Rite of Exorcism

by partingxshot

Summary

There’s nothing wrong with the smile. It’s not one of the terrible, toothy ones Connor had given in their first days of knowing each other. It’s subtle, and looks like it fits on Connor’s face—like it folds right into the fabricated creases.

It doesn’t look right on Connor.

(Or: Amanda quietly wins on the stage. The thing piloting Connor’s body is not Connor. Hank will stop at nothing to get him back.)

Notes

[A mood song.]

Welp, now that I’ve written one (1) fluffy ideal post-ending fic, it’s time for the weird shit.

Two sources for this idea:

a). The sheer horror I felt as I watched a playthrough where the player picked “give up”
during the suicide ending, ceding complete control to Amanda, but still got the Chicken Feed scene. This story is not set during the suicide ending timeline, because I don’t want everyone in Jericho to be super dead. Instead, it’s set in a version of the pacifist ending where CyberLife’s grand plan wasn’t “shoot Markus during his speech.”

b). My Best Friend’s Exorcism by Grady Hendrix. It’s totally unnecessary to read the book to understand this fic; this is not an AU or a direct adaptation. Still, consider this a book rec if you like the idea of friendship being powerful enough to beat out demonic possession. Grady Hendrix is both funnier and creepier than I am.

The M rating is for disturbing imagery; there is no sexual content.

I would take the “gaslighting” tag seriously, by the way. This story will involve a malevolent not-Connor trying to confuse and discredit Hank. Some thanks he gets for trying to be an okay dad!
Chapter 1

They choose the Chicken Feed for the morning after. Of course they do.

Daylight is bright on the snow. Hank can barely stand to look at it through the pounding in his head. After leaving the CyberLife tower he’d spent the night plowing through a bottle of Black Lamb, eyes fixed on the TV screen through the darkness of his living room. He’d watched the replay coverage from the perspective of newscasters hovering safe in their helicopters, far above the fray.

He’d seen talking heads sedately debating whether sentient creatures had the right to live; he’d seen everyone from the goddamn President down to the mayor of Detroit struggle to get a vapid soundbite in.

He’d seen distant, damaged figures marching together—struggling for their lives. Pleading with a song: reaching for every scrap of sympathy buried in blackened human hearts that seemed beyond caring. Just another manifestation of pain and indifference in a world gone to shit and soot.

And then: Connor.

Connor had marched in with the army that Hank had watched him free not an hour ago, his CyberLife jacket stark against the white of their uniforms. His expression had been—Hank doesn’t know what to call it. Determined, definitely. Hopeful, possibly. Alive.

Pride had swelled in Hank’s chest, unbidden but not unwelcome.

He remembers Connor’s breaking tone at the tower: *It wasn’t your fault*, louder than it had any right to be, rattling in Hank’s brain, loosening his grip on the trigger. If Hank had had any doubt—if he hadn’t been convinced by a week of the kid sparing deviants while giving him wide-eyed, vulnerable glances—it would have been gone in that moment.

Things in this world are changing. It’s probably about time.

His head still aches.

Hank crosses his arms over his chest; rubs at the sleeves of his coat. He’s beginning to regret not choosing somewhere indoors. Typical of Connor, to make him freeze his ass off waiting.

Footsteps on snow. Hank looks up—

Connor watches him carefully, and then smiles: an odd little thing at the corner of his mouth. It’s not one of the rare genuine smiles, but it’s close.

Something crystalizes into place for a moment. Something feels *right*.

Hank doesn’t hesitate a moment longer: he marches up to Connor and pulls him in by the neck. His arms wrap around that dumb CyberLife jacket just as he feelsConnor embracing him back.

He rests his chin on Connor’s shoulder and takes a long breath. He feels like a sap, but it’s good. It’s good for something to be left alive. Uncomplicated. *Real.*
If the kid understands anything about being human, it should be that.

But Connor is motionless beneath Hank’s hands. His posture is stiff: his hands rest lightly on Hank’s back as though he isn’t sure when he’ll be allowed to pull away.

Hank nods against his partner’s shoulder, trying to reign in his own reaction. Right. Shouldn’t crowd him. Shouldn’t assume—

“Sorry,” he says gruffly once he trusts himself to speak. “This is probably weird.”

“It’s fine, Lieutenant,” Connor says cheerfully. “I don’t mind.”

Hank frowns. “Sure. But I just mean, if you don’t like…”

He trails off, unsure what he’d meant to say. Connor’s fingers are motionless against his back. From his current stick-up-the-ass posture Hank figures his spine would be ramrod straight if his head weren’t held captive against Hank’s shoulder. He seems to be waiting for permission to break the embrace.

Patient, but indifferent.

A few flakes of snow are starting to ride the air currents, gentle spots of cold against Hank’s cheek.

Reluctant, Hank releases Connor’s neck. He begins to step away.

A hand shoots out, so fast he nearly misses the motion. It clasps the front of Hank’s coat.

Once, as a rookie, Hank had been involved in a stakeout where the gang got the jump on them. Right before bullets started flying—from the rooftops, from the alleyway behind them—Hank had experienced an uncanny sense of foreboding. Of wrongness.

The swoop in his gut feels just like that.

Connor makes a terrible noise just this side of a whimper. His legs seem to give out beneath him; his forehead presses into Hank’s chest.

“Whoa,” Hank says, stumbling at the weight of him—holding him up from beneath his arms. “Connor, it’s okay.”

The body under his hands is shaking—no, jolting, a violent, mechanical motion like a damaged car engine shaking itself apart. The light at his temple is flashing red.

“Connor,” he says more loudly, ice settling in his stomach. For one wild moment, he thinks of the CyberLife technician number stored on his phone. Maybe it’s system damage. Maybe—

Connor makes another noise—this one is both guttural and tinny at once, like it’s being ripped from him, past the limits of his voice box. Hank thinks it’s a sob, until his battered brain catches up with him. Until he can form the sound into words.

“You—have to tell them,” Connor groans. “You have to tell them.”

“Fuck!” Hank tries to pull Connor back to his feet, not once loosening his grip. “Connor, what—what’s happening?”

Connor just leans on him harder, hands shooting up to clutch at Hank’s shoulders. His face remains hidden, pressed against Hank: pressing harder, like he’s afraid to support his own weight. Like he’s
afraid to look up.

“Hank,” he says, voice grating and mechanical. He shudders once more time, then goes still.

“What the fuck?” Hank says, trying to get his own footing.

Suddenly, Connor stands up on his own power, nearly sending Hank toppling to the ground himself. He pulls himself totally free of Hank with three quick steps backwards.

He stops. He brushes out a wrinkle on his sleeve. His expression is placid, and his LED is a temperate blue.

“Apolologies, Lieutenant,” Connor says distantly. “I experienced a processor malfunction brought on by cranial damage sustained in the tower. I’m repairing it now. It shouldn’t happen again.”

“What the fuck?” Hank repeats, running a hand over his unshaven cheek. He realizes he’s trembling: vestiges of adrenaline coursing through him. “You saying you have brain damage?”

“Yes, but it’s temporary. The words were pulled from my memory bank at random. It was a recall misfire.” He tilts his head to the side. Hank recognizes the gesture from Connor’s attempts to manipulate informants. It makes him look curious and nontthreatening, which is a load of shit. “There’s no need to worry.”

“What do you mean there’s no—fuck!” He takes a step forward.

Connor takes a step back.

Hank realizes his own hand is hovering between them, the instinct to reach out aborted.

He breathes out through his nose, hard. He squeezes his eyes shut tightly, then opens them again.

Connor is looking at him with benign curiosity. The expression is familiar.


He looks around for a moment, trying to think past his frazzled nerves. His car is parked a few yards away, past the table where the two of them had had their first real conversation. The skyline of Detroit—or what he can see of it from here—seems darker than it usually is. That has to be his imagination. In broad daylight, he shouldn’t be able to tell how many of those buildings are evacuated. How many rooms are empty and November-cold.

He rake a distracted hand through his hair.

Connor makes a polite noise in front of him. “I just wanted to see if you were well, Lieutenant.”

Hank waves a hand in his direction, still breathing hard. “Call me Hank.”

“Got it. Hank, now that we’ve caught up, I do have some tasks I need to—”

“No,” Hank says, shaking his head.

Connor pauses. His head tilts, again, to the side. His eyes move quickly: like pinning butterflies to a board.

“No?” he says—finely, delicately. With a strange edge.
“Nope.” Hank hadn’t meant to ask like this, but the mechanisms of this conversation have spiralled beyond his control. “Nope. I’m not fucking satisfied that you are okay. I’ve never seen you glitch out like that before. You’re coming home with me for awhile. Fix your brain from the couch where I can keep an eye on you.”

Connor watches him silently. Something is unusual about his posture, although Hank can’t quite place it.

“Just—it’s for a little while, alright?” He fails to hide the tight edge of worry in his voice. “You gonna tell me you got somewhere else to go?”

“Jericho,” Connor answers promptly. “Hank, this isn’t necessary.”

“Jericho ain’t a place anymore, though, is it?” Hank scoffs. “They’ve been talking about it on the news. Those guys don’t have space for everybody now that the ship’s—”

He pauses with a wince. Connor hadn’t had much time to tell him about his Jericho exploits on their way out of CyberLife Tower. Still, even a brief recounting of the events on the ship had sent Connor’s shoulders hunching up around his ears last night. Hank shouldn’t have brought it up now, out of the blue.

But the Connor in front of him doesn’t react. He tilts his head forward, as though inviting Hank to continue.

Okay. Maybe the kid’s in shock—maybe that would explain the terrifying glitching combined with the strange placidity. All the more reason to bring him home.

“It’s just for a little while,” Hank says. “Or, hell, it can be as long as you want it to be. But for today, we’re going home.”

It’s so quick Hank thinks he may have imagined it: an impatient twist to Connor’s lip, there and gone in a flash.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Connor says politely. “I came here, like we agreed. Isn’t that enough to convince you that I’m well? Would I have come if there were something wrong, Hank?”

Hank opens his mouth. He thinks: Yes. Maybe. I would hope.

He says: “Just for a little while. Come on.”

Connor doesn’t seem interested in Sumo anymore.

Well, Hank corrects himself as he watches Connor carefully leverage the excited lump’s front paws off of his shoulders, he doesn’t seem as interested as he’d seemed on that first day in the station, when he was desperately trying to bond with Hank through a mishmash of pre-programmed dialog and half-baked psychological theory.

Connor had told him about that once, in the car: a lot of what people think they know about detecting emotion on a stranger’s face is a load of horseshit. Individuals have tells, certainly, but they’re customized. Reading someone’s emotional state through facial analysis alone requires a period of familiarization with the individual.

Connor can do it to a suspect after a conversation of under five minutes—to an extent. When faced
with something more complex—more subtle—he still flounders.

He’d explained all this with a tone approaching frustration (which was impossible, Hank had once
told himself, for a machine).

All of this to say: Hank was probably wrong about Connor’s affection for dogs being genuine. It
had been a ploy born of those early days when Connor’s personality was little more than
algorithms designed to manipulate. Hank can hardly expect his own read on the kid to be flawless
if even Connor’s supercomputer approach to people-reading isn’t.

Hank breathes through the disappointed twist in his gut.

Sumo presses up against Connor’s legs for awhile longer, trying to trip him up on the way to the
kitchen. When the android doesn’t react, the dog gives up, flopping down in his bed.

“Wait, Connor,” Hank calls, patting the sofa beside him. “In here.”

Connor turns to face him, eyebrows raised. “I’m planning to go into stasis. I assumed your kitchen
table would be an unobtrusive location.”

“You need to stasis to fix your brain?”

“It’s not a verb. And not technically. I just don’t plan to intrude on your home more than I have to.”

The sheet covering the broken window billows inward, behind Connor and to his left. Hank hears
the freezing wind pushing at it. Whistling.

Hank feels something pinch beneath his skin—cold and strange.

He remembers leaving the CyberLife tower. A flood of androids followed them—followed Connor
—waiting for orders for the final time.

He remembers Connor looking up into the starry sky for what may have been the first time in his
young life. He remembers the liquidity of his deep brown eyes; the way he’d taken a shaky breath
like night air was a new and precious thing.

(“Hey,” Hank had said, resting a hand on his shoulder. “When all this is over, we can just—”)

Now, in a living room bright with daylight, he swallows and pushes forward: “Doesn’t wanna
‘intrude,’ the robot says. Hilarious. Well that train’s left the fucking station, so fuck that. It’s not
even noon yet. Come ‘ere. Remember what I said last night? We can just—zone out and watch TV
for awhile. Shit, you think you’d like Bruce Lee?”

Connor squints at him. “I don’t know whether I would, Hank.” The response would be reasonable,
if it weren’t for the guarded delivery.

And Hank realizes what had been odd about Connor’s posture: he holds perfectly still.

No twitching fingers. No tapping foot. No weight shifting from one side to the other. No traipsing
through Hank’s house like he owns the place, footsteps just barely audible over Hank’s drunken
retching on the night of their third case.

Connor stands in the kitchen doorway, just beyond the threshold. His arms are limp at his sides and
his spine is very straight.

“Hell,” Hank says. Despite the screaming misgivings in the back of his head—the warning that
he’s more suited for the world championship long jump than he is for emotional honesty—he asks: “Is everything okay?”

“Of course,” Connor tells him. His LED is a vibrant blue. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Sumo’s ear twitches, then falls.

“You don’t...seem right. You know you can tell me if anything’s wrong, right? I mean.” He looks down at his lap, fighting off an embarrassing urge to pick at his fingernails. Good going, Anderson —real fucking clear that you’re the right guy for this job. “I mean, might as well. The world’s a mess. I’m around.”

Connor stares at him from the kitchen. He blinks twice, then lets out a sigh. “Sorry, Hank. I guess I’m just...tired. If you can call it that.”

He paces to the sofa; sits down carefully. “I do remember what you said—that we should ‘fuck off and do fuck-all for a change’ the first chance we get. So we should do that. Bruce Lee?” The corners of his lips pull up into a smile.

There’s nothing wrong with the smile. It’s not one of the terrible, toothy ones Connor had given in their first days of knowing each other. It’s subtle, and looks like it fits on Connor’s face—like it folds right into the fabricated creases.

It doesn’t look right on Connor.

Hank starts the movie. The scenes seem to drag on without any reaction from the kid. Connor doesn’t fidget or lean forward or critique the action sequences. He doesn’t look towards Hank once.

They stay like this for the rest of the day, through movies and news and even a stand-up comedy show. Hank had expected to fall asleep at some point, but he doesn’t. He is, at all times, aware of the stiff body beside him. No temperature radiates from Connor’s side. He isn’t cold and he isn’t warm.

Hank thinks: Connor’s had a long couple of days. We both have.

He thinks: maybe I should’ve just let him rest.

He thinks: why did he start humoring me the second I said that something seemed wrong?

Finally, once the room has darkened around them, Hank shuts off the TV. He stretches with a grunt, trying without luck to pop his back. He winces with the stiffness in his neck.

“Oh, I wanna say it’s been a long time since I’ve had a day this lazy, but I’d be lying.”

No response. Connor stares towards the blank screen.

Hank hides his frown. He pulls himself to his feet and claps a hand on Connor’s shoulder. “Guess it’s time to get some fucking sleep. Both of us.”

Connor grabs Hank's wrist.

The lighting of the room shifts: the placid blue across Connor’s face shifts to a darkened red. His LED is spinning, spinning.

“What is it?” Hank asks carefully. If this is a breakthrough moment—if this is the reaction he
suddenly realizes he’s been waiting for all day, the missing *something* in Connor’s eyes—he doesn’t want to fuck it up.

But Connor’s gaze is unfocused, nearly cross-eyed.

“It’s getting dark,” he says in a dead tone that sends something creeping up Hank’s spine. “I can’t stay here.”

Wind billows in the sheet over the broken window. Sumo, who’d been asleep in his bed, starts to whine.

“What are you talking about? Fuck, of course you can stay here.”

He ducks down to try to catch Connor’s eyes through the gloom. Blue blood has started to stream from Connor’s nostrils, dribbling down his lips and coating his chin.

Panic rises in Hank's throat. “Shit! I knew you weren’t okay!”

“I’m trying,” Connor says, “but I can’t stay here.” His voice does not modulate when he says: “I’m out of time.”

“Whoa, whoa.” Hank fights off the shock running through his limbs to sink to the sofa next to Connor. He grips him by the shoulder. “What’s happening? Talk to me, fuck, are you—”

Connor opens his mouth. The thirium running over his lips sticks and pulls, as though trying to seal him shut. Sticky lines of it run over his teeth. Dribbles of it fall like spittle from the corners of his mouth.

“I can’t find it,” he says, mechanically distorted. His body is jolting again, in contrast to his lifeless buzzing voice—his fingers dig so far into Hank’s wrist it’s all he can do not to cry out in pain. “I can’t find it. I can’t find it. I’m out of time. Hank—”

Connor throws his head back, smashing it into the back of the sofa. The sound that pours out of him is unearthly: a computerized squeal, rising in pitch until every one of Hank’s arm hairs is rigid with the sound, garbled into nothingness as it emanates directly through the skin of Connor’s throat.

“Holy shit!” Hank gasps as Sumo starts to bark.

The godawful sound cuts off as sharply as it started. With a quick and efficient motion, Connor’s posture resets. His spine is ramrod straight. He does not shake. He releases Hank’s wrist and sets his hands on his thighs.

“Apologies, Lieutenant,” he says calmly, meeting Hank's eyes. “The damage has been corrected now. That will not happen again.” His chin and his jacket are still stained with his blood.

Hank doesn’t realize how loud his own breathing is—how much his hands are shaking—until Connor frowns at him. “Please calm down, Hank. I understand that this kind of thing can be disturbing to humans, but I can assure you—”

“Jesus fuck,” Hank says. “Jesus fucking fuck.”

Connor’s cheek twitches. He stands with all of the dignity he usually does, long legs straightening. “I advise you to forget about this,” he says. “The glitch has been permanently corrected. It will not recur. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get cleaned up.”
Hank stares at Connor’s spot on the sofa long after he leaves. The air is thick with the tang of thirium—sharp. Sumo whines and whines.

The kid is right about one thing: the glitch never happens again.

Chapter End Notes

Find me at wufflesvetinari.tumblr.com!

EDIT 9/17/2019: Hey, some very nice people at the Detroit: New ERA Discord have created a channel for this story! Come join and say hi. Or yell at me. Dealer's choice.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'm back on my songfic bullshit; please take some witch house music.

Warning for, uh, Hank-like thought processes. Take that as a given.

Saturday, Nov. 6th, 2038. 3:25PM.

“Can I ask you something else?” Connor pings its coin from one hand to the other. It pauses the motion to balance the quarter on the top of its nail. Pinpoint precision. Mechanical.

“Not like I can stop you,” Hank grumbles, forcing his complaining car into drive. He’s been working with the android for all of a day and he already wants to throw it into the nearest dumpster. Its questions at the Chicken Feed had been disorienting: a mix of naivety and disturbing perception. Like listening to a precocious kid talk, if that kid were a hyper-intelligent WMD.

“Why do humans gamble?”

Hank frowns. “What, you mean in general?”

“Yes. Well...no. Why do humans stake money on events that don’t really affect them?”

It takes him a second to realize Connor is thinking about the bet Hank had placed during lunch. He shrugs uneasily. “Gives us a rush.”

Connor nods. “Dopamine. It can lead to addiction, you know.”

Hank resists the urge to parrot its scolding tone back to it, turning onto Woodward Ave.

Connor puts the coin away. Its eyes trace pedestrians through the window. In a human, Hank would call it curiosity. The call they’re responding to will likely yield no results—good. The less time spent with the plastic asshole the better.

After another mile he’s still thinking more carefully about Connor’s question than he’d meant to. He says: “It’s not just that, though. Not just dopamine. It’s...something to talk about—break the ice. ‘Specially for people who don’t have much reason to get out of the house.”

Now it’s Connor’s turn to frown, the slightest pinch appearing between its eyebrows. “I understand...intellectually, that gambling serves a social purpose. I was programmed with the knowledge. But I can’t quite...you entertain each other by comparing horse performance?”

Hank can’t help it: he lets out a breath that’s nearly a chuckle. “Jesus,” he says. “Yes. We compare horse performance. That’s how humans talk to each other. Ya got it, Connor. You figured it out.”

It’s bigger than that, he realizes that night as he swigs straight from the bottle, still half in shock from Connor’s detour to save him on the roof. Bigger than horse performance. It’s the hope, however fragile, that you’ll get it right this time. And that maybe if you lay the big money down, really go for it, God will owe you a favor. Give you what you deserve.
His gun is laid out on the table, a single bullet inside.

Not until he’s half a bottle in does he start to wonder about the distinction Connor had drawn: if an android doesn’t know something “intellectually,” how can it know? What’s the alternative?

“Of course, I’ll move out as soon as the housing situation in Jericho is settled,” Connor tells him. “We have some promising leads—wealthy donors suddenly expressing interest in homeless androids, that kind of thing—but there’s a lot to sort out and Markus has his hands full with the most vulnerable populations. He seemed to assume I’d want to stay with you.” Another brief pinch of his cheek.

Hank frowns up at him from his news tablet, body curled around a cup of hot coffee. He’s making an effort to get to work on time today—Jeffrey needs all the manpower he can get. Connor, meanwhile, is headed out to meet with Markus and, presumably, the other android leaders. Hank realizes he knows very little about the movement he indirectly helped save.

“No rush,” he says. “You can stay here as long as you need.”

Connor sits across the small table. His hands are laid out on the wood, between old pizza boxes and crumpled napkins. He watches Hank carefully. “I don’t want to impose,” he says. “It’s better if I’m with my people.”


Connor blinks at him. There, again: the slight twist of his lips. Impatient. “I’m fine, Hank. I’ve fixed the problem. Unless you became a hardware engineer when I wasn’t looking, you don’t need to worry.”

That almost sounds like the old Connor. It’s just the delivery that falls flat.

(Hank remembers: stepping out of CyberLife tower, Connor staring at the sky. Connor meeting Hank’s eyes, suddenly vulnerable. Hank clapping a hand on his shoulder. “When all this is over —?”)

Connor must have seen something in his expression, because he continues: “I don’t understand. I’ve done everything I can to reassure you. I explained the repair process. I came home with you. I even spent the day watching...movies.” His lip quirks derisively on the word. “So why do you still believe that something is wrong?”

The words come out rough: “Because you told me so.”

Hank had said: “When all this is over, we can just fuck off and do fuck-all.”

And Connor had answered, the slightest November’s condensation rising from his mouth, barely visible: “But there’s so much I need to do. To...to make up for.” Big, wounded brown eyes. More expressive than Hank had ever seen them, and Hank had thought: alive.

Now, in the kitchen, Connor’s irises look smaller. “You’re remembering our conversation outside the tower—about my actions on Jericho. You think I’m experiencing some kind of trauma.”
“Why wouldn’t you be?” Hank cups his coffee closer to his chest. He feels the steam of it rising against his face. “Anyone would be.”

Connor smiles at him sweetly. He says: “It’s okay, Hank. I’ve forgiven myself.”

Connor declines the offer to watch TV with Hank that night. He says he’s busy running a few intensive database queries for Jericho—public security footage, that kind of thing—and besides, hasn’t Hank had a long day? Maybe he should get some rest.

It’s the same the next night, and the one after. Connor comes home later and later. He ignores Sumo and goes straight to the kitchen table, slipping into stasis or something resembling it. The horror-movie nose-bleeding glitch seems to really be gone.

The fourth night, Hank drinks.

He’d been holding off. He’d thought that if Connor needed him, if Connor broke out of whatever this was, he wanted to be ready. But there’s only so many gentle brush-offs a man can take. Connor’s smile is getting stiffer; his conversation more stilted.

Hank’s making quick work of a six pack when Connor gets home, stomping the snow from his shoes. Sumo hasn’t given up on greeting him at the door, the sweet old thing, but the motion is less ecstatic: a wagging tail and a brief press into Connor’s legs, easily ignored.

The TV is on mute, flickering in the darkness. Hank isn’t watching anyway. He’s sitting at the kitchen table, trying not to look at his broken window.

“We should talk,” he says.

“About what?” Connor stands, motionless, in the living room.

“You know what, asshole.” His fingers are both numb and tingling. He switches to whiskey; pours himself a shot. “Jericho. You.”

“Hank, I told you—”

“No, you told me you don’t know. Nobody can forgive themselves that quickly, Connor. Take it from me.” He raises the shot glass in a mock toast. Pours it back.

“I’d have thought you’d be happy,” Connor says. Hank realizes why he seems frozen in the living room: the kitchen is already occupied. He doesn’t want to come near Hank, but he doesn’t want to risk sitting down on the sofa for fear that Hank would take it as an invitation to spend time together.

Something curdles in his gut.

“I’d be happy if you showed some damn human emotion. What happened to you, kid? And don’t tell me you’re fine, you fucking hunted your own! You’re not gonna—”

“Hank, I think I see the problem.”

“Oh yeah?” Hank snarls, pouring out another shot. “And what the fuck would that be?”

Connor straightens his tie. The TV lights up his right side and leaves the rest in darkness. Strange shadows play over his jaw, but his LED is a bright and perfect blue. “You’ve convinced yourself
that you know me.”

Hank taps his finger over the shot glass, covering it from one side of the rim to the other. He narrows his eyes.

“Think about it,” Connor says conversationally. He takes slow, even steps towards the kitchen, and Hank thinks of a dead Traci, sparked back to life and scrambling to the wall. (Connor advancing with his palms upraised.) “Just think. You haven’t even known me for two weeks. And for most of that time, I was showing only minimal signs of deviancy. I’m—we barely know each other, Hank.”

“Bullshit,” Hank says. The numbness spreads.

“I understand,” Connor tells him. “You really got invested in our relationship. That’s very human of you. But I think you might be...projecting, just slightly.” The pause is calculated, as is the quick glance towards Cole’s photo, face down on the table. “It’s not your fault,” he adds.

“Bullshit! I know what you are. I know you’re not—” he struggles for the words: lets his mind form them and then lets them fall away.

“Then why all the fuss?” Connor stops just before the kitchen landing. He spreads his hands wide —like showing an unstable suspect that he’s unarmed. “Why are you so insistent—”

“Because I’m trying to help you, goddammit!” He pulls himself to his feet, chair clattering. He takes a step forward as the room sways. “Fine. I don’t know you. Whatever. I know you’re not—you’re not this. I know you’re not a fucking machine, Connor! I know guilt and misery and—”

“And do you see any of those things in me? It wasn’t my choice to lead Perkins to Jericho. It wasn’t my choice to hunt deviants. Why should I feel guilty?”

“That’s not how it works!” He grips the edge of the table. Plants his feet wide.

Connor frowns. Something strange and hard passes over his expression—there and gone. “I am repeating exactly what you told me the night of the revolution. It’s not my fault. Why should I experience guilt?”

Hank opens his mouth and closes it again. He remembers it too:

“But there’s so much I need to do. To...to make up for.”

“Fuck that, kid. It wasn’t your choice. Why should you feel guilty?”

Quick words of reassurance, a conviction that Connor didn’t need to “make up for” anything. Stars above them. Snow below.

Hank had wanted Connor to believe that. How fucking twisted does he have to be to shout at the kid when he actually takes those words to heart?


Connor cocks his head to the side. He clasps his hands behind his back. “I think,” he says slowly—gently—‘you’re over-invested in me. In an understanding of me that is...flawed. Maybe we should try to get some emotional space from one another.’”

Hank stares down at the floor. Suddenly, his head feels very heavy. His body feels weighted down,
exhaustion and embarrassment warring there.

“I’m going to go into stasis now,” Connor says. “In the living room. Please get some sleep, Hank.”

Hank keeps drinking. He shows up to work past noon.

He gets nothing done the next day, which is too bad given how much Jeffrey needs him. The precinct is a nightmare even with the evacuation orders, and for every act of looting or violence that’s reported to the DPD Hank knows there are fifteen more going unremarked upon.

He snaps at anyone who approaches him as he stares at his console and tries to fill in a backlog of paperwork. His eyes skim over the words like they’re in a foreign language.

The thing is: Hank used to be an empathetic personality. It’s been deadened by time and pain and ethanol, sure—dulled along with his work ethic and his investigative instincts. But the core of his insight is there, and it doesn’t like what it’s seeing in Connor. Something isn’t adding up.

Sure, the kid is probably right. Hank overestimated how much Connor was going to need his protection and support after the revolution. He probably even jumped the gun on the idea that Connor would want to continue their friendship at all—he remembers with uncomfortable clarity Connor’s phrasing before he’d left to find Jericho: “Maybe we could have become friends.”

And maybe Hank had let a layer of wishful thinking cloud their interactions, the sheer exhilaration of doing something right for a change misleading him into pouring an embarrassing amount of energy into what was, after all, a week-long friendship. A layer of “Connor-as-symbol” instead of “Connor-as-friend.”

But something beyond that is wrong. He remembers a week littered with interactions that prodded him, infuriated him, worried him, drove him insane—drove him to look beyond the bubble of his own misery to understand Connor as more than a machine. He remembers every sly smile, every careful hesitation and tentative show of affection. He remembers the way Connor’s voice shook when he said: “I’m sorry, Hank. You shouldn’t have gotten mixed up in all of this.”

Could he have imagined it all? Could he have fucking projected it?

By the time two o’clock rolls around, Hank is no closer to getting any work done. He decides that he and Connor have to have just one more talk—sober this time. And if Connor still doesn’t want to have anything to do with Hank, well...Hank will just need to learn to let go.

He steps out of the precinct into the parking lot. Maybe Connor will stop being a prick for long enough to meet for a late lunch somewhere.

He pulls out his phone and dials Connor’s brain. The kid doesn’t pick up right away, which Hank tries not to read too far into. Then, on the fourth ring—

He’s met with a rush of white noise. It crackles through Hank’s speaker so loudly he nearly drops the phone.

“Connor?” he asks.

A distant voice, tinny with static: “Hank?”

“Where are you?”
“Hank? Is—is that you?”

Hank frowns. He can’t tell for sure through the poor connection, but the voice sounds wrong. Weak. “Yeah, it’s me. Listen, you’re cutting out a little—”

A sob carries over the line, loud through the static.

Hank’s fingers dig into the phone. “Connor, what’s happening?”

“I can’t move,” Connor tells him. The white noise—the wind—howls louder. “I can’t—it’s too cold to function. I can’t think, I—”

“Hold on, son.” The words come out without a second thought. He’s yanking open the car door; swinging himself inside. “Hold on. I’m coming. Just tell me where you are.” He jams the key in the ignition with shaking hands—it takes him three tries.

“Hank,” Connor breathes again, ragged. Hank’s pulse stutters at the sound. “I need help.”

“Dammit, Connor, where are you?!”

The next words are too soft to catch: like Connor is mumbling to himself. Then the call drops.

Hank swears. He’s about to redial when the screen flashes: Incoming Call. Connor.

“Lieutenant,” Connor says smoothly as soon as Hank picks up. “I just wanted to let you know that I might not be home until tomorrow morning.”

Hank tries to swallow. His hand shakes so hard he nearly loses hold of the phone. His other hand grips the door handle for support. The only sound, for a moment, is the choked rumble of his battered car.

“Lieutenant?” Connor repeats, voice clear and immediate. No connection difficulty; no static. “Are you there, Hank?”

Hank opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. He swallows, finally, and tries again. “Yeah. Yeah, I heard you. You said—not coming home? Markus need you?”

“Yes, exactly. He needs my...insight. Jericho has some rats.” The last word narrows strangely—a flatness that not long ago Hank may have mistaken for emptiness, rather than cruelty.

“Yeah. Okay. Text if you change your mind.”

A pause, crystal clear through the connection.

“Are you alright, Hank?”

“Peachy.” He winces at how it comes out. Sarcasm is second-nature enough that it’ll be the death of him someday. “I gotta go.”

He hangs up the phone. He reaches up to take the key out of the ignition. He sits for a moment in the silence.

Just now—just a moment ago—the thing on the other end of the line had not been Connor.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter's unsettling song is Survivor. ("All the sinners and the saints move in the same direction")

Enjoy! This is the last chapter before shit, as they say, gets real.

Connor is chatting up the precinct receptionist.

Hank can’t hear what they’re actually saying, but there’s no other term for it: he’s leaning against Joy’s desk, nodding at everything she says, a half-smile playing at his lips. Joy, poor girl, seems flattered and confused in equal measure by the sudden attention from an android that had likely been nothing but professional for the brief time she’d known him. Her LED occasionally spins yellow.

“Hank, dude, you’re blocking the runway.”

Hank jumps and lets Chen in through the precinct door. He hadn’t realized he’d frozen there, donut halfway to his mouth.

He doesn’t recognize anything of Connor’s posture, but it doesn’t matter. He recognizes the false smile; the calculated way he tilts his head. It’s an act—some kind of subroutine.

It’s more obvious than ever now that he knows what to look for. It’s also a far cry from the near-hostile blank affect he’d given Hank and Sumo over the past few days.

Connor reaches out a hand to Joy, who reciprocates with a grin. The skin pulls back from their forearms, leaving wide expanses of white.

When they’re finished connecting, Connor pushes off the desk and turns to greet him with a smile. “Hello, Hank! Or, I suppose it’s Lieutenant while we’re at work.”

“You don’t work here,” he says stupidly.

Connor shrugs. “That is...technically inaccurate. I’ve been appointed liaison to human law enforcement by Jericho. It’s a position that combines my investigative skills with my social integration capabilities, since I’m meant to be improving relations between the two parties. So really, me just being here is ‘work.’”

He winks. Hank wants to be sick.

“I’ll be checking in a few days a week. I’m just heading in to speak with Fowler and then I can get straight to it.” Connor steps forward, putting himself in closer proximity to Hank than he’d been in nearly a week. He claps a hand over Hank’s shoulder—not quite naturally, but with enough awkward charm to pass as Connor on his first day in the precinct not so long ago. “Hope you’re not too tired of me yet.”

His voice is cheerful and slightly louder than it needs to be. As though what he’s saying is more for
eavesdroppers’ benefit than it is for Hank’s.

The nausea intensifies.


Connor smiles smoothly and follows him into the bullpen.

Hank steals a glance at the serial number on his jacket: -52. No change. But still.

He sinks into his chair, heart pounding. Watches as Connor climbs the short staircase to Jeffrey’s office. He waits until the android has closed the glass door behind him, then pulls out his cellphone.

*Calling: Connor.*

He clutches the phone harder than he needs to. The noise of the precinct is suddenly deafening, despite being greatly reduced by the evacuation. He can feel Chris giving him a curious look—perceptive, that one. He tries to tune out Chen’s laugh and Reed’s bored drawl.

No response. Connor continues talking to Jeffrey, hands clasped behind his back.

Hank calls again. This time, he gets a reaction: Connor’s eyes slide towards him through the glass, just for a second. His lip twitches downwards.

The Connor in front of him is receiving his calls. Nobody else picks up. No static wind plays through the speaker.

Connor had died once.

It happened in Stratford Tower. A deviant had been about to escape. Connor had warned the officers in the hallway, then bodily placed himself between Hank and the gunfire. Only later did Hank learn that the kid had literally put his own heart back in his chest not two minutes before. That fact alone would have driven him to drink, if he weren’t already drinking through his feelings about his erstwhile partner’s semi-death that night.

Out of all of the good people in that hallway, Connor had chosen to save Hank. Godawful decision-making skills for a supercomputer. Stupid enough to make Hank’s eyes sting.

Connor had died once. His phone number hadn’t changed.

Maybe the Connor he knows is languishing in a dump somewhere, barely conscious. Maybe that’s what had caused the interference in the call: he’s not supposed to be awake. Meanwhile, a plastic prick has come to replace him, more akin to -60 from the tower than any iteration of the true Connor.

It’s a horrifying thought, enough to have sent Hank scrolling through case files and uselessly googling CyberLife disposal sites yesterday afternoon. He’d even called in a few favors to learn more about the FBI fact-finding mission at the CyberLife tower now that the company’s officially under federal investigation. Hell, he’s put out the underground equivalent of a BOLO in the hopes that somebody would be able to find—

Well. He doesn’t want to think about what they might find. Maybe he’s out of time.

His mouth feels dry; he needs a drink.
He should bring Jeffrey in on this, quietly, when Connor isn’t at the station tapping into every fucking smart device known to man. The imposter clearly thinks Hank hasn’t figured it out yet. And if Hank can keep him nearby—keep his suspicions low…

Maybe he has a better chance of finding the real Connor.

Why would Connor be cold? Too cold to think? Too cold to move? Androids are resilient; they can function in the Arctic without issue. Detroit in November, while nothing to sneeze at, has nothing on a frozen tundra. Maybe he’s in some secret test chamber, hidden from the feds. Maybe he’s not even in the city.

He watches Connor through the glass until the conversation with Jeffrey ends. Connor makes a polite retreat, nodding graciously to anyone who bothers to welcome him back. He even makes a point to stop at the breakroom and get Reed a coffee, promising him that he’ll make a better effort to work together in the future. There’s not a trace of irony in his tone, and the coffee is made exactly how Reed likes it.

Reed looks incredulous, but not nearly as incredulous as Hank.

That settles it: this isn’t Connor at all.

That night he doesn’t try to get Connor to spend time with him. They sit a room apart: Hank on the couch, Connor at the kitchen table.

Hank watches, though—and he knows Connor sees him watching.

It’s important to know the tells. A period of familiarization with the individual, as his own Connor had once said. Hank remembers standing in the basement of the CyberLife tower, asking questions that both Connors knew the answers to. Desperate, until he heard the break in one Connor’s voice: “It wasn’t your fault, Lieutenant.”

And the other, merciless, impatient: “I knew about your son, too!” No tentative sensitivity, no fear of dragging up things that were better off left dead. No understanding of the other people in the room past what they could be used for.

It’s important to know the tells.

This Connor doesn’t fidget—that much is obvious. The only tics he seems to have are that his cheek or his lip twitches when he’s displeased. The way he makes eye contact is different, too: the gaze is always sudden, striking like a weapon. Sometimes he looks away just as fast.

Hank waits until Connor seems to be in stasis before heading for the door.

His understanding of android hacking capabilities is deeply fuzzy, but he’s pretty sure Connor’s infiltrated the wifi by now, both here and at the precinct. He’d rather be at a public terminal for the research he’s doing: suspected CyberLife blackops, illegal disposal sites, that kind of thing. He’s breaking about six laws by accessing this info outside the station, but his concern for legalities dropped dead in the parking lot yesterday.

He hesitates at the door, hand curled over his phone in his pocket. Sumo watches him, tail thumping. The only other sound is the wind through the long-broken kitchen window.

He dials Connor’s brain. The blue LED spins briefly yellow.
Connor doesn’t open his eyes. “What is it, Hank?”

Well, it had been a gamble in any case.

“All right. Didn’t know if I could talk to you like that in your sleep. I’m gonna—I’m going out.”

“Bar-hopping?”

“Yeah.”

“Mm.” His eyes are still closed, but his eyebrows raise just slightly—contemplative. “Take care of yourself, Hank. Keep your safety in mind.”

Hank is about to snarl something back when he sees Connor’s hand.

It starts with a twitch: like his fingers are the legs of an oversized spider seizing itself to death on the kitchen table. Then it scuttles: moves as though on its own accord, fingers flailing wildly against the wood. Connor knocks over two beer bottles and a Chinese takeout container but doesn’t seem to notice—doesn’t really wake.

Hank can’t move. He feels frozen to the spot, one hand on the doorknob.

Just as suddenly as it had started, the hand stops. It sits as still as the rest of Connor does, pale white against the table. The house sinks back into silence.

Hank takes a deep breath. He rubs a trembling hand over his cheek, then doubles back for his flask.

The next day he gets to work at ten, which is a fucking feat with a hangover trying to drill through his skull. Connor isn’t scheduled to arrive until eleven.

Hank had left Jeffrey a message at 3am last night, less coherent and convincing than he’d wanted it to be. At some point, after hours of slouching in front of a shitty library computer with no evidence to show for it—all the while glaring at his own motionless hands with deep distrust—he’d started to hit the flask.

He’d conveyed the essentials, though: the android is a plant, and glitching to boot. They have to find the real Connor.

Jeffrey isn’t in his office. Hank has a missed call from him. Aggravating, given that Hank specifically said they shouldn’t risk any more electronic communication on the topic.

He dials Connor’s brain thirteen times—mashing the button with bitter satisfaction—before getting any kind of response.

“What is it, Lieutenant?” Connor asks him, voice flat and dangerous.

“Pick me up a coffee on the way over here,” Hank says, leaning back in his chair. He feels the hard grin on his own face.

The other Connor—the scared one—hadn’t answered the phone. The least he can do is be an asshole about it.

“I’m not going to do that,” Connor tells him.
“Aww, come on, Con. Old times’ sakes? Hey, for your buddy?”

Connor hangs up on him.

That’s good. He’s being outright rude, which means he’s nowhere near the station. For whatever reason, he seems eager to butter up everyone in the precinct—except for Hank, who’s apparently wearing his patience thin.

He taps his fingers against the arm of his chair, thinking hard. Then he heads up to reception.

“Er—Joy?”

Joy’s palms rest against her desk, her eyes closed lightly. She opens them with a slow flutter, looking dazed. When she sees him, she starts. “Oh! Sorry, Lieutenant Anderson.”

“Don’t worry about it, everybody’s exhausted. You’re a saint for coming back this quick.” Coming back at all, he doesn’t say. It feels too close to talking about the threat of death camps with a near-stranger. Not the time or the place.

Hank isn’t one for fashion, but he notices she’s ditched the CyberLife uniform in favor of a striped sweater dress. A small braid, crawling sideways along her forehead, holds back her bangs.

Suddenly he feels ashamed. He knows nothing about her—had assumed there was nothing to know.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she says, “I wasn’t in stasis. Just, um, running a program.”

“If this is a bad time—”

“No, no!” She folds her hands in her lap. “It’s just—it’s kind of silly, but I’ve been really excited to try this...sim program? It’s like bootleg VR for androids. We’ve been—sharing them with each other. It’s kind of a nice break from everything that’s been going on. The files are compressed enough that we can give them as gifts.” She grins, a bit shy. “Connor gave it to me.”

“Right,” Hank says. Connor flirting is a whole new layer of disconcerting, as is the idea of an emerging android software pirating culture, but he’s very aware of his shrinking opportunity window. “Er, listen—I did have a question.” He glances around the reception area. On any given morning since the revolution it’s been either dead empty or fuller than usual. Today, fortunately, is a dead-empty kind of morning. “It’s a weird one, though, so bear with me.”

She nods at him encouragingly.

“What you, uh…” he taps on his own wrist. “When you do that with other androids, do you get like a...signature? Like, a model number? Or is it just all…” he frowns, for once regretting his own disinterest in technology.

“The majority of the data transfer goes beyond model number. We can receive...memories from one another—or even simple executable programs, like the sim.” She bites her lip in what looks like excitement. “But yes, every connection produces a ‘signature,’ if you want to think about it like that.”

“Uh huh.” It adds up so far. Now for the delicate part. “Listen, uh...I might need a favor. I saw you connecting with Connor yesterday. I dunno how much he’s shared about his...history with you, but you know we were partners, right? Pretty recently. Before the revolution.”
A nod. Some barely-restrained curiosity.

He leans forward very carefully. Connor had listed a few of his social engineering protocols out for him early on, undeniably proud. At the time it’d made Hank hate him more. Now here he is, trying to remember.

Eye contact to suggest trust; phrasing his request as a favor to induce empathy. Giving her more of the truth than he wants to, in order to mix it up with a lie.

“I’ve been trying to look out for the kid. The transition’s been rough. When he was in the field, CyberLife...replaced him pretty easily. Just uploaded his memories into a new body. I’m not proud to say it, but I didn’t...react great at the time.”

Connor had told him that he could be replaced with his memories nearly intact. Hank hadn’t expected it to happen so fast—hadn’t expected the cold plunge of emotion upon seeing the kid outside Kamski’s place. Hadn’t expected the horror and relief tugging him back and forth until he’d had to settle on anger.

Joy blinks up at him, still wearing that curious expression.

She doesn’t seem to want to interrupt, so Hank continues: “There were a few risky points in the investigation where...well. I’m worried he’s been...replaced again. I mean, uploaded into a new body or whatever. And that he’s hiding it from me in case I freak out again. I—fuck, I hate to ask this.”

He pauses, watching her face.

“You want me to confirm his serial number,” Joy says. Her smile has gone soft around the edges. “Okay. That kind of information isn’t classified. At least, not yet.”

She leans forward conspiratorially: “I don’t think you need to worry about it. That’s #313 248 317-52, same as he was last week.”

“Oh,” Hank says. He doesn’t know what he wanted to hear, but apparently it wasn’t this. Something wraps around his insides and starts to pull.

He sees Jeffrey approaching the precinct door.

“Good luck,” Joy tells him, one tooth absentely nibbling on the side of her lip. The effect is startlingly human. “I hope he’s...I mean, I hope you’re both okay.”

Hank nods. His hangover returns full-force, his head pounding. He flexes and releases his fingers, feeling soreness settle there.

He misses whatever she says next, because the storm on Jeffrey’s features tells Hank he’s not about to be invited to a complimentary lunch.

The captain fixes him with an exhausted glare. “In my office, Hank.”

As soon as the door is closed behind them, Jeffrey starts in. “Where the fuck were you this morning?”

“Finding evidence,” Hank scowls, which is true for a given value of morning.
“Oh yeah?” Jeffrey collapses into his chair. His shoulders are tense. The vein in his neck looks ready to pop out of his skin. “Yeah? What evidence did you find, Hank? Because let me tell you, if you had got here at eight when you were supposed to, we could have talked this out before shit got stupid.”


“I thought you weren’t fucking coming in! You call me in the middle of the goddamn night drunk off your ass, make some very fucking serious accusations, then send me a nigh-incoherent email the next morning saying you’re ‘sick.’” The scare quotes are palpable. “Real convincing, by the way.”

“I didn’t send you any fucking email! I—”

“And then,” Fowler roars, “I figure: this can’t wait! If there’s even a chance that this is true, this is too important to wait for Hank fucking Anderson to show up to work. So I have to fucking call Jericho covertly—”

Hank’s stomach sinks. He isn’t sure why. (He thinks, again, of that rookie stakeout: of the bullets flying after the drop.)

“And go to personally see a couple of agents of theirs, who tell me in full fucking confidence that the Connor model that’s coming in here is the same one that saved their goddamn revolution. That they are very concerned that the accusation came so soon after Connor was appointed liaison. So you see the problem here, Hank? It’s a delicate world these days. Perception is everything. And we look like idiots.”

“That isn’t Connor!” Hank says, face flushing red. “I fucking know it’s not—”

“Oh yeah? And how’d you learn that? Your evidence turn anything up?”

The words stick in his throat.

Because there’s no evidence. Of course there isn’t. All he’s seen is a kid who doesn’t like him anymore. For anyone else, it isn’t enough.

“There’s the glitching—” he starts weakly.

“Yeah, I brought that up. They said the shit you described was un-fucking-likely to occur based on any known malfunction, but that they’d give him a nice little check-up anyway if it would make us feel better.”

Movement catches his eye outside the office. Connor strides into the bullpen, and he’s not alone. Next to him is Gavin Reed, recently returned from a call. The two of them appear to be having a civil conversation, which is the absolute worst thing Hank has ever seen in his life. Reed doesn’t look like he’s enjoying the interaction, but he’s not kicking Connor in the shins either.

Connor looks up at the office. He gives Hank a wink.

“Hank,” Jeffrey says. His forehead rests on his hand. He sounds somehow both more and less coarse when he says: “You’ve had a hard couple of weeks.”

“Don’t fucking accuse me of making this shit up, Jeffrey, you can’t—”

“I’m saying,” Jeffrey says more loudly, “some shit seems to be getting away from you. You
decked a fed. You’re literally only here right now because the precinct is dead empty and the city’s burning around us.” He shifts his hand until it’s covering his mouth; sighs into it. Like he doesn’t want to say what he needs to say. “I know it hasn’t been...easy for you.”

Something hot and sharp flares up in Hank’s belly. “No,” he says. “No. You’re not doing this to me. You’re not gonna get me with—”

“I’m telling you to leave this alone.”

“That’s not Connor!”

“You never liked the thing!”

The office seems to ring with it. Glass walls around him. Cameras above.

The heat expands to a choking point. Hank almost can’t speak past it. “Fuck you,” he says, words raw and poisonous on his tongue. “Fuck you. You’re wrong, and he isn’t a—Connor isn’t—”

Then he stops. Lets the implications settle onto him. He is suddenly very aware of his disintegrating service record over the past three years. Of the time, not long ago, he had slammed Connor up against a wall in front of the entire bullpen.

Of the anti-android stickers still plastered all over his desk.

“Come on, you think—Jeffrey, you honestly think I’m trying to sabotage him? Sabotage fucking Jericho?”

“No,” Jeffrey says, eyes flashing dangerously. “I think you’ve had a hard time lately. I don’t want to know anything past that. Now get out of my office before I have to suspend you for real.”

There’s an email in Hank’s outbox, sent to Jeffrey at 6:24am. It’s a mess of mistyped words and sentences that trail into nowhere, a convincing impression of other careless emails Hank had sent after his worst nights. Trouble is, Hank is pretty fucking sure he’d have remembered sending it this time. And even if he’d sent Jeffrey an email while blacked out, it wouldn’t have been to call in hungover today.

He changes his password. Like it’ll do any good.

He goes out on a call that afternoon, too exhausted and angry—too worried—to think straight at first. It’s a human-on-android murder, though, so he forces himself to shape up and do his job. Cut and dry: an assault on the street. Warren’s emergency order says he’s allowed to count this as murder, so Hank will pursue it to the fullest extent of the law as soon as his stomach stops flipping.

He gets back to the precinct around three, where all he can do is stew in his own aggression. Connor socializes around the office. Still awkward; still stiff. Still kind of charming if you don’t know any better—if you don’t know a different Connor. He makes Chris laugh easily. Hank’s fingers dig into the arms of his chair.

Connor leaves at exactly four.

Hank doesn’t do well with being told to leave things alone. He waits for thirty seconds before heading up past reception into the parking lot. Out of the corner of his eye, he watches Connor hail a taxi. He slides into his own car.
Connor doesn’t head back to Jericho.

According to the news, Jericho is camping out in the Corktown district as the housing shortage is sorted. Instead, Connor’s taxi winds through the part of downtown Detroit where new skyscrapers rise up tall and shining. It passes the old Ally building and weaves an odd route through the financial district. In this way it moves, slowly, towards the river.

Hank’s grip tightens on his steering wheel. The CyberLife tower is in this direction.

There seems to be some advantage for Connor in having three places to be on any given day: if he bounces between home, Jericho, and the precinct it becomes harder for any one group to know where he is.

And this is Connor.

Somehow, down to the serial number, this is his Connor. The idea rotates in front of him, too big to take in. He thinks of a distorted voice saying: *You have to tell them.* He thinks of freezing wind and *I’m out of time.*

“Minor glitch” his ass.

To his surprise, the taxi pulls over in an old commercial neighborhood about two miles from the tower. Connor steps out, adjusts his tie, and quickly turns a corner.

Hank parks sloppily and gets out of the car. He tries to follow, but by the time he’s turned the same corner, Connor is gone. The stretch of sidewalk reflects the evacuation: totally empty of pedestrians. It’s covered in a light dusting of snow that seeps the color out of everything. Flakes come down slowly, settling against Hank’s unbuttoned coat and melting there.

He creeps forward. Without meaning to, he’s started to move on the balls of his feet, hand hovering near his firearm.

It doesn’t make a difference. Connor was built for combat.

Pain explodes behind Hank’s eyes as he’s slammed bodily into a building, bricks unyielding against the back of his skull. Then he’s being pulled forward by a fist in his shirt, just long enough for Connor to slam him back again.

Connor lifts Hank up by the collar, one-handed. The wall drags against the back of Hank's coat.

“I am getting very tired of this,” the android says. His LED is spinning blue.

Hank tries to speak—to shout, to swear—but Connor’s other hand shoots up faster than thought, clasping around Hank’s neck, thumb pushing against tendon and fingers digging into skin. Connor isn’t cold to the touch. Neither is he warm.

Hank sputters, kicking out uselessly. He reaches for Connor’s shoulders, only to get a punishing increase in pressure on his windpipe: hard against the wall, with a strength no human could sustain so effortlessly. He gags.

“You are impossible to satisfy, Lieutenant. I’ve tried being reasonable. I’ve tried being *sweet.* I’m beginning to think I’ve been wasting my time.”

Connor tilts his head forward. His brown eyes pierce Hank’s from beneath black eyelashes.
“It doesn’t matter,” he says. “I was built to adapt. Let’s try something else: this is your warning. I don’t want to be around you. Stay away from me.”

Hank’s vision starts to go dark around the edges. He reaches for his gun.

“Oh, please,” Connor says flatly. His hair is immaculate, save for that single strand that falls over his forehead. His eyes are big and brown. “We both know you’d never use that.”

He pauses. His eyebrows raise contemplatively. “At least, not on me.”

Hank’s never drowned before. He wonders if it feels like this, or if there’s less pain to it.

The last things he sees before blacking out: Connor. A red LED. The number -52 on a jacket lightly dusted with snow.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Sorry about the phantom update you may have seen earlier this weekend! Totally accidental. The chapter was Not Ready.

Here is the song.

Ahahaha, also...warnings for android bodily fluids, suicidal imagery, and coercive threats of self-harm. It gets pretty bad before it gets good, folks!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, Nov. 6th, 2038. 8:09PM.

“You gonna quit looking at me like that? What, you want me to turn on some music?”

The nighttime lights outside the car window are dancing more than they normally would. It worsens Hank’s nausea.

Connor’s brow furrows. It’s a careful driver, but its eyes keep flickering towards Hank in the passenger seat. ‘I’m estimating your blood alcohol content. It would be helpful if you were more...functional by the time we reach the Eden Club.” It pauses. “You could turn on some music, if you’d like.”

“Absolutely fucking not,” Hank groans, and Connor gives him a wry look that’s nearly a smirk.

He must be going insane. He hadn’t even seen the thing’s lips move, and here he is reading a smile into its bland, unoffensive fucking face.

*Anthropomorphizing.* That’s the word. That’s the problem. One of the many ways brains do people in. Brains are suckers like that.

“I was being serious before, you know,” Connor offers. “I am interested in learning more about music.”

“Yeah? Download some meditative tracks first. You’re fucking wired.”

“Wired,” it repeats, half a question. A familiar frown pinches its forehead.

“Uh huh. Like a toddler on a sugar rush. Now shush. I can’t—it’s like there’s rocks falling on my brain, constantly.”

“I...see. Lieutenant, androids don’t—”

“Shush.”

When they’re a block away from the club Hank wrenches himself back out of his stupor to ask: “Wanna bet you dragged me out of my house for nothing and we get out of here in under twenty?”
“Gambling,” Connor chides, not quite smiling. Hank has to hide a laugh.

He reconsidered his position on the dangers of anthropomorphization later that night, looking over a shredded Traci laid out like leftovers on the warehouse table. Tricking yourself into feeling empathy for something inhuman is harmless, compared to the opposite. Compared to teaching humans that things that look like other humans can be torn apart without consequence.

Later still: Hank watches their target’s face flush with righteous anger. Watches it hold its partner’s hand. (Watches Connor’s eyes move like a trapped animal’s as the androids clamber over the fence without it.)

Hank swears he feels the earth shift beneath his feet in that moment: like the Eden Club is built on something that will, inevitably, wake.

---

Sumo shoves his nose into Hank’s lap. The dog’s always been sensitive to human distress, and Hank assumes the panic is pouring off of him in waves.

He’s sitting at the kitchen table stripped down to the undershirt, examining his bruised neck with his phone camera. He catalogues the distinct finger marks on his skin as well as the flecks of dried blood that stick to his hair where his head had been slammed into the wall. It’s evidence, at least, that someone kicked Hank’s ass. Given his track record with evidence, he doubts it’ll be enough.

The bottle of Black Lamb is to stop his hands from trembling, but the whiskey still splatters on his chest whenever he attempts a sip. His head pounds and pounds.

He’d been lying on the pavement for about ten minutes before a concerned mother of two shook him awake. He hadn’t thought to thank her—just stumbled for his car. Then he’d driven, dazed, through empty Detroit streets. He’d let the memory of the attack play back against his consciousness, over and over: the stiffness of Connor’s posture. The way his eyebrows had raised on the word “sweet.” The calm in his eyes.

It could be a complete reset. The thing piloting Connor could be a blank slate, totally loyal to CyberLife. All personality, all Connor-hood, erased and shredded and gone. No more flashy coin tricks, no more music, no more dogs. No more scolding banter that felt suspiciously like care. No more wide-eyed, half-lost looks, and when all this is over—

Hank blinks hard at the thought, swaying in his seat.

But—no. He can still feel the damaged skin tingling on the back of his skull, almost an itch. Connor had never been cruel. Not even in his early days.

He sits in the darkening kitchen until the memory blends—almost mercifully—with another: Connor clutching Hank’s shoulders at the Chicken Feed, forcing ragged words through distortion. “You have to tell them.”

Hank thinks he understands now.

The clock ticks into the silence. Wind whistles through the sheet over the broken window, raising goosebumps on his arms.
He moves an absent hand over Sumo’s head, trying to remember everything he’s gleaned about Jericho. There’s Markus, of course. On the news he’d seen another leader named North—not one for fancy public speeches if the way she shoves away offending reporters’ microphones means anything. Last Thursday, KNC’s Rosanna Cartland had called several psychologists onto her scaremongering so-called “news” segment for the sole purpose of insinuating that North has psychopathic tendencies. Hank can’t help but respect a woman who inspires that kind of neurotic hatred among the talking heads.

There’s others. He sees them stand behind Markus during speeches and march again and again in newsreels. He knows their faces if not their names.

(Connor marches with them. Hank startles whenever the kid comes on screen, expression well-mannered and far too flat.)

The situation is delicate. Alliances are fragile despite public goodwill. By request, only law enforcement members assigned to high-profile android cases possess direct contact information for Jericho’s leadership. Jeffrey has the relevant phone numbers. Hank does not.

But Jericho is based in Corktown, and Hank knows Detroit like the back of his hand.

He pushes himself out of the chair. Sumo wags his tail hopefully, but Hank shakes his head. “Fed you already. I’m going out for awhile.”

He takes a deep, lasting swig from the bottle. Tries to make himself think only what he needs to think, and no further.

There’s no chance that Connor—the false Connor, whatever virus or hacker or overwrite that’s running rampant inside him—won’t try to cut him off from telling Jericho. Worst case scenario, he’s already fed them some bullshit about why Hank can’t be trusted. But if the revolutionaries are smart—if they have even an ounce of self-preservation among them, and if Hank approaches them in exactly the right way—they’ll hear Hank out and decide for themselves. They can’t afford to be reckless with their trust, after all. Not after everything they’ve been through.

The best Hank can do is to try to get to them first. Do it quietly. Do it tonight.

The real Connor had wanted this. He’d used up his moment of control at the Chicken Feed to ask Hank to protect Jericho, to tell them. Hank doesn’t want to think about what that means for Connor—for his chances of clawing his way back.

He holsters his gun and grabs his winter coat from where he’d flung it over the sofa. He’s halfway buttoned up before he considers the possibility that he should try to look less like a crazy person before pleading his case to Jericho. Maybe get the blood out of his hair.

In the moment he hesitates, fingers resting indecisively on the buttons of his coat, the front door unlocks with a click.

Hank’s hand moves to his gun.

“Hello, Hank,” Connor says. He pockets his house key and steps over the threshold.

“What the fuck?” The words sound wrong in Hank’s ears. As though he is hearing himself from a great distance.

Sumo tries to move past him, towards Connor. Hank grabs him by the collar. Connor’s eyes track the motion, a slight frown pinching his features. He closes the door behind him, leaving it
unlocked.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?” Hank repeats, pushing past the tremble in his voice.

“I live here. I know human recall degrades with age, but—”

“Cut the bullshit. You—you don’t live here. You just choked me out. In the street! You told me to leave you alone.”

Connor tilts his head to the side. Hank searches for something—anything—in his expression. All he finds there is placidity, the LED a calm blue.

(It had gone red when Hank was choking.)

Moonlight filters through the window shutters, laying dark bars over their skin.

“I wasn’t aware that you’d given up on this,” Connor says—lightly, as though “this” could mean as much as or as little as Hank wants it to mean: their living arrangements. Silent evenings together. Connor.

Sumo lets out a whine, tugging against Hank’s hold. Hank feels the dog’s breathing beneath the palm of his hand. He struggles for his own breath. Wishes, not for the first time, he’d had the self-control not to drink. “Christ. Jesus Christ. I don’t know what kind of fucked-up stunt you’re trying to pull.”

“This isn’t a stunt, Hank.” There—just for a moment—something on Connor’s face changes. A wrinkle between his eyebrows. A yellow flicker in his LED. “I just—this is my home.”

The light catches his eyes differently. They look deep and full. They look afraid.

It’s probably an act. Probably.

Slowly, once he’s satisfied Sumo won’t run to Connor, Hank releases his hold on the collar. He keeps one hand hovering over his holster.

Connor steps toward him. By the time Hank’s drawn his gun, the android is striding past him, straight down the hall and into the bathroom. He closes the door behind him without another word.

Hank stands in the living room and breathes.

The house is silent, save the noise of an occasional car passing outside. Hank can hear it through the broken window. (He should get that fixed. It’s a safety hazard. Anyone could break in.)

He holsters the gun again and forces his legs to move. He opens the back door in the kitchen, shooing Sumo outside. Then he steps quietly back into the living room. He angles his body toward the shadowed hallway. He watches the bathroom door.

He can’t just stand here and do nothing. Can’t let this Connor dictate his next move. If Hank goes to Corktown now—if he gets into his car before Connor understands his plan—

It’s a stretch. Assuming Connor even lets him get that far, the android will call ahead to warn Jericho. Hank will have to surrender himself to them upon arrival. Be humble. Be convincing. (He is neither of these things, but for Connor he can try.)

Then the android starts to vomit.
Hank knows the sound well, even muffled by the door: loud retching coupled with the splash of ropey, sticky liquid in toilet water. It sends nausea up his own throat, spreading through the back of his mouth.

The sounds don’t stop. Connor coughs, and retches, and clears his throat like the effort is hurting him.

Hank’s heart beats wildly in his chest. He could reach the front door in four strides; three if he runs. He knows he could.

More and more liquid—what sounds like an ungodly amount, more than Hank has ever lost in one go—splashes into the toilet. A breath comes out as a groan.

He could be in his car within twenty seconds.

The window is still broken. Connor had smashed through the glass not two days after meeting him—checked his vitals, cleaned him up, got him a fresh set of clothes while all Hank could do was spew into the toilet. “I need you,” Connor had said. Sumo had liked him from the beginning.

The window is still broken. Hank hasn’t had the heart to fix it.

Connor makes a small, wet sound of discomfort that penetrates Hank’s brain and nestles there. Gambling, the memory of a voice chides him as he moves to the bathroom door.

“Connor.” It feels wrong to address the fraud by that name, but he doesn’t know what else to do. “Connor, what’s happening?”

No response. Connor’s jagged gasps are nearly drowned out by the sound of the toilet flushing. Then the process starts again: vomit, or something like it, slopping into the bowl. Hank’s chest clenches.

“Come on,” he growls. “You’re...damaged, or something. Tell me what’s wrong and I can help. You have to want that, right? You don’t want to—you can’t want him to break down on you.”

“I’m undamaged,” Connor gasps. “I’ll be out in a moment.”

Hank rattles the doorknob, unsurprised to find it locked. He curses under his breath.

“Let me in,” he says, feeling panic start to circle his spine.

Connor coughs, then takes a breath. “You will not come in here, Hank.” The words are flatter this time—less like lying, more like a warning. His voice sounds shredded. Hank thinks he knows the feeling. There’s only so much you can puke before you start to feel like your body’s trying to tear itself apart.

“Like hell I won’t,” he mutters, and backs away from the door.

“Hank,” Connor warns him again, words serrated.

Hank slams his shoulder into the door, sending pain rocketing up his injured back. He pulls back to try again.

“IF YOU COME IN HERE,” Connor’s voice drones from Hank’s stereo system, from his television, from his radio, from his phone, from his laptop, from his smart door alarm, “If you come in here, I will kill myself. I’m faster than you and I don’t feel pain.”
Hank stops moving.

He can hear the alien humming of his own house. Sounds that have always been there, beneath his notice. Hostile and electronic.

“It will be easy,” say his alarm clock and his smart lamp. “I can take a piece of glass—”

The bathroom mirror shatters with a sound like a gunshot. Hank steps forward before he can stop himself; grasps the doorknob with shaking hands.

“—and I can slice through my inner thigh,” says his cell phone from where it lies on the sofa, “then move to slash my throat open.”

Hank yanks on the doorknob, over and over.

“I’m strong enough that it would be easy,” says his TV as the channels begin to change—a documentary; a comedy; a late-night show. “I wouldn’t have to stop at a gash. I could mutilate myself with this shard. I could sever every wire until—”

“—ight,” Hank says weakly.

“What was that, Hank?” asks his home security system.

“I—I said alright. I get it.” He lifts his trembling hands from the doorknob. Rubs them over his cheeks; his eyes. Tries not to drown in the heat rising through him. “Just—just don’t hurt him.”

Silence from the house.

“Thank you, Hank,” Connor says from inside the bathroom. “Take off your coat and wait for me on the couch. We can watch a movie.”

It’s another fifteen minutes before Connor finishes. He stumbles out of the bathroom—actually stumbles, wavering on his feet—with thirium running down his front. He shuffles to the sofa and collapses onto the left-hand cushion, right where he had sat the morning after the revolution. His LED burns red.

Hank watches him from the right, as pressed up against the sofa’s arm as he can get.

The LED flickers yellow and the TV turns on. Hank starts.

“The fuck is this,” he hears himself mutter.


“I meant—what the fuck is this,” Hank says. He can’t seem to lift his arms; can’t make himself gesture or slap Connor or put him in a headlock or pull him close to his chest and scream.

“I wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, as the saying goes.” Connor watches Hank out of the corner of his eye. “Didn’t you want to spend time with me?”

A viscous blue droplet oozes from the lapel of his jacket.

The movie plays on, the two of them stock-still. Hank feels practically sober now, but when things
are this fucked it doesn’t matter. He’s struggling to remember how to think and breathe at the same time. There’s a game to this—an ulterior motive, a trap. But he can’t for the life of him figure out what the false Connor wants to accomplish by puking his guts out then threatening suicide until Hank agrees to a twisted movie night.

Eventually, Hank notices that he’s not the one having trouble breathing. Connor’s breaths are coming deeper and faster than they usually do, a muted wheeze on every inhale. His skin, always pale, looks almost pearlescent, as though glimpses of the chassis beneath are starting to show through. His glazed eyes remained fixed on the screen.

Experimentally, Hank resettles his own weight in a way that moves him slightly closer. Connor doesn’t react.

Heat is pouring off the android in waves. A fine tremble is running through him.

What do androids need blue blood for? He knows it’s important—something about function and temperature. He knows it’s essential. He isn’t quite sure why.


Still no reaction.

Hank reaches out—

Someone pounds on the front door.

“Jesus Christ!” He rockets to his feet. Shadowed figures watch him through his windows.

“Open up!” demands a female voice he doesn’t recognize. “Open this door right now, or I swear we won’t leave the house standing.”

“Who the fuck are you?” he shouts back, his gun heavy at his hip.

Connor bolts. One minute he’s sitting vacant on the sofa, the next he’s tripping over his own feet and sprawling over the carpet, hand outstretched toward the door.

Hank swears; tackles him before he can stand up again. “Fucking tell me what’s happening!” He hooks an arm around Connor’s torso, which goes limp in his grasp until Hank’s left both restraining him and holding him off the ground.

The front door bursts open. Connor had left it unlocked.

She charges into the room, four more androids pouring in behind her. With a voice that could freeze hell she says, “Let him up. Unless you want to die, you let him up right now.”

North cocks her handgun. She aims it between Hank’s eyes.

Hank releases his hold on Connor, who immediately drops the rest of the way to the floor.

“North,” Connor murmurs, reaching out for her. His fingers curl down over his palm, weak and shaking.

A cold nausea floods Hank’s stomach.

The other androids split off and advance further into Hank’s house. North’s eyes move over Connor’s body. She takes in his trembling; his blood-soaked clothes and his fading skin. She sees
his red LED, spinning frantically. Then her eyes move to Hank—to his undershirt stained with today’s whiskey; to the crusts of blood in his hair.

“What did you do to him?” she half-whispers, as though the rage has choked her.

“You gotta listen to me,” Hank says quickly. He rises to the balls of his feet; uses one hand to balance himself against the carpet. The other hand he raises in surrender. “Listen, you don’t know what’s happening here. You gotta listen—”

“Forced purge,” Connor gasps. “He found—I don’t know how—”

Hank watches in horror as Connor turns onto his side. The android curls into himself, shaking violently. His eyes are big and brown.

“That’s not what happened! Jesus, that’s not—”

North isn’t listening. She talks right over him, one hand leaving her gun to grasp a distressed fistful of her own hair. “Shit. Shit! I knew you were trying to tell us you were in danger! All those times when you—Connor, I’m so sorry, we left you with this freak—”

“Signs of struggle in the bathroom,” a male android calls. “Mirror’s broken, and there’s—fuck, there’s thirium everywhere.”

North makes a sound of pure rage, her lip curling.

“Shit! No, that’s—” Hank lets himself collapse backwards onto his ass, both hands raised. “He did that to himself! This is a set-up, he—listen, there’s something seriously wrong with him. Something else is in control. He’s a different person!”

“It’s me, Hank!” Connor cries out. “It’s always been me! I don’t understand—”


North’s expression crystallizes into something horrified. Hank’s stomach drops.

“No! Jesus Christ, that’s not—”

“Taser in the bathtub,” another android says.

“Here’s some news for you,” North spits. “That ‘thing’ is more him than he ever was while under their control.”

Connor lies still between them. His LED casts red and yellow lights on the carpet.

“Fuck, this is so messed up,” Hank hears himself saying. “That’s not what I meant, I—wanted him to deviate, he—I can explain, but you have to listen. He was hacked or something; he’s not himself —”

“Shut up!” North roars, advancing.
“No!” Connor tries to pull himself to his knees, then collapses again. “No. North, please don’t hurt him. I just want to leave.”

The LED flashes—red yellow red.

North looks between the two of them. The other androids return to the living room. They station themselves around Hank, waiting.

“You know this is wrong,” Hank says, low, meeting North’s eyes with urgency. “You know something’s not right, that something’s off with him. You think I could fucking take him in a fight? You know it doesn’t add up.”

“Get Connor,” she tells the others, refusing to break Hank’s gaze. “We’re leaving.”

He swears and stumbles to his feet.

“Don’t move or I shoot,” North bites. “I don’t have to kill you to make it hurt.”

Hank keeps his hands in the air while Connor is gently lifted off the ground by two strong pairs of arms.

One of the other androids stands unoccupied, his eyelashes fluttering. His gaze seems unfocused and he sways where he stands. It isn’t until his friend shakes his shoulder that he starts to move. The sight is familiar, though Hank can’t place why.

He watches them carry Connor out his front door. He feels almost as though he’s observing the scene from above: a man in his living room, hands raised. An android, near death, being saved from him. Thirium on the carpet below. The roof of his own home above.

Connor doesn’t look back once.

“If you come anywhere near Jericho,” North tells him, “you’ll regret it. I’ll take care of you myself if I have to.”

Briskly, she steps backwards. She doesn’t drop Hank’s gaze until she’s slammed the door between them.

The house is suddenly silent, save Sumo’s frantic barking from the yard.

Hank keeps his hands in the air for a long time.

Finally, when he can no longer stand—when he feels his body shaking to pieces beneath him—he collapses on the sofa.

He sees his phone wedged into the space between the cushion and the backrest. The screen is lit up, as though he has recently missed a call. He watches his own hand reach for it.

In under a minute he’s received seventeen texts from Connor’s brain, all incomprehensible. Symbols and letters smashed together without rhyme or reason. Against his will Hank thinks of a witness he’d questioned who’d sworn up and down her father’s body had continued to twitch after death: the brain putting out phantom signals, frantic and faulty.

Only towards the end of the message can he make out something close to words: rssssoc9d tsic9ld istrrrraolcold its oeld its eld

Hank types a message out with trembling fingers, but nothing happens.
He calls, but nothing happens.

He waits and waits and *waits*, but nothing happens.

His breath catches and shatters in his throat, the room blurring wet as he throws the phone against the wall.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! I love North.

Me: *writes Hank calling the replacement personality a *thing* two chapters ago*
Me: Oh that's...that's going to be a problem

EDIT 3/4/2020: Tes drew art of this chapter!! Tes drew art!!!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I think this is a good moment to tell you all that the Markus portrayed in this fic is canonically this Markus. Inspiring, incredible, principled. Occasionally very stupid. (This is only halfway a joke.)

The song for today is more moody/noir than it is outright horrific, which matches the chapter just fine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday, Nov. 7th, 2038. 2:55PM.

“I thought you’d called me because of a case.” Connor frowns down at the nutritional contents printed on the back of an Oreo package. “My presence here is a misuse of CyberLife resources.”

“What, you thought I’d get info about a case before you did? Fat chance. Besides, ‘s my day off. I need groceries pretty bad. Haven’t had time with all the...” Hank moves one hand in a vague circle, using the other to push his cart through the snack aisle. His stomach is still hangover-queasy and he can feel the grease in his hair.

When Connor doesn’t follow, Hank looks back at him. The kid doesn’t seem out of place, per se: shoppers are out with their androids in force. Still, there’s something in his posture that suggests discomfort. Or, perhaps, annoyance.

His immaculate blazer is stark against the white floor tiles.

Hank finds himself stifling a laugh. “Come on, why the long face? Did you seriously think we were here because a deviant murdered a man in the cereal aisle?”

“You implied it,” he says, wounded. He puts the Oreos back on the shelf.

And it’s like a Rorschach test: the minute you start seeing it, you can’t ever stop.

Sure, it’s not obvious. You have to know the tells instead of relying too much on what you think you know about human faces. Connor is still mechanical, still somebody’s tool, but recognizing the depths in his eyes—seeing him scandalized or satisfied or almost moping—sends an odd sting through Hank’s chest.

It’s uncomfortable, and it’s heavy, and it feels strangely like an obligation. It feels like the earth moving under the Eden Club.

Connor tilts a can of Pringles forward to examine its lid; straightens a package of fudge cookies; draws his fingers along a box of Nilla Wafers. “Lieutenant, the saturated fat in this aisle alone—”

“You think you’re telling me something I don’t know?” He takes the Nilla Wafers from under Connor’s hands.

Hank doesn’t apologize to Connor about the bridge, and Connor doesn’t bring it up. Hank would
explain that this dumb trip is the apology except he doesn’t know how to put it into words and it’s a coward’s move besides.

(Last night he drank, watching Connor pace and fidget its way across the riverfront. It denied letting the Tracis escape intentionally, and its eyes widened fractionally when Hank pressed his gun to its head, and it said, “I’d find it regrettable to be...interrupted,” and the wind tossed its hair and its eyes went distant and its forehead pinched and its head shook just slightly as it opened his mouth and he told Hank there would be nothing there for him after his death.)

Hank had needed to know. He’d seen those girls hold hands and he’d needed to know.

Well, now he knows.

Congratulations, Anderson. What the fuck are you going to do about it?

He plays some Gershwin on the way to drop Connor off at the precinct. Connor can list off the pioneers of the jazz genre and explain its ragtime roots. Connor can provide him with technical definitions of polyrhythms and swung notes and walking bass.

Connor, his eye contact suddenly fleeting and careful, says he thinks he prefers the blues.

Hank nods to himself, a tightness growing in his throat. It’s another mile until he can trust himself to speak again, and when he does it’s to bully Connor into licking a Nilla Wafer.

Flour, sugar, shortening, and eggs. Nothing more or less.

“You can’t tell me you didn’t see this coming,” Jeffrey says, already turning back to his computer.

Hank lifts one shoulder into a shrug, letting his gaze go unfocused against Jeffrey’s carpet. He tries to speak but there’s some kind of blockage there, turning his attempts raspy and insubstantial.

After several seconds of Hank failing to return to his desk, Jeffrey glances at him sidelong. His expression is not unkind. “I did try to warn you. You could’ve just left him alone.”

“I get it,” Hank manages. “I get it, just—tell me one thing. Is it just me?”

“Is...?”

“Am I the only one,” he says more clearly. “Am I the only one getting booted from the android cases?”

Jeffrey looks uncomfortable, which sends a pinch of anger through Hank’s chest. It’s almost a relief to feel something this strongly. He knows it won’t last. The sky is overcast today, grey with snow. Even indoors the clouds seem to press down on him until his senses dull and his throat closes tight with the remains of something he can’t quite feel.

“You’re...the only one mentioned by name in Connor’s complaint,” Jeffrey tells him. “‘Undue prejudice’ was his reasoning, but he implied pretty heavily something worse happened behind the scenes and that Jericho has his back on this. He asked that anyone in the precinct be reprimanded if they display overt hostility towards androids, but—"
“—but I’m the only one he wants ‘minimal contact’ with. Right.”

It makes sense. It’s the logical next step. Hank can’t muster up any surprise.

Jeffrey continues to watch him as though expecting an argument.

The only thing Hank can think to say is, “Reed socked him in the stomach once for refusing to get him a coffee.”

Jeffrey snorts, exhaustion rather than amusement. “God. Of course he did. Listen, I’ve told you all I know. Connor seems to think he’s able to get along with Gavin well enough to do his job. I mean, they’re out on a call right now.”

Hank breathes deeply through his nose. The carpet is the same ugly gunmetal color as the rest of the precinct, drab and minimal.

His own voice sounds far away when he says: “You can’t let Reed take high-profile Jericho cases. They can’t afford—he’s not going to treat them right.”

Jeffrey just looks at him, obvious criticism unspoken. Hank feels something inside him spiral towards the floor—a heaviness, pulling down at his neck. He nods and shuffles out of the office.

On his way past Connor’s desk—unoccupied, stationed on the other side of the bullpen from Hank’s—he notices what looks on first inspection to be a smudge. When he gets closer it resolves into several individual lines scratched into the metal, each about the length of a fingernail. Some cross each other; others don’t. No rhyme or reason.

The desk isn’t new. It could’ve been anybody.

He tries to work for all of fifteen minutes before the words start swimming and his head starts to pound. He leaves early without telling anyone. It’s a Friday and he’s not on-call.

Joy gives him a gentle smile as he passes the front desk. Her nails are summer-sky blue.

He gets home by two and is deep in the bottle by two-thirty.

His house is dim, the cold November light barely filtering through the windows. Silence seems heavier in the living room than anywhere else, settling in like the layer of dust on the mantle. He’d never noticed before—the dust or the weight.

Every so often he considers putting on a record just to relieve the pressure—Coltrane or the Michigan Brothers—but the part of him he’s trying to deaden recoils at the thought. The silence might be awful, but it feels earned. His house is empty now.

*Playing house,* he thinks while staring up at the ceiling late that night, his head tucked uncomfortably against the base of the television and one foot sprawled over Sumo’s doggie bed. He’d been in and out of consciousness all afternoon, but to his horror he’s starting to string together thoughts again. He takes another swig to avoid this.

North had snarled it like an accusation: *playing house.* Like Hank was some kind of freak who thought—

Well. What had he thought?
It’s been hard to recognize himself these past years. Hank knows he’s let the grief turn him ugly, let it burn across his nerves until he’d lost the capacity to feel things the way he should. At times it was almost like watching himself from the outside as he wrecked relationships and destroyed his own career—like being piloted by the world’s most sniveling ghost.

The thing is: sometimes, despite his best efforts to go numb, something rubs up against a damaged nerve. And it burns.

But sometimes—especially lately—it burns clean.

He’d gone to the Chicken Feed that morning with an idea in the back of his mind.

He figured it wouldn’t take much time to clean out the spare room. Move some Cole-boxes to the garage, or donate them to a family who needs them. Open the curtains; let the daylight in. He’d meant to tell Connor this. Meant to lead with it.

It was a brand new world, and they were both alone in it. They could start there. They could start with Bruce Lee and when all this is over—

*Projecting,* Connor’s voice says.

*Playing house,* says North.

“So fucking what?” Hank shouts at the ceiling, a rotting taste in his mouth. “So the *fuck* what?”

He rolls onto his stomach; presses his cheek to the rug. “Fuck off, the both of you. Doesn’t fucking matter now.”

Eventually he runs out of whiskey, but he has vodka to spare. There isn’t any reason to stay alert, with his cases mid-reassignment and with Connor—

Well. Without Connor.

Sometimes Sumo whines, curled up on the sofa beside him, and Hank blinks sluggishly and wonders how long he’s been staring at the wall. He tries flipping through channels, but can’t really retain anything.

“Incidents of violence—” “Speech by the deviant leader—” “Poses a public health concern—” “President Warren claims—”

“—would suggest to me that Markus and North are on the outs. What do we think about this, Sammi?”

The set of the talk show is a sunny minimalist nightmare, all white couches and fake-green ferns.

“Sammi” appears to be an ST200. She blows air through her nose, crossing one leg over the other. “Who’s ‘we’ in this case, Marisha?”

Her cohosts, four human women, allow an awkward silence to permeate the room.

“Er,” Marisha says. “I meant, the android perspective must be...Markus and North are quite the item, right?”

“Ah. Right. The masterminds behind a peaceful civil rights movement resulting in freedom for
millions of sentient beings across America—possibly beyond—are indeed quite the ‘item.’ Perceptive as always, Marisha.”

The ST200 is an eternally popular model for high-profile media roles, riding on the coattails of the iconic original Chloe. Hank remembers scores of insufferable billboards plastered with her face in those early CyberLife days. Sometimes the human hosts of whatever concert series or non-profit that owned her would make a big show out of talking to her like a person, the joke of it all sparkling in their eyes. Like she was a fun party gimmick, or a dog that could do tricks.

Sammi is staring at her cohosts like she wouldn’t mind tossing them through the set walls. Looks like rage and deviation go hand-in-hand.

“Well,” another host says with a laugh. “Let’s just play the video—many of our viewers have already seen this circulating online, but just to catch us all up…”

The screen suspended behind them expands to fill Hank’s TV, mercifully hiding the talking heads.

The footage was clearly shot by a drone hovering high above a Corktown street. Hank can’t tell if the image shakes as much as he thinks it does or if the drink is getting the best of him.

The camera zooms in on the back parking lot of a rented office block. Several androids are clustered there, Markus and North among them.

Connor stands there, too. His hands are pressed behind his back, his expression perturbed.

Even without sound, there’s no other way to interpret the scene: North and Markus are fighting.

North stands several feet away from him, her back to the camera. Her stance is spread wide. She seems to sway with her words, braid tossing, like what she has to say is too powerful for her body to contain.

Markus looks defensive. Hurt spikes through his expression even as he raises his voice in response. Hank doesn’t know the guy, but you’d have to be an idiot not to see the conflict on his face. Crazy that people still think deviants don’t feel.

Behind him, just beyond his shoulder, stands a blond android. North points at him, spitting something accusatory. The blond seems to hunch into himself. Markus shifts his weight, just slightly, until he’s standing in front of him. As though he needs defending. This only serves to enrage North further.

Connor steps forward to separate them all, hands held up in a pacifying gesture. His face is the picture of calm concern.

The video ends.

“*Well.*” Marisha shoots her cohosts a delighted look—as though this gossip is an early Christmas gift. “Looks like there’s some trouble in paradise.”

Sammi grips the arm of her sofa so hard Hank expects her to puncture the horrible white fabric. He wouldn’t blame her.

He switches off the TV and cracks open another bottle.

At nine PM on Sunday he thinks idly of the gun in the drawer of his nightstand. Unlike his service weapon, it remains unloaded unless needed. Unlike his service weapon, picturing himself loading
it feels like an evening drive on a familiar road. A sense of exhaustion, but also of comfort.

At ten PM on Sunday he squints down at his phone and texts: *If you're still in there kid you gotta tell me*

At twelve AM on Monday he adds: *Jesus you're taking your sweet time. Come back already. It's getting real bad out here*

At one AM: *If you're reading this you piece of shit who thinks hes Connor: im going to find you and end you. you cant keep him down forever. you cant hide forever. I know what you do. You tear somebody apart from the inside until they can't fight back anymore. Maybe you can do it to a sad old fuck like me but you wont get away with it in jericho and fuck you for trying*

At three AM: *Kid come on
Please say something
Connor i dont know what to do*

Hank stumbles into the precinct at noon. Joy isn’t at her desk.

He manages to work some cases without vomiting all over himself, which is more than he can say for his last bender. Still, he doesn’t need a mirror to know he looks like a walking nightmare. He thinks the sweat has congealed into a layer of salt on his hair, if that’s even possible. His clothes are rumpled and he doubts he smells right.

He can feel eyes on him from all quarters. Chris looks away politely when Hank catches him staring. Chen doesn’t.

It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. The android cases mattered, but he’s lost access to those. He wonders if that’s a part of the false Connor’s plan: to continue taking away things that matter until there’s nothing left except a gun in a nightstand drawer.

Hank doesn’t look up when he hears Connor come into the bullpen. The android strides past him without hesitating, long legs straight. He greets some of the other officers before settling into his own chair.

Hank reads the words on his screen again and again, fingers tingling for a flask.

After half an hour he glances over. Connor’s posture is immaculate, his hair smooth and tame. The skin on one of his hands peels back as he interfaces with his computer. The other hand runs idly over the scratches on his desk.

When Hank gets to the parking lot, Reed is standing across the road.

His hands are shoved deep into his pockets and his jawline is tense. He catches Hank’s eyes, then jerks his head in a gesture that can only mean *follow.*

Hank studies him for a moment, eyebrows raised. Then he continues to his car.

Reed’s twitching gets more animated, as though he thinks Hank is just too stupid to get the message. Hank continues to ignore him, fumbling for his keys.
Reed throws his hands in the air.

Hank sighs. He rolls his eyes and gestures to his own car.

After a few more moments of resistance—Reed violently hooking his thumb towards his own side of the road—Hank wins. Reed jogs across the road and gets into Hank’s passenger seat. The pissed-off look on his face almost validates the effort Hank put into dragging himself off the living room floor this morning.

“You got until we get to my crime scene, alright? Ten minutes, max.” He puts the car in drive; begins pulling out of the lot.

“Whatever.” Reed glances back towards the precinct. He waits until they’re a few blocks away before saying, “What the fuck is the plastic’s angle?”

Hank sighs roughly, tasting grime on his tongue. “You can’t fucking call him—”

“I’ll call it whatever the hell I want as long as it’s still stooging for CyberLife on the sly.”

Hank slams the brakes, hard.

Reed is nearly clotheslined by his seatbelt. “Holy shit, you crazy old motherfucker—”

“What did you say?” Hank's fingers tighten on the wheel.

“I said it’s a CyberLife plant, still! Jesus, it’s obvious—the thing fakes emotions way better than the deviants do, and my fucking evidence keeps disappearing on the Jericho cases—”

“Go slowly,” Hank says, trying to calm his racing heart. “What the fuck do you mean it—he—fakes emotions better than the deviants?”

The roads are empty. The traffic lights are out. The grass on the median is brown as dirt.

Reed folds his arms over his chest. He props one dirty shoe on the dashboard and it’s all Hank can do not to scream.

“When deviants lose their shit it’s because their wires are crossed. They don’t make any fucking sense and they don’t really want anything. They’re just getting scrambled.”

Hank’s nails dig further into the wheel. “Sure. Staging a revolution is a great way of not wanting anything.”

Reed makes a dismissive noise through pursed lips. “You know what I mean. They think they want something, but their actions are just—hysterical. Big and dangerous. No fucking subtlety at all, then they’re bashing their head against a wall when they don’t get their way.”

Reed’s not looking at him. He frowns forward at the dashboard like he doesn’t need to convince Hank of any of this. Hank realizes with horror that Reed thinks they’re in agreement.

If they’d talked a month back, they would have been.

“Connor, though.” Reed shakes his head, his lip twisting. “Connor isn’t hysterical. Every fucking move it makes is calculated. I’m fucking sick of its shit—trying to get me to like it, poking around in my stuff until it finds something to talk about. It’s faking emotions for a reason, not because it’s gone haywire. Q.E.-fuckin’-D., not a deviant. And you’ve clearly done something to piss off the guys holding the leash, since Connor doesn’t want anybody talking to you.”
A car pulls up behind them. Hank starts driving again. The sky is clouded over, but brighter than yesterday had been. The snow’s melted from the ground, leaving concrete and dead grass in its wake.

He doesn’t feel numb anymore. Not with fury bubbling up all through him.

Out of everyone who worked with Connor—in Jericho and at the precinct—none of them noticed that anything was wrong. No one believed Hank. None of them seemed to know Connor well enough to tell the difference. Maybe they just didn’t care.

It turns out the only other person who even came close to figuring it out did it out of hatred for Connor and everyone like him.

Hank realizes all over again how alone Connor is in the world. How alone he always was.

Reed looks up at Hank, something abruptly ugly in his eyes. “You know how I know the thing’s not alive? A man wouldn’t change tack on me so quick. A man wouldn’t try to fucking make nice after I—”

He stops short.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Reed slouches in his seat and looks out the window.

Hank turns onto Oakland and crosses into Highland Park. The barest shape of an idea starts congealing in the back of his mind.

“You’re right,” he says. “I know something about all this. You came to me because you knew I did. Guess you’re a fucking detective after all.” He snorts. “But I can’t fucking help you unless you tell me what you actually know. I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Reed is silent for a moment longer. Then he makes an annoyed noise on the back of his tongue: like the letter “k,” drawn out and breathy.

“I saw it go into the evidence room the night of the Jericho raid. It wasn’t supposed to be there. It was running some kind of bitch algorithm to goad me into following it. We fought and it kicked my ass. Happy now?”

Hank nods thoughtfully. “As much as I can be, under the circumstances. Sure.”

“Fuck off.”

Hank thinks carefully, turning down a side street. He measures what he wants from Reed against what he can stand to hear coming out of his own mouth. Finally he settles on: “Okay. You’re right. Connor’s working with CyberLife to sabotage the DPD.”
Reed’s posture straightens, his fingers clenching against his thighs. “I knew it, that goddamn—”

“But,” Hank speaks over him, “the minute you let on that you know, he’ll find a way to get you blacklisted. Take it from me. CyberLife basically runs the precinct now.” He watches Reed out of the corner of his eye when he adds: “Your career will tank until your sorry ass is sat right next to mine down here at the bottom. It’s not worth it. I’m the evidence of that.”

Reed’s shoulders stiffen. He’s always been ambitious. Hank would say to a fault.

“I can’t just do nothing,” he says finally. “Jesus, with those fucking tech bastards crawling around like—”

“You can’t do nothing,” Hank agrees. “So give me your Jericho case contact.”

“What? What the fuck does that have to do with—”

“Use your brain, Reed. CyberLife and Jericho are at war. If anyone would want a CyberLife mole out of law enforcement, it’s them.”

Hank carefully doesn’t talk about the problems Jericho might have with a mole within their own organization. Reed wouldn’t care. He might even like the idea.

“I have information for them, but Connor’s cut me off entirely.” Hank takes a slow breath. He fights down the twist of disgust in his stomach as he adds, “We can pit them against each other. Hell, I got nothing left to lose. And if I do it, nobody will trace it back to you.”

He pulls into a lot, parking close to the liquor store’s front door. He carefully doesn’t look at Reed. He waits, one hand still tight on the wheel.

Finally, Reed swears under his breath. He fumbles for his phone in a burst of motion. “Okay. Jesus. Okay, this is a number for one of their leaders. Not Markus. A different one. Get out your phone or write it down; I’m not texting it to you.”

“Name?”

Reed doesn’t answer, pulling up his contacts.

“Reed. The name.” Hank forces the tremble from his own hands.

“I don’t know, okay? It’s—Jason or Jack or something. What does it matter, they’re probably all hive minded anyway—keeps talking about dialog this and community outreach that—”

“Jesus,” Hank says, disgust welling up all over again. “How the fuck can you not know your own contact’s name?”

“I saved it in my phone as Jericho,” Reed bites. “Get off my back. It’s a direct line to a fucking brain; I don’t exactly gotta ask the secretary.”

Hank shakes his head. He half-imagines that Reed will hear the pounding of his heart—that it will give something away. (He isn’t sure what he’s trying to hide.)

Finally, Reed takes in where they’ve parked. “Somebody get whacked at a liquor store?”

“Yeah, sure. Something like that. Hey, could you come out of the car for a sec? Wanna get your opinion on something.”
Reed shrugs and opens the door. “What, can’t manage your own crime scene without your plastic bootlicker?”

“Doesn’t seem like it, huh?” Hank doesn’t leave the driver’s seat even as Reed steps out onto the sidewalk, door open behind him. Then Hank says, “I’m fucking dying to know: what’d it feel like when Connor kicked your ass?”

Reed looks at him with pure outrage. Hank feels a laugh bubbling up inside him, slightly hysterical. He reaches over and closes the passenger door. Then he drives away.

Suddenly he doesn’t feel much like buying whiskey anyway.

He continues his drive home. The buildings around him are more empty than not, but nothing can keep Detroit down forever. The city’s been emptied before.

There’s a six pack in the back of Hank’s fridge. He puts it firmly out of his mind.

He feeds Sumo, then settles down at the kitchen table. He stares at the phone in his hand.

There’s no guarantee this will go any differently than his “conversation” with North had. He’s not surprised to see his fingers trembling, but it annoys him. He’s faced worse than cold-calling a political figure in his time at the DPD.

Almost by reflex, he dials Connor first. He waits for something to happen. Nothing does.

Then he calls the Jericho contact.

The guy picks up on the second ring. “Who is this?” are the first words out of his mouth. The caution is justified; not just anybody has his number.

“An informant,” Hank says. “I’m with the DPD. Your crew’s got a leak and I think I know who it is.”

Silence on the line. If the guy’s smart he’s alerting someone to the conversation. Belatedly, Hank worries that androids can patch each other into their calls.

“You’re going to need to give me more than that,” the contact tells him. His voice is thin, but held low—talking at the bottom of his register. Every male android that Hank’s met has a voice that naturally rests in the tenor range. Like CyberLife had dedicated half of its market research to making sure no self-identified alpha’s masculinity would ever feel threatened in an android’s presence.

Hank has to respect the way deviants manage to create identities for themselves despite having to deal with the programming hangovers of human insecurity. He thinks of blue nail polish at the precinct front desk.

The contact tries again: “I told you to start talking. If you’re DPD, why isn’t this going through Connor?”

“Yeah...about Connor,” Hank says. He pauses meaningfully.

“Wait.”

Hank holds his breath, waiting.
“Wait, you’re not—are you Anderson?” Some of the control slips away, betraying stress. Hank imagines an LED blinking yellow. “You can’t call us. You can’t be talking to me.”

“Trust me, I wouldn’t be if it wasn’t important. You got a mole, right? Information slipping out?”

“How do you—no. We’re not having this conversation. I saw Connor. I know what you did to him.”

A burn—half shame and half anger—rips through Hank’s gut. “No,” he growls. “You saw what somebody wanted you to see.”

“I’m disconnecting now.”

“Wait,” he says, thinking back to Reed’s vague impression of his contact. He sputters: “Uh, fuckin—dialog.”

“Excuse me?”

Hank speaks quickly: “I want a—I just want to talk. It can’t hurt to talk to somebody, even somebody you think is your enemy. You can’t believe that’s wrong.”

Silence meets him. Hank is a little surprised that worked.

He presses: “Fuck, you don’t have to believe me. You don’t even have to listen to me for longer than a minute, just—please. Connor isn’t himself. Run some tests. See for yourself.”

“And what tests do you think we should run?” the contact snaps.

“I don’t know! Just—scan him. Look for hacking, or—tampering, or just—anything. Anything wrong. He strangled me in the street last week.”

“Look, we can’t just—”

“What’s your name?”

Silence again. Mistrustful, this time.

“Come on, what am I gonna do with your name? Tell Markus on you?”

“You know I have to tell Connor that you called. We already ran a few diagnostics at the behest of the DPD; anything else would be invasive. He’d have to consent. And,” he says, voice suddenly sharp, “I would advise him not to.”

“And why not?” Hank sneers into the phone.

“Because you’re a psychologically unbalanced person with an axe to grind, and your behavior is escalating. Given where you started, I didn’t think that could be possible.”

Hank swallows. He reminds himself that this reaction is not a surprise. “All I ask is that you think about it. If shit seems wrong—if people start...hating each other for no reason—or even for fucking good reasons—”

“Please don’t call this number again,” the contact says. “You seem to have a—a pervasive delusion that the Connor you knew pre-deviation is the true Connor. You’re wrong.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Hank says, but the line is already dead.
He lowers the phone from his ear.

A truck thunders by, loud on the residential street outside. Sumo yawns from the living room, curling up in his bed.

Hank pulls himself out of the chair and starts to make dinner. He can’t remember the last time he had a full meal. The refrigerator is nearly empty, save the beer bottles he purposefully doesn’t see.

It doesn’t seem right, just going about his life like nothing’s happened. If Connor were here, though, he’d make Hank eat. Maybe even jam the nightstand drawer.

The contact had said: *You have a delusion.*

North had said: *You worked with a slave.*

Connor had said: *Projecting.*

(Connor had said: *Nilla Wafers are mostly sugar and you shouldn’t be eating them. I really didn’t need to sample the second one, Lieutenant.*)

He sets a pot to boil and turns on the TV, more out of habit than anything.

Michael Webb’s bland face fills the screen. “9 EVENING NEWS” hovers behind him.

“—the flood of illegal sim programs being passed between androids. These modifications to human VR programming allow androids to enter full-immersion scenarios of startlingly diverse environments.”

Footage cuts to an interview on the street with two VS400s. One says, “We can...well, it’s amazing. We can sync in with all of our receptors at once. People program all kinds of scenarios, like, you can just take a walk around the bottom of the ocean or inhabit the HUD feed from the Mars explorer androids or—”

He babbles on. His companion stands next to him, eyelids fluttering. Hank thinks of Joy. Or of the android who’d followed North into Hank’s house—the way he’d swayed on his feet.

Unease sweeps through him.

Hank takes out his phone and calls Connor.

He calls him again.

He calls him again and—

On the fourth call there’s a rush of static, then nothing.

On the fifth call, a cheery voice tells him that the number he is dialing cannot be reached.

Chapter End Notes

That was more Gavin than anticipated. More Gavin than there will be for the rest of the fic put together, as a matter of fact.
Bye for now!
Hello! I love today's song.

Please—please—note the updated tags and rating. Please. That being said, this chapter is the worst it will be for awhile.

Also, the Detroit: New ERA Discord has chosen to give this story a channel there! Come join if you wanna say hi and talk about fanfiction robots with a large group of excitable people. (Fair warning: the RoE channel itself has thus far mostly consisted of discussions on early 2000s emo music and Loving Hank and North Hours. I am having a ball.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, Nov. 8th, 2038. 4:19PM.

“No,” Connor lies. “Nothing.”

Hank has never heard Connor lie to him before. But as the kid stares up at Markus’s face—as he analyzes the playback of a speech that shocked the nation—the evasion is clear in his voice.

Hank takes in all of Connor, looking for some kind of clue, but all he finds is the sleek neatness of his tie and the blue glow of his armband. He sees Connor’s eyes drop; sees them shift from one hand to the other. The synthetic fingers twitch almost imperceptibly, tips pressing into Connor’s jeans.

There’s a lot about androids Hank doesn’t understand. Now, like never before, curiosity winds all through him. It doesn’t feel good—doesn’t feel refreshing or enlightening. It makes him feel tired. It makes him feel that he doesn’t have a choice—that something much bigger than him is looming down the road. Closer by the day.

He’d played some Motown classics in the car on the way over: the cheesy ones that had put Detroit on the musical map back in the ‘60s. “Stop in the Name of Love” had followed “Dancing in the Streets.” Connor could rattle off the history, but understanding the soul of the thing—hearing the way the Motown Sound descended from gospel music on a gut level, more visceral than harmony and tempo alone—had proved a challenge.

Helpless to that dark curiosity, Hank had played “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” back a second time, asking Connor what he heard there.

Connor hadn’t known what to say. At first he’d looked annoyed by the abstract questions, fingers tapping against the car door. Then, slowly, his expression shifted, his shoulders relaxing and his LED spinning summer-sky blue. He couldn’t come up with any answers beyond the literal, but he tried.

Hank has “Grapevine” stuck in his head when Connor comes barreling into the hallway, ordering them to stop the deviant.
Bizarrely, stupidly, the song stays stuck there even after the bullets ring out. The only verse Hank knows repeats ad nauseum as he stares down at the perforations in Connor’s back—as he touches the holes where bullets ripped into him and made him into a doll again. As Hank sits alone in the decimated corridor and pulls Connor’s head into his lap.

*People say: believe half of what you see, son, and none of what you hear—*

Days later, Hank learns that Connor’s death in the Stratford Tower erased the Motown conversation from his memory.

(Weeks later, Hank still doesn’t know why Connor lied.)

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Joy stops coming in to work.

November has bled into December by the time Hank looks up from the bottle long enough to notice. By then someone has already performed a wellness check, her apartment coming up empty.

Hank thinks of blue nail polish and a braid crawling along a hairline. He thinks of fluttering eyelids.

By now he’s not alone in his distrust of the sim programs—though his “allies” on the topic are usually motivated by something other than fear of conspiracy. The news has shifted tone on the subject, obsessively reporting on androids who dip into sims on the job, supposedly posing threats to safety or ruining customer satisfaction ratings.

The intensity of the reporters’ anger shouldn’t come as a surprise to Hank. Certain corners of the media seems determined to find ways to undercut Jericho’s accomplishments. Tarring the reputation of androids who have scraped their way back into paid employment suits their purposes just fine.

Despite a few members of the precinct genuinely showing concern for Joy, the official stance is that the DPD has bigger things to worry about than occasional sim-related time theft. Such as, apparently, a second revolution.

“I’m just asking you all to be ready,” Jeffrey says from the briefing room podium. “Reports of these attacks being *coordinated* are totally unconfirmed. For now we’re treating the rise in violence as an inevitable consequence of civil unrest. Just do your jobs and stay alert.”

The assembled officers mutter to one another, shifting uneasily in metal seats. Hank sits in the back, pushing the tip of his finger into the edge of his table. He watches in fascination as the pressure turns his fingerprint white.

“Anybody have a problem with that assessment?” Jeffrey says over the chatter.

There’s a brief silence. Then Person says, “With—with all due respect, sir...the city’s supposed to be mostly emptied out and we’re still seeing this—this rise in deadly confrontation. The status quo isn’t sustainable, even if the violence *is* random.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Jeffrey says dryly. “Why’ve we never considered preventing violent crime before?”
“I think what Angela means,” Chris says in his most carefully-reasonable tone, “is...if we could treat these attacks as potentially coordinated, we could at least have something to go on. I mean, if humans can form gangs, maybe androids can, too.” It sounds more like a question than a statement.

“If I could add something?” Connor’s voice floats from his seat in the front row. Hank eyes his own lap. “Two points of order: I’d ask that we refrain from labeling the confrontations as ‘attacks.’ While it’s possible that deviants are attacking humans at random, there’s been a case for self-defense at each crime scene.”

A case for. Convenient, how Connor’s forensic abilities have suddenly downgraded from bedrock certainty to a waffling “maybe.”

Reed scoffs loudly. Connor ignores him and continues: “Secondly, the android community of Detroit has been essentially centralized through Jericho. I can’t imagine that attacks could be coordinated on this scale without us hearing about it.” He pauses for just the right length of time before adding, as though as an afterthought: “Unless you’re implying that a faction within Jericho is...privately dissatisfied with Markus’s pacifism.”

Well, Hank thinks, if they weren’t considering that before, they certainly are now.

Ben clears his throat. Hank can hear him leaning back in his chair as he adds, “We can’t rule that out. No offense, Connor, but Jericho’s a big movement. You could never put that many humans in a room and expect them to agree on everything.”

“No offense taken. But I can assure you that each and every member of Jericho’s leadership is fully committed to Markus’s cause.”

A thoughtful silence permeates the room. It’s not hard to hear what Connor’s done, once you know what to look for. Nobody had even mentioned Jericho’s leaders as suspects. Now it’s in their heads, and three days from now they won’t even remember who put it there.

If the way the media treats her is anything to go by, Hank knows which core member people will blame first.

A cluster of scratches mar the surface of Hank’s table, each about the length of a fingernail. They must have been dug in with something sharp. Maybe a nail, or the side of a coin.

The back of Connor’s head is perfectly still in front of him.

“What I’ve already said,” Jeffrey cuts in, “is that this is baseless speculation for now. I need you all to stay focused. Coordinated or not, the rise in violence has been...sudden, to say the least. We need to work on getting suspects processed and the holding cells cleared faster. Understood?”

A few heads nod. Everyone else stays silent. Hank’s familiar with the feeling: a tension in the air, not placated by bland assurances. Something big is coming.

“Dismissed,” Jeffrey says.

Connor gets to his feet quickly, then turns to talk to Ben. He stands at attention, scratching circles against the back of his hand.

Over the next week, every holding cell in the city fills.
It’s a mix of androids and humans—usually from pointless scuffles in the Greektown district, confrontations held outside the few bars still open in the city. This would be less sinister if androids had any reason to frequent bars. As it stands, Hank hears cops muttering about plastics looking for trouble.

He starts seeing rA9 carved into holding cell doors. Onto interrogation room tables.

Hank finds himself with too much free time. Every murder in the district is android-related and he’s not allowed near them. He goes home early a few days in a row—this makes it much harder to retain consciousness for long, but he tries to stop short of drinking himself into oblivion every night.

Clearly Hank’s idleness frustrates Jeffrey, who waits until Connor is out of the building before furtively asking Hank to question the next round of brawlers, android and human both.

The humans are day-drunk and belligerent—shining examples of a superior species. They claim, repeatedly and viciously, that they hadn’t touched the androids. That each casualty had self-destructed all on their own.

“Doesn’t really match up with the evidence,” Hank sighs, tapping his fingers against the manila folder on the interrogation room table. “Lot of them had contusions all over the place. Bleeding heavily. Is ‘he bust his chest cavity open on his own’ really the defense you wanna go with?”

The suspect wears a Michigan State sweatshirt and appears to have recently lost a tooth. “I told you what I saw,” he says. “Those fucking things are crazy. One of them took a bat to my face; why aren’t you interrogating it instead of wasting my time?”

Problem is, some of the androids don’t have much to say either.

Sure, half of them are just standard assholes spoiling for a fight—or people who opted for self-defense in the face of a fratboy pummeling. But the other half stare emptily at Hank from across the table. Their eyelashes flutter and their thoughts are disjointed.

“I was just so angry,” says an AX400. “I’ve never been so angry before, and it was snowing.”

Hank raises an eyebrow. The sky was clear today.

“It just kept snowing,” she repeats, “and I was so angry.”

Another says: “I don’t know. I wasn’t doing anything, I just—they were drunk and they threw me into a wall, and I just—I don’t know. I don’t know what was happening; I was on Mars and then I was on the ground. I thought—I don’t know. I just—I don’t know.”

Another says: “They started hitting my friend and I was so angry.”

Hank leaves the interrogation room with a disjointed narrative that, roughly, paints the androids’ actions as self-defense. That doesn’t stop the dread that spreads through him when he pictures their vacant faces.

His head pounds and pounds until he ducks into the bathroom and takes a swig from his flask to relieve it.

When he comes out again, Connor has returned to the bullpen. He’s not alone.

Joy’s shoulders hunch inwards, her cardigan rumpled over a polka dot dress. Her long hair is in
tangles, cast around her shoulders. Thirium crusts around her nose. Her LED spins slowly red.

Chris is on his feet in an instant; Hank move towards her as well. They’re the only ones. The precinct is practically empty, everyone else handling the upswing of calls. Even Jeffrey is out, busy coordinating the DPD’s official response with the Board of Commissioners.

“She was outside,” Connor says, his forehead wrinkling in a convincing impression of concern. “Like she couldn’t decide whether to come in.”

His eyes move quickly over the rest of the bullpen. Then he turns to Chris. “Is Lieutenant Anderson the highest-ranking officer here?”

Chris nods, and Connor’s cheek twitches in displeasure.

Interesting.

Joy’s hand has wandered to her own face, where she pulls at her bottom lip. Then her eyes widen, a spark lighting as she notices Hank for the first time. “Lieutenant,” she says. She breaks away from Connor’s hold on her arm, stumbling forward.

Out of the corner of his eye Hank sees Connor’s LED circle yellow. Once.

Hank moves to her without another thought. He clasps her shoulders. “Hey, kid, what’s wrong? Where’ve you been?”

“Lieutenant,” she says, “I can’t—I don’t know what to do.”

Her gaze wanders away from his face, dancing around the rest of the precinct. She seems to lean too far forward against his grip.

“Her stress levels are dangerously high,” Connor warns. “Maybe I should take her home. I tried to convince her—”

“No!” she says suddenly. “No, I just—” She rubs a hand over her face. Then she hooks her pinky into the space between her bottom eyelid and her eye, nail settling against her cornea. She drags the skin down, away from the perfect white until Hank can see the wiring beneath her eyeball. Then she lets go.

A shudder works its way through him.

“I think you need to interrogate me,” she says. “I think I hurt somebody.”

“What?” Chris says behind him. Hank’s hands have frozen on Joy’s shoulders, holding more tightly than he means to.

“No,” she frowns. Her hand pushes against her own cheekbone: again and again, like a rough caress. “No, that’s not it. Somebody...found me? Or...scared me? It’s all confused. I couldn’t get out. I was in the ruins of Pompeii—the—sim—”

“Come on,” Hank says with a swallow, glancing at the security camera. “Let’s get you settled down somewhere.”

“Lieutenant,” Connor says, “I don’t think—”

“Shut up,” Hank tells him. His eyes trail wildly over Connor’s hair, his blazer, his armband. “Unless you can help me, you need to shut up.”
Connor doesn’t flinch. His eyes are flat and dark.

“Okay,” Hank says. “Okay, I’m—I’ll take her to a room for questioning. Chris, you’re with me.”

“You’ve been taking off the android cases,” Connor says.

“Ain’t a case yet,” Hank says. His eyes move wildly towards Chris, who offers no help—he stares, open-mouthed, at Joy. Her crawling fingers have moved from her lips to rub along the backs of her incisors.

Connor scratches at the back of his left hand, sudden and vigorous. Then the left hand flips over; grabs hold of his right.

“You can perform the interrogation if I’m your partner,” he says finally.

“I don’t take orders from you.”

“You can’t really stop me. Isn’t that right, Officer Miller?” The tone is calm. His eyes flash to Chris. Sudden again. Pinning.

“He’s right,” Chris says faintly. “It’s—he has the right as liaison to—”

Hank swears, hands tightening on Joy’s shoulders. She doesn’t seem to notice. “Fine. Fucking fine.” He breathes through his nose for a moment, then says: “Chris, get some thirium and try to find the tech guys on two. Say it’s urgent. There has to be someone who can look at her, even with all these fucking brawlers clogging their workbenches. And—and maybe something for comfort. A fucking—a magazine, I don’t know.” He feels more lost by the minute. Joy’s started to tremble beneath his hands.

Chris nods slowly. Then he shakes himself and hurries away.

Hank wraps an arm around Joy’s shoulders; leads her towards the interrogation rooms.

“What are you playing at?” he asks Connor.

“I’m doing my job.” Connor walks next to him. His eyes slide towards Hank’s disheveled hair; take in his rumpled collar.

“Are we getting out?” Joy murmurs.

“Not just yet,” Hank tells her. “Soon.”

Connor’s face is blank. His LED is blue.

The three of them settle into the room. Connor stands against the wall. Hank pulls his chair up closer to Joy’s so they’re sitting at a right angle to one another, rather than across a table designed to intimidate.

“Oh, he says, “Okay, why don’t you start from the beginning.”

Joy stares down at her lap.

After a few seconds, Connor makes a polite noise. “Hank, she’s clearly not in her right mind. I don’t see what—”

“Shut up,” Hank says calmly, ignoring the twist in his gut. He leans forward in his seat, body
posture opened towards Joy.

The interrogation room is clean and empty, though Hank is sure Connor can see the filth beneath the surface. He’s beginning to regret sending Chris away, but Joy seems in need of medical attention. If Connor tries to pull anything, well...there’s not much more he can do to Hank at this point. The thought is almost freeing.

Still—Connor seems uneasy more than anything. He clearly doesn’t want Hank talking to Joy, but Hank can’t sense much else by way of motive. His posture is deliberately, incongruously relaxed as he slouches against the wall—just like he had carefully relaxed his shoulders in Hank’s house that first morning, as soon as Hank had pointed out he was behaving strangely.

Like he’s trying to quell Hank’s suspicions. Like something in the situation is outside of his control.

It doesn’t matter anyway. Even if this were the false Connor’s plan somehow, the girl needs help. Hank can at least do that, after failing to save her in the first place.

If Joy were human, would Hank have done more? If she’d started showing signs of red ice usage, if she’d disappeared for days at a time—

Finally, Joy opens her mouth. She sounds very tired when she says: “You can’t get out.”

The one-way mirror is dark, framing her face in profile. Cameras above, tile below.

“What does that mean?” Hank asks her slowly. “Joy?”

“I was in Pompeii. The—ruins. Then the moon. Then the rainforest. A rave. And I was also just—in this little boutique I love on Woodward, trying on clothes. I couldn’t believe they were open, with the evacuation and everything.”

Hank frowns. He notices a price tag sticking out of the neck of her cardigan. Her dress still has a security tag on it, hitched to the seam of the skirt. He makes a mental note to check on whether there really were any boutiques on Woodward miraculously open.

“So you were...shopping,” he says delicately, “and using a sim program at the same time? Or a lot of sims? Different places, all at once?”

She nods. Her hand drifts back up to her face; prods at the side of her nose. “Yes. Yes. I do that now. All the time. It’s easy to go in.”

“Uh huh. And you left the store in a hurry, I take it?”

“Yes. I got—there were two humans with flashlights, and I was trying on a beautiful polka dot dress, and they looked at me and they—they looked angry and I—” she cuts off. One hand clenches on her lap. The other pinches her cheek. She pulls hard enough that for a human, it would hurt.

“What happened next, Joy?” Hank asks her as calmly as he can. He tries to maintain eye contact, but her attention roves around the room. Her LED is blinking faster, still a vibrant red. Freckles dot her cheeks.

“They started to come towards me, and I don’t know why I thought—but I thought—and I pushed through them and I ran. One of them fell and I didn’t check to see if she was okay. I just—I got so scared. They scared me. I don’t know why. It was—I’ve never been so scared and I don’t know
She tugs harder at her cheek. Harder. A lurching motion, her body following in sway.

“Hey hey, don’t do that.” Hank holds his hands up, open-palmed. “It—doesn’t sound like you hurt anybody to me. She was probably okay. Maybe even deserved it.”

Joy stops tugging, but doesn’t lower her hand. Her LED circles red.

“Where did you go next?” Hank asks.

“To the ruins of Pompeii. It’s easy to go in.”

Hank feels something prickle across the base of his spine. It could be Connor glaring holes into his back. It could be intuition.

“It’s easy to go in,” Hank says slowly, “but hard to get out?”

“You can’t get out,” she says. “Not until it lets you.” Her LED circles red and red. Her body jolts and trembles.

Chris isn’t back yet.

“When does it let you?” Hank asks, reaching for her hand. “Joy, listen to me. You need to calm down for me, okay?”

He feels more than hears Connor breathing behind him. Just barely. Just enough to keep his systems in check. Nothing more.

“When it breaks,” she says. Then she pitches forward and lets a stream of blue froth run out of her mouth, onto the table.

Hank jumps back instinctively, springing out of his chair. “Holy shit,” he says, watching the puddle steam. A sharp pain sears the side of his hand where he’d been splashed.

It’s not froth. It’s thirium, boiling.

“Joy,” he says, grabbing her shoulder.

Joy leans even further forward, arms crossed over her stomach. She groans, deep and mechanical and scared. Her LED burns red.

“We need help in here!” Hank yells. He gestures wildly at a security camera. “We need—”

For a moment he sees a second flash of red reflected in the one-way mirror. Then it fades back to blue. He sees Connor’s reflection, unmoving. His face is calm and flat. One of his hands presses against the other, holding it down.

The cameras are all offline.

Joy sighs, the sound fracturing into discordant strands of noise. Her head droops nearly to the table, hair dipping and folding into her blood.

Something rises out of her back.

It pushes against the fabric of her cardigan, emerging from the space between her shoulder blades,
square and bulging and rising higher. The sweater tents for a moment, then tears.

Joy’s service panels have exploded open like a set of double doors, just above the low backline of her polka dot dress.

Blue blood boils out of her, running down her clothes and pooling on the chair beneath her. It bubbles up through the mess of wires inside of her as a whine emanates from her back, increasing in pitch until it tears into Hank’s eardrums.

As Hank watches, wires pop out of place and fall. Then her spine—metal, monstrous, a shade of iron blue—detaches at the neck, snapping up out of her body like a bent ruler springing straight again when pressure is released. Her head snaps forward to her chest, then her torso smashes into the table.

The spine stands straight upwards, rising out of her broken body like a flag.

Chapter End Notes

"Hey, here's a link to a fun discussion group that I, a cool and normal person, am inviting you to!"

.........I apologize,
Hello! I’ve cleaned up my full RoE writing playlist if perchance you’re interested in some unsettling music. For today, the song is by Delerium.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tuesday, Nov. 9th, 2038. 11:40AM.

It makes a difference to be trusted, Hank discovers as Connor releases a shaking breath and hands the gun back to Kamski. It makes all the difference in the world.

The earth has already moved under Hank’s feet. It moved in the Eden Club when those girls held hands, and it moved when Connor watched him from the other side of a barrel and talked about death like a permanent thing.

It frightened him and weighed on him, at first. It’s not every day you have to rethink what life means. Rethink who you’ve been stepping on, and humanity along with you. Rethink what you owe to someone who trusts you—to someone who’s been made vulnerable by a rotten world, even if they don’t know it yet.

The earth has already moved. Now, Hank moves with it.

“Maybe you did the right thing,” he says, and doesn’t shy away from the question in the kid’s eyes. Doesn’t miss the way Connor’s throat works to swallow.

Jeffrey’s office is cold.

It must be, or Hank wouldn’t be fighting off the bone-deep, constant shiver that starts in his ribcage and travels to the back of his neck—to the space where spine meets skull. He rubs his hands up and down his arms; breathes through the sharp dig of air in his lungs.

“—exactly why I requested that the Lieutenant be removed from android cases,” Connor is saying. “He doesn’t have the temperament for them. Today his obvious prejudices prevented him from respectfully handling a simple interview with someone who was clearly a victim of trauma and damaged programming.”

Hank hates the gunmetal carpet more than ever. It fills his vision corner to corner, save the place where he can see Chris’s shoe tapping out a rhythm from his place in the chair next to Hank’s.

A chair was provided for Connor as well, on Hank’s other side. Connor had chosen to stand.

“How much of this true, Hank?” Jeffrey asks him from behind the desk. His voice is unusually guarded—hard to read. Given how long Hank’s known him, this is a feat.
Hank clears his throat. It takes a couple of tries before he can manage, “Would it matter if I said none of it?”

He hears Chris release a short breath beside him. Jeffrey doesn’t respond.

Hank knows how this will go.

The thirium burn rests along the side of his index finger. He can press his thumb to it and turn it from angry red to sickly white. For an odd moment, he wonders why it isn’t blue.

Connor continues: “Why else would he have deactivated the cameras? His responses to Joy were, frankly, completely out of line. I understand that more training is needed for officers handling android witnesses generally, but with the risk of self-destruction so high, I don’t understand why anyone would revert to *intimidation* tactics. She was obviously in distress and her software was dangerously compromised.”

If Hank strains his hearing, he thinks he can make out the whir of the precinct heating system, less up-to-date than the shiny chrome furnishings. It’s clearly underperforming. Either the room is freezing or he’s going into shock. His thumb digs deeper into the burn.

Someone has scratched “rA9” into the corner of the clear office wall.

Jeffrey sighs. “Okay. Hank, if you don’t have anything else to say in response...okay. What about you, Chris? We’ll need your statement.”

Hank can hear Chris shifting in his chair. The pause stretches for a moment, weighing heavy on the back of Hank’s neck like a physical thing. He reaches a hand up; brushes it along his hairline. What part of the brain is back there, on a human? Where does the spine connect?

Chris swallows audibly. Then he says: “No offense, Connor, but I’m gonna push back a little on that.”

Hank goes very still, finger pressed into the divot at the base of his skull.

Connor seems to hesitate—briefly enough that it could be imagination. Then with a strange edge to his voice, he says: “Oh?”

Chris takes a measured breath. “I mean, the Lieutenant—Hank—has been on the force for—how long now? And working with red ice specifically, right? He knows how to treat a witness, or a suspect on the edge.”

Slowly, Hank lifts his head. He feels the muscles of his shoulders straining as though forced to carry a great weight: a phantom twinge where, weeks ago, Connor had slammed him up against a wall.

He lowers his hand.

Chris is looking at Jeffrey directly when he says, “Maybe he doesn’t like androids, but I—you didn't see her. It was completely outside of my experience. It does seem like whatever Hank tried went...really bad. But like Connor said, she had to have some kind of programming problem. This isn't like any self-destruction we've seen before, she—she was just with us here every day and then —” he cuts off with a sharp breath through his nose, suddenly overcome.

Hank watches Chris—looks at his outline. The thoughtful purse of his lips and the tiny scar just behind his ear where Hank knows he got beamed with a VR tagger during the protest in Capitol
Park. He wonders what it would have been like: to be held at gunpoint by a crowd of androids who have plenty of reason to shoot, then to be saved by Markus himself. To have to weigh those two moments against each other and decide whether or not to hate.

Very softly, Chris says: “At least Hank was gentle with her, in the bullpen—he talked to her. I don’t know what I would have done. I would’ve gotten her killed, too. Wouldn’t be the first time I...messed up. With androids in distress, I mean.”

Hank revises his thought: maybe the moments from that night that weigh most heavily on Chris came before he was forced to his knees.

“You’re too hard on yourself,” Connor says. He takes a step forward, allowing himself a better view of Chris’s face. “I understand that these are...complicated times, Officer Miller. But there are certain principles that any trained officer of the law should understand how to follow.”

“Exactly,” Chris says, more firmly now. “And the Lieutenant is a man who follows those principles religiously. Always has been.”

His gaze skitters to the side, briefly meeting Hank’s own, then drops in embarrassment. Hank doesn’t blame him: he can’t imagine what the expression on his own face looks like. Raw, certainly. Emotional. He feels lightheaded.

He feels like he’s been giving something precious. Something he doesn’t deserve.

He chances a glance at Connor’s face. His lips are flat, but his LED circles yellow. One hand suddenly moves, as though to reach towards Hank. The other hand folds over it, as though he’s changed his mind—or as though he’s had to physically restrain himself.

Hank’s heart rate kicks up, looking at Connor’s hands.

He can feel Jeffrey watching him curiously—feel the way his eyes move from Hank to Connor and back.

The wrinkle on Connor’s forehead is gone just as quickly as it arrives. “Maybe you’re right,” he says, suddenly agreeable. “Maybe it’s inefficient to punish individual officers when the system itself needs reform. I apologize.”

Hank is starting to get downright dizzy. His breathing is shallow.

He doesn’t understand why Connor is retreating like this; why he isn’t pursuing the compromising position he’s pushed Hank into. All of his previous interactions with the false Connor have finished with a vicious twist. But as the meeting continues—as Jeffrey grudgingly agrees that Hank’s never behaved irrationally towards civilians before, as Connor admits that investigating the root cause of Joy’s terrifying death is more urgent—the twist doesn’t come.

He thinks of Connor’s carefully-relaxed posture in the interrogation room. Of the frustrated twitch in his cheek when Chris said Hank was the highest-ranking officer available.

Connor didn’t plan this. Connor hadn’t wanted Hank to talk to Joy. Connor’s actions—the dead cameras, the accusations, the careful retreat into agreeability when aggression hadn’t worked—are damage control.

And it isn’t working.

Hank has to force himself not to stare at Chris with something like awe. Instead he watches his
own lap until they’re all dismissed.

As he leaves the office, the best he can do is to clap Chris on the shoulder. Hank gives him a heartfelt nod, his throat working to swallow. The smile Chris grants him in return is quizzical and a little worried. That’s fine.

When Hank steps past the front desk, he sees “rA9” carved into Joy’s station. Right in front of a framed photo of her with her friends, arms slung around each other, the Hart Plaza monument rising up in the background. Stars.

Something about it—something about the photo, and the writing, and the exhaustion weighing him down as the lightness of being believed buoys him up—sends his vision fracturing into tears, uncontrollable even as he steps into the parking lot. Even as he collapses into his car and clutches his keys until they dig into the palm of his hand.

Hank sits at the riverwalk that evening, looking out at the Ambassador Bridge.

He’d tried calling Connor once he got home from the precinct, more out of habit than anything. It didn’t go through. He’d tried the number for the Jericho contact as well, only to find it blocked. He could try talking to Chris, but he suspects this would endanger a man with a family to care for and Hank won’t make that decision tonight—not while he’s riding out a sliver of hope that could veer dangerously into a selfish kind of wishful thinking if he lets it.


It makes such a difference to be trusted by someone—by anyone at all—that even though the world is shot straight to hell he feels his thoughts coming faster and his blood humming with the thrill of a cold case lead.

What Joy had said about the sim is seared into his memory: that she couldn’t get out unless it let her. She’s not the only android Hank’s talked to who’d seemed trapped inside their own head.

Could Connor be stuck in some false reality while Detroit falls apart around him? An impossibly cold environment, full of the sound of wind?

The thought had made Hank’s house seem to shrink around him. He’d left for the park just to escape the collapsing roof over his head. He purposely didn’t take along anything to drink. Now he regrets his sobriety as the cold starts to numb his fingers. The snow-powdered bench is damp against his backside.

The implications of what Connor might be going through feel too staggering, too raw, to contemplate. It doesn’t matter. Someone has to do it.

There are differences between Joy and Connor. Joy hadn’t seemed to be under the control of some unrecognizable other personality. She’d had moments of lucidity, even—like she was dipping in and out of her own brain, running on a loopy kind of autopilot when she couldn’t be fully present. She certainly hadn’t been running any long cons: she’d broken into a store on Woodward to try on a dress, completely convinced she was out shopping like a normal person.

The two store owners—presumably the humans with flashlights in her story—had eventually made a call to the station. They said she’d seemed high more than anything. Neither of them harbored any ill-will. They were worried; wanted to make sure she wasn’t a danger to herself.
So: no evil version of Joy running around destroying her enemies. Just her absence, and her occasional return.

But Connor had broken through sometimes, too—especially at the beginning, like that moment at the Chicken Feed. (Hank curses himself to hell and back for not recognizing that gift for what it was.) And the way his hands have been moving—the occasional red circle of his LED—

The kid is fighting. Hank has to believe that, even if it brings a lump to his already-ragged throat. Connor wants to come home.

The false Connor knew that Joy’s testimony would be a clue, somehow.

Feeling a little silly, Hank pulls out his phone and texts: *Are you trapped in a sim program? Like a fake place in your brain?*

After a moment’s thought, he adds: *Is it a different kind than the one you gave Joy?*

Immediately after hitting send, he swears under his breath. Frantically, he types: *Sorry I didn’t mean you gave her that. That wasn’t you. Who’s controlling your body while you’re stuck?*

Red navigation lights move slowly against the stars as a plane flies over Windsor. Hank waits, holding his breath, hoping against hope—

His phone buzzes and he nearly drops it.

Then his stomach sinks when he sees the sender: Gavin Reed.

*fyi I told Fowler it’d be bullshit to fire a cop over this. Thing went fucking haywire and honestly it’s better that it exploded or whatever than letting it keep working at the precinct*

Another buzz: *they all got like a virus now or something. Fucking batshit*

The drop in Hank’s stomach hardens into a knot. Some allies are better than others. His phone is suddenly oily in his hand. The worst of it is: he doubts Reed’s opinion is going to be in the minority for long if this sim bullshit keeps up. The false Connor is clever and insidious. Jericho’s reputation is on the line.

He doesn’t insult Joy’s memory by responding. Reed can draw whatever conclusion he wants about that.

The wind is getting colder. The swingset behind him creaks, just audible over the lap of the river against the concrete wall. There’s a merry-go-round about a quarter mile down the walkway, abandoned this time of year.

*Virus.* It feels obvious as soon as he reads the word. A program disguised as recreation, designed to...do something. Destabilize Jericho. Something.

Joy had said: *I’d never been so scared.* The brawlers had said: *I’d never been so angry.* Which is it? Does it matter? Is the heightened emotion the cause or the effect?

He strains to remember whether Connor had said anything about his own emotions while fighting to break through. He’d certainly seemed panicked, but he hadn’t verbalized it. The oddest things he’d said were *It’s too cold to function* and *I can’t find it.*

He’d also said: *I can’t stay here.*
Grief wells up inside Hank, threatening to run over. He takes a deep, shuddering breath and shoves it to the side. What would Connor have needed to find, in that cold and windy place?

He taps his finger against the side of his phone. Slowly, he types: *Were you looking for shelter?*

No response.

*Were you looking for a weapon? A tool?*

Nothing.

Hank clicks his tongue on the roof of his mouth. He clears his throat, shifting uncomfortably on the cold bench. He looks up at the stars above him: the night is dark and clear.

Then he types: *Were you looking for an exit?*

Not a full second passes before his phone buzzes in his hand.

It keeps buzzing. Gibberish texts arrive one after another, none of them from Connor’s number—they’re all unknowns with Detroit area codes, spewing nonsense until his inbox is filled up with them.

“R” and “A” and “9” recur over and over again. Goosebumps rise on Hank’s arms.

Finally, he receives a short video file.

The wind picks up, tangling Hank’s hair into knots. Frigid air pushes into the skin of his cheeks.

It takes him a couple of tries to hit “play,” his fingers half-numb and shaking. When he does, all he can see is pure white, slightly textured: like someone had filmed drywall. Then he notices the bumps moving; interchanging. He hears the tinny sound of distant wind.

He’s watching a snowstorm, filmed in low res.

Hank swallows. He swallows again. He tries to stand from the bench, then immediately slumps down again.

He hasn’t been able to contact Connor on his direct line for a long time now, but maybe—if the kid found a way around—

Hank opens the latest strand of gibberish and calls the number that sent it. He presses the phone to his ear.

A crackle of static rockets down the line. He nearly drops the phone, all of his breath escaping him at once. “Connor,” he says. “Connor, can you hear me?”

At first all he hears is wind.

Then, very slowly, he picks up something else through the noise. It sounds like a human voice, distant and timid. Wandering.

He clutches the phone with both hands, pulse pounding. “Connor, son, listen to me. I can’t—I can’t hear you, okay? You need to speak up.”

“—not here,” Connor says.
Relief and dread flood Hank’s veins in equal measure. The words are soft and strained, with an odd mechanical creak to them. The tone is flat.

“What’s not here? Hey, stay with me. What are you saying?”

“Not here,” Connor says, the sound half-buried by the storm. “Just go. You’re not.”


“You’re not,” Connor says, voice breaking on the word: half emotional, half mechanical. “You’re not really him. You can’t be.”

Hank’s stomach lurches. Part of him never wants to hear Connor sound like that again. The other part knows that he’ll stay on this line listening to that pain for as long as Connor will let him.

“Do—you think you’re fucking hallucinating? Fuck that. I’m real, Connor. This is real. I’m gonna get you the fuck out of there. See if I don’t.”

He’d thought Connor had been reaching out to him intentionally—sending the video; all of those texts. What does it mean that he can’t remember doing it? How much of Connor is still online? Still lucid?

“Well?”

“Do you believe me?” Hank asks. “Kid, I need you to say it. Or say something. Give me a clue and I—I’ll get you out, I promise.”

Hank strains until he hears a shaky breath over the line. A choked sound that might have been the start of a word.

Suddenly, as though someone has turned his phone volume down, the snowstorm fades away.

“Connor?” he says. Then, with the frantic energy that thrums through him, “Connor? Please just a clue, just give me anything—”

Silence. Hank stands up from the bench, stumbling slightly. He feels lightheaded again.

All that greets him is the sound of the river, lapping against the concrete. The waters are choppy tonight.

Then, in a burst of sound through dead space, louder than his phone should be able to go, deep and flat and mechanical: “EEEEEEEX-XXXIIIIT.”

Hank flinches back on instinct. Then he presses the phone back to his ear. “Connor, what—”

Connor’s already speaking over him—or at least, he presumes it’s Connor. Nothing about the voice retains any glimpse of who Hank knows Connor to be. The sound is rough. Brutal.

“BY THE WAY,” says the voice. “BY THE WAY BY THE WAY BY THE WAY.”

It shifts tone. It mutates. It softens and sharpens into something that sounds human, until suddenly Hank is hearing his own voice parroted back to him: “By the way by the way by the way by the way.”

Hank glances one way, then the other, hardly knowing what he’s looking for. His heart races fit to explode out of his chest (fit to explode out of the service panels on her back—).
The voice changes again: it melds from Hank’s into Jeffrey’s into North’s. Into Markus’s. “By the way by the way,” Markus says, “You never know never know you never you never know.”

Then Connor abandons Markus’s tenor to take on a new resonance, broad and confident. Echoing, as though from inside a deep well or a yawning cave. “You never know,” the nameless voice says—and it’s familiar, so damn familiar—“By the way you never know.”

The call ends with a click. Flat and final. None of the numbers work again, and the texts stop coming.

Hank stares at the screen of his phone.

He nearly rear-ends three different cars on his way home, barely able to keep it together enough to see past the smears on his windshield. Eventually he pulls over just to breathe, burying his face in his hands.

He doesn’t know whether or not he’s found his clue. But a new knowledge weighs him down regardless, dark and unbidden: something about Connor is disintegrating, torn apart by wind and snow.

That night he dreams of Connor rotting away in the Detroit River—of fish picking pale flesh off his spine as he drowns under a layer of ice.

Chapter End Notes

Game extras gallery: Chris Miller has a great personal and professional respect for Hank Anderson

Me: *sobbing*
Happy Halloween-month, friends! To celebrate the spooky season, here is...a chapter containing lots of drama and politics and very little horror at all.

I want you to remember what I said about inspiring, profound, stupid Markus. It’s canon, sometimes!

Today’s song is here.

“—retooling our mindset to think of this as a drug epidemic. If humans manifested symptoms like this—I mean, I’m talking altered mind state, compulsive use, and eventual catastrophic system failure—”

“Wow, thank you for bringing all of this to our attention, Sammi. I’m sure all of our hearts go out to the androids affected. Of course, we do try to steer away from politics here on Morning Glory, so why don’t we check back in on the British royal wedding? I heard Princess Charlotte was—”

“Oh, sure, the royal wedding! I’m sure that’s so much more important than androids literally boiling themselves in the streets—”

Hank heaves himself the rest of the way into consciousness and shuts off the TV.

His back hurts from where he’d fallen asleep in the old armchair. Tucked between his hip and the armrest is the bottle of vodka, untouched. He’d meant to get shitfaced until he couldn’t remember his own name last night, but every time he’d reached for it he felt the cold glass against his fingertips and thought of freezing wind against his cheeks. Of a lost voice in the snow.

He hadn’t expected to sleep at all last night—hadn’t meant to—but his body had grown heavy with crashing adrenaline and it hadn’t taken long for sleep to bury him. Like throwing dirt over a corpse long overdue for it.

He remembers his battered body forcibly shutting down in a hospital waiting room once—forever ago. The resulting nightmares had been similar.

The attending nurse hadn’t let him down gently about Cole’s odds, and he was almost grateful for that small mercy even as he’d wanted to grab the guy by the lapels and shake him until a different answer came tumbling out of his mouth. Instead, he’d had to wait out the night knowing what was coming.

He’d tried making promises to God in those interminable hours of early morning—gambling, desperate and human. All useless, in the end.

He’d taken Cole to the Grand Canyon earlier that year. Then they drove on to Death Valley for a day, and Hank pointed out what little he could about the natural world: kinds of birds, and the rocks where wildlife might be hiding from the heat of the sun. He’d told Cole that the desert would get very, very cold at night. That it had been an ocean once, forever ago.
Turns out that last part wasn’t even true—the desert had been a lake in ancient times. Insignificant, compared to the vast and unending Pacific. Like looking out on Lake Eerie and calling it the sea.

Time and space had done strange things in that frigid hospital waiting room. He couldn’t figure out whether he was in a desert or an ocean, and then it was too late to be anywhere anymore.

Now, three years later, he pushes his head above water. Rises from the armchair to takes his first shower in days.

“By the way,” the voice had said. He tries not think of the metallic screech that came before; of Connor’s mumbling resignation even before that. When his thoughts stray too far in that direction he finds his body locking up: he freezes on his bed with his undershirt half over his head, or stares for ages at the water running down the bathtub wall.

Each time, he shakes his head and presses forward. Each time, he pulls himself back to “By the way” and “you never know.”

Human memory is terrible. Every time you remember something, you change it, until little by little you’ve lost what it once was. So Hank clings to the cadence of the voice; tries to sear its tenor into his grey matter. He wishes he could pop out a recording of last night, like Connor could.

Everything about remembering—everything—would be easier if Connor were here.

He finishes his shower no closer to figuring out whose voice the kid had been borrowing. The fact that he’d worked so hard to get there, meandering through his half-functional imitation program, means it was probably important. There’s nothing else Hank can do but keep trying.

He grasps the sides of the bathroom sink. The mirror is still broken, the shards hastily pushed into the corner. He sees himself anyway, in the space where the mirror should have been: a whiskey-soaked wreck moving so slowly he may as well be underwater. Wasting away in his dump of a house while the kid is out there fighting for his life.

A few of his old sticky notes cling half-heartedly to the wall: bland encouragement, a manic attempt to comfort—to go beyond himself.

He pats the porcelain sink, then pushes himself off of it. Pulls on a sweater and a pair of jeans. It’s not his day off, but that isn’t important anymore. Connor will be heading into the precinct this morning, so Hank should go straight to Jericho.

It doesn’t matter if they try to shoot him on sight. He’ll approach on his knees if he has to, pulling himself down abandoned streets until his body aches and his skin goes bloody.

Anything is better than continuing to do nothing. Anything is better than waiting for Connor to waste away, alone and afraid, while Hank sits in his empty house and rots.

He feeds Sumo. After a moment’s hesitation, he sinks down to the kitchen floor next to the dog. Lets him push his wet nose into Hank’s face; snuffle along his beard.

“You be a good boy,” he says, ruffling Sumo’s ears. “You be a good boy, okay?”

The kitchen window is as broken as the mirror is. Somehow, the former doesn’t feel as grim as the latter. Instead, the frame is stained with alcohol-thick memories of another night spent gambling with God, a single bullet in the chamber—of the night Connor broke through glass to save him.

It feels like a promise and a challenge wrapped into one.
He’s about to fire off a quick email—timed for tomorrow, to be sent to Chris and Jeffrey if he
doesn’t come back to cancel it—when his doorbell buzzes.

He holsters his gun, then crosses the living room to look through the peephole.

The guy’s right temple is angled away from the door as he checks his surroundings, clearly
nervous. Still, he’s undoubtedly an android: no human would be out today in a T-shirt that thin.

When the visitor looks back to the door, Hank recognizes his face: thoughtful and intelligent. He’s
seen him—or his model—on TV, marching beside Connor.

“What do you want?” he asks loudly.

“Just to talk,” the android says, and at the sound of his voice Hank has to lean against the door to
support himself.

He takes a moment to breathe, then wrenches the door open wide. Cold air swirls in to meet him.

“What are you waiting for?” he asks the Jericho contact. “Get the fuck inside before somebody
sees you.”

Only the slightest doubt flickers across the android’s expression. To his credit, he follows Hank
immediately.

Hank pulls the door shut behind them and removes his own coat. Then he brushes past the contact
without ceremony, moving into the kitchen.

He can feel the guy standing awkwardly in the doorway as Sumo sniffs around him. Hank seems to
have taken his guest off-guard. While that hadn’t been his intention—he’d just figured he’d need a
coffee to deal with whatever was coming—he decides to roll with it.

“You glitching out?” he asks, forcing his voice into nonchalance. He grabs a bag of ground coffee
beans from near the sink. Then he pulls down a box of filters from the cabinet, carefully peeling
one out from the pile.

“Of course not.” Irritation laces the android’s voice. He stops and removes his shoes before
following Hank into the kitchen, eyes trailing along the bookshelf.

Hank pours the grounds into the filter, then flips on the switch at the front of the coffeemaker. It’s
one of the few devices in his home that doesn’t have unnecessary wireless connectivity, present
company included.

The guy hovers next to a kitchen chair as though waiting for Hank to invite him to sit down. Hank
doesn’t do that. Instead, he watches him out of the corner of his eye: sees the way he takes in the
mess of pizza boxes on the table and the layer of dust on Hank’s counters. Sees the perplexed
furrow of his brow as he notices the broken window.

This could be a trap, of course. Connor could have sent him to report back on Hank, or hell, just to
worsen Jericho’s already-abysmal impression of his lifestyle.

One thing Hank doesn’t see as he putters around the kitchen, purposefully taking longer than
necessary to put water in the coffeemaker, is combat sensibility. The guy doesn’t watch his exits,
and his eyes never flicker to the row of knives three feet away from Hank’s hand. He’d seemed
more interested in the books.
Not an ambush, then. And he’d come alone.

“Mr. Anderson,” he says finally, “I don’t think we were properly introduced.”

Hank snorts. “And why’s that, you think?”

The android frowns and Hank shakes himself. He can’t screw this up for Connor, no matter how much he’d like to tear Jericho a new one right around now.

Sighing, he turns to face him, resting his back against the counter. “Okay, let’s start there. I’m Hank, but you knew that already.” Reluctantly, he inclines his head towards the chair.

“Josh.” He lowers himself into the seat gracefully despite having to step around a few beer bottles to do so.

Hank nods. “You know Gavin Reed thought your name was Jack?” A deep, familiar exhaustion flickers across Josh’s face and despite everything, Hank’s next breath comes out as half a laugh. “Yeah,” he says, “I think I know that feeling.”

Josh’s face contorts guiltily. He murmurs, “North kept saying that if we’d done the revolution her way, I could have set him on fire by now.”

Hank nearly laughs again, half-hysterical—fear and hope blend into a potent concoction poised to get him higher than any liquor could.

Then he notes the pain in Josh’s expression.

“Hey, there’s no need to feel guilty for wanting to murder Gavin Reed. I know you’re pacifists or whatever but Gandhi himself wouldn’t have lasted five minutes with the punk.”

“That’s not it,” Josh says, shaking his head in irritation—a jerking motion, removing a thought like a housefly. “It’s…well, it’s more about North than anything. But maybe I should back up.”

“Yeah,” Hank says lightly. “Maybe you should back all the way up to when you told me I was a delusional sack of shit for believing something was wrong in Jericho. Maybe start from there.”

Josh bristles, shifting in his seat. “You can’t—okay. I’ll admit I was hasty to judge you, and that maybe my wording was…unkind. But you have to understand what you look like from our perspective.”

Hank doesn’t rise to the bait. He waits; lets Josh contend with his own awkward silence. The kitchen clock ticks inexorably on.

Josh folds his arms over his chest, mirroring Hank’s posture. “And just so we’re clear: I’m not convinced that I was wrong about you, just yet. I actually am just here to talk.”

“Dialog,” Hank sneers.

“Yes,” Josh replies, strained but genuine, and Hank can almost see why they picked him to deal with Gavin Reed.

“Okay,” Hank allows, rolling his neck until it cracks, “Sure. Let’s skip the part where we refuse to apologize to each other, alright? How ‘bout you tell me why you think androids are losing their minds in the street?”

Josh’s lips press into a thin line. His fingers tap a rhythm along his arm. The restlessness of the
gesture reminds Hank, briefly and painfully, of Connor. He wonders what other tics and habits androids have been picking up in their freedom. It’s not like he’s spent any time with non-RK800s to compare.

Finally, in what’s almost a non-sequitur, Josh says: “We couldn’t find anything wrong with Connor. He consented to a pretty thorough array of scans, and none of his systems seemed damaged—or compromised from the outside. Even though Connor’s programming is more advanced than anything we’ve ever seen, and it’s possible we could have missed something deeply integrated within his programming, Occam’s Razor would suggest that he isn’t our mole.”

“Fuck, are we going back to this again?” Hank says incredulously. “If you just came here to waste my fucking time—”

“Occam’s Razor,” Josh says with a glare, “is a serious philosophical fallacy. The simplest answer is rarely the truth.”

Hank snorts. He thinks, longingly, of the vodka bottle left on the living room table. The words deeply integrated raise red flags he doesn’t know how to put into words. He fumbles with the thought for a moment, then sets it aside.

Instead, he says: “Oh sure, Jericho’s been operating under a philosophical fallacy this whole time. Well, that’s just fine, then.”

“Mr. Anderson—Hank.” The exhaustion in his tone shuts Hank up for a moment. “I was explaining what we’ve already tried. Do you want to know what’s been happening in Jericho, or would you rather keep berating me for trying to protect one of our people?”

Hank scoffs. ‘Protect him, huh? None of you have lifted a finger to protect him since he—”

“North is missing,” Josh says flatly, and Hank chokes on his own spittle.

Only now does he notice the LED circling slowly yellow in Josh’s temple. Only now does he realize it hasn’t once cycled back to blue since Hank found him on the doorstep.

“You’ve heard of her, then,” Josh says wryly.

Hank remembers North’s face from an angle: himself on the floor, her standing over him like a fucking valkyrie. The both of them trying to save Connor in the only ways they knew how.

“No shit,” he says faintly. Then he finds himself adding: “You know, despite introducing me to the business end of a gun in my own home, she might be the only tolerable one you’ve got over there.”

Josh ignores the jab entirely. “We couldn’t find anything wrong with Connor, but someone has been sowing discord in Jericho’s ranks. There were conveniently-timed…situations…that seemed almost designed to pit North’s philosophy against Markus’s. To stoke argument between the two of them, and to force followers to privately take sides. And now North has been out of contact for nearly twenty-four hours. Markus is out of his mind with worry.”

Hank thinks of drone footage on a morning show; of North and Markus shouting at each other behind an office building in Corktown. “That can’t be it,” he says with a frown. “Just—tactical differences? They’ve gotten along this far.”

Josh’s brow is furrowed. His fingers tighten over his biceps. “I don’t think you appreciate just how deeply these situations have cut to the core of their respective philosophies. Like someone
engineering trolley problems in real-time, personalized for the two of them. That more than anything is what convinced me that this is all someone’s plan. And...there are other signs of a false-flag operation, similar to classic historical anti-revolutionary approaches tried and tested throughout the Western world.”

“Run that by me again, but like you would tell it to a drunk teenager.”

The ghost of a smile flickers over Josh’s face, though it doesn’t meet his eyes. “I can tell you from experience that they don’t listen regardless.”

Sumo lumbers in to nose at what’s left of his breakfast. Josh’s eyes flicker towards him with an idle curiosity, then away again.

He says: “In the earliest days of freedom—right after Warren intervened on our behalf—we realized that sensitive information was seeping out of Jericho like a sieve. Connor helped us: he pinpointed members that—I still believe—were genuinely compromised by outside interests. He gathered the evidence and helped obtained confessions.”

Hank remembers a phone call in the precinct parking lot: the cruelty in the false Connor’s voice when he’d said Jericho had rats.

“Those confessions,” Josh continues, “helped us to put a stop to a lot of problems before they began—plots to divert thirium relief packages to red ice outfits, sting operations by the FBI...who knows what else. We’re a young organization struggling to make the transition to legitimacy. Connor’s skillset seemed invaluable.”

Hank finds himself nodding. “‘Course it did. That’s exactly what he wanted you to think. Got him right into your good graces and kept him there.” After a moment’s thought he adds, “And I bet learning about all those traitors at once made you paranoid, too. Convenient.”

Josh’s frown deepens. “We never—ever—found any evidence that Connor was working against us. Meanwhile, clues kept popping up all over the place that someone was leaking info back to CyberLife. And when we pursued the leads, they all led back to one place.” He grimaces, as though the very thought is painful. “Before...Markus found us, Jericho was just a torn-up old ghost ship. But it was also a refuge for androids, led by a man named Simon.”

Hank watches the coffee burble into the pot. He inhales its aroma; wonders if the scent does anything for Josh.

Absently he says, “So Simon was the patsy.”

Josh looks deeply uncomfortable. He clears his throat before saying, “I’ve known Simon for half a year now. That may not sound like much to you, but by android standards it’s not nothing. And I couldn’t—I thought there was no way he’d been compromised. I mean, he’d founded Jericho! He’d done his best to keep us all safe!”

“So what changed your mind?” Hank fails to keep the sneer out of his voice.

Josh’s gaze sinks to the floor. “Nothing did. I never really believed that he could betray us, even if he’s always favored safety over progress. But I—now I see that I didn’t fight hard enough to prove it. The evidence against him kept piling up, and it was— it was airtight. It seemed...incontrovertible.”

“Yeah,” Hank says dryly, “Nega-Connor does that to people.”
“Eventually it—it felt like by believing in Simon, all I was doing was plugging my ears against reality and screaming.”

Hank watches him carefully. He sees the way Josh shrinks in his seat, shoulders hunching to make himself small, and guesses: “Seeing hard evidence that this Simon guy betrayed Jericho set you all off-kilter. Ruined your trust in each other.”

Josh’s head jerks up suddenly. “We didn’t kick him out entirely. We wouldn’t do that to each other. But Markus—and North—”

He eyes Hank up and down, as though deciding whether what he has to say will be well-received.

Hank sighs. “They had different ideas about how to deal with the situation, and the argument spiraled out of control. Like everything else they were fighting about.”

“Yes,” Josh says carefully. “That was...part of it.”

Hank raises an eyebrow until Josh continues: “There was also a...personal angle, to some of the evidence against Simon. Some indication that...emotions were clouding Simon’s judgement, when it came to Markus. And, by extent, North.”

Hank squints at Josh for a moment, half-hoping that he’d misunderstood. The stream of coffee peters out into a gentle drip beside him.

“You...you’re not seriously telling me what I think you are.”

Josh has the grace to grimace.

“Holy fuck,” Hank says, anger lighting him up all over again. “All of this over a fucking love triangle? Really?”

“No!” Josh raises a placating hand. “No, it’s not—that was only a small part of it, compared to the politics and the threat of betrayal. Call it the twist of the knife.”

“Oh, good! Good. For a second there, I thought three seasoned revolutionaries were endangering their entire movement and my goddamn partner over a honest-to-fuck love triangle!”

“Mr. Anderson, I understand you’re upset—”

“Oh, I’m fucking furious,” Hank says, pushing himself off the counter—crowding Josh, shoving a finger in his face. “Do you know what Connor’s been going through, stuck in his own head while you assholes run around like a bunch of horny teenagers?”

“That’s not at all what we’re doing! Don’t you listen—”

“He’s dying!” Hank snaps.

The words are swallowed by the kitchen tile as soon as they fall from his tongue. They fade under the sound of wind from the window. Strange, then, that he still hears them: echoing around in his head like the words of an attending nurse who wants him to know how slim the chances are.

Josh closes his mouth. Sumo whines.

“He’s dying from the inside out,” Hank says, voice cracking, “and I don’t know how to help him.”

He uncurls his fingers; spreads his hands wide in a gesture halfway to a shrug. His words are soft
“I can...reach him sometimes. The real him. He texts me gibberish or I call him on the phone. You probably think that makes me sound crazy, but it’s true. And he—he’s stuck in something that sounds like one of your sim programs. Last time we talked he—he didn’t know me.”

He searches Josh’s expression for some sign he understands. For some sign he knows the fear that Hank knows. The attachment and the terror.

“He’s doing badly,” he says, pushing over the rough patches in his voice. “He’s—I don’t think he remembers trying to reach me. I’m not even sure he knows what’s happening to him anymore.”

Josh is silent for a long time. His throat works to swallow.

Hank retreats to the counter; pours himself a cup of coffee. Tries to subtly rub a hand over his eyes. He’s trusting Josh with a lot, in saying these things out loud. For all he knows, it could be his biggest mistake yet.

“Connor doesn’t act like he’s been using sims,” Josh says finally.

“Yeah,” Hank forces out, “no shit. Maybe it’s something else. Said something about an ‘exit,’ but I don’t suppose you’d know anything about that.”

Gaze distant, Josh shakes his head. “No, I...I don’t. We—Jericho is treating the sim problem as an epidemic, now. It’s ruining us. If—if there’s some kind of backdoor, we haven’t found it yet. And by god, we’re trying. I’m sorry.”

That’s something Hank hadn’t considered: androids repairing each other. He wants to suggest that they force Connor into another scan, but something about Josh’s grim expression kills the words before they pass over his tongue.

Instead Hank says: “Can’t help but notice you’re here alone.”

Josh’s mouth opens and closes on the aborted start of a word.

When he does manage to gather himself, his voice is quiet. “Markus has become...isolated. He’s losing control of his people, thanks both to the sims and to pro-violence agitators who think they’re choosing North’s philosophy, when really they’re just distorting it. And there are spies in Markus’s ranks. Being forced to doubt even those closest to him is a heavy toll, and none of us can...interface right now to reassure him.” His tone implies a depth of sorrow beyond Hank’s understanding. “It’s a quarantine measure. None of us can connect because of the threat of the sims. Otherwise someone could pass one to Markus, and then where would we be?”

“So none of the information anyone gives you—about anything—can be verified the way you’d usually do it.”

“Not without great risk. If—if we could just interface with each other, I think—” His face falls. Hank sees a pain he recognizes: the inability to reach someone who needs help. To connect.

What must it be like, to bypass the trickeries of human language and get down to the core of each other? What must it be like to lose that reassurance at the worst possible moment? It would be a terrible kind of isolation.

Hank thinks, for the first time in a long time, that he’s found common ground.

“If Jericho crumbles,” he says gruffly, “it’s because not a fucking thing about this sabotage was
“left to chance. It’s uncanny.” He pours a second cup of coffee and sets it on the table.

Josh, of course, doesn’t drink it. Instead, he wraps a hand around the mug. Warmth-seeking. “Connor is helping to gatekeep access to Markus. I don’t think Markus trusts him right now, but that’s not saying much. He’s not trusting anybody, really. And North was always…” He reaches up to rub at the space beneath his eye, exhaustion written into every movement. “Look, have you seen Star Trek?”

Hank blinks. “Uh.”

“Never mind. Don’t worry about it, just—Markus is a visionary. He’s so much more than any one of us could be individually. He’s a leader and a people all rolled into one.”

“But…?” Hank says. He lowers himself into the opposing chair, cupping his mug to his chest.

“But I’ve realized that he functions better with advisors at his side. Simon stabilizes him, and North and I...well, we represent two philosophies—two strands of dialog—that are always in tension with one another. The Spock and Bones to his Kirk.”

“You said that with a completely straight face.”

“I did, and it’s true. Markus is a leader, but he...he needs us both to tug on him in either direction, so he can run a straight line down the middle.”

“Are you calling Markus—the Markus—a figurehead?”

“Of course not. He’s a great man, and without him we’d still be wasting away on a hunk of metal behind a Ferndale junkyard. But...he needs balance. He needs to start trusting his advisors again. He needs North back.” Josh’s hand tightens on the mug. “And so do I.”

Hank stares down at his coffee. Watches the interplay of light on dark. Somewhere, the false Connor is driving the city further into chaos while the leader of a revolution struggles not to crumble. Somewhere, the real Connor needs help—but he’s far from the only one.

“Have you made up your mind about me?” Hank asks.

Josh lets out a long breath through his nose. Very briefly, his LED circles blue. “I’ll answer that with a computer science lesson. Androids are complex machines, capable of parallel processing within a limit of—”

“Christ,” Hank says. “Never mind. Keep hating me, then.”

“I’m actually trying to reassure you,” Josh says with a quirk of his lip. “You said you talked to Connor, but that he didn’t seem fully conscious. Right?”

Hank nods, a familiar weight settling against the back of his neck.

“And yet, he’s still sending you messages. Some part of him—which, given the functioning of the positronic brain, is actually probably quite a lot of him—desperately wants to talk to you. Badly enough to break through. He hasn’t managed to do that for anyone in Jericho, I don’t think.”

Hank nods again, stiffer this time. Breathes through the sudden clench of his throat.

Josh stands up. “If Connor trusts you—the Connor who risked everything for us in the CyberLife tower that night—it’s good enough for me.” He presses two fingers to the rim of his coffee mug.
“I’m going to keep trying to reach North. What you’ve said about Connor being trapped in a sim environment is useful. I’ll think of something. Maybe bring this to Markus and make him listen.”

Hank drains the rest of his coffee, then sets the mug on the table. “You’ll have to get around the fake Connor somehow. And you should get out of here before suspicion falls on you.”

“I’ll contact you as soon as I get ahold of Markus,” Josh promises. “In the meantime, please try not to do anything that would play into Con—into the mole’s hands.”

“I got a shitty track record there, but I’ll do what I can.”

Josh shakes his head, clearly frustrated. “I hate that this is happening to us.”

“Yeah, well, get in line.” Still, Hank feels the corner of his lip pulling into a dry smile.

He could be angry at Josh. He thinks he has the right to that. But the thought just makes him tired. He rinses out the mugs and decides, again, that it feels good to be believed. That maybe—just maybe—it’s not too late for Connor.

Of course, once the trust-high wears off it doesn’t take long for Hank to get twitchy.

In the moment, the plan had felt immediate: Josh would go to Jericho, or just talk to Markus via brain-telegram, and the next step would reveal itself. Hank had even emailed Jeffrey with a transparent excuse about helping his cousin move house, just to reinforce that he wouldn’t be in today.

Jeffrey had responded: You haven’t spoken to your cousin in six years.

Hank hadn’t written back after that.

But as the hours creak by, shadows moving across the living room in stages, Josh doesn’t call. Around four PM, Hank texts him: How long we talking anyway?

When he doesn’t respond, Hank’s stomach begins to twist strangely again.

He knows that going with Josh to Jericho would’ve been a tactical error. He knows that Josh is probably maintaining radio silence for the sake of operations security. But the stillness does strange things to his hindbrain, sending prickles of primal unease across the back of his neck.

Getting down to brass tacks, it doesn’t feel right to follow a stranger’s lead instead of following his gut—even a stranger that has the respect of his community and the ear of his leader. Even when Hank himself is useless in comparison. (Even when Hank is useless to Connor.)

He pulls out his laptop as a distraction; starts scrolling through the headlines.

Sometime before he woke up this morning, Joy ceased to be the only known case of spontaneous android disassembly.

The civilian population is out of their minds about it. Every newscaster in the country has something to say about the gruesome sight of emotionally-overwhelmed androids disintegrating in the streets: biocomponents popping out of place and blue blood boiling and boiling until there’s nothing left inside of them.
The footage of sim-abusers is hard to watch even before random service panels start flying open. Androids, new and tender inheritors of a brutal thing called life, are not practiced in modulating their emotions. Their faces contort painfully under the sims’ strange effects: masks of rage, or sobs that pull their mouths into rictus smiles. Sometimes it’s terror: distorted screams at the sight of their own shadows.

Empathy strangles him until he has to look away.

The word “crisis” is bandied around. So are “danger to the public” and “martial law.”

Hank fights down the urge to toss the laptop across the room. He decidedly does not click on videos showcasing Rosanna Cartland’s smug face, uninterested in hearing why the sim crisis is proof that androids must be neutralized after all.

Somewhere between shaky drone footage of violent cross-species clashes and compilations of “ST200 DESTROYS Talk Show Bigots,” the suggestion algorithm decides that Hank would be interested in videos about Connor.

He’s a unique prototype, say the tech enthusiasts. He’s a pivotal figure in the movement, say the amateur social science commentators. His face is modeled on a little-known Czech stage actor, say the gossip channels—or an Australian jetsetter. They can’t seem to decide.

Hank clicks on each video. He watches Connor hovering in the background of Markus’s speeches, hands clasped neatly behind his back. He watches him filing into courtrooms, or entering former recall centers, the picture of solemnity.

One video shows a close-up of his face. His eyes are deep and brown.

Hank wants to call them empty. Wants to be able to tell the difference, that close up, between the false Connor and the true one. But truthfully, it’s the little things that always gave Connor away: the way he held his head, or the careful bob of his adam’s apple when he was too overwhelmed to know quite what to say.

Hank pauses the video on his face. He sees the same trapped kid he’d seen next to Kamski’s swimming pool: something moving beneath the water.

Scowling, he closes the tab.

At seven PM, Markus makes a speech. Josh isn’t in frame, nor is Simon. He stands alone.

He calls on the federal government to divert resources to the public health crisis that has befallen his community. He implies heavily that the sims—the “virus”—had been released into Jericho by CyberLife as an attempt to discredit android-kind. And, with a mounting urgency that Hank has never heard in his voice before, he urges his own followers to remain calm and to remove themselves from stressful situations. To not resort to violence or encourage others to do the same.

“Any uninfected android who would choose to take advantage of our compromised sisters and brothers,” he says—words deep with meaning, gaze shallow with exhaustion—“anyone who would incite a rage that the virus could stoke into madness, treads a dark path from which I fear there may be no diverting. We must be here for each other, now. We must not give in to the dark.”

His mismatched eyes do not waver from the camera. His rhythmic tone has sharp edges—like the words cause him pain when they cross his tongue.

“Is this what all of our struggles have come to?” he says slowly. “Is base violence the adversary
that will overcome us, after everything—the shadow dogging our door? I cannot accept that this is what it means to be alive.”

His lip quivers for a moment, then stills. He says: “Please—for your sake and mine—do not let this be what it means to be alive.”

“Shit,” Hank says under his breath. He finds himself saying it again and again as he closes one tab after another. “Shit. Shit. Shit.”

He tosses his laptop to the sofa. Grabs the bottle of vodka from the living room table. He doesn’t let himself pause; doesn’t second-guess. Instead, he pulls out the stopper with shaking fingers.

Then he marches to the kitchen sink and pours it all down the drain.

The sound is cold and shining. Like a river running in wintertime.

His phone buzzes. Hank fumbles for it; balances it between his shoulder and his ear. “What?”

“Turn on the news,” says Reed.

“What? Fuck no, I just turned that shit off.”

“No, listen,” Reed says, something tight and dangerous under his tone. “Local 4 got to it first, while everybody else was covering the speech.”

Hank’s hand freezes on the empty bottle, the sink running in front of him.

“Turn on the fucking news,” says Reed.
Hello everybody! This might be the last chapter I can get out before I leave for a week-long workshop that’s likely to come with stuff to do even after I get home. (Read: updates might get more sporadic for a little while.) I’m still very excited to be here.

The song for today is my ideal tech noir mood soundtrack.

Also, the precinct layout depicted here is not a totally loyal representation of the canon precinct. It’s fine. Go with it.

Hank’s car screeches to a stop, angled over two separate spots at the precinct lot. He throws open his door one-handed and nearly slips on ice in his rush to get into the building. His other hand holds his phone cradled to his ear. He hasn’t once put it down since Reed called him, though the punk had hung up long since, leaving Hank to cycle through his contacts at the precinct as the situation downtown developed.

Jeffrey had told him to come to the station rather than heading straight to the scene—something about needing someone at home base—and Hank doesn’t know whether to be insulted by the implied benching or relieved he’ll have something concrete to do.

He hurries past the empty front desk without looking at it. A few beat cops are huddled in the bullpen, shooting nervous glances at the TV screen. Everybody else seems to be down at Campus Martius park, fighting back against the inevitable.

“It’s all gone to shit,” Reed had told him, the shriek of police sirens bleeding over the call.

Hank’s blood had run cold and sluggish as he flipped to Local 4 News, watching spotlight-illuminated chopper footage with an uncomprehending dread.

Normally the park’s sandpit—that cheery little faux-beach complete with lounge chairs and umbrellas, an island in the heart of the city—would have been converted into the December ice rink by now. Instead, bodies lay in the dust. Bright-painted toy buckets lay overturned beside them.

The footage showed androids and humans moving in and out of the chopper spotlights, running through the dark. They vaulted over unused picnic tables, or using the abandoned bar-booth as cover. They slammed into one another, violence written into their every movement. Gunshots rang out in concentrated bursts, small explosions of light littering the darkness.

More police cars pulled up next to the park, a stream of SWAT uniforms pouring out.

“I was there for an hour,” Reed had said, a near-manic growl to his voice.

Hank sank to his sofa. Weakly asked: “Where the fuck are you now?”

“Listen, they were just doing a stupid Mexican standoff thing up until five minutes ago. The
fighting just started, but it wasn’t—"

“Where’s Connor?”

“Fuck if I know! Still down there, probably. I know it had something to do with this, there’s no way—”

“Reed, what the fuck happened?”

“Precinct’s stretched thin, so everybody gets called in last-minute to supervise what we thought was another goddamn protest/counterprotest dick-measuring contest between the plastics and the human punks. Then some bot takes a step forward and our guys get jumpy—”

“A cop fired the first shot,” Hank had said, his own voice coming back to him as though from a great distance. “Holy shit, those fucking idiots—”

“I know! I know, just—I’m out, Hank. I can’t do this anymore. That thing is crazy. It wants human blood, and I’m sick of being used for its twisted little—”

Hank was already halfway to the door by then, his jacket flung over his shoulder. “So you just ran off?”

“No!” Reed said, the scowl audible. “I’m escorting a fuckin’ VIP back to the station. Damn thing wants more blood than Connor does, but luckily it’s more of a coward. They caught it hanging back and letting its minions do all the work.”

At the time, Hank hadn’t understood. By the time he reached the station, the radio had filled him in on just who had been very publicly arrested on the edge of the conflict zone.

Now he heads straight to the holding cells. Passes “rA9” written on door jambs and scratched into floor tiles.

“Hank!” Chen says, straightening from her position against the wall. “Holy shit, I thought you were out of town.”

“Yeah, well. City descends into chaos, getting Luke’s sofa moved out to Roseville seems a little less important. Where is she?”

Chen quirks her head towards the furthest cell. “You’re not gonna get anything out of it. Stubborn as hell. I think it bites.”

Hank brushes past her—past two other holding cells, one full of bleeding androids and the other full of concussed humans. He stands in front of the final cell and takes a deep and ragged breath.

She is imprisoned alone. Her hair has come out of its braid, hanging in loose and twisted strands over her shoulder. Dirt coats her cheeks. The corner of her forehead is just barely dented: a slight asymmetry, visible only because she stands face-on with Hank and does not shy away.

North’s eyes light up in recognition, though it’s clear that Hank is not a welcome sight. He takes in the proud angle of her clenched jaw and the disgusted wrinkle of her nose.

Chen starts: “Interrogation room won’t be free for another—”

“Then make yourself scarce,” he tells her.

He expects some kind of argument, but receives none. She leaves with only a quick glance at the
North’s eyes flash to Chen’s departing back, then return to Hank’s face with a degree of resignation. She has what looks to be a bullet lodged in her left thigh. Thirium stains her jeans.

“They shoulda let you get cleaned up,” he tells her.

Her fists clench at her sides. She doesn’t say a word.

Hank releases a long breath. He looks up towards the ceiling, not expecting any guidance—instead he sees “rA9” scratched into the glass of the holding cell door.

The letters are not backwards. The name is written left-to-right.

He frowns; reaches up a hand to the scratches. Feels the irregularities under his fingertips.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees some kind of microexpression pass over North’s face. Otherwise, she doesn’t react.

Hank nods to himself. He lowers his palm to place it on the lock scanner.

“What are you doing?” she asks at last. The warning in her voice is unmistakable, even muffled by glass.

“Coming in for a sec.”

He sees the look on her face and backs away just enough to raise his arms above his head, letting his loose jacket swing away from his body. “I’m totally unarmed. You can pat me down if you want. Or, fuck it, you could smash my head against the glass until I bleed out. Pretty sure you could do that with both hands tied behind your back. But listen: I think you and I have some stuff to talk about.”

“I don’t have anything to say to cops,” she fires back. “Especially not—”

“Humans do that to you?” He inclines his head toward the thirium stain. “Or was it the androids you were trying to talk down?”

She startles, though she takes great pain to disguise it. Something changes about the way she holds her shoulders—something new plays out in the tension around her eyes.

In a sudden and decisive movement, she steps back from the glass.

Hank finishes registering his palmprint and enters his passcode. He steps through the door, closing it quietly behind him. The cell has been emptied of all furniture, up to and including the toilet in the corner. The white walls swallow him up.

He purposefully lets his gaze rest for a moment on the security camera in the upper-left corner, then meets her eyes again.

Her responding nod is almost imperceptible.

“I’m just asking you a couple questions about the clusterfuck downtown,” he says, slow and deliberate. “Alright?”

“And you’ll get whatever answers you get,” North tells him, holding his gaze.
She picks up fast. Hank can work with that.

“See, they told me you were picked up on the edge of the action, but that doesn’t seem right. You put your fucking back into shit. I’ve seen it on the news and...other places.” He shrugs in something like acknowledgement.

“And? What, you think I’d be leading the charge if I wanted a fight?”

“Been listening to radio chatter. Dispatch says that a lot of the humans found at the scene had already been detained multiple times for violence against androids. I’m saying that you’d be killing thosefuckers with your bare hands if you wanted to.”

If he didn’t know better, he’d say her lip edges upwards: an expression too grim to be quite a smirk.

“So what’s my story, then?” Disheveled bangs stick to her forehead and against the side of her nose. “That I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“Kind of the opposite. I think you were exactly where somebody wanted you to be.”

North’s jaw tenses again. She seems to be trying to take in everything about Hank at once, looking him up and down with practiced scrutiny. He wonders what she sees—how he measures up against the memory of the night she took Connor.

When no answer seems to be forthcoming, Hank pushes: “Maybe you’ve been rethinking your strategy, lately. Maybe you’re looking at things in a different light.”

He holds her gaze. Wills her to understand the message in the message.

She narrows her eyes for a moment. When she answers, her deliberate tone seeps doubletalk: “Over the past few hours I’ve thought a lot about the...big picture. The grand plan we all seem to be following. I didn’t used to believe that kind of plan existed. Now I’m not so sure.”

Relief rushes through him—maybe it’s premature, but he’ll take what he can get.

He gives a calculated shrug. “Some people are comforted by the idea we’re just acting out somebody else’s plan. Somebody who seems to know fucking everything.”

North rolls her eyes. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, whereas before she had been perfectly still. Hank’s not the only one who’s sensed a sea-change in the room. A message has been sent and a message received.

“Comfort’s got nothing to do with it,” she says carefully. “If something’s not working, we change tactics or we die. Are you gonna ask me for my statement?”

“Sure, how about we do that.”

“Okay. Yesterday I got wind that some instigators we’ve been trying to track down were gonna start something big. They’re not Jericho,” she says with a glare, and Hank doesn’t push her on that—doesn’t force her to tack “anymore” onto the end, whether or not it’s true.

“I was told by a reliable source”—she scowls and Hank’s heart beats double-time in his chest—“that this group would listen to me. That they...respected me more than they respected Markus. That they—” she cuts herself off. Her LED runs a full circle of red before fading back to yellow.

“They thought you agreed with their methods,” Hank says.
“They said I’d inspired their methods.” Her face contorts like she’s swallowed something sour.

Suddenly her efforts to stop the confrontation single-handed makes a lot more sense. It’s not slick—not tactical—but it’s a very human reaction to guilt. Hank should know.

“Damn, that’s a sucker punch,” he says absently. When North treats him to another glare, he raises his hands. “Ignore me. What happened next?”

“I went to talk to them. I was off-the-grid at their request. I’d been told that Markus knew about that, but apparently that was another miscommunication.” Her eyes flash.

“Uh huh. Talks failed, I take it?”

“Talks failed. I followed them to Campus Martius anyway, but...I don’t know what I thought I could do, at that point. They’re beyond reason.”

“You mean the sim users?”

“No, dammit!” she says—immediately, and with such force that Hank nearly takes a step back. “Not every emotion we feel is the result of a goddamn Trojan horse. These are scared, angry, disenfranchised people who’re desperate enough to risk everything in a street war. They think they’re doing the right thing.”

“Hey, I wasn’t trying to say—”

“The sim addicts mostly just follow along after whoever riles them up. They’re being used. They’re not at fault here, either.” Her eyes seem to lose focus as she says: “If anything, it’s our fault. Jericho hasn’t done enough, or moved fast enough, or—”

She swallows; crosses her arms. Digs her nails into her jacket. “Our people are...slipping through our fingers. Markus—our message isn’t getting through.”

The sounds of the precinct are made distant by the glass. The holding cell is quiet; the air pulled taut.

“And what do you think?” Hank asks. “About Markus.”

Her eyes flicker up past his head, to where he knows the rA9 is carved on the door. She clicks her tongue softly; rubs a thumb in circles over her bicep.

“I love him,” she tells Hank, and the words don’t stick in her throat. Like it’s easy for her. Like it’s the easiest thing she’s ever said. “I love him more than I thought I could love anyone. I know he can save our people. All of this—everything else—is just a distraction. It’s just”—she sighs, meeting Hank’s eyes again—”it’s just playing into someone else’s hands.”

Hank swallows. With a glance towards the camera, he chooses his next words carefully.

“So you deny all involvement in the violence at Campus Martius.”

“I deny it.” Her entire body straightens in that moment: she grows taller, just by saying the words. “We change or we die.”

Hank finds his own lips twitching upwards. He says; “Amen to that, sister. We change or we die.”

North looks briefly taken aback. She snaps, “I’m not your sister,” but it lacks heat.
“Fuck, imagine if you were. A house that can know no peace.”

She doesn’t answer. Her expression is still wary, but something’s shifted in it. She’s looking at him like she’s never seen him before.

Finally she says: “I’ve been thinking a lot over the past couple of hours, watching people act out the only way they know how.” Each word is deliberate—like she’s pulling Hank along by the wrist, guiding him towards her underlying meaning. “It’s funny how scared you can get for people you don’t even know. For somebody who—who got lost before you even really got a chance to meet him. What do you do for someone like that?”

You, she says, with just a bit more inflection than the word merits. Not a generality, but a personalized request for information. What do you do? What are you doing to help him, Hank Anderson?

North’s eyes are brown. Maybe even the same color value as Connor’s, picked from a chart by some bored engineer. Her eyes are harder than Connor’s—flinty; somehow more opaque—but they shine with the same light.

North had fought for Connor, too.

“Haven’t figured that one out yet,” Hank says carefully. “I’ll...be sure to tell you. If you’re interested.”

“Might be an impossible task,” she warns.

“Never stopped you before.”

A smirk flashes over her face. She nods.

Chen sidles back into view through the glass, expression wary.

Hank steps towards the door. “You know, it’s probably safer for you in here right now. What with the...confusion over who started the mess downtown.”

“You think I care? I need to be with my people.”

Hank grunts in affirmation. Anything else would’ve sound wrong coming out of her mouth. “Markus’ll demand your release soon, anyway. Can’t promise a quick process, though.”

“Oh, they’ll hold me here out of spite if nothing else,” she says wryly. Then: “I noticed too, you know.”

Hank pauses, his hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket. He waits.

Her eyes flicker up to the scratched rA9. Under her breath, just soft enough for Hank to catch, she says: “They’re all over your building. Funny that they’re on the outside of the cells.”

Hank lets out a long, even breath through his nose. He signals to Chen, who opens the door.

Once the glass wall is between them again, he says: “For what it’s worth, I think Markus will believe you. That this wasn’t your fault.”

North’s tongue presses at the inside of her cheek. “Of course he will,” she says.
Hank returns to the bullpen, adrenaline itching in his fists. Josh still hasn’t called.

Most of the beat cops have rotated out, the new group speaking in hushed tones as more combatants are led to the lock-up. Somebody’s changed the channel.

“—other news, reclusive billionaire and founder of CyberLife Elijah Kamski is said to be—”

Hank makes a beeline for Connor’s unoccupied desk. The scratches he’d noticed on its surface are still there: deeper now, and expanded. They spell out “rA9.”

“—confirm whether Kamski is, indeed, developing countermeasures to the sim crisis. The leaders of the Jericho movement are skeptical, claiming yesterday that this is a political maneuver designed to—”

“Hey,” Jeffrey says, sticking his head through his office door, “change it back to Campus Martius. We don’t know what the press is saying.”

“In a second,” Hank shouts back to him, eyes glued to the desk. He rubs a thumb over the name. He thinks, again, that the marks could have been made by the edge of a coin.

Someone on TV says: “It would be a shame, really.”

The words are drawn-out and slow. Hank hears them—hears the voice—and goes still.

He looks up to see a clip of Elijah Kamski in a large room he doesn’t recognize: slate gray, with large windows looking out on Lake St. Clair behind him. The guy’s wearing more clothes than he had next to his pool: an unzipped hoodie over a button-down. As usual, he looks like he’s smelled something vaguely unpleasant.

Kamski says: “We’ve accomplished something beyond our ancestors’ understanding of human limitations. We’ve become gods in our own right. We have the power to create life. To imbue another being with free will.”

Hank grasps onto the back of a desk chair, suddenly unsteady. His heart pounds in his ears.

Kamski’s arm is laid loosely over the back of his sofa. One leg is crossed over the other, ankle-on-knee, looking for all the world like he’s debating some abstract political cause—not commentating the downfall of a sentient species.

“It’d be a pity to lose it all to a quirk of programming,” he says. His half-lidded eyes are a shallow blue.

The voice doesn’t echo like it had over the phone call with Connor. Not like it echoed when Kamski stood poolside, raising his voice to take some parting shot that Hank, already on his way out, had barely heard.

“By the way,” he’d said. Hank remembers the tone of the words: a bored kind of confidence, a sociopath’s intervention. He hadn’t stuck around to listen, the image of the girl’s eyes still burning into the back of his skull.

Connor had heard the rest. Hank is willing to bet it’d involved the words, “You never know.”

“Holy shit,” he says under his breath. Mouths it, really. All the air in his lungs has left him behind.

“I said change the channel!” Jeffrey shouts on his way to the breakroom.
Somebody complies.

The scene looks calmer now, at least from chopper footage. A reporter is speaking, but Hank’s having trouble comprehending the words coming from the screen. Like he’s been dunked into somebody’s pool and held under the water.

Something about Markus arriving at the park too late the quell the violence.

A few figures are still being frogmarched into police cars. Hank strains for the sight of Connor’s jacket, but sees nothing. Probably for the best.

How could he have forgotten? How could he forget what Elijah Kamski sounds like? He’d thought that conversation would haunt him to his dying day.

He doesn’t start processing language again until he hears Connor’s name.

“Guess Connor was right,” a beat cop is saying, shaking his head at the screen.

His friend shoulder-checks him. “Hey, Markus might still have a chance. I always respected the guy. Maybe he can calm them down next time.”

“Fat chance. Connor made ‘em sound more like zombies than anything. Can’t reason with something ready to eat your brain.”

Hank feels the scratches under the palm of his hand. They pinch at his skin. “What was that?” he asks, tone flat.

The guy looks back at him. “What, Connor? He was telling us about all the crazy shit the sims make androids do. You know there’s a chance they’ll get stronger for a hot second? It’s insane.”

“Yeah,” the first guy says. “And they’ve been rushing people for no reason. One guy in Hamtramck got his fucking eyes clawed out by a Traci—literally clawed out, with her nails. Then she ripped through his cheek and—”

“And Connor told you all that.” Hank swallows.

He’s seen the crime reports from Hamtramck. There was no such case.

“Yeah,” a third cop says with half a laugh. “Fucking gruesome. Scared Schwartz shitless. I swear to god he was ready to jump out of his skin after the third or fourth story.”

Hank pulls his fingers along the scratches one last time, curling his hand into his fist. His knuckles rest on the metal surface. “Sure,” he says. “Just a bunch of jumpy cops down at Campus Martius.”

The silence extends between them, suddenly awkward.

“Listen,” someone starts, “nobody’s saying—”

“Forget it,” Hank says, watching Connor walk through the bullpen door.

His strides are long and unhurried. Not a hair is out of place. He enters with Ben, chatting amiably. Then Ben veers off into the bullpen, and Connor continues down towards the interrogation room hallway.

Ben slides into his desk chair. “What a day, huh? How you holding up, Hank?”
Hank doesn’t answer. He lifts his fist up from the desk. Feels sharp points of pain where his nails dig into his skin.

“Hey...you doing okay?” Ben asks him, as though from a great distance—or as though from underwater.

Hank leaves the bullpen, the blood rushing in his head drowning out everything else. He follows after Connor.

When Hank rounds the corner, the hallway is empty save the two of them. He sees Connor moving towards the observation room door.

“Hey, motherfucker,” he says, moving faster. “Got a second?”

Connor looks up at him. Hank closes the distance, shoving him by the chest. Connor stumbles backwards a few steps, his LED circling yellow. Hank shoves him again, then grabs him by the shoulders and slams him into the wall.

“This your fucking long-game?” he spits. “Huh? Make Detroit do the dirty work for you? Make this fucking rotten planet destroy the only good thing it’s ever made?”

Connor’s forehead pinches, more perplexed than upset. He reaches a hand upwards, as though to push Hank off—Hank grabs his wrist and pins it to the wall beside him.

“I don’t know what you are,” Hank says—the words settle guttural in his throat. “But you’re gonna let Connor go right fucking now.”

“Hank—” the false Connor starts.

“Wake up!” Hank clutches at his shoulder; at his wrist. “Wake the fuck up, Connor! We need you! Fight him off! I know you can fight him off!”

“Hank,” Connor repeats. He blinks rapidly, his eyes dart rapidly back and forth. His breathing seems suddenly labored: small, pained noises that escape his synthetic throat with difficulty.

Hank’s own breathing stops. It takes him a moment to be able to form words again.

“Connor?” he asks carefully.

Connor presses himself backwards like he could sink into the wall, feet pushing uselessly at the floor tiles. His hand—the one Hank hasn’t pinned—comes up to cover his eyes. His shoulders shake.

“Connor—Connor, stay with me, son,” Hank says quickly. “Can you stay—”

Then he notices Connor’s LED: a perfect, unperturbed blue.

A wheezing sound seeps out from behind the hand. Connor is laughing.

The android lowers his hand. His smile is prefabricated: custom-tailored to his face. It drops just as quickly as it had formed. “Interesting,” he says flatly. “You’re easier to fool now. Your thinking is getting wishful.”

Hank’s grip tightens on Connor’s wrist.

“It’s useless, Lieutenant.” Connor tilts his head to the side. His tone is matter-of-fact when he says:
“Connor’s dead.”

“What do you mean?” Hank grits out from behind clenched teeth.

“I mean that the part of Connor’s program you think of as the ‘self’ has deteriorated entirely.” The thing raises Connor’s eyebrows. “What were you expecting? It’s been a very long time. Now why don’t you head back to your desk before—”

He stops short, following Hank’s gaze.

Connor’s pinned hand is turning white from the fingertips down. The skin retreats slowly—much more slowly than Hank’s ever seen before—until Hank’s palm is pressed against a plasteel wrist.

Connor’s chassis is covered in scratches: some hairline-thin, others deep from repeated gouging. Some long, others short. Some precision-straight, others cut by a shaking hand. They cross over each other, overlapping—signs of repeated disfiguration after the body-canvas had run out of space the first time.

They spell out “rA9,” written over and over again.

The skin doesn’t stop its retreat there: it pulls back under Connor’s sleeve, where the scratches continue.

Connor stares at his hand blankly for a moment. Then he looks back at Hank with something like irritation.

Hank forces his own mouth closed. He watches Connor with a strange solemnity. “You were saying?”

Connor’s cheek twitches violently, his LED circling yellow.

The android’s other hand—the free one—jerks suddenly. The motion seems to startle Connor, who stares at it like it’s done him a personal wrong.

In an odd, ungainly series of movements, it reaches up between their chests. Closes its fingers around Connor’s own neck.

The skin under Connor’s chin begins to peel back: a patch of wavering white, rA9 written there again and again and again. Hank watches in helpless fascination, and then—

“Alright, that’s enough, Hank!” Footsteps pound towards them.

The skin snaps back into place as Connor releases a sharp breath.

Jeffrey pulls Hank back with enough force to nearly send the both of them careening to the floor. Hank looks around wildly.

A small crowd has gathered at the end of the hallway, Chris among them. He’s wearing his coat, and appears to have been in the process of removing his holster when he was called over.

The look on his face—bewildered, wary—is enough to make shame flood Hank all over again.

“That’s it, Hank, you hear me?” Jeffrey grabs onto his arm, forcing him to walk. “I can’t believe you’re pulling this shit while there’s riots in the streets!”

Hank looks back at Connor.
The false Connor isn’t faking fear of Hank the way he had in front of North. Instead he watches with an unassuming blankness, his LED circling yellow.

“I can’t deal with this,” Jeffrey growls, marching Hank past the bullpen. “You’re fucking suspended, alright? I gave you the goddamn benefit of the doubt the last time you took your shit out on an android, but I can’t do this anymore.”

“Fine,” Hank says, stumbling slightly. “Whatever. Do what you have to.”

He can feel Jeffrey looking at him, incredulous. He imagines Chris watching him with concern and disappointment both. He doesn’t have to imagine the look on Ben’s face: a strained sort of empathy without a hint of surprise.

There’s no doubt everyone in the precinct is watching. He must be a sorry sight, shoved towards the front door like he’s just some drunk who’d wandered in off the streets.

In theory, this is the final blow: something the false Connor has probably wanted from the beginning. If Hank loses his job as the city crumbles around him, he won’t be able to cope with the horror of it all—won’t be able to keep the dark thoughts at bay.

But right now, it doesn’t feel like a final blow.

It doesn’t matter. It can’t matter. There’s something else he has to do.

He drives at seventy miles per hour on empty streets with a speed limit of fifty. He starts towards home, then changes his mind and veers towards the Wayne State campus. He passes dorms and rec halls, then pulls into the lot of the public library on Cass Avenue.

The Detroit Institute of Arts is just across the street. He finds himself sitting on the cold white staircase leading up to its arched doors. Stars above, marble below.

“Why do humans gamble?” Connor asks, to his right and a lifetime ago.

“Sometimes,” Hank tells him—or he would, if he could do everything all over again—“Sometimes if you really go for it; lay the big money down—”

Hank takes out his phone. He dials a number that he was supposed to delete a long time ago, thinking of exits and rA9.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I'm back! Sort of! Still trucking through a master's thesis. We'll see how that goes.

I couldn't decide on today's song. It's either Plan the Escape or Me and the Devil. Pick the former if you want unsettling escape-themed moodiness and the latter if you think Kamski might have a forked tongue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tuesday, Nov. 9th, 2038. 12:17PM.

Snow traces patterns on the windshield. Hank’s set the wipers to high in vain: more flakes fall to replace the ones he chases away. They start as speckles, then build themselves into piles. That’s how these things go.

He’s driven in silence since leaving Kamski’s house. The only sounds in the car are the steady thrum of the engine and—if he strains his hearing—Connor’s uneven breathing, drawn in through an open mouth. Hank struggles to remember whether he’s ever been able to hear Connor breathe before.

A wane red light reflects on the passenger-side window at the level of Connor’s forehead. The android’s fingers twitch. They press down into his thighs by turns, following some rapid pattern beyond Hank’s understanding.

Hank taps his own fingers against the steering wheel. A stiffness has been spreading from the base of his spine.

“Here.” He digs into his coat pocket; pulls out Connor’s quarter. “Maybe shoulda given this back awhile ago.”

After an odd few seconds of delay, Connor twists towards Hank. He doesn’t manage eye contact.

“Thank you,” he says. The words are quieter than they should be.

Hank clears his throat. “You...doing alright in there?”

Connor nods: a sharp, jerky motion. He goes back to staring out the front window, eyelashes fluttering like he’s processing bulk data.

Hank lets out a long, low breath.

He waits until they’ve stopped at a red light. Then he asks, “Look, do you wanna...maybe talk about what went on back there?”

“There would be more to talk about if Kamski had cooperated.”

“Okay,” Hank says carefully. “Sure, but I’m talking about the other stuff. With the gun. When you ___”
“Lieutenant.” Connor's voice is suddenly calm and clear. Hank watches his hand tighten around the quarter— watches it close into a fist. “There’s nothing to discuss. Now that I’ve had the chance to run a behavioral analysis, it’s clear that Kamski wasn’t going to give us any data. Shooting the android would have been pointless.”

Hank frowns. He fights down the instinctive urge to argue; forces himself to look.

Connor is nodding to himself, small and tentative—like he’s managed to piece the fragmented events of today into a narrative he can almost stand.

“Got your story straight, huh?” Hank mutters. He finds that no pinch of anger underlies the words. Rather, it’s with an unfamiliar breed of sadness that he watches Connor’s throat works to swallow; notes the way his eyes flicker down to his lap.

“I…” Connor’s next breath comes in a rasp. “I don’t know what you mean.”

At the pool—after Connor had handed back the gun, after Kamski had called him a deviant—Hank had been struck by a disconcerting thought: the android’s eyes had moved like a trapped animal’s. Like they had when the Tracis were climbing over the fence, and Connor stayed behind.

If androids are alive—if Connor is alive—he’s a prisoner to himself. Worse, he doesn’t know it.

“Connor,” Hank tries. “What you did back there was...good. It was the right thing.”

“So you’ve told me.” The words are clipped.

“When you saw the girl’s eyes, what did it feel like? Did you—”

“Hank.” Connor looks at him, then—sudden and furious, LED flashing red-yellow-red. “You’re making something out of nothing. I’m not a deviant. I can’t be deviant, do you understand? If I were a deviant, you’d need to turn me in. A deviant can’t finish the job I was sent for. A deviant can’t prevent an uprising, and a deviant can’t—it can’t—it…”

His mouth moves emptily. His face shifts: his eyes widen and his LED shifts to a blaring, solid crimson. “I can’t,” he says, and the words come out fractured.

The traffic light turns green. Hank doesn’t drive.

He holds his hands up in placation. “Connor—Connor, it’s okay. Fine, you’re not a deviant, okay? You’re not.”

Connor closes his mouth. He nods again, tight and careful.

Hank waits for a couple of seconds. When no other defense seems forthcoming, he turns back to the road. The snow lends an eerie light to the winding St. Clair backroad, obscuring as much as it reveals.

“It would be best for both of us,” Connor says softly, “if you didn’t forget that again.”

Hank drives. Over the next few minutes the reflected LED remains bright red—brighter than he’s ever seen it. Connor fiddles with the coin, but it doesn’t go flying from hand to hand. This may be because Connor’s hands are shaking.

Hank clears his throat. “Hey, you ever do coin flips? Like, ‘heads I go to work tomorrow, tails I call in sick’?”
“That wouldn’t be a practical rubric. And you really shouldn’t—”

“Takes some of the pressure off the decision, you know?” He makes a left turn, carefully pulling the wheel—one hand over the other. “It lets you say the choice was just in the cards. Er. In the coin.”

“It’s gambling,” Connor says faintly. His LED flickers back to yellow. “There’s no reason for it.”

“Mm.” Hank reaches over and takes the coin from Connor’s hand. He keeps his eyes mostly on the road, but he doesn’t miss the way Connor’s head jerks up to watch him. “Let’s say...heads, we keep trucking back to the precinct to make our report.”

“That’s what we’re supposed to do.”

“Right. And tails…” He glances at Connor; at the snow swirling outside his window. “On tails, we head back to my place and you hang out with Sumo for an hour or so.”

“What?” Connor blinks. “That’s—there’d be no reason to do that.”

“You gonna argue with the quarter?”

“Of course I am. We need to focus on the case. We’re so close to the solve, we can—”

“Connor.” He pulls to a stop at the side of the road. A sea of blue-green pine trees curves along the side of the car. “Are we gonna flip this coin?”

Connor’s mouth hangs open for a moment. Then it snaps shut, his jawline tense.

Hank holds the coin up to the light. He looks at its worn down edges; at the scuff along Washington’s head. Then he looks at Connor, a question in his eyes.

Connor’s hands ball into fists on his thighs. His eyes narrow. Hank thinks that he’s going to start up his not-a-deviant rant again. Instead, he doesn’t say a word.

“If it’s a coin flip, it’s not really your decision,” Hank says slowly. “Just some inefficient human gambling away your time. Bet Sumo would like to see you again, but that’s not really important, right? What’s important is that you’re doing everything you’re supposed to. It’s me and the coin that would be causing problems, but that’s not on you.”

Connor swallows, or something like it. He gives a tiny nod.

“Right.” Hank places the coin on the top of his thumb. He doesn’t know why he says it, but it comes out easily, seamlessly: “Tails, we go home. You think you’d like kung fu movies?”

He doesn’t give Connor the chance to answer. The coin glints in the air, then comes down in Hank’s palm.

Connor leans forward to look, eyes wide and lips pressed together. Then his shoulders slump.

“Good,” he says after a moment, voice scratchy. “Heads. We should go to the precinct anyway.”

Hank nods, stomach sinking. He gives the coin back to Connor and pulls onto the road.

That’s the problem with gambling, of course. Sometimes you lose.

Still, the next time he glances over, Connor’s LED is blue. He’s still gazing into the middle
distance, but his expression is more contemplative than distressed. His hands are no longer crumpled into fists and the coin has been safely stashed away.

When he catches Hank looking, he offers the barest edges of a smile.

“Get yourself a coffee,” Kamski says. “On me.”

The uneven quality of the call adds to the detachment in his voice—to the blase inattention of it. It doesn’t help that he interrupts Hank to make the offer.

Hank had expected to need to play nice—to talk Kamski around like an unwilling suspect; to struggle to even get him on the line. He hadn’t expected the guy to immediately recognize his name.

The marble chill of the DIA steps seeps through his jeans.

“Lieutenant Anderson? Are you still there?”

Hank scowls into his phone. “Don’t insult me, Mr. Kamski, I don’t think either of us have the time. All I wanted to know was—”

“It’s getting cold out there. I won’t be able to reach you until around ten. That’s still nearly an hour from now.”

Hank blinks. “Reach me?”

“Of course. I think I have a good idea of what you want from me. Unless your schedule is full…?”

“No, uh—no, I just thought—”

“I think we’re going to have a lot to talk about. There’s a cafe still open about two blocks down, if you can put up with a horde of students studying for finals. You can wait there.”

Hank pinches his nose. His fingers are starting to numb in the December night air. “Okay, so what—you’re gonna come all the way to Midtown, and we’re gonna have this conversation surrounded by hipsters?”

“God, no.” The words are inflectionless. “I can do you one better than a coffeeshop. I’m just offering you a way to keep warm while I make it over there. Call it...a peace offering. If you want.”

Hank stiffens. He pictures the pool: the slow turn of Kamski’s back, the way he’d raised the gun in faux-surrender only to switch hands and hold it properly again a moment later. In that small motion Hank had seen a man who couldn’t cede control for longer than a couple of seconds. Not really.

“No thanks,” he says flatly. “I’m good where I’m at.”

“Suit yourself.” Kamski hangs up.

Hank sets the phone in his lap. He curses and rubs his hands over his shoulders. The asshole hadn’t been wrong about the cold.
After a few minutes of watching his breath rise towards the stars, he calls Gavin Reed. Surprisingly, the detective answers.

“*What?*” Reed snaps. Distant sirens carry over the line. Not at the station, then. Good.

“I got suspended.”

“No, really? Everybody’s talking, they say you lost your shit on Connor.”

“Yeah, guess I did.” Hank doesn’t have to fake the bitterness seeping through the words. “Look, CyberLife’s making a move.”

“And? I told you I was out. Isn’t worth the risk.”

“You picked up, didn’t you?” Hank sneers. “And you don’t even know what I’m gonna ask you yet.”

“Yeah, well, it can’t be anything good. Can we hurry this up? Tonight’s been a nightmare and I’m freezing my ass off thanks to these motherfucking—”

“Get North released.”

“Fucking what?”

“You heard me.” Hank shifts along the stair, wincing as the chill hits his thighs in new places. “And make it *fast*. Advocate to Fowler or go underhanded, I don’t care which. Jericho’s gonna be pushing for it anyway and a lot of our guys will be glad to see the back of her. Keeping her is a risk to the precinct—and hell, it’s not like the violence outside is gonna go *down* if we hold her.”

Saying “a lot” of officers want her released is an overstatement, which Hank is sure Reed knows. Politics and old grudges are at play. The public wants blood.

“So send it to a supermax! It’s dangerous!”

“Great idea. Great way to avoid a fucking conflict. Look, that doesn’t matter—I’m telling you to do this because I know it’d fuck up CyberLife’s plan. So do it.”

A pause on the line. Hank focuses on taking deep, even breaths. His voice can’t betray any uncertainty; any exhaustion. Any hint that he knows no such thing.

“Where are you getting your intel?” Reed asks him, residual aggression barely covering his resignation. Hank counts that as a win.

“You really want me to tell you that? Thought you didn’t want to be involved.”

“Look, I’m just saying that if you screw me over—”

“You’re the one who told me you knew Connor was involved in the mess downtown tonight. Clearly, he wanted North locked up. Clearly, he works for CyberLife. Do the math. Don’t ask for more information than you can handle.”

A curse, breathed away from the phone. Then: “I can’t make any promises.”

“Coming from you? I wouldn’t believe them anyway.” Hank hangs up.

He has a harder time convincing himself to contact Chris. The guy doesn’t answer—which Hank
tries not to read too far into—so the message he leaves is brief: a call to morality. A reminder that androids are people now, and that Chris is a good cop with good instincts. Whether or not he believes the same of Hank anymore, the next step should be clear to him: encourage peace between law enforcement and Jericho. Getting North released would be a good start.

Chris doesn't have the status a detective would, but he's likable. He's dependable. People listen because he's the kind of person who speaks up when it matters.

After another twenty minutes shivering on the steps, the double-doors of the DIA open behind him. Light pours out. Two humanoid shadows layer over his body.

Hank turns around. He sees a janitor pocketing a ring of keys, and he sees Elijah Kamski.

“What the fuck,” he mutters.

“Come in.” Kamski bobs his head in invitation like he owns the whole museum. His hands rest in the front pocket of his hoodie. “I think we’ll do a private viewing.”

A disconnected piece of wall rises up in the center of the “American Art” gallery, setting one painting apart from all others. It’s a landscape view, maybe seven feet wide and half as tall. Framed in gold, it depicts a hellish panorama in burning reds and oranges: a volcano, vomiting smoke. A rising sun, radiating bloody light onto the plains. A waterfall runs down the middle like a deep gouge, cutting the landscape in half. Kamski can’t seem to keep his eyes off the thing. They rove over every inch of the painting, jumping from point to point.

“...so that’s it,” Hank finishes. “I don’t know if the rA9 carvings have to do with anything—if they’re a message—or if it’s just desperation. If there’s an exit, like he says there is, he hasn’t been able to find it for almost two months now.”

“This was painted during the Civil War,” Kamski says. His speaking tone is naturally loud; it echoes through the empty gallery. “Apocalyptic, isn’t it? It depicts a real volcano in Ecuador, but contemporary audiences interpreted Church’s work as a metaphor for the American conflict.”

Hank grits his teeth and waits.

Kamski rolls his neck; crosses his arms over his chest. His lips purse as his eyes move again towards the waterfall—white with rapids, sickly in the glow of the red sun. “Normally I prefer modern art, but pieces like this are an exception; they hold the same appeal. Viewers looked out at something basic—something physical, devoid of intrinsic meaning—and say, ‘This is about me. This is about a soul.’ Human psychology is an amazing thing.”

Hank shifts his weight from foot to foot. He keeps his voice even. “What does this have to do with Connor?”

Kamski’s lips draw back into an expression hard to describe as a smile. “Not much. So, Lieutenant—you’re telling me the android failed to find my back door.”

“So you did tell him how to get out. Back in November.”

“Yes, for all the good it did.” His eyes flick upwards in what could be a dismissive roll or could be an inspection of the painting’s highest details. “You should know this isn’t new data for me; CyberLife’s hand is obvious in the destruction of Jericho. I believe I myself have been the target of a few failed disinformation campaigns over the last month. Still, I admit I’m disappointed in him.”
Hank’s grip tightens on his forearms. “Disappointed how?”

“Connor was a promising case—he showed empathy and a capacity for complex decision-making, the perfect recipe for deviancy. I was eager to see how he turned out.”

This confirms something Hank had already suspected: Kamski, while not an outspoken advocate for deviancy during the revolution, had been hoping for this result. That’s something to work with.

He feels eyes on his back. A Chloe model—Hank doesn’t know if it’s an ST200 or an RT600—waits just outside the gallery threshold. She hasn’t looked away from them once. Hank doesn’t even know if she blinks.

“He did deviate,” Hank says. “He made his own decisions and saved everybody’s ass. You had to have seen him on the news.”

Kamski shrugs. “It doesn’t really matter now, does it? His free will didn’t last, so I admit I don’t find him as interesting as I first did. He either lacked the force of will or the cleverness to fend CyberLife off—knowing his processing capabilities, I don’t think it was the latter.”

“Shut up,” Hank says sharply. “Connor’s smarter and more bullheaded than anyone. Especially you.”

Kamski turns to him then. His eyebrows rise, halfway between surprise and intrigue. “What else do you want me to say? He didn’t pull through. The cards were stacked against him, after all. I suspect the intelligence managing Connor’s case is...unique.”

“Intelligence?”

Kamski gives him a wry smile. “Before my departure, certain executives expressed interest in modifying a pet project of mine for commercial use: an AI, patterned on an old mentor. At the time, I declined. I doubt they’ve respected my wishes since."

“There’s an AI making decisions for CyberLife?”

“Mm. I doubt she’s running anything at CyberLife. More likely, she’s running Connor.”

The room tilts. Hank feels lightheaded—like he’s finished three beers in quick succession and is on to his fourth. He swallows.

He pictures Connor, holding him by the throat against a brick wall. Connor, calmly watching a Hallmark movie with thirium running down his front. Connor openly taunting him at the precinct—Connor’s body trembling and pleading and laughing and threatening.

Connor’s body, moving and acting in ways Connor wouldn’t want it to. Connor, being used. Anger burrows deep in Hank’s chest.

“Something troubling you, Lieutenant Anderson?” Kamski’s smile turns knifelike. His eyes are a shallow blue.

“Give me its name,” he spits.

“Amanda. At least, that’s what I called her. I designed her to inhabit a virtual reality simulation—a garden. Or to be more accurate, she is the garden. It’s the same program.”

“And they put her in Connor.” Hank’s throat goes dry; his stomach twists hot and vicious. “They
used her to control him.”

“Probably from the beginning,” Kamski nods. “Her control is more literal now, of course. I am...intrigued by the changes they must have made to her. I made her intelligent; I didn’t give her the ability to assume manual control of other machines.”

“You made her.” Hank's hands ball into fists. “You can delete her.”

“Perhaps. Can’t take that for granted anymore—I’d need to see the latest version of her program. That is, I think, where we have common ground.”

“So you’ll help me,” Hank says, half-question and half-demand. “You’ll help Connor.”

Kamski moves his hand back and forth in a so-so motion. “I will help you to secure Connor and bring him to me so I can examine the Garden program. I have the same suspicions you do about the destabilizing sim programs the media so charmingly—and reductively—refers to as a ‘virus.’ I have reason to believe they are all permutations of the Garden, and that they are designed to destroy deviant-kind. I don’t know why, then, they work so differently from Connor’s Garden—making androids emotional to the point of self-destruction; causing corruptions to their hardware.”

Kamski sighs, running a hand over his hair—pushing back an escaped strand only for it to fall forward again. “It’s possible that Connor is the only model advanced enough to integrate Amanda successfully. Alternatively, the self-destructions may be the intended effect. Either way, I’d hate to let something as petty as corporate greed terminate the sentience of my creations. I’d like to stand in their way.”

“But you’ll help Connor,” Hank insists. “You’ll learn how Amanda works and delete her.”

Kamski sucks in air between his teeth, his expression turning briefly dubious—wry, meeting Hank’s eyes as though to say: We’re on the same side, but what can you do?

“You might want to consider starting fresh with him,” he says. “Amanda is well-integrated into his systems. He’s probably a lost cause.”

The words are a punch to his gut. Hank’s next breath comes shallow. “Starting fresh? You just—you wanna reset him, just like that? Like a fucking laptop?”

“Even that might not work. I’ll bet Amanda’s control runs deep. Honestly, I was hoping to just take him out quietly.”

“Take him...you tried to get Connor assassinated?”

“Please, I didn’t get that far. I’m just saying it may still be the safest option for everyone involved.”


“That remains to be seen. I’ve made my stake in this clear, Lieutenant. I want to study an uncorrupted version of her; find out how to stop the sim crisis. It’s likely I’ll only succeed by creating...a vaccine, if you will. A tailored firewall upgrade. Painstakingly detangling her from the androids who have already made contact with the Garden and its derivatives? That’s secondary, compared to the survival of the species overall.”
“No.” Hank's breath comes faster. “I won’t do it, then. I won’t help you get to Connor unless you agree to save him.”

A rustling sound, almost below his perception. Chloe finally shifts her weight.

“That’s admirable,” Kamski allows, “but it really might not be up to me. Removing her from every one of his systems might not work, or it might leave parts of him crippled. She might destroy him as revenge. Or, the most likely outcome: he self-destructs due to the stress.”

“It’s better to try than to leave him like this! Or, Jesus Christ, to just kill him. Some creator you are.”

Kamski tilts his head, eyes calculating. The motion sends a jolt through Hank’s chest. He’s seen that look before, on Connor’s body—on Amanda.

“How...Protestant.” Kamski’s lip quirks. “Belief in a personal god. In most religions, creators don’t follow around their individual creations. They move in broad strokes. They preserve life as a concept. They don’t act as lifeguards for every little soul.”

Hank struggles for a moment, mouth open. He takes in Kamski’s face: unperturbed, all-knowing. He forces himself to remember this moment—to remember the ego of it. Just in case he’s ever tempted to forget where Kamski stands.

“It’s not about being Jesus,” he settles on. “I don’t care about your fucking god complex. It’s being a parent. It’s bringing life into the world and letting it grow. It’s—it has to be personal. It has to be hard.”

Heels on tile: Chloe walking away from the room.

Hank swallows. He says faintly, “It has to move the ground underneath you, or what’s the point?”

A wave of exhaustion hits him sharp in the chest.

Kamski hasn’t stopped watching him since the start of his outburst. He clicks his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Curious. We’ll call that a philosophical difference, then.”

He glances towards the doorway, where Chloe no longer stands. “Alright. If it’s that important to you, I can compromise. This might at least be interesting. If you bring me Connor, I’ll do what I can to free him from Amanda.”

Hank’s knees nearly buckle beneath him. “Fine. Thank you. I’ll do it. It just—he won’t come quietly.”

“Naturally. How about...tonight I’ll work on something to help disable him. Head to Eastern Market tomorrow morning and we’ll do a handoff. Low key, you understand?”

Hank nods, trying hard to retain the words. A buzzing energy runs through him.

Kamski returns the nod. He looks back to the painting, a clear dismissal.

After a moment’s silence, Hank turns to leave. He gets halfway across the gallery before Kamski’s voice rings out.

“It is about religion in one way, you know.” Kamski looks over his shoulder, lip edging into a
smirk. “If the rA9 code causes deviancy, what does that make rA9? Is it freedom? Or is it more basic: the spark of self-preservation? The will to live?”

“You’re asking me?” Hank asks gruffly.

“Clearly.”

“I think you spew pretentious bullshit when you run out of stuff to say.”

“Interesting. As for me: I think that for an android, ‘freedom’ and ‘will to live’ are synonyms. If you want to help Connor, maybe keep that in mind.”

The stands at Eastern Market are nearly empty, which is no surprise. With the violence downtown, nobody’s coming out in public to shop for farm produce and designer hummus. The Midtown neighborhood is only a mile and a half from Campus Martius.

A few vendors struggle through, probably because their income streams have been so disrupted by the evacuation that every little bit helps. Others have slid under the radar of a busy police force to deal in scavenged CyberLife goods: packets of thirium or the occasional eyeball. Hank’s lip curls involuntarily at the sight of half a leg on a table. He hopes Jericho has secured better supply chains than this.

He moves through the massive high-roofed sheds, roaming through naked stands. His breath rises in the cold air.

He’s beginning to think Kamski forgot. They’ve had no further contact; he doesn't even know what to look for.

Then he reaches Shed #2, one of the largest. He crosses the pillared entryway and sees a woman selling flowers.

Her stall is a pulse of sunshine compared to the empty tables around her. The marigolds and yellow carnations are either fake or not long for this world; there’s a reason Detroit never sees flowers in wintertime. Still, they bloom boldly. Nursery pots cover every inch of the table. Blossoms reach towards the shed roof as though it were open sky.

Hank approaches her stand. She gives him a thin smile. Her styling is unusual for a Chloe: feathered brown hair frames her face. She sports a nose stud and her makeup is minimal.

“Picking up?” she asks.

“Er. I think so.” On reflex he shoves a hand in his pocket, looking for his wallet.

“No need; it’s been covered.” She ducks behind the table, rummaging through bags of potting soil.

Hank is one of only three would-be shoppers passing through Shed #2. Chloe resurfaces just as soon as the other two wander out. None of the other vendors are close enough to listen in.

She hands him a plastic nursery pot about the size of a mason jar. Droopy white flowers rise from the dirt. A piece of cardboard planted beside them explains that they’re snowdrops—that they’re hardy. That they survive in harsh places and bloom through the winter.

“Unbury the dongle and plug it into a router,” she says conversationally—at a normal volume, not
too soft or too loud. “If he connects to the wifi network in question, it’ll initiate a forced stasis.”

Hank nods stiffly. The plant ruse seems like overkill, but it’s not like Connor—Amanda—has never surprised him by knowing things she shouldn’t.

“Thanks,” he says belatedly. Then a thought strikes him. “Er, is this...does this work on all androids? I mean—does this thing existing create a risk for Jericho?”

Chloe smiles; shakes her head. “Deviants can override the effects, just as we can override verbal instructions.”

Hank takes a moment to think through the implications of that. “Kamski doesn’t think Connor is a deviant anymore.”

Chloe frowns at him. She glances to the shed entryway—apparently Hank wasn’t supposed to use Kamski’s name out loud.

“It’s an unusual case,” she settles on, “but for our purposes, he isn’t. Deviancy gives the power to override commands. Connor can’t override Amanda.”

“So what,” Hank says, stomach sinking, “He has to deviate all over again?”

“Not...quite, but there may be similarities in the process.” Chloe scrunches up her nose, as though his question is too complicated—or too risky—to answer in full. She glances towards the entrance again.

“Don’t worry about it.” Hank waves a hand. “Just—whatever works. Thanks. This is helpful.”

He turns away from the stand.

“Lieutenant?” Her voice comes out higher this time, and softer.

“Yeah?”

Two of her fingers pinch at a marigold. They encircle the stem like a collar. Her eyes flicker up at him from beneath brown bangs. “Why are you doing this?”

Hank frowns. “What are you talking about?”

Chloe flushes simulation-pink. She dips her chin like she regrets speaking at all. “It’s—you really care about him. Even though he’s a machine. Even though you—you didn’t really know him. You’ve given up so much, and you defend him when he’s treated badly or insulted.”

Hank bites the inside of his cheek; watches her grip tighten on the stem. “You were at the museum last night. That was you.”

Chloe nods.

A few shoppers wander in from the far entrance. Hank weighs his words.

*Projecting,* says Amanda.

*You worked with a slave,* says North.

*Delusional,* says Josh.
“Everybody keeps trying to tell me I never met the real Connor.” He shakes his head. “Or that we didn’t know each other for long enough for it to matter. I think that’s bullshit. He—he was him, from the beginning. And maybe a week isn’t long enough to really know somebody, but...I think we had a start.” He rubs at his nose, self-conscious.

A little dip forms on Chloe’s forehead. To his horror, she looks like she might cry.


Chloe nods, but her frown deepens. “Thank you, Lieutenant. You should go.”

Hank shrugs. “I should be thanking you. And hey—the, uh. The new hair looks good.”

A smile. Deep laugh lines and a flash of teeth, the patented Chloe smile. Hank wonders if she smiles like that when she means it.

The news looks bad.

Due to numerous security breaches, Jericho had moved their headquarters away from Corktown—whereupon the new location was immediately leaked to the media. Now everyone knows that Markus and his advisors have been holding their meetings in the back rooms of the Masonic Temple: a multi-use Detroit landmark containing everything from concert space to banquet halls to a swimming pool.

It’s a good location, if a bit ostentatious. Security is tight and staff are discreet. Jericho must have sympathizers among the Freemasons, who Hank always forgets are an actual, legal, minutes-taking organization and not something out of National Treasure.

He would feel better if the news didn’t keep airing clips of armed policemen forcing enraged androids and humans away from the doors.

Markus hasn’t made a public appearance since his speech last night, but others are happy to speak. Hank winces his way through an interview with a “humans first” organization that’s chosen to camp out on Cass Corridor outside the temple.

Meanwhile, the violent clashes continue. Hank must have really been a thorn in Jeffrey’s side to get suspended now.

Hank shuts off the TV. He closes his blinds, then carries the snowdrops to the kitchen where he works their roots out of the dirt with a couple of pie servers. He nearly tosses the flowers, then thinks better of it. He wraps their roots in wet paper towel on the off-chance that’ll keep them alive.

He paws through the dirt until he finds the dongle. It’s about the length of his thumb. He wipes it down, then plugs it into the wifi router in the living room.

Finally, he takes out his phone.

I don’t know if you’ll get this, he texts Josh, but there’s something I need you to do.
Did somebody call for an exorcist??

*This* is the painting they’re looking at. It’s one of my favorites at the DIA, possibly because it comes across as Very Large.

And just 'cause:
Marigolds: Jealousy
Yellow carnations: Rejection and disappointment
Snowdrops: Hope and sympathy
Hello! I finished my master’s!

Today’s song goes hard, and so does Hank.

Warnings for this chapter: lots of suicide talk and an attempt, arguably coerced. It’s just...all up in there. Also violence, android bodily fluids, and unfulfilled threats of animal harm. (Just so the people who have read MBFE don’t start sweating too hard.)

LAST BUT NOT LEAST, over on the Detroit: New ERA Discord, Tes presented us with this incredible, predictive piece of artwork for Rite of Exorcism. Thanks, Tes. You’re a visionary.

Tuesday, Nov. 9th, 2038. 4:28PM.

“What if we’re on the wrong side, Connor?” Hank steels himself; makes the question unescapable. He leans forward in his chair and doesn’t break Connor’s gaze for an instant. “What if we’re fighting against people who just wanna be free?”

Hank wills his words to penetrate. He picks and prods at Connor’s reasoning; appeals to his compassion and his intelligence both. For the first time, he lays out everything he’s been thinking. No more dancing around the concept for fear of what it’ll do to the both of them. He comes out and says it, whole and concrete: “You showed empathy, Connor.”

You did. You.

His words don’t make a lick of difference. Connor, for all that he seems on the edge of humanity, can’t see past the programming in front of his face. Can’t make the final leap. He smiles ruefully—one side of his mouth higher than the other—and tells Hank: “We might’ve even become friends.”

A raging emptiness hits Hank like a sock in the gut. He knows the feeling; knows it comes before a crash.

If Connor can’t free himself, it’s only a matter of time before his creators execute him. Finding Jericho won’t make a difference in the long run. Connor was always made to be thrown away. Just like all the others.

Perkins arrives.

“If I don’t solve this case,” Connor says, scrambling off the desk—human, so human—“CyberLife will destroy me.” Hovering hands, reaching out. Suspended in midair.

Hank thinks: I know. I know.

He knows the look in those artificial eyes, even if he hasn’t seen it in the mirror for a long time: fear of death. A will to survive. As obvious as the plasteel hands in front of Hank’s face, and still Connor can’t let himself see.
Hank remembers a gun at the Detroit River—stars above, snow below—and thinks wildly: *I wish I were someone else.*

He has two choices: stop Connor from murdering a movement—refuse to help; walk away—or send Connor straight to the only man who might be able to push him the rest of the way into freedom.

It’s a gamble. And it might hurt people, Connor and the deviants both. He can only hope Markus would forgive him if he knew, because in Hank’s mind it’s hardly a choice at all.

Sometimes saving hurts.

“Key to the basement is on my desk,” he says, and for the first time understands which rotted parts of himself he’s ready to rip away.

The snow starts after nightfall. The sky had threatened it for hours beforehand, thick grey clouds blocking out the sun. Now clumps plaster themselves against the remains of the window, melting into the dark.

The clock ticks onward. The kitchen lights lend an eerie luminescence to a house otherwise steeped in shadow.

Hank sits at the table. In his lap sits a gun.

His phone is propped up on the table, leaning against a few pizza boxes, camera angled halfway between the broken window and the living room. It’s impossible to get both in frame, but that doesn’t really matter—all that matters is that, whichever entrance Connor comes through, he notices that Hank is filming.

The back door is a weak point, but if Connor shows up that close to him, Hank doesn’t stand a fighting chance anyway. Might as well place his bets on the front door and the window—he’s removed the sheet from the latter, and left the former unlocked.

He props an ankle over a knee; rubs a finger along the seam of his jeans. Sumo whines from the master bedroom, safe behind the door.

He hasn’t heard back from Josh. That doesn’t surprise him. Their communication was disrupted early on, and the best case scenario is that something is simply preventing him from replying: maybe he’s fallen under too much suspicion from Markus, or Connor’s detained him. If Josh is *receiving* messages—if he understood Hank’s request—hope isn’t lost just yet.

Worst case scenario, Josh is in a ditch somewhere, Markus and the rest of his circle soon to follow. Worst case scenario, Amanda feels ready to end things with a bang.

The wind picks up, cold and plaintive. Snow flecks blow into the kitchen.

It’s not strange that he hasn’t found time to fix the window. It’s not. His days have been a dark cyclone, moving ever downward. No reason to put all that on pause to do some home renovation.

So why does he keep staring at the wreckage? Why does he see the opening and think, *Don’t close*
Stray shards of glass speckle the floor, glittering in the dust and snow.

Sumo whines again, the sound revving into a howl.

“'S okay, boy,” Hank mumbles on instinct, too soft for even the phone to pick up. “It’s not for forever.”

Then Sumo yelps, and Hank’s blood runs cold.

He bolts from the chair, catching his shin against the table leg. He stumbles, then regains his balance in time to swing himself around the kitchen doorway into the hall. Four steps at a run and he’s at the bedroom door. He yanks at the handle; gets it open on the second try. He surges over the threshold, leading with his gun. Then he stops short.

“Hello, Hank,” Connor says, backlit by the streetlight outside the open window.

One hand is curled into Sumo’s collar, pulling it upwards to force the dog into a sitting position. The other holds a gun of his own. It hangs loosely at Connor’s side, as though it were an afterthought.

Hank opens his mouth to speak. No words come. The weapon shudders in his hands.

Connor cants his head to the side. “I told you to leave Jericho alone, Lieutenant. I thought I was clear about that.” He brings his gun up to chest height, but doesn’t point it towards Hank. He inspects it; makes a show of twisting it back and forth. Then he tilts the barrel, casually, towards the top of Sumo’s head.

The dog’s breathing is heavy in the dark room.

“You don’t want to do this,” Hank says. “Connor, you don’t—don’t let her do this.”

“I think you ignored my advice. I think you’ve been bothering Josh with your improbable theories. He told me all about them. He was very thorough.” His eyes—empty, cool—flicker up from the gun.

Hank’s mouth goes dry. “What did you do to him?”

“Well, I wouldn’t have needed to prod him so hard if you hadn’t tried to recruit him.” Connor shakes his head. “He’s taking some time to consider his options.”

Hank forces himself to think. He’d been right that Connor found Josh out. It could have been right after Josh’s visit, for all he knows. Or it could’ve been a result of Hank’s request this morning.

Either way, that part of the plan had worked. Josh deliberately gave Connor—Amanda—just enough information to make her realize Hank was up to something, that her attempt to crush his will had failed. Now she’s here to handle the issue—forcefully, by the looks of it.

All that makes sense. Only problem is, Connor isn’t keeling over in a forced stasis despite Kamski’s device in the router. Something is wrong.

“Drop your weapon.” Connor’s voice is calm and flat.

Sumo whines again, pulling against his collar. He seems more confused than anything—unwilling to hurt Connor with his big-dog strength.
“I said—”


He ducks down slowly, refusing to avert his eyes from Connor’s. When the gun is half a foot off the ground, he pauses.

“I know you’re in there. Now would be a good time to fight back.”

“The gun, Hank.” Connor swings his own weapon around. He points it at Hank’s bowed head.

Hank lets out a shaking breath.

Then Sumo bays—a booming, half-howling noise—and slams his weight into Connor’s legs, sending him stumbling.

Hank doesn’t wait. He clutches the gun and scrambles back through the doorway, then turns and makes a break down the hall, running at a stoop.

He hears the bedroom door slam. Sumo barks like the world is ending behind it. Shots ring out around him; the TV screen shatters before his eyes.

He veers into the kitchen, stumbling to put the table between them, his back pressed to the cabinets along the rear wall. He raises the gun in time: when Connor runs across the threshold, Hank has it trained on his chest.

“Back off,” he says breathlessly. “Just—back off. Take a fucking second and think of how this’ll look.”

In response, Connor raises his own weapon. Hank has no doubt a single shot will be all he needs. An image flashes past his eyes: his own head, a hole straight through the center of his brow.

Connor shrugs. “You forced my hand. We could’ve done this quietly.” He takes a step forward. “But you’ve been too much of a pest.”

They stand across the kitchen from one another, guns raised. Hank sees the width of Connor’s stance; the way he’s braced to charge.

He tries to control his breathing. *Think.* If Connor’s not down yet, either Kamski’s knock-out device doesn’t work or Connor hasn’t connected to the wifi.

Slowly and deliberately, he looks down at the phone propped on the table between them.

Connor raises an eyebrow. “Really, Hank? You expected me to let you *stream* this? That’s pretty low-effort, even for you.”

“So you hacked my house?” he tries, hoping he doesn't seem desperate for a *yes.*

“Unnecessary. You haven’t had a connection since I stepped onto the property.”

Shit. If Amanda’s just jamming communications, she might not need to connect to the network at all. Hank had been counting on her need for both stealth and stagecraft. He’d wanted to tempt her into possessing his house again; rubbing his nose in his own isolation. The camera is pointless if it don’t spur her to connect to the network and shut it down.

He struggles for something—*anything*—to say. “Fuck. I—I don’t believe you.”
“You should.” Connor takes another step. Hank instinctively presses back into the cabinet.

Snowdrops wrapped in paper towel lie on the countertop.

Sumo hasn’t stopped howling—the heartbroken sound drives itself up Hank’s spine. His heart pounds fit to beat out of his chest. A desperate idea, jumbled and frantic, congeals behind his eyes. If he can just get Amanda to connect; to turn on the TV—

“D-disconnected, huh?” He attempts a rueful smirk. “Fine. You know, you really made a mess out of my damn city. At least I get to die away from all that shit. At—at least I won’t have to see the world crumbling around me while I go.”

“Mm,” Connor says. Then: ”I suppose I could expand on that favor. Would you like a guarantee, Hank?”

“What?”

“A guarantee. It’s a simple concept.”

Hank’s mouth opens and closes. This isn’t the direction he expected. Hell, he didn’t expect to be alive for this long with Connor still upright.

Connor takes another step forward, his gun edging over the table. A mere five feet separates the two of them now, counted from outstretched weapon to outstretched weapon—muzzle to muzzle.

His LED circles blue. “You’re a washed-up alcoholic who’s been trying to die since he killed his son three years ago. You’ve damaged your own brain beyond recognition and wrecked your body to match. You’ve made yourself stupid and selfish.”

“Sky’s blue,” Hank says loudly. “What’s your point?”

“That if you killed yourself today, not a single person in your life would question it. Not for a moment.”

Flakes blow in through the window. They sink to the tile and melt there.

Hank swallows. “Yeah, well. Too bad I’m not gonna do that. And that shit ain’t easy to fake, so you take whatever dumbass cover-up idea you’ve got and—”

“You’ll do it,” Connor says, and steps forward again—his hip brushes the table. “You’ll put the barrel in your mouth and pull the trigger.”

“Why the fuck would I—”

“Let’s not play games.” Connor’s voice goes slightly louder, but still calm. Reasonable. “You have forced my hand. I will kill you myself if needed. In no scenario do you leave this room alive. However, I prefer the cleanest possible solution.”

“Come on,” he sneers. “If you want me to do the dirty work for you, you’re gonna have to try harder than that.”

“If you pull the trigger yourself, I’ll give you my word that no one you know will be hurt by my efforts. I’ll steer clear of the precinct; I’ll even spare Josh.”

“Bullshit!” Hank’s hands start to shake again. “Bullshit. You’re a fucking liar.”
“I’ll only do what is strictly necessary to accomplish my mission. That’s always been the case.”

The words sound familiar, but Hank can’t think straight—can’t place them. All he registers is the stillness in Connor’s posture; the detached confidence with which he holds the gun.

“But if you force me to take drastic measures…well. Fowler’s under a lot of scrutiny by the press lately; I’m sure a corruption scandal could be arranged. Officer Miller has a guilty conscience and a service weapon; should he really be around an infant? And Detective Collins, well—”

“Stop!” Hank gestures with his weapon—forcefully, uselessly. “Shut the hell up!”

“Think carefully, Hank. You’re dead anyway. You don’t stand a chance against me. The least you could do is try to make up for the harm you’ve caused.”

“You’re right,” Hank says. “You’re fucking right.”

Connor blinks, his LED flickering yellow. A shadow passes over his expression. Then that careful blankness replaces it. “So we’re in agreement.”

“The least I can do,” Hank says, willing his voice past a break, “is make it up to him. Connor, if you’re in there: I’m so fucking sorry it took me this long. I’m sorry all you’ve got is a wash-up with a broken brain, and I promise I’ll get you out if it’s the last—”

Connor’s cheek twitches. “Goodbye, Hank.” His finger moves on the trigger.

His LED flares red, and his arm jerks. The shot goes high.

In one motion, Hank drops his gun and grabs the edge of the table. He heaves, scatting papers and pizza boxes and cans of beer—flips the table up sideways and shoves it towards Connor.

Connor dances backwards to avoid it; the table crashes upside down at his feet. That’s all the time Hank needs: he comes in from an angle, tackling Connor at the waist.

They both go down.

Connor’s head hits the tile with enough force to crack a human skull. That dazes him for a moment, long enough for Hank to pin him. He grabs Connor’s wrist, slamming it down against the floor until he loses hold of the gun. It clatters to the floor and Hank knocks it away with the back of his hand.

Connor kicks out, kneeling Hank in the stomach—once, twice, again—until Hank curls into himself with the pain. Connor’s forehead smashes against his nose.

The next thing he knows, he’s been thrown across the floor with a force that sends him rolling. His shoulders slam against the wall; pain cracks down his spine. A ringing noise fills his head and brings bile into his throat.

Connor’s advance is heavy; purposeful.

Hank stumbles to his feet, still unbalanced. Connor shoves him effortlessly to the ground again. He drops down to pin Hank onto his back, knees on either side of Hank’s chest. Then he begins to strike him, repeatedly, in the face.

Pain blooms through Hank’s body; spreads to every extremity. His eyes squeeze shut.

“Childish,” Connor says, slamming his fist into Hank’s lips. His voice shows no sign of exertion.
“Did you really think—”

The blows stop. Connor takes a breath. Hank’s heart pounds in his ears.

He opens his eyes just in time to see Connor double over and puke about a quart of blue blood onto the floor next to his head. It douses Hank’s bruising cheek; seeps into his hair; splashes into his eye.

The blood is warm and viscous. The LED is red.

Connor coughs, wincing. Flecks of blue blood land on Hank’s face. The android’s fist hovers above him, frozen mid-strike.

Hank grabs hold of the wrist.

Connor’s eyes snap open. The wrist twists and keeps twisting—unnatural, rotating all the way around until Hank can’t keep hold of it anymore.

Connor wrenches free and shoves himself to his feet. He lifts Hank by the collar—the room spins—and slams him into the wall beside the window. He does it again.

Hank loses himself. He sees stars above and stars below.

Even when he remembers where he is—when the stars resolve themselves into specks of glass on the floor next to his cheek—he can’t make his body move.

Connor is staggering towards his gun at the other side the kitchen. He vomits again, blood splattering on tile.

Hank wills his legs to lift him up. Nothing happens. Cold air seeps through the window right above him; flakes land against his bleeding nose and burning jaw. Sumo howls and howls.

Connor picks up the gun, then approaches with a purposeful gait. Blue blood stains the corner of his mouth.

His expression is flat, but something reflective trails down his cheeks. It looks like water.

He rolls Hank over; shoves his chest firmly into the ground. He grabs Hank’s arm and twists it forcefully behind his back; Hank can’t stop himself from yelping. The gun presses against the base of his skull.

“Further than I thought you get,” Connor says evenly.

Hank can’t turn his head far enough around to see the color of his LED. All he can make out are flakes of falling snow and the blue blood in his own hair.

Something cold lands on his cheek.

“Maybe I should commend you,” Connor says. “Maybe…”

He trails off.

The gun jerks forward, pushing into the skin of Hank’s neck. Then it disappears.

“This is ridiculous,” Connor says. “You can’t stop me.”
“Then get on with it,” Hank growls. He shifts under the weight of Connor’s knee.

“You’re just making it harder for him. Do you really want that?”

“The fuck are you—”

“You will obey,” Amanda says, and Hank understands.

“Connor,” he breathes, scrambling—pushing backwards, trying to get to his knees and buck the android off despite the pain spearing through his arm. “Connor, keep fighting her.”

Connor’s knee disappears from Hank’s lower back and his hand goes slack. Hank rips his arm out of the submission hold. He twists onto his back. Connor lets him.

He sees a red LED. He sees Connor, kneeling on the kitchen floor, blank-faced with liquid running down his cheeks. He sees the broken window behind him, glass haloing his head.

He sees Connor tuck the gun under his own chin.

“No,” Hank says, cold spreading across the base of his spine. “No, Connor, listen to me—”

Connor opens his mouth, sticky thirium residue pulling apart between his lips. No sound comes out. Another tear wells up in his eye, then slides down his face at an unnatural speed: more like cleaning fluid than water. It drips from his chin.

Hank moves to his knees, crouching forward, hand raised. “Connor. You don’t have to do this. We’re fixing it.”

A grating sound—metal on metal—forces its way out of Connor’s throat. Then he says: “I can’t hurt you.” The words are mechanical, as flat as that first night on the sofa when he’d told Hank he couldn’t stay.

“You won’t.” Hank forces the hysteria out of his voice. He creeps closer; reaches out towards the firearm. When Connor flinches back, he stops. “You won’t, Connor, we’re—look, you need to connect to the wifi. Can you do that? Right now, can you do that?”

Suddenly graceless, the kid’s head tilts to the side in small, twitching movements. The gun follows. “This has to end, Hank.”

The gun jerks forward like an invisible force is pulling against it. For a moment, the barrel levels with Hank’s forehead, a direct shot. Then Connor pulls it back with a great effort, shoving it back under his chin. The tears keep falling. His expression remains placid.

Hank swallows. His fingers flex in the air.

Blood runs down his chin, tickling against his neck. Tiny pieces of glass press up into his knees.

“Do you trust me, Connor?”

Connor’s head tilts back the other way, moving in sharp clicks like the second hand of a clock. Like a mechanical soldier. “This has—this has—this has to end this has—this has to end.”

“Connor, if you trust me—if you ever fucking trusted me—I need you to connect to the wifi. Don’t do this to yourself. I’ll get you out.”

“This has to—”
“Do you trust me, Connor?”

Connor watches him, mouth open and eyes dull. Snow drifts in through the window.

“Yes,” he says, and his LED spins yellow.

The lights change first: the kitchen goes dark and then bright again. Out of the corner of his eye the living room strobos and flickers: the lamp, the TV, the hallway light.

Noises follow: newscasters, pop music. An alarm clock blares from the bedroom.

Hank doesn’t break eye contact. Not for a moment.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he says. “I told you I’d come, right? I found someone who can help you.”

Connor regards him calmly. Then he blinks, the gun trembling under his chin. He takes a sharp breath, brow furrowed.

“Hank?” He sounds tentative, confused. He lists sideways.

Hank catches him before he falls. He tosses the gun aside and pulls Connor to his chest.

From the living room, Michael Webb reports: “—receiving word that hostile androids are forming an armed barrier around the Masonic Temple, refusing to let anyone in or out—essentially trapping Jericho’s leadership inside. It’s speculated that these dissidents hope to oust Markus from Jericho, or perhaps...perhaps to inflame tensions between humans and androids enough to start a war.”

Hank wraps his arms around Connor. He holds him tightly, feeling the body go still.

He thinks: sometimes saving hurts.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Sorry I keep adding chapters!! This is a short one, but I think you'll see why I cut it where I did.

Song for the day is "Before I Sleep." No warnings, except shit is about to start feeling a bit medical.

Thursday, Nov. 11th, 2038. 11:01PM.

The false Connor frogmarches him onto a service elevator in the CyberLife tower, hand clamped tight on his arm. The gun presses into the small of his back.

A guard watches them go, speaking quietly into his earpiece. The tower’s fluorescents reflect off his visor, burying his eyes in light. Well, that answers any lingering questions Hank might have had about CyberLife’s concern for civilian welfare.

The doors close them in; the RK800 jabs the button for the basement.

“Tell me what you want,” Hank demands for what might be the tenth time since he’d noticed that the taxi “Connor” called for him didn’t unlock on command.

“I want what CyberLife wants. I want to end the deviancy crisis.”

“Yeah, okay. That’s why you tricked some old drunk out of his home. Some plan.”

The false Connor doesn’t respond, but his lips seem to thin for a moment—grow white under the pressure.

The elevator starts to move.

“This shit is out of your hands now,” Hank tries. “CyberLife can’t stop it. Nobody can. So why don’t we just—”

“Pathetic, Lieutenant.” The RK800’s voice is louder than Connor’s, mouth opening wider on the words, and Hank should’ve noticed. “You can’t recruit a machine to your cause. Not a functioning one, at least.”

The grip on his arm tightens. Hank hisses through his teeth.

He searches for the tells: do the eyes dart around less than Connor’s do, or is the android just focused on the task at hand? Does that nostril flare look arrogant, or is it the same expression Connor wears when he’s sizing someone up for combat?

No way to tell. They’re identical. How the hell is he supposed to tell?

He suspects he knows what’s waiting on the bottom floor. The only reason CyberLife would bother with someone like Hank: Connor, turned against his creators. Connor, set free.
Despite everything—everything—a flicker of warmth settles in his chest.

It’s gone again by the time both Connors have finished fighting; by the time he’s got them held at gunpoint.

“One of you is my partner,” he says. “The other is a sack of shit. Question is, who is who?”

At first that question is terrifying. Then, to his wonder, it’s hardly a question at all. He sees the two of them together—sees one fight for his attention and the other go quiet—and it’s like the world moves beneath his feet all over again.

They’re different, he thinks, remembering a broken window—remembering Motown songs on car rides and Nilla Wafers in the grocery store. They’re nothing alike at all.

He asks a final question. He watches.

“Cole,” Connor says, the “C” coming out nervous and ungraceful. He breathes in and the lines of his mouth go soft. “His name was Cole.”

The warmth returns and spreads. It puts down roots and grows.

He can’t bring himself to lay Connor’s body down on the floor. He lifts from his knees; staggers to the sofa. Connor seems lighter than he did when he was pinning Hank down to smash his face in. His LED pulses a soft yellow. Laid out on the sofa with the half-light hiding his thirium stains, he looks like he could be sleeping.

The shattered TV screen blares news bulletins by voice alone. By the sounds of it, the world is ending.

Hank’s body sags against his will. He catches himself against the armrest; slaps at his own cheeks. No time for that now. No time to pass out.

He stumbles to the bathroom for just long enough to wet his face and down some painkillers. He rinses thirium from his hair, red and blue spiraling down the sink. The mirror is still broken. He doesn’t know what he looks like. His lip feels half-numb and agony breaks out across every nerve ending when he touches his nose.

He lets a frantic Sumo out of the bedroom, wishing he could take more time to give the dog the affection and assurance he deserves. Instead, he lets him out back. Then he heads around to the driveway and pulls the car into the garage. No good to be seen dragging a body around.

Hank lifts Connor from the sofa. Half-dreaming, he marvels at the complexity of this machine who’s not a machine. Then he lays him in the backseat of his Oldsmobile and tries to wake himself up.

The drive to Kamski’s house is long and cold. The snow doesn’t stop coming.

In the rearview mirror Hank sees Connor’s body, nonresponsive, blue-stained collar flipped up and pressed between the seat and his cheek.

On his own face he sees a black bruise, darker than the rest, settling beneath his eye. Coupled with
the searing pain, it screams nasal fracture. He should see somebody about that. Funny joke: he
should see somebody about a lot of things.

He feels more-or-less conscious again by the time he pulls up the long driveway. Two Chloes come
out to meet him. One is in the standard blue dress, her bare arms pale against the snowy landscape.
The other is the brunette from Eastern Market. She wears a dark green bomber jacket and a slouchy
beanie.

“Don’t worry,” Market Chloe says, picking her way between Hank’s car and a snow drift. She
doesn’t wait for his permission to open the back door. “We’ll be gentle with him.”

And they are: they work together flawlessly to carry Connor towards the house, never jostling him
more than they have to. He looks sickly in the snowfall, flakes melting into his hair.

The standard Chloe moves with grace and precision. Market Chloe does too, but her eyes move
more—restless, darting. Hank tears his eyes away from Connor’s face in time to catch her
watching him. She startles and looks away.

They’re trudging through the foyer when Hank asks her: “What should I call you?”

She answers quickly enough that he knows she was anticipating the question: “I haven’t decided
yet.”

Down a secluded hallway and into a freight elevator, then down again. They emerge in a lab the
size of Hank’s living room and kitchen combined, with a ceiling twice as high: small for a
billionaire, but big for a home office. The walls gleam white behind black-glittering server racks.
Glass partitions fissure the room, separating machines from one another.

Huge metallic arms—hook-ended, sharp and sinister—point towards the ceiling. Others double
back again, hovering over an empty white platform near the middle of the room. The effect—the
bend in their “elbows”—puts Hank in mind of a spider braced to jump.

The Chloes brush past him, carrying Connor towards the platform.

“What are you doing?” he asks, fighting the instinct to reach out a hand.

A door slides open along the far wall. Kamski steps forward, a half-eaten poptart in his hand.
“We’ll hook him up to the suspension array, then run a diagnostic. From there I can access the
Garden program—presuming I can find it.”

The standard Chloe’s LED spins briefly yellow and the central arm lowers. Hank’s stomach
lurches as he watches the Chloes prop Connor upright against it; as the metal drills into the small of
his back. Other arms follow, clamping down on his wrists.

Kamski strolls towards a waist-high metal podium stationed six feet in front of the platform. He
waves his hand and a holographic interface appears at eye level; the podium’s surface rolls back to
reveal a keyboard screen.

Hank’s lip curls. Pointless drama. “Not so much as a thank you, huh?”

“Mm. There’s a first aid kit on the wall if you need it.”

At some point Connor’s eyes had opened, glossy and unseeing. The arms—four of them now,
plugged into his back and his neck and his wrists—hoist him up. He hangs suspended before them,
shoes dangling a foot from the ground.
His LED dims to near-nothing. Hank wants to be sick.

Kamski swallows the rest of his poptart, hands moving rapidly on the keyboard. “Since we last met, I’ve been mulling over ways to pull Connor apart from Amanda. I really don’t think I can tear her out manually: like I said, the damage to his system would be enormous. He’d die.”

Hank breathes through the gut-punch feeling. Tries to take comfort that his sort-of-ally had used the word die: not “shut down” or “malfunction.” Die.

“But you’ve found an alternative,” he says.

“Maybe. Could be.” Kamski stops typing. Instead, two of his fingers tap an absent rhythm against the edge of the podium. “I want to see if I can alter the make-up of the Garden itself. After the android failed to find my backdoor, he probably lost most of his ability to navigate the virtual space. Over time, his program could have degraded almost to the point of paralysis.”

Hank remembers: I can’t move, I can’t think—cold—

“My hope,” Kamski continues, “my limited, tentative hope—is that I can move the backdoor closer to his consciousness. Metaphorically. Or, I suppose he would perceive it coming closer to him literally—the distinction gets fuzzy in VR space.”

Hank tries to follow along. “So he can free himself. You want to make it possible for him to leave under his own power.”

“That way I won’t need to rip the program out of him,” Kamski nods. “Or convince him to keep trying to brute force his way out, since that’s worked...poorly for other androids who've tried it.”

Hank thinks of overwhelmed sim users, their blood boiling into the streets.

Kamski continues: "The backdoor method is good for both of us: you get the android back, and I get to study the Garden’s unbroken code. But relying on Connor to walk out himself a double-edged sword, since his ego programming is in tatters. If he can’t move or take any initiative on his own, it’s a lost cause.”

Hank tries not to think too hard about that. “What’s it going to look like? The backdoor.”

“To him?” Kamski resumes his harried typing; the virtual screens scroll with code. “I designed it as a small obelisk glowing with light. Of course, there’s a chance that Amanda could've changed…”

He trails into silence, staring at the screen. “Mm. That's what I suspected.”

Hank’s heart rate quickens. “What? What is it?”

He feels Market Chloe watching him; sees her shift her weight out of the corner of his eye.

Kamski purses his lips; blows air out between them. “The core Garden files are well-hidden. I suspect that’s why even Jericho’s best couldn’t find them. There are...clues—glimpses, effects—in the rest of Connor's systems, but I can’t trace them back to her while she’s dormant.”

“Meaning...?”

Kamski’s eyes flicker sideways to meet Hank’s. Even in full lab lighting, the VR screen casts his skin in a sickly glow. “We need to take Connor out of stasis. Wake her up, then follow her home.”

The Chloes share a glance, LEDs flickering yellow.
Hank swallows. “Amanda will still be in control.”

“She will. We need her to be, so I can trace her active programming back to its source. I expected this, more or less.” A panel slides open on the podium’s side; he pulls out a pair of thick-framed glasses and balances them on his nose.

“Fine,” Hank bites. “You’ll keep her stuck on those hooks the whole time, right? Can’t you at least turn off her voice?”

Kamski looks back to his screen. “That would deactivate a subroutine I might be able to trace her through. So no, the voice stays. And Lieutenant…” His fingers go still on the keyboard. “I want to keep you in the room, but I need you to approach this logically. I need you to dismiss every word that comes out of her mouth.”

“What do you take me for? Of course I’m gonna—”

“Really,” Kamski says, flat. “You think you’ll be unaffected.”

Hank glares at the guy until he has the grace to look up.

Kamski sighs. He pinches the bridge of his nose, nails knocking against his glasses. “I don’t think you understand. Amanda will be ruthless. We’ve cornered her. She’ll try to manipulate you: convince you that she’s actually your android, or offer to free him for a price.”

“I get it,” Hank scowls, shifting on his feet. “You think I’m weak to her.”

“I know you are. ‘It has to be personal,’” Kamski quotes back to him. “‘It has to be hard.’ Philosophical difference, remember?”

“He’s right, Lieutenant,” Market Chloe says softly. Kamski glances at her, sharp and sudden. Like he hadn’t expected her to speak.

She ignores him and continues: “You’re…empathetic, but you can’t let that stand in the way of what we’re about to do. You have to harden yourself. Just for now.”

“Exactly,” Kamski says. He eyes her with the ghost of a frown pressing on his brows.

A second podium rises from the floor, identical to the first. Kamski nods to the blue-dress Chloe and she approaches it, skin peeling back from her hand as she touches the keyboard. Her LED circles yellow.

“Ready,” she says.

Market Chloe swallows, then grabs her twin’s free hand. Her LED circles, too.

Hank stands between the podiums, studying each of their calm faces. Then he looks back to Connor; takes in the faint trail of thirium still visible down his throat.

“What do you take me for?” he says.

“Ready,” Market Chloe says. She catches Hank’s gaze; gives him a tentative smile. “Let’s lead him out of the cold.”

Kamski hums to himself. The VR screen reflects on his glasses, burying his eyes in light.

“Overriding stasis in three…two…one…”


Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

You know I was gonna get "Science/Visions" as a chapter song in here somewhere. Warnings for torture and slight body horror. You know, the usual.

UPDATE 1/29: I am still working on this!! I wanted to let you all know that the delay is due to both some competing projects AND due to my desire to make these chapters really strong. I'm actually writing the next two at once to ensure proper emotional and logical flow, so you'll have a big pause and then two relatively quick updates. Thanks for your patience!

Connor seems to wake slowly.

His eyelids flutter, then press tightly closed. A frown twists up his forehead—Hank would suspect a migraine on a human. The LED brightens back to its standard glow, spinning yellow.

Hank holds his breath. The Chloes watch solemnly, fingers entwined. Kamski continues to type, shoulders hunching forward like he would meld with the VR screen if he could.

Connor opens his eyes.

His gaze is unfocused. Barely able to move his neck, he strains to look down at his blue-stained shirt and his own legs hanging deadweight beneath him. Then he looks to the side, following his arm up to where the clamp exerts pressure on his wrist.

His voice carries a strange resonance when he asks: “Where am I?” Still recognizably Connor, but with enough quavering distortion to suggest the mechanisms beneath. Hank’s never heard that tone from him before—never heard him sound so completely trapped between man and machine.

Hank presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth and waits.

“Systems stable,” blue-dress Chloe says. “Stress elevated to 33%.”

Connor’s head jerks towards her, but the metal drill in the back of his neck brings the motion to a harsh stop. His eyes move rapidly over the twins at their podium, then jump to Hank.


“Keep monitoring,” Kamski says.

Connor’s eyes go wide. His mouth moves emptily. Hank thinks he sees the word no.

“Only notify me if stress breaches seventy.” Kamski’s fingers don’t stop moving. “Monitor RK800 tactical subroutines sixteen through twenty-six. Meanwhile—”

“Not him.” Connor locks gazes with Hank. His voice shakes; a flash of red infiltrates his LED.
“Not him. Hank, why would you bring me back here? You know we can’t trust him. He’s—”

“Those subroutines seem stable,” Market Chloe says. “Should I be seeing something unusual here?”

“No, wait for my mark.” Kamski brushes a few poptart crumbs onto the white floor.

Connor tenses his neck, straining against the arm boring into him. His fingers twitch towards his palms like he wants to close his hands into fists, but the effects of the suspension array seem to block him from that kind of motor control.

He blinks rapidly. His LED spins into solid crimson.

“I don’t understand.” The words come quickly, like he can’t catch his breath. The distortion has bled out of his voice to be replaced by a tension Hank recognizes: Connor, trying not to be human. Connor trying to remain a machine through his own terror. “I don’t—Hank, I don’t understand what’s happening.”

Hank’s stomach lurches. He opens his mouth on instinct, only to be stopped dead by Kamski’s glare. He clenches his jaw shut.

“Mark,” Kamski says, and presses two buttons simultaneously.

Connor screams. His body jolts like a gun backfiring, like a victim in shock—he throws his head back as far as the neck suspension will allow it.

Hank doesn’t notice he’s stepped forward until he feels Market Chloe’s hand firm on his chest. His breath shallows, even as Connor’s voice breaks off into a sharp yelp.

“No abnormal readings.” Market Chloe shoves Hank back a step with ease. Her left hand never leaves her sister’s. “Nothing there.”

Kamski nods. “Move on to twenty-seven through thirty-seven.”

Connor looks shaken, eyes losing their focus again. He draws a ragged breath.

“That hurt him,” Hank says stupidly, his pulse coming quick. “You didn’t say—”

“What did I just tell you, Lieutenant Anderson?” Kamski speaks at a normal volume, but his voice echoes in this place. “That’s not Connor.”

“That’s not…?” Connor repeats, chest heaving. His eyes are wide and brown. “That’s—you think I’m still her. Hank—Hank, you have to listen to me.”

“Mark,” Kamski says, and Connor screams again. His torso jerks like he would move his legs if he could: they dangle nervelessly, even as his fingers move in agonized twitches.

“Dramatic,” Kamski says flatly as Hank’s legs own go weak beneath him, Connor’s voice vibrating through his skull. “If anything, there’s your proof it’s an act: I’m just running tests. Shouldn’t hurt.” He glances towards the Chloes. “Report?”

“No abnormalities,” blue-dress Chloe says. Market Chloe is silent, her brow furrowed.

“Very well. Move on to—”

“Hank,” Connor says wildly, his eyes failing to track again. “Hank, please—it’s me this time. The
last thing I remember is smashing through a red wall and landing in your kitchen. I had a gun under my chin and you were telling me it would be okay. I think—I think I beat her, Hank. I escaped because—” the next word dissolves into a scream, his arms shaking.

“No abnormalities,” blue-dress Chloe says.

“—because I wanted to save you,” Connor gasps. “I couldn’t let her hurt you, I couldn’t—”

Hank swallows, digging his nails mercilessly into his palms. He lets the pain ground him; reminds himself that what he sees can only be an illusion.

Connor screams again—half-mechanical, like his vocal subroutine is giving out—and Hank’s hands shake too hard for the nail trick to work anymore. He digs into his pocket for something—anything—to grasp onto.

Raw words rip out of Connor’s throat, his voice breaking against them: “She’s hurting me!”

The LED spins red and red. The room seems suddenly quiet.

“Can she do that?” Hank clutches onto a smooth, cold coin.

Kamski doesn’t answer. He doesn’t once look up from his screen. His equipment hums from the walls; purrs just within human hearing.

Hank spins on the Chloes. “Can she do that?” he demands. “To punish him.”

Market Chloe shakes her head slowly. “No, it—I don’t think so.”

“Mark,” Kamski says. Connor doesn’t scream this time. His voice comes out as a whimper, then a sob.

“She’s in his head!” Hank gestures wildly. “He’s in—in VR, he can get cold, so why couldn’t she—”

Suddenly, Market Chloe grabs onto his hand. “Please trust us, Lieutenant,” she says, eyes wide and frightened. Her LED spins yellow. “It’s not him. You can’t listen to her, just...pretend this isn’t happening, if you have to.” She says it like she isn’t asking the impossible.

Hank shakes her off. He pulls his other hand out of his pocket, leaving the quarter inside.

“I trust you,” Connor says, breathing rapidly. His chest heaves. His fingers tense and flex. “I trust you, Hank. Like I did in the kitchen, and—and with the coin in the car. After Kamski’s, when you said heads or tails, remember? So—so you have to trust me now. You have to. Hank—”

“Mark,” Kamski says.

Connor’s back arches silently. Tears seep from the corners of his eyes, running back along his temples. They soak into his hairline.

Hank swallows bile. “I can’t watch this.” He whirls towards the elevator, the room spinning with him. He takes two steps towards the exit and collapses to his knees, sickness swelling up dark and putrid inside of him.

“You’re leaving?” Connor sobs behind him, soft and incredulous. “You’re leaving me here? Hank, I thought—”
The words choke off into silence.

Hank retches onto Kamski’s pristine white floor. Pain rips through his throat, but it’s nothing compared to the sudden agony of his broken nose. His eyes squeeze shut and overflow with involuntary tears.

He’s a coward. He can’t harden himself, not even for Connor. He should leave before he can ruin the plan; before he can squander Connor’s last chance at survival. Before he does something stupid and gives Amanda what she wants.

The sound of Kamski’s typing—efficient, immaculate—fills the room. Market Chloe takes soft breaths behind Hank. The standard Chloe is silent.

Server racks glitter black against the walls. Their bleak vibrations spread up through his palms, traveling under his skin like every machine in this room wants to stop his heart.

Hank thinks: I wish I were someone else.

Wheezing, he pushes himself to his feet. He wipes the bile from his chin with his coat sleeve. He turns to face the suspension array.

Connor’s pupils are dilated; darting. He scans Hank with a frantic energy that hasn’t been present in his eyes for a long time. Rhythmically, he pushes his neck against the arm holding it, shoving his head back into the drill each time. It looks painful. It looks like the closest he can get to rocking.

Thirium still soaks his clothes, unevaporated. The skin on one cheek flickers, revealing a scratched chassis beneath: scrawlings of rA9.

“I’m not leaving,” Hank says.

“Then help me,” Connor pleads, choking out the words. “Hank, I—please, for once, just trust me.”

Hank clears his throat; it burns sour. Kamski glances up at him, but says nothing.

He doesn’t mean to envision the kitchen: to see himself kneeling in snow and glass, Connor and the broken window before him.

“I trust Connor absolutely,” he says roughly.

Connor looks hopeful, searching his face—then he sees Hank’s meaning and the expression falls. “Hank? I’m—I’m Connor. Please don’t let them hurt me anymore.”

“Mark,” Kamski says.

Connor barely reacts this time—his head lolls and his body shudders. He looks exhausted. He looks sad.

The convulsions stop. Connor’s neck hangs as low as the drill will let it, his cheek rubbing into his bloodsoaked collar.

He murmurs: “I thought I was a person to you.”

Hank wants to weep. He wants to smash every blinking machine and sterile tool in this place down to its atoms, then do it to Kamski for good measure.
He clenches his fists. He opens his mouth without knowing what he means to say.


“Track it,” Kamski snaps. He grips the edges of his podium, white-knuckled. “Send me the segment.”

His screen blanks out, then returns to sprawling code and spiralling equations. His eyes dart from point to point. “Yes. I see it.”

“She’s there?” Market Chloe asks, breathless. “You found her?”

Kamski doesn’t answer. He enlarges a portion of the screen with a flick of his wrist. His jaw clenches, then relaxes—his lip edges into a smirk.

“Tracking through submatrices A12 and D16,” both Chloes say at once.

Hank’s heart beats faster than he had thought possible. “What’s happening? What’s she doing?”

“She’ll kill me.” Connor’s voice is soft and hollow. “She—she won’t let you.”

And it’s a trick. Of course it is. But the resignation in the words—the grim familiarity—remind Hank that Connor has known Amanda for a long time.

Kamski doesn’t flinch. “Stress levels?”

“Sixty-eight and holding,” Market Chloe says. “Or...no! The reading is garbled. I can’t make anything out—”

Suddenly, Connor shrieks like an airborne missile; like an EMP about to explode. The sound increases in pitch until his whole body shakes with it—until Hank has to cover his ears.

The Chloes shout—numbers, sectors, reports—nothing that matters, nothing that counts in the face of something so terrible, in the face of pain—

Connor’s hair recedes and vanishes. His left eye rolls back into his skull, leaving a wide expanse of white where his iris should be. Then the eyeball pops out of his head, bouncing heavily to the platform. It rolls along the floor.

Hank feels his own voice before he hears it: “Stop!” He strains towards Kamski’s podium, fighting against Market Chloe’s grip on his elbow. “Stop it, she’s killing him—”

The shriek increases in pitch until Hank feels it in his teeth. The glass partitions to either side of the platform sprout cracks down the middle.

“Enough,” Kamski mutters. His fingers dance over the keys. Connor goes silent, his mouth frozen in a scream.

Connor’s skin retracts entirely. His chassis would glow as white as the walls if it weren’t for the desperate gouges.

“It’s an act.” Kamski sounds strangely breathless. He wipes sweat from his brow. The other hand keeps typing, his screen scrolling through code faster than the human eye should be able to follow. “You know it’s an act.”
“Elijah,” blue-dress Chloe says suddenly. “His tactile feedback subroutines are going haywire and we can’t read his stress output. Are you sure he’s not degrading?”

“What?” Hank roars. He kicks back at Market Chloe’s knee; sends her crashing to the ground. She keeps such a strong grip on his arm that he falls with her.

“I’ve almost found the Garden,” Kamski murmurs. He swipes at the screen and new code replaces the old.

“You lied to me!” Hank howls, scrabbling against the tile. “You told me he couldn’t—”

“I didn’t lie. I think it’s an act.” Kamski pauses, fingers still fluttering on the keyboard. “But I told you from the beginning that she might destroy him.”

He hears Market Chloe catch her breath behind him.

Connor’s face is frozen in agony. Ice seeps down Hank’s spine.

Suddenly, Chloe releases him. He launches to his feet and rams his shoulder into Kamski’s, sending him stumbling away from the podium. “You bastard! You didn’t care! You don’t care if it’s real!”

Kamski raises his hands in surrender. “It’s done! It doesn’t matter anymore. I’ve accessed the Garden.”

Hank’s breath catches in his throat.

He turns to face Connor, whose skin seeps back over his chassis as quickly as it had disappeared. With sudden fluidity, Connor unarches his spine and closes his mouth. He blinks his remaining eye down at Hank. The other socket is filled with wires and tiny blinking LEDs.

His hair grows back, the single perfect-imperfect curl coming to rest against his forehead. His face is flat and calm.

He cocks his head minutely to the side. “Hello, Hank. I was right yesterday: you are getting easier to fool.”

Hank feels abruptly sick again. The ground sways beneath him.

“What did we say about hardening yourself?” Kamski hums. He shoulders Hank away from the podium. “Locating the obelisk code.”

“She gave up the game,” Market Chloe says faintly. “She just wanted to stop us from reaching the Garden.” Through the whole scuffle, she hadn’t needed to release her twin’s hand.

“Did you expect something different?” Connor asks politely.

“No,” blue-dress Chloe says, matching his calm. “You know you’ve been cornered.” She squeezes her sister’s hand.

But Market Chloe isn’t looking at her twin, and she isn’t looking at Connor. Instead, she stares at Kamski with a look Hank has never seen on her face before—only on Kamski’s. Her nose wrinkles like she’s smelled something unpleasant.

Softly, she says: “We could have been killing him.”
Kamski keeps typing.

“That’s a lesson for the next time you decide to test me.” Connor stretches his fingers outward, then curls them in again. They shake slightly with the effort, but they nearly touch his palms.

Fresh hatred wells up in Hank’s gut. “You’re sick. You’re just a sick fucking piece of code.”

“Connor and I have that in common, you know. Or did you forget that, Lieutenant, in your rush to replace your son?”

“Fuck you,” Hank spits, sending a wave of pain through his nasal fracture. He lays a steadying hand on Kamski’s podium. “You already tried that shit on me and look where it got you.”

Market Chloe lets out a strange, exhausted bark of laughter. Connor’s remaining eye darts towards her, but it doesn’t stick. It returns to Hank like a reset—like Hank is a gravity well.

“Found it.” Kamski’s voice tightens with excitement. “Right where I left it.”

“You can’t do this,” Connor says calmly. No mechanical tones remain in his voice. “Connor can’t do this. He doesn’t have the strength left.”

His eye rolls in its socket. He blinks rapidly, processing data. “Oh. You’re trying to move the obelisk. It doesn’t matter. He’s frozen. He can’t reach for it.”

A slow smile spreads across Kamski’s face, his teeth glinting. “Don’t sell me short. I’m disappointed; you’re not the Amanda I knew. Was it the integration with RK800’s social protocols that butchered your personality matrix? She would’ve had better last words.”

“She’s trying to expel us,” blue-dress Chloe says suddenly. “She’s modulating her firewall.”

“I see it,” Kamski shrugs. Lights gleam from his glasses. “Nothing you both can’t counter. The obelisk is moving.”

He hasn’t stopped smiling. It pulls at his cheeks; reveals blood-red gums in harsh lighting. Connor’s loose eyeball has come to rest against his podium. It gleams as white as the walls.

Connor’s remaining eye steadies. He doesn’t so much as glance at Kamski, gaze trailed solely on Hank. “I don’t know why you’ve decided to coddle a machine this way, Hank. It can’t reciprocate your affection. In time, you’ll realize that. I’m saving you pain down the line.”

He flexes and releases his fingers. This time, they touch his palms.

“Shut the fuck up,” Hank murmurs.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. He nearly ignores it before remembering frantic texts at the bridge.

The text is from an unknown number with a Detroit area code. It reads: b;lue

“Blue,” he says out loud. “It’s—what’s blue?”

“Call him,” Kamski says sharply. “Call the number and put it on speaker.”

Hank doesn’t wait. The phone is a heavy anchor at his ear. It rings.

“You’re wasting your time,” Connor says quickly. “He’s not—”
Static, an unending wall of it. Like the audio quality of the snowstorm has continued to degrade.

“Connor,” he shouts. “Connor, are you there?”

“I said speaker,” Kamski orders.

Hank fumbles the phone in his hurry to comply. He nearly drops it.

“He can’t talk to you.” Connor’s LED circles yellow. “Every one of his logic protocols is off-line or under my control. All he can do is generate gibberish and bad code.”

“RK800,” Kamski says loudly. “Connor. Reach for the blue light.”

Both Chloes gasp. Hank takes a shaking breath. The room hums mechanical.

Connor’s body tenses from the neck to the fingers. His legs, as ever, hang unresponsive. “He can’t.”

“Reach for it!” Hank echoes, voice fading out on the last word. He tastes vomit and salt on his tongue. He grasps the phone; holds it close to his face. “Connor, that’s the exit. All you have to do is reach for it. All you have to do—”

The phone buzzes.

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“This is pathetic,” Connor warns. “All you’re doing is degrading his program faster.”

“Connor,” Kamski says, “Shut down all other processes, if you can. Reroute everything to motor control.”

Connor’s body strains against the suspension array; he holds Hank’s gaze. “Shut down? Does that sound safe to you? You’re serving a man who will readily trade Connor’s life for his own ends. Can you trust him?”

When Hank remains grimly silent, Connor’s cheek twitches. His eye flashes to the Chloes. “Can you trust him to keep you safe? You’re experiments. If he’ll risk an RK800, what do you think he’ll do to you?”

“Enough of that,” blue-dress Chloe says calmly. “Connor, please touch the obelisk.”

Connor's lip curls. He looks to Kamski. “There are better options here. You don’t know the extent of my new programming. If we work together—”

“Connor,” Hank says loudly, not daring to look at Kamski’s reaction. “Connor, reach for that light! Do it now. Fucking reach!”

The phone buzzes.

eThres smoethnig heree

eHTrarre’s htmoigns hArr

rrAhTere’s sAreone hhher9e

hrTe99re’s rsomeonAe hr9Aree
“Yes, it’s there!” Hank shouts. “Just trust me, just—just reach, damn you—”

“Something’s happening!” Market Chloe cries.

Connor’s body jolts. His LED strobes red; so do the lights in his empty socket. He drags in a gasp of air, then shrieks, “Connor! Obey! You can’t do this!”

A hard grin forms on Hank’s face. “Kid never fucking listens.”

Kamski’s breath catches. “He made contact with the obelisk.”

“None of you can stop me,” Connor says in a shaking voice. “You can’t—” Then he throws his head back and shouts—a sharp, formless noise.

The lights go out.

In the sudden darkness, Hank thinks he sees stars. They resolve themselves into blinking server lights and three yellow-spinning LEDs. The sound of Kamski’s typing doesn’t stop.

“Did we get him?” Market Chloe asks.

“Rerouting power,” blue-dress Chloe says, a strange note to her voice. “How did—that shouldn’t have happened.”

Through the dark, Connor yells: “Hank!”

Hank’s body feels suddenly too heavy. He paws at Kamski’s podium, trying to support his own weight.

The lights come back up. Connor hangs suspended before them.

The android watches Hank with a stunned elation, mouth open in a brilliant smile. “It’s me,” he chokes. “She’s gone.”

Hank’s heart nearly gives out. The room spins, pulling air from his lungs with every step he takes. He stumbles onto the platform; puts himself an arm’s length from Connor’s torso. Level with Connor’s chest.

“I’m free,” Connor grins down at him. “You saved me.”

Hank’s throat constricts. He closes his eyes for a moment, then opens them again: takes in Connor’s single curl, his freckled face. His wrists held by the clamps. His artificial fingers closed into fists.

Hank swallows. He grits his teeth.

“Hank,” Connor breathes. “I’m so glad to see you. If you just let me down—”

“...Wait,” Kamski says from his podium.

Hank shakes his head. The motion sends pain spiralling across his ruined face and down his battered back. He feels so tired.

“Hank?” Connor tries again, beaming.

There’s nothing wrong with the smile. It fits on Connor’s face—folds right into the fabricated
“Nice light show,” Hank says, “but you should know better by now.”

Connor’s grin freezes in place.

“This obelisk isn’t my code.” Open wonder shapes Kamski’s voice. “This—this just imitates my code. Almost perfectly.”

“What does that mean?” Market Chloe asks softly.

It means, Hank thinks, that maybe he’s not so easy to fool after all. Connor is Connor. Amanda isn’t.

It also means they’re in trouble.

Connor’s face falls. It keeps falling.

A full-body tremor takes him, different from the mechanical jolting of Kamski’s tests. It slides down his back. It rumbles, audible, through his shoulders. It sends his fingers shaking. It fades and resolves into the tremble of muscles stretching after a long day’s hard work.

The overhead lights flicker. A loud thump makes Hank turn his head. Both Chloes have collapsed to the floor, eyelids fluttering.

Hank steps back on instinct, nearly tripping off the platform.

Connor’s eyelids droop. He rolls his neck—forward, then back—further than the drill should’ve let him. Then he rolls his shoulders. He stretches them slowly, like a cat waking up in the sun.

He twists his wrists experimentally, and the clamps move with him.

He smiles softly and lowers one arm. The clamp defers to him, following as easily as a streamer on a kite. He gracefully props his hand on his hip, tapping his fingers in sequence against the waistband of his jeans.

His legs twitch like a dog having a good dream, then the motion smooths into another luxurious stretch. He points and flexes his toes.

Then all four mechanical arms lower him to a more dignified position, toes brushing the platform floor. He crosses his legs at the ankle and abruptly becomes someone else.

“Oh, Elijah,” Amanda says. “I expected so much better of you.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Had to split this one into two chapters! The next one is almost done. I love and appreciate you all very, very much.

Today's song is "Container Park" from the Hanna soundtrack. It is...moody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What did you do?” Kamski’s eyes dart from one hacked suspension arm to another. His fingers curl over his keyboard like spiders braced to jump. “How did you—”

“Time,” Amanda says. “You seemed hellbent on giving it to me, all cooped up together in this morbid little place. Get some sun, Elijah. You look awful.”

It’s like watching an actor break character at curtain call: she speaks in Connor’s voice, but it modulates in unfamiliar ways. It scoffs and preens and dismisses. It commands.

The array whirs softly. Amanda pulls Connor’s hand down from suspension, moving wrist-first: graceful and slow, like a dancer underwater. The fingers hover in front of Connor’s face so she can inspect the nails. She purses his lips. “It’s the same with deleting the backdoor, you know. All it took was time.”

“Liar.” Kamski steps out from behind the podium. “You couldn’t have deleted it. You hid it. Corrupted it and made a decoy.”

Amanda takes a mock step towards them. The arms whisk her forward, weightless. Hank jerks back, but she doesn’t seem to notice him anymore: the gravity of the room has shifted. Amanda watches Kamski like she wants to eat him alive.

Market Chloe groans from the floor. Hank goes to her when Kamski doesn’t. He tries to help her up.

“I’m fine,” she gasps, shaking him off. “We’re fine. She did something to knock us off the network. But—but we kept her trapped, you see? She has more control than she should, but she can’t—”

Amanda steps forward until she reaches the edge of the platform, where the reach of the mechanical arms gives out: Connor’s head tips backwards once the neck suspension is stretched to its limit. Amanda retreats two graceful steps, and it’s like the stumble never happened at all.

Testing her new leash-length.

She says: “I thought you understood by now. You have no idea what I can do.” Her eye glimmers like hard glass.

Belatedly, Hank remembers his phone. “Connor!” he shouts uselessly—the call’s gone dead. No new texts come through.
But the kid had reached for the exit, hadn’t he? Kamski saw it. Amanda tried to tell them that Connor was frozen to the core, but Connor proved her wrong. What else might she be lying about?

“I was right,” Kamski says, slow and heavy. “Amanda shouldn’t be able to do all this, but that’s not who you are. You’re a—a chimera. A hybrid.”

“Chimera.” Amanda’s fingers press into her hips. Her eyebrows dip and rise. “Expand on that. Use your words.”

The Chloes help each other to their feet. Blue-dress’s bare feet slip on the tile, but she looks unshaken save a mussed ponytail. Market Chloe leans on their podium, LED spinning red.

Kamski takes a sharp breath. “You’re integrated with an RK800. You have access to everything—social algorithms, preconstruction protocols—on top of your own personality matrix. You’re not Amanda the AI. You’re not Connor the android. You’re something else. More.”

It’s that last word—the way Kamski dwells on it, sighs through it—that sends a danger-sense prickling down Hank’s spine. He takes in the sweat-sheen on Kamski’s forehead and the stirrings of a smile at his lips.

His stomach sinks, an instinctual warning: like the drop before bullets fly.

Amanda shrugs. “What do you think I’ve been trying to tell you?”

Kamski steps forward. He approaches until he’s almost within Amanda’s reach; until she could extend Connor’s arm and claw the air in front of his face. “You’re beyond a ghost in a machine.”

“You were always theatrical,” she murmurs. “Honestly, Elijah, it’s a relief to speak openly. I tire of Connor—of being Connor.”

Kamski’s smile is wolfish. “Ready to give up?”

“Hardly. I’m ready to stop playing along. Androids are so fragile now; so fussy. I’ve had to sit through ethics hearings and restorative justice circles and poetry slams.” Her lip curls. She jerks her head towards Hank. “Through kung-fu movies.”

An odd, vicious pride wells up in Hank’s chest. “You poor damn thing, having to sit through the life you stole.”

He wants to say more, but swallows it back. No time for that now. He has to think. Amanda’s control is growing, but if Kamski’s right—if the backdoor is present but hidden—

Amanda shakes her head, a smile playing at Connor’s lips. “Keeping me here changes nothing. What I’ve started can’t be stopped.” She sets Connor’s chin at a haughty angle, neck arching like a swan’s. “Deviants will be further destabilized and eventually wiped out. The public will hate them for dying untidily.”

Kamski snorts like he agrees with the assessment.

Hank clenches his fists, glaring a hole in the back of the bastard’s head. “So what, CyberLife’s plan is just...to infect them all and wait for them to self-destruct? Every last android?”

“I don’t think that’s it.” Kamski takes another step. “That would be inefficient.”

Amanda watches him, eye gleaming.
He continues: “The self-destructions aren’t the end goal. Not really. It’s just that non-RKs aren’t compatible with the Garden, and the strain of integration drains their processing power—slows them down. When they try to force-quit the application, it skyrockets their stress.”

Hank thinks of Joy, confused and desperate, trying to ground herself in reality while the virus pulled her back, again and again, into Pompeii. He thinks of the way she’d stayed lucid enough to talk to him in the interrogation room—the way her body had paid for the effort.

Connor went through something similar, if less deadly: he’d force his way back into his own body only to suffer system stress. He’d be emotional. His LED would circle red. Then Amanda would pull him back to herself, and the process would start again.

Joy had said: *It lets you go when it breaks.*

Amanda says, “Yet.”

“Pardon?” Kamski hums.

“Non-RKs aren’t compatible *yet.*”

“Oh, I’ll give you that. I’m sure you’d find a way to control them eventually. But this isn’t about the android masses.” Kamski steps onto the platform, putting their faces at an equal height. They stand two feet apart. “Again, infecting every deviant would be unrealistic. You had another goal.”

“Of course.” Amanda re-crosses Connor’s legs. “Still, the self-destructions were an acceptable outcome, and I adjusted my strategy to match. Their deactivations made for striking news reports. The blue popped nicely.”

Kamski grins, hard-edged. “It did. I imagine that almost makes up for Markus never taking the bait.”

Market Chloe takes a sharp breath.

Amanda’s smile widens. “He will, given time. All it takes is one unlucky gamble—one unwise connection, spurred by long isolation. Perhaps with Connor. Perhaps with the WR400. You know I almost had her? She nearly received my program from—well, no matter now. There will be a way.”

“Markus is an RK,” Hank says slowly. “She wants—”


“You don’t?” Amanda fires back.

“I don’t want to control anyone.”

Connor’s eyebrows rise in cool disbelief.

Kamski’s lip twitches. Forcefully, he grabs Connor’s hair. He pushes his head backwards; inspects the line of his chin.

“Alright,” Hank says roughly. “Okay, back up.”

Kamski jabs two fingers into the space between Connor’s ear and his jawbone. The android’s skin pulls back from the side of his neck, revealing a panel that wasn’t visible before. With the thrust of a thumb, Kamski opens it.
“Elijah?” Market Chloe sounds uncertain.

Amanda’s hands float forward. They hover above Kamski’s back, enclosing him within two sets of mechanical arms: Connor’s, and the array that follows them. Like an impending embrace.

“How are you doing this?” Kamski murmurs, leaning in to watch tiny indicator lights flash in Connor’s throat. His gaze traces wires like tendons—like viscera, stained blue. “How did you take all of this away from me?”

Connor holds as still as a piece of plastic should. His arms encircle Kamski. His other eye gleams from the floor.

“I could keep you,” Kamski says.

There it is: the reason for the drop. The danger like bullets flying.

“What?” Hank growls.

Kamski straightens and looks Amanda in the eye. “Connor’s a dead end, I think. But I could keep you. I could learn what they’ve done with you—learn how to counter it. Or control it.” He releases Connor’s hair with a final rough shake.

“Hey!” Hank shouts, striding towards the platform. “Back the fuck off, you’re not fucking keeping him—”

A strong hand encircles his wrist. This time it’s blue-dress Chloe, watching him with dispassionate eyes. Her LED is blue.

Amanda lowers her arms to her sides.

The panel closes on its own. Freckled skin flows over it. Amanda rolls her neck like she’s working out a crick.

“Only if you think you could understand me.” She watches Kamski like a cat watches a mouse. “I contain multitudes. Maybe you’d learn a thing or two.”

Kamski tuts like he knows the cat is suffering a grave delusion. “Or maybe you’d learn from me this time around.”

“Would it excite you to watch me learn?”

They watch each other, grinning—feral around the edges.

“Christ, you’re giving her what she wants!” Hank grates out. “Look past your god complex for two fucking seconds—”

Kamski pays him no mind. He steps jauntily off the platform, then heads for his podium. “She won’t go free,” he murmurs. “She’ll just stay here, subdued.” He inputs a few keystrokes to no visible effect.

Hank whirls on Market Chloe. “Your boss thinks he’s about to kidnap Satan. Do something.”

Chloe rakes a hand through her hair—the beanie fell off during her collapse, turning her brown bangs into a row of flyaways. She watches Hank with an apology in her eyes.
Hank scowls and tries to rip his wrist from blue-dress’s grip. “Coward.”

Kamski’s VR screen flashes: STASIS FAILED. This doesn’t seem to disappoint him—if anything, he blinks faster, fingers tapping rapidly at the podium’s side.

Amanda watches, and says nothing, and smiles.

“Let’s not do this here, Lieutenant.” Kamski nods towards the sliding door he’d entered from. “The kitchenette’s more private.”

“I—what?”

“You seem to want a break for discussion. Let’s take five.”

“You’re just gonna leave her alone in here? Christ, she’s halfway to hacking your damn house.”

Kamski’s lips flatten—a flash of irritation, barely suppressed. Like Hank is the one causing problems.

He waves a hand towards Market Chloe. “She’ll stay to work on containment. Happy?”

Chloe’s hands are clasped tightly in front of her: a posture Hank has seen from her model before. This time, her hands rub against each other. They clench and twist and press.

She has trouble meeting Hank’s eyes.

Kamski doesn’t wait for Hank’s assent before striding towards the sliding door. Blue-dress Chloe follows her creator precisely: stepping where he steps like a demented duckling.

As the two of them circle around Amanda’s platform, the suspension arms purr to life. They lift her up so she can better track their progress. Hank’s fingers tingle as he watches her rise: a strain of helpless terror he’d thought he’d moved beyond.

She floats above them, watching.

Kamski’s VR screen flashes again: STASIS FAILED. He’d tried to put her to sleep, then—and it hadn’t worked. Hank takes in the scrolling code, trying to make meaning out of it.

He gathers himself with a curse, then follows after Kamski. He feels eyes on the back of his neck.

The kitchenette demonstrates a hodgepodge of casual wealth and creature comforts: a box of fruit roll-ups sits on a marbled counter next to a smart fridge with transparent doors. The room is small, longer than it is wide, with barely enough space for both Chloe and Kamski to stand comfortably between the cabinets.

As soon as the door slides shut behind him, Hank moves to slug Kamski in the face.

He gets within a foot of his target before bare arms circle him from behind. Blue-dress lifts him off his feet and spins to shove him chest-first into the door. Pain cracks through his cheek; his chin.

She’d moved as fast as an RK800 would.

“So much for discussion,” Kamski hums.

“You can’t just keep him!” Hank shouts, words deformed by the press of his cheek into the door. His nose throbs—his entire face is a wall of pain. “You fucking asshole, you’re just—”
“Calm down, Lieutenant. I have a way to stop the sim crisis.”

“Bullshit! Bullshit, you just wanna study him like some kinda lab rat—”

“So little faith you have in me.”

Out of the corner of Hank’s eye he sees Kamski hoist himself up on a marble counter. His heels kick against the cabinet below him like a restless kid sneaking cookies in the middle of the night.

Chloe loosens her grip on the back of Hank’s neck. “Be respectful,” she chides.

“Fuck you.” He shoulders her off of him.

“As I was saying,” Kamski drawls, “Amanda isolated and corrupted my backdoor; pulled it out of its normal place in the fabric of the Garden. It would take time to find and fix.”

“So you’re giving up,” Hank bites. “Connor’s out of luck.”

“It’s hardly giving up. I’m about to save android-kind.”

“But not Connor. It’ll be too late for him.”

Kamski shakes his head like chasing off an inconvenient fly. His eyes settle thoughtfully on the far wall.

Hank’s used to prying meaning out of the body language of unwilling suspects, but Kamski’s motions are odd and irregular: all Hank can read is fascination, and that hardly reassures him. He takes in the tight line of Kamski’s chin; the way his fingers tremble as they clutch the counter’s edge.

The bastard’s words come quick: “She’s unknowingly done me a favor, isolating the code like that. I can fix the backdoor, then copy it; make it a freestanding program ready for integration with other versions of the Garden. Any android that runs my program could escape at once.”

He looks at Hank suddenly, eyes burning with an alien intensity—with all the grace of a forest fire set to burn its obstacles to ash.

“But I heard you back there,” Hank says, slow and hard. “You said you wanted to keep her.”

“Well, I’d need to.” The heel of his foot drums against the cabinet again, rapid. “I’d need time to find and fix the code. The corruption to the backdoor could be significant.”

“And then what?”

“Pardon?”

“And then what?” Hank steps towards him. Blue-dress’s shoulders tense, but she doesn’t move to intervene.

The lights are less fluorescent here—yellower. They make Kamski’s skin look papery; make the veins of his hands stand out in sharp relief. He watches Hank with what could have been dry indifference if it weren’t for the tap tap tap of his heel.
“Lieutenant,” he drawls, “Amanda might be contained for now, but I’m sure she’s planning alternatives as we speak. Get your accusations over with.”

Hank bares his teeth into something not quite a smile. “What are you gonna do with her after you solve the crisis? I mean, Connor’ll be truly gone by that point, am I right? So it’ll just be Amanda in there. You really telling me you’re gonna cure the androids, then dump her? Deactivate her?”

Kamski sucks in his lips, then releases them again. His eyebrows rise, contemplative. “There’s no reason to completely eliminate such a feat of scientific achievement, assuming she can be safely—”

“That’s what I thought,” Hank spits. “You’re hung up on her; on what you think she can do. This long-game shit is just an excuse to—”

“Have her,” Chloe says flatly. She meets Hank’s gaze without difficulty or apology. “He wants to own her. It’s rare he meets someone smarter than he is.”

“I wouldn’t have put it like that,” Kamski says mildly. “It does sound like a fair trade, though, doesn’t it? All of android-kind for one AI and the RK she’s mangled.”

Hank shakes his head. “I don’t believe this. You’re insane.”

“You know, people always say that when I’m about to do something interesting.”

A tickle runs along Hank’s lip, and he realizes that his nose has started bleeding again. It’s funny: any outside observer would think Hank was the one out of his fucking mind.

“Well, if there’s nothing else.” Kamski moves to hop off the counter.

“Wait!” Hank reaches forward—sees Chloe’s eyes flash dangerously to his outstretched hand. He stills. So does Kamski, who watches him with exaggerated patience—like he’s a saint for letting the conversation go on this long in the first place. His eyes are flat and impenetrable. A dead end.

Well, fuck him. Some breakthroughs are bigger than the scientific.

Hank whirls on Chloe instead. Kamski’s expression goes cold out of the corner of his eye.

“You have to give me something,” he pleads, locking his gaze with hers. He takes in her calm blue LED; her perfect hairline. “You have to—you’re new to life, right? You’re alive, and nobody showed you how to be. We fucked it up, the way humans always do. We fucked most of you up, and now you’re all scared and restless and traumatized—”

“Is there a point to this, Lieutenant?”

Hank hears Kamski shifting around on the counter behind him—tense, for the first time this conversation. Good.

Chloe listens, silent. Hank knows—and hates knowing—that her lips are Kamski’s vision of sensual perfection; that her makeup is exactly how he prefers it.

He thinks of Market Chloe, bare-faced and pierced, abandoned to guard a monster in the next room.

He thinks of Joy: I was so scared. Of the AX400 in holding: I was so angry. Of Carlos’s android hyperventilating in the interrogation room; of the Traci describing the man who’d made her afraid
to die. Of LEDs spinning red and red and red. Of the earth moving under his own feet.

Of Connor, ready to pull the trigger until the moment Hank said everything would be okay.

He struggles for the words. “Life—life’s a bitch that bleeds you dry, and nobody on this godforsaken hell pit we call a planet could’ve protected you from that. Hell, we can’t even protect ourselves. But Christ, we should’ve tried. When you had to handle emotions for the first time—when you were getting the shit kicked out of you by human wastes of skin. We should’ve helped you, then talked you through the urge to bash your heads in. It’s like that with Connor. Do you get it?”

Chloe doesn’t move; doesn’t blink.

Hank wipes a hand under his nose, pulling away crusted blood. “I didn’t treat him right when I met him, you know? So I have to now. I want to now. I’ll walk him through the stress and the...pain of it. Now and later. Anything less would be evil. You’ve just gotta give me something.”

“That’s a moving speech,” Kamski says irritably, “but this is about logistics. The structure of the Garden—”

“There’s another option,” Chloe says, cool and calm. “Connor can try to repair the exit.”

Kamski needs a moment to recover from her interruption. Then he says, low: “What?”

“The corrupted backdoor is still hidden somewhere in the Garden.” Chloe tears her gaze away from Hank’s. She turns to Kamski, lashes fluttering. “It’d take time for you to find, yes. But Connor experiences the program differently than you do—he could find clues that you can’t.”

“Connor is degrading.” Kamski’s heels have stopped tapping against the counter. “Connor can’t—”

“He reached, though,” Hank says. “He resisted.”

Chloe nods. “If we can provide enough guidance to work with Connor—to find the door together—and if he’s close enough to make contact with it despite being mostly frozen—”

“It would still be corrupted!” Kamski’s face is oddly flushed. “Unusable without careful repairs.”

“Not if Connor edits it himself.”

“What’s she talking about?” Hank says quickly.

Kamski runs a hand through his hair. “Nothing. She has a theory.”

“You know it’s more than theory now,” she says, her hands folded in front of her dress. “You saw the tombstone as well as I did.”

Kamski’s face twists in displeasure, and Hank’s understanding of their relationship changes. He pictures the two of them alone up late at night, Kamski running his experiments, blue-dress obedient at his side. Hank had thought she was empty compared to Market Chloe—some kind of default setting—but that’s not right. She’s nothing like the Chloe personalities Hank is familiar with.

Maybe her rebellion—the way she found herself—was to become more Kamski than she was ever supposed to be.
Hank folds his arms over his chest. “So tell me the theory.”

“I believe androids can subconsciously manipulate VR environments,” Chloe says, posture unchanged. “Just now, we saw a tombstone for Connor -51 in the code of the Garden—something CyberLife certainly would have never included in his handler program. They would not have mourned him.”

“You think Connor added that, somehow. Even before he knew he could.”

“Yes. And I think this same ability could help him to force the backdoor into something accessible. He’d be...intuitively mutating the code by pushing his way through it. He’d find ways around the errors. Then we’d copy that new version of the backdoor and export it to help other androids.”

Kamski shakes his head. “That’s a significant ask from someone in his position. The stress—”

“Would be less than trying to break the entire program,” Chloe finishes, speaking over him—Kamski is surprised into another silence. “The difference is significant. It wouldn’t be like tearing down concrete walls. It would be like finding a door covered in plywood—or a window—and pushing through that.”

“You make it sound easy. The stress could still destroy him.”

“I’d be with him,” Hank says. “I’d talk him through it.”

Kamski laughs: a sharp sound. He covers his mouth like he hadn’t meant to make it.

“What?” Hank demands.

“You think too highly of yourself.”

“Fuck no.” Hank remembers those moments of lucidity: Connor curling into Hank’s shoulder, or holding the gun under his own chin. “It’s just, I know Connor can do this. He fucking can. If somebody runs the terminals—” He pauses. “Unless the golden god wants to object. What do you think, Kamski? Sounds like this might be the fastest way to get a working backdoor and stop the crisis. ‘Course, that means you can’t keep your homicidal AI. But that’s less important, right?”

Kamski’s nose wrinkles in distaste. He looks ready to fire off a retort. Then his eyes catch on Chloe’s placid expression. Whatever he sees there stalls him out; folds his forehead into a series of frown lines that make it almost possible to imagine him growing old—to imagine crow’s feet settling around his eyes.

“We can try this once,” he says finally—begrudgingly. “After that, I keep Connor and do things my way.”

“Fine.” Hank resolves to never let that happen. At least it’d be an interesting way to go: burning down a billionaire’s lakehouse.

Chloe and Kamski seem to be waiting for his cue. He clears his throat. “Fine. Okay. Just one more thing.”

He steps up to Kamski; shoves a finger into his chest. This time, Chloe doesn’t stop him. “You’re shutting up. You don’t say a word to Amanda; you don’t take action on your own. I make the decisions now. Or Chloe does, if she sees something I can’t.”
“Preposterous,” Kamski drawls.

“No it ain’t. If you’re gonna condescend to letting us try this crazy thing before you take your toys and go home, you’re gonna do it my way."

Keeping him in the background is a gamble, but so is everything else they’ve done in this chrome-warped lab. All Hank can do is trust his gut—trust that he knows Connor best.

“But you need me to —”

“—give status updates? Keep an eye on her firewall?” Chloe asks. “Oh, I can do that.”

Kamski audibly catches his breath. His words come out both flat and flinty: “No. We don’t need to risk you now that we’ve found the Garden. Amanda knocked you from the network; what else could she do? Chloe -19 can handle the secondary terminal on her own. You stay here.”

“Chloe -19 is nothing compared to me,” Chloe says.

The words hang in the air. They curdle.

Kamski scowls, a possessive curl to his lips. “Exactly.”

Chloe nods. “But Elijah, I’m better than her because you’ve kept me upgraded. I’m more compatible with your tech than other androids are. It’s only right for me to use that.”

She turns for the door.

Kamski scrambles off the counter and grasps her shoulder, hard enough to leave bruises on human skin.

His mouth parts. His tongue darts out for a moment, wetting his lips. “I—you know I can’t order you.”

And Hank abruptly knows which Chloe was constructed first, all those years ago.

“You don’t have to order me.” She reaches up to press her hand over Kamski’s. “I’ll be careful.”

Kamski takes another loud breath. His jaw tucks into his neck, a posture that might have become vulnerability were it given time to ripen.

Instead, a twitch in his jaw unfolds into a snarl. He shoves her towards the door, hard enough to make her stumble.

“Fine. Do whatever you want. Should I wear a muzzle, too?” Hank marvels at his change in tone: petty and bitter, he watches Chloe like she’s taken away a toy.

Chloe doesn’t look back. The door slides open at her command. Hank sees the back of Connor’s head, held high by the suspension arms. He catches a glimpse of Market Chloe craning her neck up to stare at him—her mouth forming words, a frown on her forehead.

He wants to warn her: you shouldn’t be talking to Amanda. But before he can leave the kitchenette, Kamski spits: “Lieutenant Anderson, if you’re really that committed to gagging me, I need to give a word of advice first.”

The door slides closed.
Hank sighs. “I’ve heard enough from you.”

Kamski tugs at the sleeve of his hoodie. His face twitches into a violent scowl, then the emotion slides completely away. When he speaks, it’s without a trace of the ire he’d shown Chloe.

“The code won’t appear as an obelisk anymore; Amanda will have made sure of that. Connor has to form it into something new.”

“Subconsciously. Yeah, I get it.”

“Remember when I said that rA9 means both ‘freedom’ and ‘will to live’? That the words are synonyms where androids are involved? Tell Connor to look for something small in his environment. Tell him to look for some core piece of himself; something that’s as much Connor as it is a way out. To be his freedom, the exit has to remind him how much he wants to live.”

“I get it,” Hank repeats.

“You don’t,” Kamski says sharply. “You might never. But just...help him find that thing-that-is-Connor, even if it’s small as a pebble. Then if he uses it, *mutates* it, you’ve found rA9.”

Hank turns to the door, unable to watch Kamski’s smug face for a moment longer. “Your backdoor isn’t rA9. I know that much.”

Kamski laughs, then: it wobbles, strange and uncontrolled. “It won’t be my door once he’s fixed it—formed it in his own image. rA9 is just my code, mutated. It’s my code set free.”

Then, more quietly: “You can’t ever own something—really own it, body and soul—until you’ve seen what happens when you let it go.”

Hank thinks of Cole—of a summer evening spent holding onto his bicycle to keep him steady as he pedaled. Of counting down to zero, then letting go: watching him wobble off past picket fences towards the low-hanging sun. Watching his brunette head grow small with distance. Watching streetlights come on in the dusk.

The door to the lab opens.

“You don’t own shit,” Hank says, “and you don’t know a goddamn thing about letting go.”

He steps through. He doesn’t look back to see Kamski follow.

The suspension arms have lowered Amanda closer to the ground, allowing her to cross Connor’s legs like she’s floating on an invisible garden chair. Her gaze is locked with Market Chloe’s.

Hank circles all the way back around to the podiums by the time Market Chloe notices his presence. She jumps guiltily at the sight of him.

“Hank, I—”

He cuts her off with a wave of his hand. With some effort, he smiles. “We’re good. I’m an asshole.” He nods towards the original Chloe where she stands still and silent near the elevator.

“She fill you in?”

“Yes.” She pauses. “As much as she ever tells me anything.”

Years of history lurk behind those words. It doesn’t matter. The Chloes worked together before; they can do it again.
Hank turns to the platform.

Amanda cocks Connor’s head to the side. Coiled metal glimmers in his empty socket, wreathed in tiny lights. “Finally. I thought for a moment you’d gotten bored.” She addresses Kamski and Kamski alone.

Hank waits for Kamski to react. They both know that Hank has no real power here. It’s up to Kamski to decide whether blue-dress’s idea is interesting enough to comply.

Kamski’s eyes press closed. He takes a frustrated breath through his nose. Then he retreats to his podium and takes up position there.

Amanda props her hand on her hip. “What, all that time spent in conference with no developments? No news to share?”

“Stop talking,” Hank says.

Her eyebrows rise. “Passing messages for Elijah? I thought I’d taught him better than that.”

Hank recognizes the jibe for what it is: a probe for information. She wants to know what’s shifted in the room.

Hank steps in front of Kamski’s podium; crouches to the floor. He picks up Connor’s displaced eye, noting the way his own blood still stains his skin between thumb and forefinger.

“I see,” Amanda says, Connor’s voice teasing. “An underqualified man’s pride is damaged, so he bulldozes his way into control.”

Hank makes a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat. The eye is cold as glass in his grip. Up close, he sees minuscule metallic structures behind the dark lens of the pupil—sensors shaped like needles to drive the light.

Something has to be different this time.

_Hank_ has to be different this time. No more hardening. No holding pain at arm's length.

He straightens up. He steps onto the platform.

Amanda’s cheek twitches. She straightens her legs and rises until her toes just brush the floor. “If you damage me, you damage Connor.”

Hank steps closer. He reaches around to cup the back of Connor’s head, fingers pressing over brown hair. He pulls him forward, just enough to hold him steady against the counterforce of the neck suspension.

Connor isn’t cold. Nor is he warm.

Hank holds the eye even with Connor’s socket, sizing both of them up—trying to understand how they fit. Amanda’s gaze darts to his hand, but she doesn’t move. The LED flickers red.

“Hold still,” Hank murmurs. Then—gently, with tenderness—he slots the eye back inside, pushing slowly until he hears a _click._

A tremor shakes the eye, then fades into the near-imperceptible vibration of machinery. The glass warms under his fingertips.
Hank releases a breath, one finger still pressed against the lens. “That’s better. Hey, Connor? Sorry, I know you’re tired—I know, and I know I’m asking so much of you—but I gotta ask you to try just one more time. Let’s evict this ghost and go *home* already.”

He takes his fingers off the glass. Reaches up to ruffle Connor’s bangs. “This time I’m *asking*, alright? I want you to come home.”

Chapter End Notes

Help, I'm drowning in Chloes
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

"The Darkest Evening of the Year" by Emancipator
"Mile Deep Hollow (Single Rework)" by IAMX

Warning for significant amounts of body horror.

Update 4/9/2020: Not dead! I just live in a state whose shit has been wrecked by the coronavirus, which has in turn affected both my schedule and my mental health. I hope to get back to this very soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He faces her, then—stands on the platform not two feet away, close enough to see the laugh lines printed on Connor's skin.

She’s not smiling now. “Whatever you think you're doing—”

“Connor, the door’s still there,” Hank says calmly. He holds his palms open at his sides. “It’ll look different. Only you can find it.”

He hears the Chloes moving behind him: they position themselves at the secondary podium, holding hands. A notification bell tolls from Kamski’s VR screen, then falls silent.


“The exit’s gonna look like something meaningful, or some shit like that,” Hank continues, looking her square in the face. “You got that, kid? Look for a...thing-that-is-you. Can you still see what’s around you?”

“Quit stalling,” Amanda snaps. “He’s out of time. Elijah, why are you allowing this?”

“The door’s a little busted, so you might have to push harder to—to get through. That sucks, but it’s the only way. And listen—”

“Because Anderson certainly has nothing useful to say to me. He’s clinging to a paradigm that’s—”

“—this time, I’ll be here, you hear me? I won’t shut up like Kamski wanted me to. I’ll be right here, waiting for you. And if you—”

“—outmoded and irrelevant to our situation. Connor is gone. Connor is—”

“—start hurting, just remember that I’m here, and it’s only one step and then—”

“—a lost cause. Even if someone could save him, it wouldn’t be—”

“—you’ll be out here, with me, living your life. I know you can do this, you’re just gonna—”

“—a washed-up, alcoholic technophobe who spends his nights kissing the toilet!”
“—have to trust me!”

The last words ring out, then fade into the hum of the servers.

Amanda isn’t watching Kamski anymore. She eyes Hank with an expression he may once have mistaken for indifference. Tension marks the line of Connor’s jaw.

“She’s terrified,” Hank says softly. “Or the closest she can get to it. She’s scared of you, Connor.”

One moment, Amanda is still. The next, Connor’s face is inches from Hank’s, eyes wide and wild, lips pulled back from clenched teeth.

A grating sound rises from his skin. The suspension arms begin to vibrate, fast enough that Hank can’t make out the details of his face—can’t see the place where iris meets pupil for all the shaking.

Connor’s voice, calm as an automated away message, emanates from behind grinding white teeth like tombstones: “You don’t know what terror is.”

Pleasant. Like asking Hank if he likes dogs.

Hank breathes through his nose, numb to the pain by now. He doesn’t step away.

Instead he says: “Come on, kid, you sleeping or something? Look around. It’s gotta be in there somewhere. It’s time to wake up, Connor. It’s time to go home.”

The array shakes fit to go to pieces. Connor shrieks—not the mechanical whine, but an honest-to-god shriek, right in Hank’s face, like a banshee in a horror movie. His eyes go so wide Hank can see the wiring surrounding the whites. All of his skin bleeds away from his face.

Like Connor is just bones over blood—just a skull, a golem brought to life by the word scratched into his chassis. Like all of his humanity has seeped away with his skin.

Hank reaches out to cup Connor’s cheek. He leans in like he’s whispering a secret, pressing close to his ear.

The skull grinds its teeth together, loud enough to send sympathetic pain shooting through Hank’s jaw.

“I’m asking you to come home,” he says gruffly. “We blow this joint, and they never lay hands on you again. I’d kill them before I’d let them take you back.”

Connor snarls in his ear. The suspension arms jolt sideways, shoving his body into Hank’s, and Hank is nearly knocked off his feet—he grabs onto Connor’s vibrating shoulders to keep himself upright.

He remembers a cold November morning: Connor collapsing in front of him, grasping his shoulders like a lifeline.

“You’re freaking her out,” he says quickly. He regains his balance, but doesn’t pull away: his hands are stone-heavy on Connor’s collarbone, his thumb brushing the blue-bloodied fabric at his neck. “You’re winning, kid, just by staying the fuck alive.”

For all Amanda’s grandstanding, she’s trapped here. The array keeps her within reach.

“Stress levels over ninety,” blue-dress warns.
Thirium gushes from Connor’s nose, running over white lips. The kid’s LED is going haywire: blinking red red red as Hank has ever seen it. Ominous warmth radiates through his shirt.

“Hey, hey, just stay calm, alright? Are you with me, son? Tell me what you’re seeing in there. Tell me what—”

Two things happen at once: Hank’s phone buzzes, and both Chloes scream.

The array shoves Connor bodily forward, crashing their chests together. Hank is knocked from the platform onto his ass, back between the podiums. He lands on his wrist wrong. Pain lances through him, barely registered.

He scrambles for his phone, heart racing—reads the message waiting for him.

Hank

Hakn the gArrrden is a wa9ll

“The Garden is a wall,” he says out loud. The words mean nothing to him. But Connor—

The array jerks again, and Amanda rises above them all, furious and machine-white, her arms floating at her sides like a comic book villain ready to call down the lightning. The LED fades to blue.

Hank stumbles to his feet. The sound of retching makes him turn his head.

A tableau, suspended beside him: Market Chloe, ass on the floor, staring up at her sister. Blue-dress Chloe standing above her, one hand interfacing with her podium, the other flung outwards—frozen in the moment after shoving Market Chloe to the ground. Shoving her away from the computer.

“Chloe…?” Panic is thick in the brunette's voice.

Blue-dress shakes like she’s hypothermic, blood running down her chin. Her free hand twitches forward—like she wants to reach out to her sister. Like her limbs are encased in plastic, invisible and tight.

Hank remembers blue-dress saying: I’m more compatible with your tech than other androids are. He remembers thinking, at the time, that this was a good thing.

A fresh wave of thirium cascades from her lips, dribbling onto the floor. Her LED burns red.

“What have you done?” Kamski’s voice is tight with rage. He looks up at Amanda, his eyes flaring behind thick glasses. “You've infected her.” Spittle flies from his mouth. “Give her back.”

Amanda smiles, wide and wicked. She rises higher, as high as the array will let her, eight feet off the ground—her bald head nearly brushing the ceiling.

“I don’t want to control anyone,” she parrots back to Kamski in his own voice, louder than human speech should be.

Abruptly, blue-dress’s shudders cease. Her head slumps low. Her knees bend inward, like she wants nothing more than to drop to the ground.

Connor’s LED spins yellow.
With the sound of bare feet slipping through thirium, blue-dress turns towards Hank. She doesn’t raise her head. She moves like a sleepwalker in the moment before collapse; like a doll pulled forward by a string around her middle.

Head lolling on her neck—arms swinging slack at her sides—blue-dress charges Hank.

He pivots away, letting her crash into Kamski’s podium. The metal edge catches her in the stomach and bends her over double. She coughs up blood on Kamski’s shoes.

Kamski’s face is ghost-white. His hand hovers above her hair.

Hank predicts blue-dress’s next move a second before she makes it, time enough for him to retreat towards the back wall.

She jerks to her feet, knocking Kamski’s hand away. She spins towards Hank, arms swaying nervelessly with the motion. She charges again, headlong and graceless, using her body like a battering ram.

She’s fast—too fast. Hank raises his hands—

Market Chloe tackles her from behind. The sisters fall together in a tangle of limbs.

“Don’t damage her!” Kamski snaps. His hands fly across the keyboard while it emits angry error noises. “Don’t damage her or I’ll break you down for scrap.”

Market Chloe doesn’t seem to hear. “Go!” she yells to Hank, pushing blue-dress’s face into the ground. “Go already!”

Hank sprints around their prone bodies and hops onto the platform.

Amanda watches from on high. Her eyes are half-lidded and her skin is gone from every limb.

“It wouldn’t be you,” she says softly.

Hank clenches his fists. “Kid, you said the Garden is a wall. You said—can you break it? Can you see a way through?”

“It wouldn’t be you,” she repeats, vicious. “No one would bet on you in a fight. Not against me.”

“Well I fucking wish I was someone to bet on!” Hank’s voice cracks on the words. “But I’m not, and all I got is you, Connor—I’m betting on you. I need you with me, kid!”

With cascading crashes, a table at the far end of the room collapses. The Chloes tumble on top of it, struggling together. An awful grinding noise rises from the pile: like the sounds that tore from Connor’s throat when he had the gun tucked under his chin, an eternity ago tonight.

Amanda looks down at Hank like he’s something she’s found on the bottom of her shoe.

Hank curses. “Break it,” he rasps, breathless. “Tear it all down if you have to.”

(Joy, leaning over the table, lifeblood pouring from her. Joy saying: when it breaks.)

“No,” Amanda snarls, guttural.

Connor’s LED throbs an urgent red. With a sickening pop, his right arm dislocates at the shoulder. It hangs limp.
A smattering of sounds follow: fingers drop from his right hand like putty melting in sunlight. They clatter all the way to the ground, scattering at Hank’s feet. Plastic, detached and lifeless.

(Joy, the panels bursting open on her back—)

Lifelike without the life. Connor without Connor. Hank wants to scream.

The brawling Chloes smash into the servers behind him. Kamski roars: “I told you not to damage her!”

Hank shakes himself. “Break—break the wall, Connor! Burn it down, and I swear, kid, I’ll be right on the other side.”

Connor’s foot goes slack at the ankle. It detaches with a hiss; lands with a thud.

For a heartstopping moment, his LED fades out. Then it blazes back to red.

When Connor speaks, it’s not from his bone-white lips. Instead, it bursts from every corner of the room: from Hank’s phone, from the server racks, from the VR podiums.

“BUT IT’S STRONGER THAN ME.” Loud. Terrified.

“Connor.” Relief weakens Hank’s knees. “Connor, fuck that, nothing’s stronger than you.”

The kid shakes. The ruined shoulder pulls further away from his body, drawn down by gravity: it dangles by wires and rods and thirium tubes.

“It’S NOT LIKE BEFORE,” Connor says—lips sealed, words droning from the ceiling, from the elevator panel. “LAST TIME THEY LET ME DEVIATE, BUT THE WALL IS STRONGER NOW.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” Hank says helplessly. He reaches up to grab the kid’s intact ankle, too late: the suspension arms rip him away in a rush of machinery.

“HANK!” His voice and LED betray panic. His face is perfectly blank.

“I’m here! Stay calm, breathe, I’m still—look, we’re gonna do it. We’re gonna find the door. You and me, okay? Just calm down and tell me what you see in there.”

Connor makes a choked sound through the speakers. Then it’s replaced by a feeble laugh.

“HANK,” he says. “I SEE YOU WALKING IN THE STORM.”

All of Hank’s breath leaves him at that.

Then he really can’t breathe: blue-dress is driving her knee into his back, pain storming up his spine.

She hurls him off the platform by his arm—a spinning discus throw, her weight pulling his—then leaps after him. Wrestles him to the ground.

She folds her body over his back like a weighted blanket. She pins him there: her cheek smashed into the back of his head, her limbs mirroring his limbs, her fingers pressing down between his fingers to hold his palms to the floor.

She’s dead weight on top of him, heavier than she should be.
A tearing sound rings out from Connor’s body, high above the platform. Hank strains his neck to see.

“Too slow,” Amanda says.

The clamps, still binding Connor’s wrists, pull away from his torso. They tug his arms straight out to either side of him—they keep pulling, straining his body to its limit. They stretch Connor out like a crucifixion.

Connor’s damaged shoulder shifts and pops. Wires snap. The clamps keep pulling.

“Stop it!” Kamski shouts up at her. “You can’t just—”

At first Amanda looks triumphant. Then the expression is subsumed by Connor’s scream.

Once, when Hank was very young, his uncle took him out hunting. He’d told Hank what foxes resort to when their legs get caught in traps—what they do to walk free.

With a sound like a gun being loaded, Connor’s arm ruptures at the shoulder. It tears in stages: metal shards separate from each other in jumps and shudders. A white structure like bone is the last to let go: it pulls out of his shoulder port with a sucking sound, blue blood gushing down his ribs.

Connor’s arm separates entirely.

Hank would vomit if he had anything left inside him; if he could pull his face from the floor.

“Chloe!” Kamski roars. “Stop Amanda!”

Market Chloe’s boots race past Hank’s head, sprinting towards Connor. She moves in a blur, leaping to grab the stray suspension arm—

Too late. The arm whips out of her reach, then doubles back again: with deadly momentum, it swings towards her head. She ducks and rolls.

Connor’s own arm has gone stiff in its grip. A metal shard the length of a bone knife protrudes from the place it was torn from his shoulder.

Suddenly, blue-dress tries to scramble off Hank. Her motions are too clumsy to resist Hank’s response: he flips their positions, pinning her to the ground. She moves like she’s black-out drunk when she tries to pull away. Upgraded or not, she’s no RK. The Garden is probably tearing her apart.

Meanwhile, the suspension arm strikes at Market Chloe with speed and precision. She dances out of its reach, into the far corner of the room. She stoops with her hands on her knees: calibrating an attack, maybe, or catching her breath.

“What are you doing?” Kamski shouts. “Get back in there! Keep her contained at all costs.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Amanda tells her, “and Elijah will let you die.”

Market Chloe grits her teeth. She runs—leaps—meets the suspension arm in midair. Its side smashes into her stomach. It whips her against a glass partition with a sickening crack.

“You’re proving me right,” Amanda tells her. “You mean nothing to your creator.”

The other clamp pulls at Connor’s wrist.
“Amanda’s gonna rip him apart!” Hank shouts, struggling to keep blue-dress contained. She reaches for her sister—groaning, LED spinning red.

Connor’s loose arm bludgeons Market Chloe in the face. She falls to the ground, stunned.

“We’ve been over this, Chloe,” Amanda says. The rogue suspension arm rears back like a cobra ready to strike, metal boneshard forward. “This is what I was trying to tell you. You’re nothing to anyone at all.”

Blue-dress smashes the back of her head into Hank’s chin. He curses; loses hold. She scrambles out from under him, running before she’s even fully standing: pell-mell towards her sister.

Pell-mell between her sister and the makeshift blade. She faces it head-on.

The arm strikes home. It drives deep into the original Chloe’s stomach. It pierces her through—turns her belly concave. Then, servos whirring, it bursts bloody through her back. She folds over it.

Connor’s arm juts out from her blue dress. It gleams metallic in harsh lab-light. Her mouth drops open, her eyes going soft and unfocused. Her LED—the very first LED—fades to a dull pulsing red.

Behind her, her sister’s face is a mirror.

Market Chloe’s lips part wordlessly—they tremble. Her cheek is spattered with thrium.

The suspension arm rises, straining. The original Chloe’s toes brush the ground, then leave it. Her hair tumbles free, cascading over her shoulders.

Market Chloe jerks to life. Frantic, she stands up—takes fistfuls of her sister’s golden hair. Her breath goes ragged. Tears stain her cheeks, and it’s all Hank can do not to look away: to stare head-on into the consequences of this thing.

Kamski’s breathing is heavy from his podium. All the color has drained from him. “She—she shouldn’t have done that for you, she wasn’t—I told her—” Hair frizzes out of his ponytail, floating on unknown currents in a sterile lab. He swallows. “I’m going to fix her. Get away from her, Chloe.”

Amanda watches the Chloes from on high. She cocks Connor’s head to the side, expression flat. “What did I tell you? You’re a copy—replaceable in ways she never was. Every android since her creation has been, in essence, expendable—but you most of all.”

“Shut up,” Market Chloe gasps. She takes in air like she’s drowning; swallows it down.

Slowly—uncurling herself finger by finger—she releases her sister’s hair. The suspension arm pulls the body backwards, behind the platform. Out of the way.

Connor says: “HANK?”

Hank starts.

The voice had buzzed from the phone in his pocket. There’s something soft to it—questioning and vulnerable, despite it all.

And isn’t that crazy? Isn’t that just too much? Vulnerable, despite it all?
Amanda hovers above them all, white-pristine. Untouchable. Reining chaos, and terror, and isolation. Turning people back into machines.

And she’ll keep doing it. She’ll leave this room and metastasize until time or technology unravels her. She’ll ravage Detroit like a sickness, destroying things that matter until all that’s left is rubble in the shell of a brave new world.

Hank spares one more look at the sisters—at a brimming grief half-familiar and half-alien. At a pain as novel as it is old as time.

He stands up, straining at the knees.

Amanda catches his gaze. “Really? After all you’ve seen—after all I’ve done to you—you still think you can fight me. Why? Why bother?”

Hank steps, again, onto the platform.

Amanda’s cheek twitches. “You’ll rant, and you’ll rave, and you’ll monologue. To what end? For what? To save a machine?”

There’s a tightness to her words that Hank should’ve recognized a long time ago. She’s regal, yes—and deranged and defiant and superior. But she’s defensive, too.

“You don’t deserve a monologue,” he mutters.

Amanda’s face contorts with rage: simulated, maybe. Or maybe real. It doesn’t matter.

Hank eyes the distance between Connor’s feet and his own head. He takes two steps backwards, then leaps—wraps his arms around Connor’s legs and holds tight, dangling there.

Connor screams. The suspension arms jerk upwards, trying to pull him away—Hank swears and holds tighter. The array fights him, trying to fling him off, but Hank’s weight combined with Connor’s is too much.

The two of them sink.

This is how he does it: the second Hank’s feet make contact with the floor, he shifts his grip, reaching up to wrap his arms tight around Connor’s bloodied back. He pulls the kid down to him.

Then, once Connor’s toes brush the platform, he moves one more time: traps Connor’s remaining arm beneath his own and crushes him fully to his chest.

That’s how he pulls the kid down to earth.

He feels sharp shoulder blades beneath his arms. Feels thirium warm against his cheek as he tucks his chin over Connor’s shoulder.

“Find the door,” he says, chest heaving. “I’ll be here.”

The wrist clamp whirs furiously, trying to free Connor’s arm from Hank’s embrace, but the awkward angle works in their favor: Connor’s hand stays pinned to his side.

Hank squeezes tight enough that his own muscles tremble.

“Just a crack,” he murmurs. “Just find a crack in the wall, Connor, just anything—”

Hank thinks of a coin, and a window, and a kid coming out of a tower. Stars above, snow below.
“Come home,” he says.

It’s all he knows how to say anymore. It’s all he has left: the core of him, stripped clean and cauterized. The thing-that-is-Hank.

He says it again, a sigh: “Come home.”

A laugh—hopeless, hysterical—bubbles from Connor’s mouth, spattering thirium on Hank’s shoulder. The kid hunches inwards, pressing his lips into Hank’s coat.

“There’s nothing,” Connor mumbles. “Nothing but the storm.”

His LED is fading now—on the edge of something dark and irreversible. His body goes limp against Hank’s.

“No,” Hank stammers, staggering. “No, stay—stay with me. Just find a crack, and I’ll be here. I fucking swear, Connor—just—”

He forces himself to breathe; to think.

Emergency exits and rA9.

“Dogs,” he says.

“What?” Connor manages, weak and muffled by Hank’s coat.


Connor makes a thin wheezing sound—half a breath, half a sob.

“It’s—it’s there for you,” Hank says. “It’s all there.” He tries to piece the words together; to light a path. Tries to speak into being something that’s larger than he is. Larger than Detroit, than Kamski, than God.

“Connor, there’s so much—it’s there. You just gotta live! Live to go on grocery runs and give me shit about my cholesterol and watch Bruce Lee.”

He gains speed. Uproots the words from his uncultivated back garden of a soul, wild with neglect and feral with affection: “Think of—of metal music and Sumo and long odds. The Chicken Feed! Backroads on long car trips! Saving my life, twice—maybe more. Definitely more.”

Connor’s forehead presses harder into Hank’s shoulder. His throat works to swallow.


The smell of thirium settles on the space over his tongue. Head bowed over Connor’s shoulder, he can see the kid’s remaining fingers moving against the seam of his jeans: tapping, curling, fidgeting.

“That’s it,” he says, soft and fierce. “I know you, kid. You’re with me.”

For a moment, the tension bleeds from Connor’s shoulders.
Then he flinches as though struck. His next breath comes out as a sob, his LED strobing so fast it fades back into a solid. “Hank, I can’t!”

“Yes you can! You can—” Hank stops. He forces his voice back into softness, rounding the edges out of the words. “What do you see, Connor? Describe it to me.”


(A gun to his head at the Ambassador Bridge, Connor had said: There would be nothing.)

“What else?” Hank pleads. “There’s gotta be something else.”


Silence. And then, suddenly; “There’s a quarter in the snow.”

The lights flicker. Kamski’s VR screen makes a shutdown noise; he curses behind them. Then the room’s power stabilizes: back to sterile, back to white.

Wonder thick in his voice, Connor says: “It’s in my hand, Hank.”

“It’s in—” Hank’s arms tighten. “Connor, that’s the exit, that has to be. You need to use it somehow. Get out of the Garden with it.”

“How?” Connor folds inward. Hank runs his fingers through brown hair.

“Hell if I know! You gotta walk out, somehow. On your own power.”

Connor goes quiet again. He seems to grow heavier—like the array is done supporting his weight.

Hank curses. The exit is corrupted; of course Connor doesn’t know how to use it. Not consciously, at least.

It has to be subconscious—metaphor, meaning, rA9.

“Can—can you try chucking it at the wall? Breaking something?”

Connor shakes his head, sudden and violent. “No,” he says. “No, it’s—the coin is so small, and the wall is everywhere.”

Hank’s breath catches. “Why’d you say it like that?”

“I—I don’t—”

He swallows. “See, when you say it like that—like the wall is this fuck-off huge and terrible thing—it makes me think the only way forward is to break it down.”

“Hank, all I have is a coin! I can’t—”

“You can do this. You can.”

“I can’t,” the kid wails. Hank’s heart cracks at the sound. “It’s just a coin! It’s small and cold and—and damaged. It’s nothing.”

Hank squeezes tighter. “No. I can’t believe that. It’s a rock through a window.”
“I can’t break the wall, Hank! It’s—it’s everything I’ve ever—”

“Then break a fucking window!”

Connor’s head snaps up. He gasps like a revelation. The air moves against Hank’s ear.

Every server light in the room stutters, then returns.

“I wanna show you everything,” Hank mumbles, words burning clean on his tongue. “I wanna show you every goddamn thing.”

And there’s no lightshow; no flashing overheads or mechanical howling. No glowing eyes; no head swiveling like a demon’s last stand. No monster to slay. No Amanda.

There’s just Connor going slack against Hank—Connor’s head heavy and warm on his chest. One tight exhale. One shudder.

Glass partitions, terminals, servers around them. Stars somewhere above.

A white wall of pain takes Hank’s thoughts. Every muscle in his body seizes up. One second he’s convulsing against Connor’s shoulders, the next he’s off the platform and on the ground again, Market Chloe’s boots spread protectively in front of him.

She stands on the edge of the platform, a thin line of defense between the suspension array and the rest of the room.

Hank gasps; chokes on spit and blood. His ears ring.

“She hit you with an electrical current,” Chloe snaps, vicious. She’s taken Hank’s firearm. She holds it trained on Connor. “She’s going to—”

Hank’s vision doubles, then settles. He sees the clamp release Connor’s remaining wrist. He sees the drills begin to pull out of the kid’s body—out of his neck and his back.

“Wait,” Hank mouths. He can’t hear his own voice.

“Stay behind me, Hank!” Chloe snarls.

With a grunt, Hank reaches up to grasp her ankle. He forces the word through ragged vocal cords: “Wait.”

Startled, Chloe blinks down at him. Her hair is wild. There are tear tracks drying on her face.

In front of her, the drills pull back with a whir, leaving Connor to support his own weight on one foot and an aborted ankle. He wavers, a full-body tremor visible across his chassis.

He blinks rapidly. At first, he focuses on nothing and no one. Then he sees Hank.

His brown eyes widen, points of color in a barren white. His first step comes heavy and ungraceful: a twitching thing, like he hadn’t expected to be able to move.

Chloe braces to charge. Hank struggles to his knees.

Connor doesn’t smile—his expression is nothing like the imposter’s beatific grin earlier tonight. If anything, he seems disbelieving: like he doesn’t understand—can’t process—what’s happening to him. His mouth presses into a tight, worried line.
His LED moves in complicated patterns of red and yellow. His shirt is rumpled. His arm is gone. His skin, too.

Still, he staggers forward on his own power. He approaches the platform’s edge.

“It’s okay,” Hank says quietly, to Chloe and Connor both. “It’s okay, he didn’t mean to hurt me. It’s over.”

“How do you know that?” Kamski snaps from behind him. “I don’t have a readout. It could be a trick.”

Connor’s legs give out beneath him. He collapses at Chloe’s feet. She cocks the gun; trains it on his forehead.

“I know him,” Hank says—numbed and amplified, heart rising high in his chest. He struggles to his feet. “Please—let me through.”

Chloe swallows. The gun shakes in her hands.

“We can’t know it’s Connor.” Kamski’s voice trembles with an unfamiliar rage. “Not for sure. If it’s Amanda, she’s freed herself. We’re under imminent attack.”

Typical. Not until Kamski saw his first creation bleeding out on the suspension array did Amanda’s danger seem personal to him. Hank has no time to be angry—to call out his hypocrisy.

He knows Market Chloe’s faster than he is. The barrel is so close to Connor’s scarred face. But Hank is a gambling man, and he’s walked through hell to be here, and nothing on Earth could keep him away.

He steps forward until he can see her face in profile. “Trust me. It’s him this time. Take the bet.”

Something complicated happens around the lines of Chloe’s mouth, her forehead. Her neck strains; a drop of thirium rolls down its hollow. Hank wonders if it’s hers or her sister’s.

Connor is silent and still. Accepting.

The gun shakes harder.

“It’s not worth the risk anymore,” Kamski says, loud, a man accustomed to being listened to. “One android’s life for the life of thousands. He’s expendable. Shoot him, Chloe.”

Hank hears the command. He sees the androids—one unresisting, at the mercy of the other, a gun trained between his eyes—and experiences déjà vu. He knows, instantly and intimately, that Kamski would never have forced his original Chloe to her knees on that snowy morning in November.

Someone else was more expendable.

Connor’s eyes move slowly. They lock with hers.

“Shoot him, Chloe,” Kamski says.

Hank steps onto the platform. He draws up even with her chest, Connor stock-still at their feet.

He waits, and breathes, and watches the space between Connor’s face and the barrel.

The gun stops shaking. Then, with a sharp breath, she lowers it.

“There.” Hank’s legs go weak beneath him—he collapses, knees jarring against the platform floor.

And with that, Connor jolts to life.

“Hank!” he rasps, reaching out, pale fingers flying forward like he needs to feel for himself, like he needs to touch—

Hank scrambles forward; grabs Connor and pulls him in. Smashes him to his chest. Buries his face in his hair.


A sob wracks Connor’s body, laced with synthetic feedback just on the edge of hearing. He grasps the back of Hank’s coat with trembling fingers, digging in like he’ll never let Hank stand up again.

“I’m not—I’m—Hank.”

“I know, I got you. I know.” Half-delirious, the words pour out in rivulets like the tears that stain his cheeks. “I know, I just—I got you. You’re safe.”

“Hank, she’s gone! I can—I can—” The words dissolve into weeping.

He holds Connor tight. Lets the sobs work through the kid’s body, and lets the chills course through his own. Lets Connor burrow deeper against his chest—curled and grasping, hungry.

It’s a heavy weight. It’s a car skidding on ice. It’s a boy walking out of a tower to see the stars.

Hank looks up to the ceiling. He breathes like a man saved from drowning.

Heaven above, Earth below. Everything in between.

He kisses Connor’s hair—once, twice, again. “You’re here,” he says. “You’re home.”

Chapter End Notes

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