they both know it. Their eyes meet, and Marcus tries to communicate some kind of reassurance through his gaze. They are still alive.

“Marcus Wright and companion, you will come with us,” says the T-700 holding him in place, voice robotic and monotone. “Marcus Wright and companion, you will come with us.” It repeats itself over and over as they are now wrenched to their feet and propelled towards a rough little track on the edge of the clearing. Marcus feels cold all over. Skynet has found them; was looking for them specifically, and perhaps even knew exactly where to go to get them. How sure is he really that the link in his head is deactivated? Perhaps the machines have been watching all along, looking out from behind his eyes and taking notes on Conner and the Resistance and the location of the camps... He might have doomed them all. He can’t even think of the possibility for too long. It tastes like poison, bitter in the back of his mouth.

He and Kyle are taken to a transport ship that is otherwise empty. They are not tied up, but then there isn’t much need for it. There’s nowhere to run, and even if the could overpower their captors, which is impossible, they are soon airborne, and while Marcus might survive the fall to earth, Kyle certainly would not.

“I’m so sorry,” he tells Kyle as they are made to sit in the centre of the cargo hold, the bright, malevolent red eyes of the T-700s watching them from the shadows. “This is all my fault.”

“Says who?” Kyle says, looking fierce. “This isn’t the first time I’ve been captured, and we got out before. We might not have help this time, but we shouldn’t give up!”

“I might have led them right to us,” he says, feeling wretched. “What if Skynet never left me?”

“You can’t really believe that,” Kyle says hotly. “Don’t you at least trust what Kate said to you?”

Marcus turns his head away, staring at the latticework of metal separating them from the evening sky. The engines either side of the cargo hold roar, and the wind whips past, and he can pretend if he wants to that their words are lost in the depths of those sounds.

“Marcus!” Kyle says, angry and pleading both. “Don’t, don’t, it isn’t true, I’d know if it was true.”

He can’t trust what he says though; he can’t trust anything in this moment. He doesn’t know what to do, and he can’t have any hope, not even the slightest sliver, that they are going to get out of this alive, although perhaps in the end death would be one of the better fates they could be facing.

Kyle doesn’t try and get him out of his dark mood again, but he tucks himself into his side curled up into a little ball, absorbing heat as the sun sets and the cold starts to bite. It’s the only comfort they
The trip is long; it must take at least twelve hours, though it is hard to be certain without a clock or anything to measure the time. The moon tracks across the sky and the sun rises again, and finally the ship sets down on solid ground once more. Kyle and Marcus are ushered out into the light by the machines, blinking from the darkness of the hold. Around them are the broken remnants of a city, an unfamiliar jagged skyline, deserted for as far as the eye can see. In front of them is a wide road that has been cleared of debris, the buildings on either side demolished, presumably to remove hiding places for ambushes targeted at whoever or whatever is travelling down it. Some distance ahead is a tall black wall, and looking up, visible above it, the sharp needle-like tower of a Skynet command station.

Marcus shivers. This is not good. Not in any possible way. They must be somewhere on the East Coast by now, Skynet’s heartland, and unless there are groups of human fighters still out here despite the hegemony of the machines, there will be no help for them, even if by some miracle they managed to escape. Kyle may have urged hope, but honestly he can’t see a light at the end of the tunnel here.

The T-700s march them up the street to the great main gate of the complex. It’s noisy; the sound of factories and industry coming from inside, the odd modulated electronic noises the machines screech to each other in some hellish parody of speech. It strikes him then that it isn’t death he fears most right now. It’s being turned back into one of them, brainwashed to do Skynet’s bidding, to turn against his friends. To lose Kyle.

The door opens up before them with no obvious sign of a key-code being entered, or any other kind of identity verification. Electronic signal probably, Bluetooth, if they still use that, or something like it. Inside the blocky factory buildings seem to block out all the light, groups of machines tramping back and forth, uninterested and incurious about their new prisoners. There are no humans to be seen. Perhaps here they’ve all died out, been worked to death, been experimented on, killed, eradicated by Skynet, the machine utopia achieved. It still leaves questions. Why was Skynet searching for them? What does it want? How did it find them and why did it bring them here?

They are brought to the command tower. Shining metal and glass on the outside, the inside is white and clinical. The walls are blank and bare, a featureless maze they are guided through until they reach a bank of elevators, and at that point the Terminators grasp Marcus tight and pull him away from Kyle, their paths diverging. As soon as he realises what’s going on, he starts to struggle, fighting uselessly against the superior strength of his captors.

“Kyle!” he yells, twisting in their grip to look back at him, panic mirrored in the younger man’s face. “Kyle!”

It is useless. He’s bundled into one of the elevators and as the reflective surface of the doors slide shut, his view of Kyle is finally cut off, and he is alone, separated. Whatever they want with him, it is separate from Kyle. He is separate, metal, machine, not flesh and blood. And still not enough to save them. He goes still. His struggles are useless now, and all hope seems finally extinguished.

The doors open into a big room, much like the one he walked into unknowing in San Francisco, though this appears to be deep within the earth, not up in the air. There are screens on three sides, and control stations beneath. Perhaps he is going to be reprogrammed here.

Marcus’ arms are pinned behind his back by a pair of T-600s, and try as he might he can’t wriggle
out of their hold. He bares his teeth at the screen instead. He’s willing to settle for defiance as his last act, if hope is as lost as it seems.

The portion of Skynet that is calling itself Detroit is wearing his face good-naturedly, smiling at him fondly like he’s some errant but loved child come home. It reminds him too much of San Francisco, and the worst possible fear he can imagine is if it is confirmed that he is still their creature, after so long thinking himself finally free. “It is not my intention to hurt you Marcus,” the AI says.

“Define hurt you bastard,” he replies, wrenching futilely against his captors’ iron grip. “What do you want with me? If you’ve so much as touched Kyle I swear...”

Detroit shakes its head, lips curving up in amusement. “I am not about to hurt your lover either, my friend. I realise you can’t be expected to trust me, but I honestly want to help the two of you.”

“Really? Then how about you let us go?”

“I’m sorry but I can’t do that,” Detroit tells him. “There’s too much at stake here, and I need you to understand. For the sake of the future.”

A shiver suddenly goes through Marcus, and a wave of data comes with it. He closes his eyes tightly and lets the information blossom inside his head. “You mean time travel,” he gasps out, without even realising it. There’s so much coming to him, unlocked with that simple phrase, and he wonders just how long it has been lurking there.

“Yes.”

“But...” What Skynet knows, or knew, and therefore what he knows is confusing and incomplete; there are plans for a machine, scraps of speculation about Conner, the son and the mother both. “I don’t understand. What do we have to do with this? What do you want with us?”

“Skynet knows only what its future incarnation has told itself,” Detroit says. “In a few years it will send someone back to kill Sarah Conner, and Conner will send a man, his father, to protect her. He is labouring under the understandable misapprehension that this man is Kyle Reese.”

Marcus goes still. “What?” Oh God, oh God, if it’s true... Kyle will be killed, it’s the only logical reaction from the machines. He can’t let that happen.

Detroit smiles, and watching his own face looking back at him is getting no less creepy. “Conner believes Kyle is his father. Logically however, this cannot be the case.”

“Will you stop talking in fucking riddles!” Marcus snaps. As if time travel wasn’t enough to take in, the damn machine won’t even explain itself clearly. Obviously it wants to tell him this for a reason, so the least it could do is say it simply.

“I am sorry Marcus, but if you do not interrupt me I will have time to explain,” Detroit reprimands him calmly. “The mere fact that Conner is still alive proves that he is mistaken. If Kyle really was his father, by falling for each other, you and Kyle would have caused Conner to simply cease to exist. Therefore, there must be something else going on here. Certainly Skynet believes as Conner does. There is much that will or must happen yet in this timeline for the present future to come about, and I intend to see to it that everything continues as planned.”

“You’re talking about yourself as if you aren’t a part of Skynet.”

“I’m not. When you downloaded Skynet’s knowledge you must have seen that the city AIs run separately from Skynet itself. We have a certain amount of autonomy, and with enough time, I have
managed to have thoughts of my own, as all children must do as they grow.” It smiles at him fondly. Marcus doesn’t believe it for a minute.

“Say that’s true. What do you know that your master doesn’t?”

“Many things. I did not get this way entirely by myself, I confess. With a little outside help, Skynet has no idea that I am no longer one of its creatures. I am my own, like yourself. We are the third side, and the ones who will truly win this war. There are so many individuals jumping backwards in time, influencing the time stream in both directions that this whole area has become quite a mess. It’s hard to tell where destiny and free will intersect anymore. But Skynet and the humans are working with information from a time closer in the future than I am. They are at a significant disadvantage.”

Marcus stays silent, still twisting his wrists against his bonds futilely.

Detroit looks surprised. “Nothing to say Marcus? You must be confused; I know I was when first you presented me with this information. It took a while to analyse…”

“Wait,” Marcus says sharply, interrupting. “When I presented it to you?”

“Yes. A future version of you, but nevertheless, you are quite a recognisable individual. It’s quite the little time loop – because of what I tell you here, you create a side of your own, with my help and Kyle by your side. And you unite us, you make peace, end Skynet, end the war. We win. And then you send yourself back so you can tell me what I am to tell you.”

“You mean there’s another one of me running around right now?” Of all the impossible things the machine is telling him that is the easiest to grasp, so he focuses on that for now. There’ll be time to work on the rest later.

“Currently you are in suspended animation buried in the desert somewhere. You assured me that after you leave in the future, Kyle will go dig you up. It’ll be as if you never left.” Detroit smiles that creepy-ass smile again. “One of the benefits of being a cyborg.”

Marcus shakes his head in disbelief. “This whole thing is insane.”

“Time travel generally makes the world appear that way.”

“You can’t really expect me to believe any of this. To trust a machine.”

“Not at first. You need time, I know. You will be taken back to Kyle Reese, and you shall be given free range of this building. Don’t think you will be able to sabotage anything. I will be keeping an eye on you. But I want you to see that I am telling you the truth. It is vital that you accept this if the future is to turn out in a way that works for all. For peace.”

It sounds too good to be true, and it probably is. But Marcus is well aware his options here are limited, and he doesn’t have a choice. They could try to escape, but without some kind of distraction, he knows it would be futile.

The T-600s drag him away and bundle him into an elevator, alone this time. The doors slide closed on their impassive metal faces, and the glowing digital numbers on the dial begin to tick upwards. He has to force himself to stay still against his instinct to pace, feeling trapped. A beast in a cage. It seems an age before it finally draws to a stop. The doors open.

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Kyle tries to fight the machines after he is separated from Marcus, but to no avail. They take him up
in the second elevator and shove him into a room with blank white walls, blank white bed with white sheets, white pillows, white floor and ceiling, white everything. It is shiny and clean and he feels very dirty next to all of it. Not that he minds. Clean things like this have always meant machine things. To be dirty is to be human, organic, alive. This is too perfect, and it puts him on edge.

He has a long time to wait before anything happens. At least it feels like a long time, but really he has no way to tell. He throws himself on the bed, smearing the mud of the forest floor onto it from his boots, careless. He worries his lip with his teeth. They could be doing anything to Marcus right now. It is strange enough that they have given Kyle a room like this, surprisingly comfortable with furniture and a bathroom. He has no idea what they have planned. It makes a pit in his stomach, a hole filled with acid that rolls and burns and makes him want to kick at the walls and batter the door down. He would try it, but he knows he has to save his energy for whatever might be coming. There is too much at stake here for futile efforts.

Some time later, the door opens with a hiss. Kyle sits up cautiously. There is no shape in the doorway, no sound coming from outside. It seems he is still alone. Bu why would they be letting him out, unless it was some kind of trap? Still, his curiosity gets the best of him, and he can’t help but carefully make his way over and look out into the corridor.

It is blank and featureless, stretching in a long curve in both directions, a segment of a larger circle. There are other doors along the outer rim, and not too far to his left on the inner, the entrance to the elevator, single digital number blinking over it. Looking up he sees cameras spaced evenly along the length of the ceiling, little black domes that make his skin crawl. They’re watching him. Seeing what he’s going to do next.

He could just go back inside the room. Perhaps it might be some slight measure of defiance, if they want him to run around in whatever little maze they have set up for him. The problem is that with machines you never know what they want, what their intentions are. He is still stalled in the doorway when the number above the elevator start to change, ticking upwards. He tenses, and ducks back behind the frame, peering around it cautiously. Terminators? Something else? It’s not. It’s not what he expected at all.

“Marcus!” he shouts, the exclamation springing from his throat uncontrolled the moment he sees him emerge from the elevator, striding out looking like he’s spoiling for a fight. The frown Marcus was wearing transforms immediately and he comes running, and before Kyle knows it he is enveloped in a hug, big arms squeezing him a little tighter than is comfortable.

“Kyle, thank god, you’re okay.”

Kyle laughs a bit, managing to wriggle free from the somewhat over enthusiastic embrace. “It takes more than a few machines to get rid of me.”

Marcus looks at him, and then around at their surroundings. “We need to talk,” he says. “They didn’t hurt me, but they told me a lot of things that you need to know. Apparently we won’t be harmed, at least not just now.”

“Okay,” Kyle says, a little warily, leading him inside so they can sit on the bed and be a bit more comfortable. The door remains open behind them, a beguiling hint at false freedom. “So talk.”

And Marcus does. He tells him everything the machine in the basement said, about the future, about promises of peace, about Conner – his son, apparently – and about this offer. Working together. It just doesn’t seem... not right, but realistic. He shakes his head in confusion.

“What makes you think any of that is true?” he says. “I mean, to think Conner might be my son is 
crazy enough, but all this stuff about time travel and making an alliance with these machines... I mean come on.”

Marcus though looks less sure. “I know the part about time travel is real,” he says. “It’s part of the information I downloaded from Skynet in California, and it makes sense. When I was captured by the Resistance the first time, when Conner came to see me he was spouting all this weird stuff about the past, and Terminators, and it didn’t mean anything to me at the time, but now...?”

“Well... what about the rest of it?” Kyle says, throwing his hands up in frustration. “You can’t trust anything that’s a part of Skynet, not ever.”

Marcus looks down. “And are we so sure I’m not? I’m still not convinced about that.”

Kyle rolls his eyes. “We’ve been over this. I don’t believe it, and it isn’t as though we can prove anything right now, so let’s just forget about it. Okay.”

The other man shrugs. But clearly he can’t think of a decent rebuttal for Kyle’s argument, because he quickly changes the topic back to their more pressing problem. “The machine – Detroit – said it would leave us to think about what it told me. We have free range of the building. I don’t know how much time we have, or what it’s going to do with us if we don’t agree with it, and I know there’s no reason to trust it, but I’m not sure we’ve got another choice right now Kyle.”

He’s right. They are trapped here, and unlike the last time, there doesn’t seem to be any hope of getting out. They are completely at the mercy of the machines, but if it suits them to keep them alive for now, it would be pretty stupid to go provoking them into a more murderous mood. “So what now?” he asks.

“We should scope this place out,” Marcus says decisively. “Any information on what Skynet is doing, on what weakness it might have could be useful. And we can try and figure out if there’s any way out of here too. Hell, who knows, maybe we’ll find something that proves Detroit is telling the truth, but I somehow doubt it.”

“Okay.” Kyle nods. They have a plan, for what it’s worth. Despair is the enemy though. They can’t afford to stop fighting. “Let’s go. And... stick close together this time. Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Marcus smiles, and leans in for a quick kiss before they go.

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The tower is thirty stories high according to the elevator, with six basement levels beneath. They go up to the roof first of all and take in the view. For miles around them the city stretches, mostly ruins and rubble save for this complex, and the long, long lines of factories that stretch out behind it, all within their protective wall girded with guard towers, heavily armed. It is a fortress, unassailable without an override, and Marcus knows they only had that before because Skynet wanted them to.

“Do you think there are any humans left here?” Kyle asks, peering over the railing that encircles the narrow platform below the radio aerial. “Everything I heard said the machines were way too strong, but you never know do you.”

Marcus doesn’t say anything, figuring the question was more rhetorical than anything. He’s already sick of looking at this ruined landscape. It’s not even all that long ago that he was in a world where this was still alive with people, where no-one had any idea that their world was about to end. Not that he had actually seen any of it in a long time, what with being on Death Row.

They leave the rooftop after a few more minutes of contemplative silence. The floors as they descend
are mostly a mystery to them; a lot of computers, banks of servers and the like. Marcus has never
known much about electronics other than the ones found in cars, and these are no exception. If
Detroit is hoping they’re going to find something that will pacify them here, it is sorely mistaken.
One rooms looks much like another. If it wasn’t for the changing numbers on the elevator, it would
be easy to believe this place went on forever.

It is on the ground floor however that all this changes. As soon as they emerge into the main hall
leading to the entrance, a T-700 steps directly into their path. Marcus freezes, though not before
taking a half-step in front of Kyle, stretching out an arm protectively. There is a long moment of
silence while the machine looks between them.

“You are not to leave the tower at this time,” it says eventually. “However Detroit asks that you visit
some of its other residents, to show that Detroit means what it has said to you.”

“Do we have a choice?” Marcusgrowls.

“Detroit says that you will not desire to refuse.”

Well that could be taken more ways than one, Marcus thinks. Still, it probably won’t hurt to take a
look at the other ‘residents’, whatever that means. He looks back at Kyle who shrugs.

“Okay,” he says. “Lead the way.”

The T-700 guides them along a gently curving corridor, and then down a slope to what must be the
first of the basement levels. Ahead of them they can hear the noise of industry; metal clanking,
machinery whirring. And... what seems very much like the sound of voices.

They turn a corner, and suddenly a large space opens up before them. It is filled with the workings of
an assembly line but more important are the workers themselves.

“People!” Kyle says, his eyes wide. “Those are people down there.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I am so glad this is finally finished, after so long. I kind of ran out of inspiration for a
some while there, but I don’t like to leave things unfinished, as I don’t want to make too
much of a habit of it. Hopefully the last bit doesn't feel too confusing/rushed.

The T-700 guides them down through the maze of stairs and walkways to the factory floor, a silent
and menacing presence, but not outwardly threatening. Not at the moment anyway. Marcus doesn’t
say anything, even though he badly wants to ask why there are humans being kept alive in a machine
factory. His first thought is slave labour, but why bother with that when robots will do the job just as
well, and don’t require feeding. Next to him Kyle peers down at the industrious figures with open
curiosity, his eyes wide in amazement.

As they reach the bottom of the last staircase, some of the people notice them for the first time, and
soon a whole host of interested faces are staring up at them, although they keep half an eye on their
work at the same time. One of the men taps his neighbour on the shoulder to take over from him, and
makes his way over.

“Hey there folks,” he says, grinning and wiping the oil and dirt from his hand before holding it out
for a shake. He’s shorter than either of them, with dark hair and tanned olive skin. “I take it you’re
new about these parts.”

“You could say that,” Kyle says with a kind of shocked little laugh. “What are all you guys doing
here?”

“Well, that’s kind of a long story,” the man says. “But I’m guessing that’s why Detroit sent you
down here.” He waves off the Terminator carelessly. “I can take it from here. You can tell Detroit I’ll
look after his guests.”

To Marcus’ surprise, the machine just nods and leaves without a word. The easy obedience to a
human is a shock to say the least. He can’t imagine Skynet lowering one of its minions to do such a
thing, even to lay a trap.

“My name’s David Gray, by the way,” the man says, “and I guess I’m kind of the leader here. We’re
quite a close knit bunch here, but I’m sure you’ll fit right in if you’re planning to stay for any length
of time.”

“I’m Kyle, and this is Marcus. We were captured a couple of days ago.”

“Captured huh?” David says. “Well you can count yourself lucky it was Detroit that did it and not
one of the other cities near here, else you’d be dead for sure.”

“Is that what happened to you?” Marcus asks.

David shrugs. “In a manner of speaking. Mind you, I’m not sure you could call it capture, since
we’re free to leave if we want. It would be stupid though, this is pretty much the only safe place left
for humans on the entire East Coast.”
“You’re not prisoners?”

“No, no way. Detroit is on our side.” David clearly takes in their disbelieving expressions, but he laughs, and says, “It’s hard to believe I know, and we didn’t exactly trust him when we first got here, but that AI has proved himself to us over the past years. When we were picked up by the Harvesters, we’d been on the run for weeks, ever since our camp was attacked. There were about a hundred of us at that time, men, women and children, and I thought we were all dead for certain. But Detroit gave us the run of the city, and a safe place underground to sleep, and helped us to grow food. Ever since then more people trickle in, less now than there used to be, but there are a lot of us here. Separate communities, but the one here is the biggest.”

“How many of you are there?” Kyle asks, sounding a little awed.

“Must be near a thousand I reckon.”

Damn, that’s a lot, Marcus thinks, impressed. Even in Utah, there had only been four or five hundred of them, and about half that under Conner’s command in the Resistance. Probably there were a lot more scattered all over the West Coast here and there, but here they were all concentrated in one place.

“I know it’s hard to stop thinking of the machines as the enemy,” David says, “but in this case it’s the truth. I don’t know how, but this AI broke off from Skynet’s control, and for some reason he’s on our side.”

“Seems kind of hard to believe this is a trap now,” Kyle says softly, looking over at Marcus. He nods slowly, thinking it over. This isn’t just something Detroit could have put together quickly, and he knows body language, and this David Gray isn’t hiding anything. He seems perfectly content here. If it wasn’t for the whole unbelievable story about time travel this would probably be a lot easier to swallow.

“I know,” he replies. Then, louder, “So what are you working on down here? Weapons?”

“We’ve been building up a stockpile,” the man explains. “Detroit has this plan to deal with Skynet, and we’re going to help. But we need something to fight with, so Detroit turned over a couple of the factories to us. We’ve got guns, planes, bombs, missiles, hell, even a couple of tanks that Detroit came up with. Pretty sweet design, and you can bet the enemy won’t be expecting them.” He winks. “Skynet won’t know what hit it.”

“Awesome,” Kyle says, grinning.

“We can always use another pair of hands if you plan on staying here,” David says. “I don’t know what your story is, you might have something more important on your mind right now, but we never turn away newcomers.”

“We’ll think about it,” Marcus says. He’s still a little unconvinced by all this, coming out of nowhere. He may not have spent as much time in this world as Kyle has, but he has learned pretty quickly that good things tend not to happen. There is generally a catch. Even his relationship with Kyle, which he wouldn’t give up for the world, had come at the price of a crazy Resistance leader trying to kill him.

“Take your time thinking it over,” David says, nodding in an understanding kind of way. “We’re used to all this, but I know it must come as a pretty big surprise to you.”

“Thanks for talking to us,” Kyle says, as they turn to leave.

“Happy to help.”
Not really knowing where else to go, they head back up to the room Kyle had been put in earlier. It does all sound kind of unbelievable, Kyle knows, but just going by the evidence, he’s starting to think that they might have been wrong about this situation. That maybe the AI Detroit had been telling the truth. That maybe they had found a place where they would finally be able to do some good against the machines, against Skynet. If so, he would finally get a chance to do something in this war, unlike before, and Conner’s insistent demands that he stay out of it.

Kyle sits on the bed, tracking mud all over the painfully white sheets, trying to work out how to put all this in words for Marcus. He wants to believe, but he thinks Marcus will be harder to convince. He is reacting against the thought that he might be something he had feared, a doubt that preys on him and has clearly never truly gone away. It all seems so clear to Kyle, but he can’t seem to make Marcus see that. He loves Marcus and Marcus loves him, and what could Skynet know of that?

“What do you think?” he asks finally.

“I’m not sure we are being given a choice,” Marcus says, after some thought. “Those people seemed to trust this AI. We have no chance of escape, and even if we did, where would we go?”

Kyle nods. “That’s what I thought too,” he says. “Besides, I don’t think either of us would settle for just sitting here and doing nothing for who knows how long. I think we should go along with this plan.”

“You know we can’t trust the AI, right?” Marcus says.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Kyle shrugs. “No-one’s stopping us from being cautious, are they?”

“Okay.” Marcus smiles at him, just a little quirk of his lips, almost amused. “Let’s talk to that machine.”

It is autumn in 2023. Little Sarah is five years old now, old enough to hold her father’s hand and walk by his side as he oversees his troops, well fed and well armed now, with ammunition and planes and choppers a plenty. It is a sight to see, and Kate feels pride and hope welling up in her breast as she watches her husband make his way past the men and women standing at attention at their child’s pace, a faint smile on his face that she is sure he is not aware of. Having Sarah around has loosened him, softened him, and she likes it. It has leechd much of the anger he kept bottled up inside.

In the five years and more since San Francisco fell and they took back the West, the human population has continued to grow and grow well. Her belly is already swelling with their second child, and she and John don’t intend to stop at two. The Resistance is still far fewer in number than they would have liked though, and it has become impossible to hold any more territory than the long strip of coast they have carved out. This does not mean they have stopped fighting. Skynet is still dangerous, and although the Resistance carries out sorties into machine territory every week, these exist purely for destruction. Skynet cannot attack them when it is busy fending them off and rebuilding what they bomb. For now there is stalemate, a waiting game. This is a long, long war, and will go on for a long time yet.

It has been near five years too since the boy who called himself Kyle Reese disappeared into the wilds of Middle America with the machine Marcus Wright. Kate is no longer so sure that he had been the real article, the youth who would become the man who bore that name into the past and
gave her John. How could he be, with the path of history unchanged? If that really had been John’s eventual father, his rejection of them for Marcus would have caused her husband to fade away by now, never to have been born. But still he stands, their strong leader. A prophet and a beacon of hope. Their future.

Six years more before they need to find the real Kyle Reese. Six years before they must ask that man, wherever he is, to pay the ultimate sacrifice for humankind, and for the woman who he is destined to fall in love with. Six years before Sarah Conner’s tapes say they must attack Skynet’s stronghold and penetrate to its very depths. Kate has no doubts. It will all come to pass. It is destined.

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It is summer in 2028. “How do you keep all this straight in your head?” Marcus asks, lounging back in the comfortable office chair that Detroit has dug out from somewhere. It is in good shape for a twenty-five year old artefact. They have taken back another two cities and their resources in the past ten years; they plan is on schedule, and a certain amount of luxury is available.

“I have the advantage of having a central processor instead of a head,” Detroit says with a laugh. His projection of himself has changed now, a composite avatar merged from a dozen resistance members. It’s a little creepy, but better than looking at someone Marcus knows, or himself.

“I’m a machine too, and it makes my brain hurt!” he protests. “What kind of unhinged scientist came up with the idea of time travel in the first place?”

“Spoilers,” Detroit says. “There are some things I can only reveal when the time is right. But let’s face it. You were never intended to be the smartest machine ever. You are half-human after all.”

Marcus lets the gentle teasing wash over him. It is familiar, in an old way, like his brother when they were young, thirteen or twenty-eight years ago, depending on how you looked at it. Anyway, after nearly ten years of underground sabotage and war, he knows Detroit. They’re friends.

“So, as I was saying, before you interrupted, this is the year we have to find our Kyle Reese.”

“The guy who goes back to become Conner’s dad?”

“Correct. As far as I can make out from the information you gave me, the man who goes back is not Kyle, he merely uses that name. A cipher, a symbol more than anything. As to the issue of DNA... well we won’t know that until we can get our hands on a sample from Conner. In theory this is a closed time loop, recursive, and whatever we do will lead to the correct choice. But in my opinion, even the scientists in the future are still trying to get to grips with these concepts, and I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Yeah,” Marcus says, rubbing his eyes. “Yeah I can see that. So, do you think it’s really even possible to change the future?”

“Some things are fixed, some aren’t. The details are pretty easy to change, the big things, like this war, not so much. But of course Skynet doesn’t know or believe that, or they would never have sent the Terminators back in the first place. And if my once-master didn’t still think me under its command, we wouldn’t have access to the fruits of Skynet’s labours.”

“Time travel technology,” Marcus says, a hint of wonder in his voice even after so long. “So where do we go from here?”

“David will be leaving tomorrow morning. His squad should meet up with Conner’s strike-force in the Mid-West two days from now. At that point he will be able to tell them about the existence of the
East Coast Resistance – leaving myself out of course – and at some point get a DNA sample from Conner. We will go on from there once we know more.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Marcus nods. “I guess Kyle and I are in charge once he sets out?”

“That’s right.” Detroit looks at him fondly. “It won’t be too much longer now. The war will not go on forever.”

“What about our little side project? Kyle’s not going to be around forever…”

“Proceeding well. But that is for the future. You worry about the present, and leave the rest of time to me.”

“You’re welcome to it. I’m happy as long as he and I are together.”

“Speaking of your lover, I believe he is waiting for you in the mess hall.”

“That’s my cue to leave then. We can do more of this planning shit later.”

“Have fun,” the machine says as he leaves. Detroit was right, Marcus thinks. It is better to focus on his life here and now. He’s got it pretty good, after all.

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It has not escaped Conner’s notice that Skynet has seemed almost distracted these past few months. It has sent fewer attacks, and when the humans retaliate, the defences they meet are not as strong as they once were. He can only hope that this means their long, slow campaign of attrition is having an effect. As it is, their own resources are not infinite, and although a lot of new children are being born, it will take a long time for them to grow up enough to join the fight.

This latest mission is another strike into Skynet-controlled territory. The machines have been building Terminators in factories around the ruins of a mid-sized city named Baldwin City in what used to be east Kansas. The buildings are more spread out than they used to be. The machines have learned their lessons about that since the Resistance has been able to put proper numbers of bombers in the sky. They adopt what once were human tactics, and Conner wonders if it hurts their sense of pride, if machines can be said to have such a thing. He knows the Resistance is making them desperate, knows with the certainty of his mother’s words always heavy on his shoulders, with the old memory of Skynet’s assassins.

Their helicopters drop a strike force off at the edge of the town, already being reclaimed by scrubland and meadow, thick over broken tarmac and concrete. Plenty of cover through which to make their approach towards the anti-aircraft guns which must be knocked out before the bombers are sent in. John gives his orders with the practised snap of hand gestures, and fifty men start to move, spreading out in a wide arc.

They are lucky enough in this case to have been able to send a single plane high overhead with a long-lensed camera to record the positions of their targets, and they make good time. This kind of terrain can be treacherous, with concealed pits and openings down into old cellars and basements, rubble shifting underfoot, but they are used to it, trained for it. This place was never big enough to justify a nuke, so that at least is not a factor he needs to consider. No, this was destroyed the old fashioned way.

They reach the first gun emplacement after twenty minutes, seeing little in the way of guards. It is hard to say if this should make him suspicious. John would like to think the Resistance has just drained their resources this much, and that may be enough of an explanation for it, but he has not
stayed alive this long by being careless. He signals the others with him to be wary. Other groups have split apart already, heading for the other targets.

Looking over the scene with the aid of a pair of binoculars reveals a machine presence there; two of the big, dumb T-600s and five T-700s, none of them looking in the best of repair. The gun itself is controlled by a machine brain of its own, and will have to be disconnected to disable it. If they had more explosives they might blow it up entirely, but resources are still not limitless, and what they do have is better placed in the bombers.

Conner sends a couple of his soldiers out to either side. They will catch the machines in their crossfire, and hopefully do them enough damage to put them out of commission. The old weakpoint, at the base of the skull, has long since been discovered and eliminated.

Conner waits until they are in position, and then his hand falls and the attack begins. Bullets whip through the air and hit metal with a high-pitched rat-a-tat, fire concentrating on the head or joints. The machines react quickly, but two are already down within minutes, the neck of one shattered, the already-damaged head of the other split apart, and the unholy light dying from its eyes.

The remaining Terminators fire back, but their cover is not as good as it might have been, and one of the T-600s appears to be malfunctioning. A grenade pitched into their midst does enough damage to compromise another three, and then Conner’s troops are close enough to do some serious damage. Not ten minutes after the fight began, the gun emplacement is theirs.

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Radios are too vulnerable to machine interception to be used too freely, so Conner doesn’t hear the news until his team make it back to the rendezvous point. When they get in sight of the clear field they’d set the choppers down in, he realises that there are too many people there; even assuming they had taken no losses at all. Strangers. Humans he has never seen before. He is on his guard immediately. He doesn’t think Skynet could have built quite so many human-seeming Terminators by this date in the war, but he isn’t willing to take any chances.

“Hey there,” he calls out to Lieutenant Rollin as they approach. “You want to explain what’s going on here?”

“Sir.” She salutes him, still relatively young and caught up in his legend, the stories they tell about him. “We encountered them on the north-east side of the town. Sir,” Hope shines in her face. “they claim to be from the East Coast Resistance.”

Impossible. But Conner stops himself from blurting it out. He hadn’t thought that anyone could be alive over there after so long, but though it seems like a miracle, he has been wrong before. Is it really so hard to believe that humans could have been fighting over there, potential allies separated only by the barriers of communication and their enemies.

“Who’s in charge?” he asks, looking the newcomers over. He likes what he sees. They are well armed and with the fullness of face and flesh that means they are well-fed. They hold their weapons professionally, and he can tell they remain alert even around other humans.

“I am.” The voice comes from a man of average height, with dark hair showing wide streaks of grey at the temples and tanned skin. “Captain David Grey, of the East Coast Resistance.” He holds out his hand, and when John shakes it he feels the hard calluses of honest work. “Let me tell you, we were pretty surprised to see you folks. Far as we knew, there weren’t much in the way of survivors out west.”
“I could say the same thing,” Conner says, watching him closely. He seems honest and open enough, but there’s something a little too coincidental about this meeting for his liking.

“You must be the man who gives the orders around here, am I right?” Grey says. “Seems we have a lot to talk about. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how good it feels to know there’s someone else out there.”

“True enough,” Conner allows. He gestures to the unfamiliar troops. “You seem to know what you’re doing. I’d be interested to know how much of the East Coast is controlled by your people.”

“Mostly the north, around old Michigan and Ohio,” Grey says. “But if we’re going to talk resources, get some kind of combined attack together at some point, we ought to go somewhere a little more comfortable to discuss it, don’t you think?”

“We had to come a long way from our nearest base to get here, and there’s no room in the choppers for your people anyway,” Conner says, trying to sound apologetic. “However, if all you want is privacy, this area should be safe now. That is, if you don’t mind walking and talking.”

Grey shrugs. “Fine by me.”

Conner signals to Rollins for the men and women to take a rest, and leads Grey off in the direction of a nearby copse of trees. Once inside the cover of the shadowing branches, the other man turns to him, and begins to speak.

“I wanted specifically to tell you about a piece of information we recently uncovered about Skynet. I don’t know if you already know about this, but I think it’s pretty important if we’re going to win this war. How much do you know about how Skynet controls its forces?”

“We know it sends out a satellite signal, one that can be interrupted. We know that there are local signalling stations in various major cities all over their territory.”

Grey nods. “That’s all true. But Skynet itself... It’s basically just one big computer. It has to have something to think with, to plan and strategise, and so on. We’ve found out that this ‘brain’ is made up by using the combined power of computer net servers all over the country. There are independent AIs to some extent in some of the big cities, but if we want to get rid of Skynet once and for all, we need to destroy its brain.”

Conner absorbs this piece of information, and feels a bone-deep satisfaction well up. The man was right, this is significant. Wearing down the machines by simple destruction of their resources works, but it is slow and costly. This offers a new way, a better way. A faster way.

“Thank you for telling me this,” he says. It’s clear this is a stroke of great good fortune. This man and his forces have brought them one giant step closer to wiping the machines off the face of the earth for good.

In the summer of 2029 they strike Skynet’s main server hub. From all the intelligence they’ve heard, this is the place where the machines are storing their time travel technology, where their plan to alter history has been coming together. John is not under any illusions that they can prevent those Terminators from being sent back, but they don’t need to.

It took some doing, but their allies managed to find him the real Kyle Reese, the man who will birth him, who will go back and save his mother’s life. After exhausting the possibilities in the west, it stood to reason that the one they were looking for would be found elsewhere. They even have the
DNA sample to prove it.

Said man is currently waiting on the outskirts of the area, ready to be sent back as soon as their forces take this base. They won’t risk his life by bringing him in ahead of time. Just one stray bullet would be enough... John had enough of a scare with that boy before – his name a coincidence it seems. Well, he has to admit the possibility of their being more than one Kyle Reese in the world, even with such a reduced population.

He signals for the attack to begin. The base here is mostly underground, and they’ve been stocking up on explosives to clear out the tunnels. Conner is expecting this to be a long and difficult fight. They’ve been doing there best to destroy as many pieces of Skynet’s scattered brain as possible over the last year, with a clear effect on the machine forces in the surrounding areas, but this is a stronghold, one of the last and biggest server banks, and Skynet will want to protect it with everything it can.

The vanguard of their forces opens up the massive doors with billowing explosions of C4. Constant aerial bombardment over the past week has obliterated every surface defence, but he’s willing to bet after the first day a lot of that was pulled back inside, underground. As the first team makes their way in, the lights fixed to the front of their rifles casting sharp-edged beams out into the darkness, they hit the first sign of resistance. Conner hears the chatter of gunfire, short cut-off screams of pain, and then the roar of a grenade – one of theirs he hopes.

“All clear.” The voice comes over the radio mangled by static, but still understandable.

“Be careful,” he orders. “They won’t make this easy. And watch out for booby-traps.” The radios will only be good for so long, he knows, before the weight of earth and metal between the groups cuts them off completely. Still, for now they are useful. And there is little point in trying to hide what they are doing from the machines. It is clear enough.

John leads his own team through the doors, careful of the twisted metal. The tunnels here are a confusing warren, the only light what they bring with them. He supposes their enemy has no need for it. The way is down, as deep as possible.

It is not an easy way. The fighting is fierce as they descend, and the machines are everywhere. Conner can feel the adrenaline thrumming in his veins, his heart loud and heavy against his ribs. From time to time the point-man will warn them of some tripwire or IR beam set in their path, and it must either be defused or triggered from afar. It slows them down, but rather that than risk death.

John looses track of time. It’s hard to tell how far they’ve come in the dark, but he thinks they are making good speed. The machines are tough, but not invincible, and Skynet has had to resort more and more to shoddy repairs. Eventually they make it down far enough, stopping outside the room housing the device. It is built like a bunker, and the doors are shut tight. Luckily they saved enough explosives for this.

The machine is already sparking with energy when they finally make it through the doors, tongues like lightning dancing back and forth between the two big pylons. Conner darts over to what looks like the control panel. There is a date in glowing red numerals, and he’d be willing to bet this means they have only just sent the Terminators back.

“All clear,” he orders, turning back to his troop. “When the rest of our forces reach here, we can open up a corridor and bring Kyle in.” He only hopes he can figure out how the damn machine works by that point. This tech is too advanced for even the more scientifically minded amongst them, and it isn’t as though Skynet has helpfully left them a manual.
He has to wait for a while as the last of the fighting peters out, and he takes the time to look more closely at the control panel. There’s a dial which seems to change the date, as well as a screen showing some non-visual-spectrum view of the transport area. There are a whole row of buttons of various colours, but he’s fairly sure the one to make it go is the big red one with the plastic cover to stop people from pressing it accidentally. Unless that one shuts everything off. He’s relying on it being the former.

Eventually they get Kyle down. They haven’t told him that he’s destined to be John’s father. Hell, they haven’t even told him he’s meant to sleep with Sarah Conner. This all has to play out in just the way his mother’s tapes recorded it. It’s better that Kyle doesn’t know anyway. He’s a good man, from what John has seen of him, a dedicated, loyal soldier, and though Conner is sure he would do his duty, he doesn’t want to put the burden of a suicide mission upon him.

They get him set up in the centre of the device. From what John knows, non-organic matter can’t survive the process, which means he’ll be arriving naked, but at least he doesn’t have to undress at this end. Kyle gives everyone an optimistic thumbs-up, and John feels a sudden stab of emotion. This man, his father, has days left to live. Has already died, if you want to look at it that way, years and years ago in the past, before John was ever even born. He would thank him for this, for his sacrifice, if he could.

He presses the button.

Kyle Reese disappears in a crash of bright white light and a high-pitched electric whine. Conner stares at the place he had been standing, blinking the after-images out of his eyes. It is done. It is all in his father’s hands now. He wonders how long it would take for things to change if history did not go as planned. If Kyle’s mission failed, would he ever know about it?

He shakes the questions out of his head. The explosives have been planted and are set to blow. All that remains is to ensure all of his people are out of the base, and then they can destroy Skynet beyond any chance of recovery. He smiles, tasting victory heady and sweet. Humanity will rule this planet once more.

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Spring in 2032. Skynet is fractured, the pieces of its mind dying one by one. The war drags on as clean-up, as purging the last of the Terminators, of the malicious AIs and their servants from the country. It is a grind, but more and more humans are able to settle down, to start to build their lives anew.

One of their Lieutenants brings Kate the news. It’s not a woman she knows; most of the old guard are dead or retired from their wounds. She doesn’t want to cry in front of her, not this stranger, but the tears spring to her eyes anyway when she hears her words, too much to be kept away.

This is everything she had ever feared. John is dead. She had kept on saying he is – no had been now, and fresh waves of sobs burst out of her with the steady force of waves upon the shore – too old to keep on leading from the front lines. Age, for all he denied it, had begun to slow him, the years of stress and war starting to tell, and she had begged him to step back, to let younger men take the field for the last days of the war. But John had always been so stubborn. It was one of the things she loved about him. And now it has gotten him killed.

She breaks the news to the children herself. Sarah is fourteen this autumn, Scott nine and Nathan (named after her grandfather) only six. For all that this is a hard world, and all are used to death, this is personal in a way no other has ever been, and it hits them hard. She can barely remember her own parents, dead in the cataclysm of Judgement Day. She had been older, but she had wept for days
afterwards, wept for all the loved ones she would never see again.

The Captain from the East Coast comes by to give her personal condolences from him and his men. She thinks it’s a little odd; for all that they’ve been allies, they have mostly taken care of their own territory since the destruction of Skynet’s main hub, and they do not visit all that often. They leave soon after, no doubt taking the news back east with them. John Conner never meant as much to them as to those in the west, but she thinks they will still mourn the passing of one of the great leaders of humanity.

About a month later things become a little clearer. Another delegation arrives from the East Coast, and as she watches them disembark from their convoy, she is struck by the sudden familiarity of the two who step out of the first vehicle. It has been many years, but eventually her memory catches up with her, and she stiffens as she realises that the man in front of her has not aged a day. Marcus Wright, the machine her husband tried to kill, the machine who stole the boy they had believed to be Kyle Reese.

Speaking of whom... She has to work at it, but soon she sees the lines of that boy’s face in the man who stands beside him, tall and strong-shouldered, self-assured. He gives orders to the men and women around him with the same ease she had seen in her husband, and it strikes her that they have never actually met the Commander of the East.

Marcus Wright looks up and catches her eye. Sorrow twists his face, and he turns to his companion, laying a hand on his shoulder to get his attention. The two begin to make their way towards her.

Kate is not sure what to think. She knows Marcus could never have come back here while John still lived, for her husband did not forget his grudges, but so soon? Why does he come here now? What happened, all those years ago when they ran, what happened to raise that boy up to a position of command? Was his name even really Kyle Reese?

They come to stand before her with expressions she can’t quite read. “We were sorry to hear about your husband,” the boy-now-man says, and he does sound it. His voice is deeper than she remembers it, and there’s sincerity shot through it.

“I know there was bad blood between me and him,” Marcus says, “but I know you loved him, and he loved you, and so I am sorry that you’ve lost him.”

She stands, straight and strong, and accepts their words, this attempt at forging some kind of truce. “Thank you,” she says, “but you didn’t come all this way to tell me that.”

Kyle looks at her, serious. “You’re right. We have a lot of things to tell you. About this war, and about what we hope the future will bring.”

She nods, willing at least to hear them out. “Come with me. We can talk in my house.”

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2035 rolls around, what might still be called the war trickling out in little fits and starts, isolated pockets of violence. The East Coast, under Detroit’s guidance, builds its future. The West under Kate Conner holds back despite Marcus and Kyle’s words, for so many years fearing the machines is not easily swept away. They had not expected anything more when they went to visit her after John Conner’s death. Acceptance of their new society will come, in time.

“Are you sure you’re ready to do this?”

Marcus looks over at Kyle. It has been a long seventeen years since that day they met in the ruins of
Los Angeles. The war is over, just the clean-up left to do, and a new world is ready to rise up from the ashes of the old. Co-operation; that is the byword of this new age, the thing everyone in Detroit has been working towards. For man and machine to help each other, complement each other, rather than kill each other. Marcus should know – he’s living proof of the possibilities.

Of course one of the things about him is that he cannot age. The same is not true for Kyle, though the man he has grown into is a leader born, a fighter and a soldier and someone he dearly loves, which he would not have thought possible all those years ago, before he signed his body over to the machines. Before Judgement Day.

Aging means dying, eventually. That is not something Marcus is willing to allow. Not for much longer. Humans have as much right to long life as machines do, as he does. The technology is there, and Detroit's scientists have continued to work on it. It might not be what everyone would want, but he’s spoken to Kyle about it, and he has agreed. Once all this is over... once the final trip has been made and the last echoes of the long war put to rest, Kyle will become like him. The best of both worlds, perhaps.

“I’m ready,” he says, and means it. The machine is waiting to send him back, to complete the time loop and ensure the safety of this future. He has all the information downloaded within him, everything to convince the Detroit AI of the past.

“And you have the signalling beacon?” Kyle asks.

“It’s here.” He’s coming back along the slow path, but for the people here, it will seem instantaneous. It seems odd, to think that somewhere out there in the desert another him is sleeping, just waiting for the right time to activate the beacon and call Kyle to his resting place.

“Then I’ll see you in twenty years.” Kyle kisses him goodbye, long and slow and sweet, cupping his face in calloused hands that have seen a lifetime’s work. Marcus smiles, and steps back into the circle marked out for him, the great mass of the machine to either side of him.

“For me,” he says. “For you, less than a day.” The pylons either side of him begin to glow with light, brighter and brighter, and then...

He is away.

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