Life with Marie

by The_Whistler

Summary

The Spine tries to live the life of a human, with his own family.

Follow-up to "What Is Life and What Is Real." A series that's going to have huge piles of feels and fluff.

Just for the record, totally fan made AU.

Notes

I wanted to write a series of little stories about The Spine experiencing something like the human man's life that he craves, through a marriage to a human woman who is determined
that his being a robot is not going to stop them from being happy. Everyone has problems.

Very much my own head-canon... very little connection with the band's canon. It does explore possible scenarios for some of the events in their timeline, and Rabbit's brief (15 years is brief for a robot) relationship with Honeybee.

BIG FAT DISCLAIMER: I've wrestled for a long time with whether I should just remove this fic entirely.

I got carried away and went in directions I never meant to go. It got way too personal for the characters and questioned things I consider sacred, and many times I'm writing false lives for real people. It's problematic as can be. I will continue cleaning up some of the steamier scenes in hopes I can feel more easy about it being posted here.

So for the record, there's a lot my characters do that I'd never approve for real people. For example, Peter V sleeps with a lot of women and I personally believe in keeping that within marriage.

And Bunny transitions by explosion and I want very much to make it clear that I don't consider it the same as real life transition. I don't consider that to be as black and white as others do. I believe the feelings are sincere but I don't think it's a good idea to just start altering your body to match. I just don't think you should have to be a certain way in order to fit what society sees as masculine or feminine. And I worry that too many confused kids think they're trans when they're not because they hear about people transitioning and because they are told too much what female and male should look, act, and sound like, and they don't fit the types. So I wanted to make it clear that just because you're not the most masculine male or feminine female, it doesn't follow that you're something else.

Does that mean I hate people who do it, that I persecute them for it? Absolutely not. Because that goes as much against my Christian faith as anything I've mentioned, and don't let anyone tell you they're Christian if they believe in harming or mistreating people with other value systems. Some people will tell you that if you don't whole-heartedly support and agree with a viewpoint, that you're a hater, and that you're lying if you say you still love someone who embraces it.

Bullcrap. It's great to feel people support you in a choice but if we had to agree 100% with the choices of a person in order to love them, the world would flat out suck. You can love someone and agree with none of their choices. The human race is amazing that way. Have you never cared about someone and worried because of some of the things they're doing? Yeah.

And I love these mooks whatever they do. And yeah, they do things in opposition to my beliefs. A lot, tbh. That's free will and I believe in that above all. And I still wish them well and hope they're doing okay and enjoy the content they create.

Because humans can do that.
Alone at Last...

Chapter Summary

The Spine and Marie have gone and gotten married... but there are some compatibility issues...

Chapter Notes

FEELS WARNING!!! Well, after this chapter, this one's a little... well...

NOT a porno or really even close to it. It's as mushy as heck, though. If you don't want to go there at all, skip this chapter... it's the only one rated teen. It's just cute family stuff after that... for the most part.

I figured that question was still going to hang in the air, whether I wanted to talk about it or not, through every story... did they or did they not have a sex life? How could they? After all... well... robot. But it's a pretty danged important part of a marriage and as I said, Marie is a very determined woman, and she's got the advantage... not every husband has instructions.

Mostly I just didn't have the heart to have The Spine make the sacrifice he did in the previous story, and end up missing out on... on... stuff he could have had otherwise. Yeah. Poor guy ought to be rewarded for a choice like that.

Edit: Okay, I do actually go there a bit more later on... and then some more stuff with Rabbit... and there's a cyborg produced at one point, and an AI... that gets complicated. War, drugs and death... It's just not for kids, okay? But the one constant is feels. I like putting robots into human situations... and they seem to cry an awful lot...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Petrified, glued to the easy chair where her new husband had set her after he carried her into the honeymoon suite, Marie found her thoughts wandering. She appreciated the distraction.

She’d once told David Walter that her mother hadn’t raised her to be “that kind of girl.” The fact was, her mother hadn’t had the chance to raise her at all. She’d been raised by her sister Louise, ten years her senior, after their father died. And for a brief time, when she was away from her sister’s guidance, Marie had been that kind of girl.

She’d gone to college to become a schoolteacher. There was a war on, and she met her share of soldiers on their way to be part of it. But it was one flyer, a boy named Will, that made her heart throb. She had been in love, and had seen no reason to hold anything back. They were going to be together forever.

And then he was sent to war, and she found out she was pregnant.
She sent him a letter and he sent one back, and they were engaged. He asked for leave to come back and marry her, but it was delayed. Meanwhile, Marie vomited. Every day for two months. But she remembered it was normal to feel sick, and was happy, even as the rumors began because of it.

And then, all of a sudden, the morning sickness stopped. She was delighted… until she found out why.

She spent a week in the hospital, infected because of the miscarriage. She was told there was damage from the infection, and that it would be dangerous to have children of her own after that. Crushed, she’d sent a letter to Will, offering to let him back out of their engagement. She never got his answer. Hard on the heels of the death of his child, the flier was shot down over Midway.

Marie kept on. She’d loved him, she’d wanted the baby. She could have given up and died. But she and her sister were all that was left of their family. She had to live for someone. She would live for Louise, for now.

She’d waded through the continuing rumors, earned her degree, and taken a job as far north as she could afford. It wasn’t far, but she found a small town when no one knew of her past. She had a little house, acquaintances, even suitors, though they all went away rejected. She was in no hurry to get wrapped up in a romance again.

And then, one day, she’d had a craving for a crawfish boil, and saw David Walter fast asleep inside of a hot car. It took one look to bring to life feelings she had thought were dead. She realized it had happen when he smiled. She knew she had to see him again when he kissed her hand.

And then he was gone.

Her sister had said she was crazy when she insisted on visiting him during her trip to Los Angeles. Marie wondered whether she was. But she had learned her lesson the first time; she would not make the same mistakes.

Now, as she sat in the honeymoon suite of a very nice hotel in Los Angeles, she wondered whether she’d found a fresh set of mistakes and made them instead.

For the first time since she’d kissed David in the sultry glow of a summer sunset, she had doubts. It had seemed so clear then. That kiss, that moment, had made her feel as if all the pieces of her life had come together, that he possessed all that had been missing from her soul. Even Will hadn’t made her feel like that.

But Will had been human. David… The Spine… wasn’t.

She didn’t hold it against him, of course… she’d learned who he was inside before she’d learned he was a mechanical man. Well, mostly. At the time, due to his brother’s power core being stolen and tampered with, he had been turned into a human. Yet he had put the core back, saved his brother’s life. It had meant losing his humanity, and he’d thought that it meant he would lose her, too. He’d showed her the kind of man he was. She had stayed and not looked back, until now.

It hadn’t been bad, by any means, this past year. His brothers were darlings, as was his human family. They were the ones who had made it possible for them to get married, making arrangements and calling in favors until The Spine had a fake citizenship status as David Walter, and a marriage license ready to be signed.

Until then, with all the turmoil in the home, she’d been able to help, which made her happy. She’d also been able to be around The Spine every day, which made her happier. He was metal, but gentle
and vulnerable, afraid he’d hurt her every time he held her in his arms. Sometimes she thought it would be worth it to see him show his feelings.

Of course, in Walter Manor, there were other people around, robots with excellent hearing, a thousand distractions. There was only so much affection he’d show around others, at least, now. When he was human, he’d had far less control. She missed that part of his humanity. It had been endearing. But she was grateful at least to have seen it. She knew how he felt about her.

And even if she didn’t, this was the perfect opportunity to get a reminder. She blushed and rubbed her hands nervously.

The water had stopped running in the bathroom, where The Spine had gone to clean off his travel makeup. His hat, jacket, vest and tie lay on the bed. There was a breathless silence. Then the water came on again.

She realized she’d been holding her breath and inhaled quickly.

So many people had been worried about their honeymoon. The two of them had quickly dismissed all concerns, but the fact was, they just didn’t want to discuss it with other people. Neither of them had the slightest idea how a robot man and a human woman… honeymooned.

Well, that wasn’t exactly right. Marie had found out some surprising things and had some ideas, but she didn’t know whether he’d be willing to try them. Her face felt like it was on fire just thinking about it.

What was The Spine thinking now? What did a robot consider an intimate moment? They’d been dancing, that was nice. But they wouldn’t be doing that tonight…

The water stopped again. The door opened. His hair and makeup were off, his shirt unbuttoned and damp at the collar.

She stood as he approached, and embraced him.

“Are you hungry?” he murmured, gently putting his arms around her.

She shook her head. “I… I couldn’t eat a thing.”

She heard a strange sound, like a bubble rising in a water cooler.

“Sorry…” he said. “I’m a little… nervous…”

She giggled. “I was wondering what that sound was…”

“Mm-hm.”

It was a small, casual sound, but it made her feel warm all over. He always spoke so precisely with other people. Only with Marie did he allow himself to speak this way, sounding really human. He didn’t realize it, she knew, but his careful way of speaking to others only made him sound more like a robot.

“Marie… I’m sorry…”

“What ever for, love?”
“Tonight… this past year… everything.”

She wasn’t terribly surprised. “Why?” she asked.

“You should be here with a human being, not a machine… My father never… he was worried about other people accusing us of violent and inhuman behaviors. He said he’d considered making us fully human in shape…” His boiler hiccupped again. “There’s just no way to say this gracefully…” he moaned.

“No, there isn’t. Don’t say it.”

“It’s just that… I was once accused of it…”

She looked up. “Really? Of… what?”

“Rape.” He bit the word out. “They wanted him to turn me over to them to be dismantled. Some poor girl had seen our show and been attacked later… went out of her mind and said it was me.”

Marie was speechless.

“It was… humiliating. The only way to prove it wasn’t me was…” He stopped.

“No…”

“He showed them… well, he proved it wasn’t possible. I almost wish he had just let them shut me down instead,” he said bitterly. “After that, he was afraid to make us any more human, even if it meant… He thought he was making sure we would never be suspected again.

“The others didn’t care, but… This is… I don’t want to say any more about it.” He released her and turned away. “I should never have brought you here. I’ve been playing house, that’s all. It isn’t even a legal union…”

“David….”

“That’s not my name!” he cried sharply, turning toward her again. Oily tears streaked his face. “I’m not a man! Why did you stay with me, Marie?”

“That’s enough!” she cried, nerves frayed to breaking. “I didn’t stay because I thought you were a human! I certainly didn’t stay with you for sex! You know it very well so stop treating me like a fool!”

His eyes were wide. He looked down.

“Then why…” he whispered.

“You know why. Don’t you? I’ve gone out my way to tell you as often as I could.”

She slowly stepped forward and put her arms around him again. He didn’t return the embrace.

“What?” she asked, still clinging to him.

“I’m too upset… I… might hurt you…”

“As you like. I’ll hold you, at least.”

He raised one trembling hand and stroked her hair as carefully as he could manage. She could hear
his insides still burbling with his agitation, but she wasn’t letting go… not of his body or of him. Slowly, he grew calm and slipped his arms around her back.

“I love you, Spine. That’s why I’m here.”

“I know… I love you… that’s why I brought you.”

“Don’t forget it again. We’ll figure this out together. Got it? Everything, together.”

“Of course…” He sighed. “Marie?”

“Hm?”

“There is one thing I decided without you…”

“What? You ordered champagne?”

“Did you want that?”

She laughed tremulously. “No…”

“Good.”

He pushed her away gently and slipped out of his shirt, letting it slide smoothly down his arms to the floor. His gleaming silvery chassis was beautiful, sculpted into the shape of a man’s body, though tiny cracks of access panels could be seen across it, along with a pinpoint of blue in the center of his chest. Peter A Walter had outdone himself with his second robotic son.

He tapped the blue spot on his chest and a panel recessed and slid open. Inside was an ornate metal ring, the center of which glowed blinding blue. His power core, the thing that made him what he was, like a combination of brain and heart.

“It’s amazing,” she murmured.

“It’s all I have to give that you don’t already have of me. I wanted to show you what I am. If this is what you want, a metal man with a Blue Matter heart…”

“I thought I’d told you that already, Spine. You’re what I want. Do I need to write it down?”

He smiled. “Thank you…” He started to close the panel.

“Wait…” she said. “You’re not the only one who’s made some decisions alone. We’d better get it all out in the open now.”

She reached toward his chest cavity. He caught her wrist.

“Do you trust me, love?” she asked.

“I do…”

“Then let go.”

“I’m afraid! If you touch it…”

“I won’t. Please. I know what I’m doing.”

“How? What are you doing?”
She looked at him. He sighed and let go. Marie slipped one small hand into his chest. He held very still.

Where was it? She reached carefully around behind the blue matter chamber and found what she was looking for.

“Marie…” he whimpered. The sound cut her to the heart, but she didn’t dare rush this.

“Got it,” she said, and turned the first knob five steps to the left. She jerked her hand out as he sagged forward. He quickly straightened up, eyes wide with fear.

“What did you do?” he cried, grabbing her wrist as she reached one more for his chest opening. She gasped in surprise and he let go.

“I’m sorry!” he cried. “Are you alright?”

She smiled and held up her arm. He looked shocked.

“I grabbed you so hard… how are you not hurt?”

“Just one more adjustment, love.”

“You reduced my strength? How?”

“Yes, I did. And I’m not done. Ready?”

He stood still as she slid her little hand in once more. She found the second dial and turned it three steps to the right. Then she slid her fingers down his arm. He sighed.

“Well?” she asked.

“How did you do that?”

“How did I do what, exactly?”

He laughed softly. “It… almost tickled.”

“Not nearly enough,” she murmured and reached in, ruthlessly turning the knob four more steps. She stroked his arm again. He gasped sharply.

“That’s not possible!”

“Obviously it is,” she responded, grinning. She tried to close his chest panel, but he kept squirming away and giggling.

“Stop it! It… tickles…”

“You do it, then!” she laughed. Ticklish Spine was just about the most adorable thing she’d ever seen.

He carefully closed it and said, “Tell me! What on Earth did you do?”

“Well, we found your instruction manual, love. Rabbit and Wanda, anyway. They gave it to me.”

“I have one? What am I, a toaster?”
“I don’t know from toasters, but I figure I’m lucky. Every husband should come with a manual. Now let’s just see how well I followed your instructions…”

She put her arms around him and he gasped again. “Marie,” he choked. “It’s amazing. It feels just like… like when I was human.”

“I was hoping it would! I found out you have a set of controls behind your blue matter to decrease strength and increase sensory input. It was the last entry in the book.”

“I don’t understand…”

“You father must have put them in right before he died. There was a letter, addressed to you…’”

She found her purse and pulled out the letter, giving it to him. He held it for a moment, smiling as he rubbed the paper between now sensitive fingertips. Then he opened it and read it through.

“He… He did his best…” he whispered.

“Hm?”

“You were right. He did put them in not long before he died. He knew I’d want this someday. The letter is sort of an apology… for not being able to make me all I wanted to be.” He sighed. “Thank you, Colonel…” He smiled. “Pappy.” He closed the letter.

She took it and put it aside and wrapped her arms around him again. He giggled and held her, too softly at first. Remembering the strength adjustment, he squeezed her tighter.

“That’s not too tight, is it?” he asked uneasily.

“It’s perfect.” It did remind her of when he was human.

He sighed happily. “I’ve never gotten to hold you this tightly before. Well, not since last year. It’s wonderful…”

“You feel better now, sweet?”

“Better. But is it enough for you?”

She giggled nervously. “It’s a start. Let’s see…” She tipped her head up and kissed his neck. He giggled and shivered, and looked faintly embarrassed. She stroked his back, and he sighed happily.

“Ah. Yes,” she said, feeling rather tingly. “I do believe I can work with this.”

Back in Walter Manor, Wanda settled in for a long evening. The Jon and Rabbit had some of the “lesser robots” gathered for a movie with Pappy’s old film projector. Rabbit had suggested Pinocchio, and The Jon, completely missing Rabbit’s joke, had agreed. Rabbit set up the projector and snuggled on the loveseat next to Honeybee.

Wanda knew Rabbit was actually a bundle of copper nerves… all from worry about his brother. Rabbit had no first-hand experience with human women, of course, but he had served with soldiers in two world wars… he knew a thing or two about sex, if only through hearsay. He was the one who had insisted on finding The Spine’s manual… saying he hoped Pappy had anticipated The Spine’s interest in human women eventually bringing him to this ridiculous situation.
And it turned out he had. Wanda had been astonished, but relieved.

It wasn’t much… just a couple of last-minute adjustments, dials to bring him closer to humanity for a little while, too inconvenient to use all the time, put in a place that would not only shield them from tampering hands but would only be accessible to dainty human fingers… the hands of a woman. It struck Wanda as being strangely meaningful that only Marie could make the adjustments. It was a sort of robotic intimacy, and yet the sort of trust that a husband and wife should have.

She let the tears fall as they came, thinking back to her brief marriage to Guy. It had surprised her how much she had wanted the marriage of The Spine and Marie to come off after hers had ended. It made her feel as if life was going on as it should, that people still fell in love, and still had a chance at happiness. Spine had always been a strong presence in Walter Manor. Just having him around had made her feel safe. He often carried her to her room if she got too tired as a kid, singing to her with the beautiful voice his Pappy had given him, as he tucked her in. Yet there was always that melancholy as he went off to his room, alone.

Marie had that same air of strength, for all she was a small, frail human being. Wanda couldn’t have imagined a woman existed with such potential to give him the humanity he craved. Marie was special; she could handle this, she could make him happy.

Goodness knows he’d earned some happiness.

She looked over at Rabbit. He and Honeybee had gone into stasis, propped against one another, like the robots they were content to be. Just as well; Rabbit had kept checking the time and it was getting on her nerves. The lesser robots… not really lesser but simpler, and never called either where they could hear it… were clustered around The Jon like a group of kindergarteners, watching the movie.

Wanda dozed, smiling, in her easy chair.

The Spine felt sleepy. He couldn’t explain it, but he couldn’t explain anything that had gone on that evening… he only knew that Marie was more amazing than he had known, and that he had never dreamed it possible that he would have been able to experience what he had with her. But he had experienced it… and he was sleepy, and he loved it!

Marie, already asleep, lay beside him. He reached for her face, hesitated, remembered her careful adjustments, and allowed himself to lightly stroke her cheek. She smiled in her sleep. He sighed, put his hand over hers where it lay on the bed, and drifted into stasis.

Chapter End Notes

So there's your answer. Yes, they have overcome the obstacles and, with a little help from a kindly scientist Pappy, found their way. Dawww...

Now let us never speak of this again.
Father, Daddy, Dad, Papa, Pops...?

Chapter Summary

Marie had always wanted children... then life got complicated. The Spine hadn't really let himself think about it... and then life surprised him.

Chapter Notes

Enough feels to kill a herd of caribou. You have been warned.

"Can I h-h-hold him, Mary?"

Rabbit knew her name but for some reason always pronounced it, "Mary." Once she realized it wasn't intentional, she thought it was kind of cute.

"I don't know..." she replied. "His father hasn't even held him yet!"

The Spine held his hands up almost defensively. "That's alright. Go on, Rabbit."

Marie looked at him sidelong, one eyebrow raised. He nodded vigorously. She hid a smile and put the baby boy into Rabbit's arms while her sister hovered nearby.

Louise had taken to all of the robots, both as a mechanic and as a person, but she hadn't seen Rabbit hold a child before. What she didn't realize was that he had been holding babies since before she was born herself. Marie knew, and smiled at the gentle control Rabbit showed as he held the one-month-old infant. He didn't even need to rock; the child was lulled by his steady clockwork motor and looked calmly up at his gleaming photoreceptors.

But Rabbit rocked anyway, sometimes without meaning to do it. When the baby began to fuss, Rabbit did a smooth side-to-side jiggle and restored peace.

"Nevah thought I'd be an uncle," he sighed. "Not l-l-like this, anyhow!"


Rabbit stepped toward The Spine. "Here ya go, big guy!"

The Spine emitted a sharp puff of steam and backed away. He thumped into a chair and stopped short.

Rabbit chuckled. "What's the matter with you, little brother? Y-y-you've held babies before!"

"He's so tiny..." The Spine mumbled, eyes wide. "I never thought we'd get one this tiny..."
"Aw, love, you'll do fine..." Marie started, but Louise interrupted.

"Well, really!" She stood, hands on hips, and said sternly, "Spine! Of all people to turn out to have no backbone!"

Rabbit exploded with laughter and startled the baby. The Spine looked on in panic as Louise picked up the now sobbing child and advanced on him.

"You can strum a guitar, you can stop a tank, but you can't hold your own son?"

"Louise!" The Spine moaned. "Wait... I can't stop a tank..."

"He can if he gets c-c-caught in the treads," Rabbit commented. Marie shushed him.

"Well, never mind that. Sit!" she ordered. "Even a little child can hold a baby while sitting. Go on!"

The Spine sank, defeated, into the chair that had stopped him and meekly accepted the crying baby. He held the tiny, wailing infant as though he was made of finely carved crystal.

After a moment, the baby stopped crying. The soft chuffing sound of The Spine's boiler and the hum of his smoothly running parts and blue matter core were even more soothing than Rabbit's ticking clockwork. He stared up at The Spine's gleaming silver-tone face just as he had Rabbit's copper one, and slowly blinked his large eyes.

A plump little hand wrapped around The Spine's finger.

"Oh..." he breathed. Everything seemed to stop as he stared back at the child.

Marie wiped her eyes. So that was that! Even she hadn't fallen in love that fast, with either of them!

The Spine was staring down at his new son, the child they had been assured they would never be allowed to adopt six months ago, with a look of amazement. The baby seemed to mimic his expression. The Spine's face broke into a little smile. A moment later, the baby's face twitched for just a second into a little smile, before being replaced with a yawn.

"There ya go, brother," Rabbit said softly, sitting carefully on the arm of the chair. "I knew you could do it. What'll ya c-c-call him?"

The Spine didn't respond. He was looking steadily down at the tiny hand wrapped around his finger, the smile still on his face.

"Spine?"

"Hm?" he murmured, eyes still on the baby.

"Wouldja look at that..." Rabbit said softly. "Completely gone. It was th-that smile, I bet."

"That was just gas," said Louise.

"E-e-everyone always says it's j-just gas, but nobody says why gas makes ya smile..." he replied with a mischievous wink.

Louise snorted and smacked him playfully on the arm. She always got a kick out of Rabbit.

"So, ya g-g-got any names in mind, Mary?"
"Well, there's enough men around named Peter Walter, already," she said with a smile. "But I thought I'd take a page from their book and name him after his father."

Rabbit looked perplexed. "Yer gonna n-n-name him 'The Spine'? 'Cause..."

Marie laughed quietly. "No, silly. David."

Rabbit's worried expression relaxed into a grin. "Great! Kids would m-make fun of the other one."

"They would," she said mildly. "Kids do make fun... but there's no sense giving them too much to work with."

The baby began to hiccup. The Spine looked at Marie and back again, chuckling softly. She sat on the other arm of the chair and rested her head on his shoulder.

"David," he whispered. "David has hiccups..."

Rabbit leaned down and looked at The Spine's face. "Say, Mary, ya got that oil rag on ya?"

"It's a black hanky, Rabbit," she said, smiling. She'd taken to carrying it in case of leaks, along with a white one for herself. She'd once wiped her eyes with one that had oil on it and didn't want to experience that again.

She handed Rabbit the handkerchief and he gently wiped his brother's face.

"Look at you... big strong robust, cryin' over a baby..." Rabbit teased. "Even his mama isn't..."

Marie wiped her eyes again. Rabbit sighed.

"So..." he began. "What's he gonna call you, Mary?"

"Me?" she asked, surprised. "Well, Mother, of course."

"Mother? Not mama, or mommy, or mom, or mammy..."

"Stop!" she laughed, as the baby began to fuss over his hiccups. After a short cry, he calmed again, his hiccups cured by the crying.

"Which one?" Rabbit pressed, his copper eyebrows raised.

"Oh, I guess we'll start with mama and see what develops. That's a ways off, Rabbit."

"I know." He looked thoughtful.

Little David yawned again. The Spine lifted him and kissed his soft little cheek before settling him into the crook of his arm. He tucked the blanket in around the baby with practiced ease and nestled him close to his boiler.

Louise, sitting nearby, said, "Why in the world was he so afraid of that baby?"

"It's b-b-been a while since we had one around," said Rabbit. "So... Spine..."

"Ssh..."

"Right," Rabbit's voice dropped to a whisper. "What's he gonna call you?"

"Rabbit... please..." Marie began.
"I dunno..." The Spine murmured. The baby's eyes were blinking slower.

Marie watched Rabbit's earnest expression and an idea struck her. "Rabbit," she said softly. "What do you think David should call his father?"

Rabbit's eyebrows lifted in a look that was almost pleading. "Could he c-c-call him... Pappy?" he whispered.

Uh-huh. That was what she'd expected. "If he wants to, it's alright with me. What about you, love?"

The Spine coughed a little puff of steam and looked up at his brother with a smile. Rabbit quickly wiped another couple of trails of oil before they dripped onto the baby.

"I was afraid you wouldn't approve, Rabbit..." he said softly.

"Nah. Pappy w-would be so proud... And if Pappy wouldn't m-m-mind, neither do I."

The Spine grinned and looked back at his son, who had fallen asleep, warm against his Pappy's softly humming body.
Me and My Baby

Chapter Summary

Drabble connected with the previous chapter.

Chapter Notes

Song references: "Me and My Baby" by Steam Powered Giraffe and "Roy Rogers" by Elton John. The drawing of Rex Marksley in the booklet of album art for The 2-Cent Show has a strong resemblance to Roy Rogers, as well...

Marie had gone to bed early. Davey had been colicky for the past week, and she needed to rest.

The Spine didn't mind. He had a lot of patience, especially with Davey. He'd never dared to hope for a child of his own, and now that he had one, everything the boy did was wonderful. He didn't know how anyone could love their own flesh and blood more than he loved his little boy.

But caring for a baby isn't easy, and his flesh and blood wife could only go on for so long. One of The Spine's joys was that he could take over when she'd had all she could handle. She'd gone on for as long as she could and then went on longer, driven by some mysterious feeling that she was a failure as a mother if she handed the job over to anyone, her husband included. When she at last broke down and cried along with the baby, The Spine had kissed her tenderly and told her it was alright to take a break. She finally admitted he was right and went to bed.

Davey was a lot calmer with his Pappy, and he was glad she wasn't there to see it. He did fuss, but the sound of The Spine's motor worked as well now as it had the day they had brought him home a month before, and the baby looked placidly at The Spine while Roy Rogers galloped across the television screen. The child dozed. The movie ended.

The Spine decided to see if he could lay the baby in his cradle. Marie had been reading a parenting book that said babies must learn to sleep by themselves. The Spine secretly thought that the stupid book was causing most of her guilt and frustration, but there was no real harm in trying to put the baby to bed... except that the cradle was in their room. He stopped halfway there. She was exhausted, but the second the baby started to cry, she'd be awake and trying to calm him... and she'd fail, because she was tired and cranky herself.

He turned back to see if there was a late, late show following the late show he'd just watched.

The TV station was signing off. He sighed and looked down at Davey. Davey was looking back.

"Oh," he said softly, shifting the boy around so that they could look at one another properly. "Just a little nap, hm? Why don't you sleep through the night, little man, and give your poor mother a break?"

The baby made a strange face. Well, so far that was all he did, really. The Spine smiled.
"What should we do, then, little one? We could make faces. You're getting good at that. Or I could turn my head... this way..."

He turned his head, and the baby stared in simple wonder at the shifting reflections from his metal "skin."

"Or we could dance. I know, you're thinking your Pappy doesn't dance. That's the official story. What Rabbit would say if he'd seen me jitterbug." He chuckled. "It isn't easy to keep from tossing the girls through the ceiling, mind you. Don't forget that. They don't like being tossed through the ceiling. You can't say I've neglected my fatherly duty."

The Spine danced lightly around the room, doing a simple foxtrot. The baby burped.

"They don't like that either. They think you're showing off and then they try to do a bigger one. You should be writing this down." He swept the baby, gently, into a dip. Davey's eyes opened slightly wider and his mouth opened and shut a few times.

"Don't get used to that, son. I haven't found a girl yet who would do it."

He hummed as he danced. The baby gurgled and he stopped.

"What's that? What am I humming? Just a little song I was thinking of writing. Needs work. Y'know, your mama and I used to go out dancing every Saturday. Yet here we are. I'll bet that's what really had her upset. You're interfering with her fun. I hope you're properly ashamed, young man."

The baby began to fuss.

"Good boy."

The Spine resumed his dancing and Davey grew calmer.

"Me and my baby love Saturday night, Saturday ni-ight..." he crooned. The baby grew fussier.

"Ain't it time for his b-b-bottle?"

The Spine froze. Rabbit stood in the doorway with Honeybee, holding a bottle of formula. The Spine smiled and reached for it. Rabbit shook his head.

"Nuh-uh. Unkie Rabbit's turn. C'mere, little man!"

"Oh, alright."

Rabbit scooped up the baby, settled onto the sofa, and popped the bottle into the fussy little mouth with the efficiency of a flying English nanny. Honeybee blew Rabbit a kiss from the doorway, nodded to The Spine, and rolled her chair away down the hall.

"So," said Rabbit after she'd gone. "What were ya croonin' there, little brother?"

"Oh, just a song I'm trying to put together." He eased himself onto the sofa beside Rabbit. "Wasn't it Jon's turn to give Davey his bottle?"

"Maybe."

"You shut him down, didn't you?"

"You do it all the time."
The Spine chuckled. "Poor Jon. You'll have to give him your next turn."

"Yeah, I know."

They watched the baby feed. Marie found them there in the morning, Rabbit powered down for the night, The Spine slumped low, in stasis, with the baby sleeping on his chest.
"What's that, Davey?"

"Gog! Ruff!"

"Right! It's a dog! Yay!" The Jon clapped his hands. "What's that?"

"Gat! Mow!"

"Right! Cat! Cat says, 'Meow!' Yay!" He clapped. Davey clapped, too.

"Who's that?" The Jon pointed to the other robot sitting cross-legged on the floor with them.

"Wabbid!"

"Rabbit! Yay!"

Rabbit grinned and joined in the clapping.

"Who's that?" The Jon pointed at himself.

"Dajon! Yay!"

"Yay!"

Clap.

Marie smiled from her chair. She was reading a letter that had come by registered mail, a very dry letter that said some very surprising things, and appreciated the scene on the floor that much more for it.

"Who's that?"

"Mama! Yay!"

"Yay!" chorused the robots, clapping.

The Spine walked in and leaned down to kiss Marie. "What're you reading?"
"Oh, we can talk about that later..." She shot him a quick, serious look. He raised one eyebrow and nodded solemnly.

Davey reached toward him and The Spine beamed and scooped him up. Davey pointed at The Spine and crowed, "Dada! Yay!"

The Spine grinned. Then he caught Rabbit's eye and his grin slowly faded.

Rabbit creaked to his feet and pointed. "Pappy, Davey. That's Pappy."

"Dada!" Davey laid his head on The Spine's shoulder and patted his necktie.

"Pappy..."

"Pappy!"

"Right!" crooned Rabbit, smiling. "Now, who's that, Davey boy?"

"Dada!"

Rabbit squeaked, apparently suppressing a shout. "Pappy!" he said firmly.

"Rabbit..." The Spine began uncomfortably. "If he doesn't want to..."

"He just forgot, little brother. That's your Pappy, Davey."

"Pappy."

"Uh-huh. You love your Pappy, dontcha?"

Davey blinked at him from The Spine's shoulder. He put a little hand out and patted Rabbit's cheek plate.

"Pappy," he murmured.

"No, that's Pappy!" He jabbed a finger at The Spine.

Davey poked a stubby finger at The Spine. "Dada!"

Rabbit humphed and stomped out.

"Poor Rabbit!" said Marie, trying not to laugh. The Jon, still on the floor, didn't bother to try.

"Dada's cuter anyway," he giggled. The Spine sighed and carried Davey out.

He caught up with Rabbit quickly; he had stopped to look at a portrait of Peter A Walter I.

"I'm sorry, brother..." Rabbit said with a sigh. He tilted his head to one side. "Sorry, Davey boy."

"Wabbid."

Rabbit smiled and looked at the painting again. "Dontcha think Pappy w-w-woulda liked it if Davey called you Pappy, too, Spine?"

They'd already talked about it, but The Spine just nodded.
"I miss Pappy... I thought it'd be nice to hear a k-k-kid sayin' it around the place again. Like he was still here. You look like him, ya know."

"Of course," murmured The Spine. They both did, beneath the metal finish. Exactly like him.

Davey lifted his head and looked at the portrait. He pointed a pudgy finger. "Pappy..."

"What?"

"Pappy!"

Rabbit looked at him sidelong. "Yeah, Davey boy..." he said slowly, a smile slowly spreading from one cheek to the other. "That's Pappy. Good boy!"

"Pappy! Yay!" He clapped his plump hands.

"Yay!" said Rabbit and The Spine, as one.

Clap.
Pappy!

Chapter Summary

The government had really done their research. They had a lot of changes in store for The Spine. Really, they went beyond the call...

Chapter Notes

Who's ready for some sci fi? Well, a little...

I know I am.

I never claimed I wasn't weird. Read at your peril. If you can get past the weirdness, I do believe there's some feels in there. :3

September, 1955:

"Marie!"

She hurried through the crowded airport into her husband's arms. She didn't even stop to see if he looked any different. She knew the other passengers leaving the plane would be staring; she didn't care. He'd been gone three long months and she had her priorities.

"I missed you so much!" she sobbed.

"I know how you feel..."

She heard the tremor in his voice and automatically reached for her black hanky. As she reached up to wipe oil from his face, she froze.

"Surprised?" he asked apprehensively.

"Yes... my goodness..."

"I brought a photo of Colonel Walter so that they could be sure to get it right when they attached the new plates."

"But..."

Marie was awestruck. Before he left for Washington, DC, The Spine had been a beautifully constructed robot, shaped like a man, but with bolts here and there, shapes that were not quite human form, gaps and seams between some of his plates. Just as his Pappy had made him.

Now... She touched his cheek. There were no seams at all! No cracks! He put his hand over hers and pressed her fingers to his jawline, and she could feel the slightest hint of a seam there, one she still could not see.
"It's amazing!"

"They did it to my whole body. And my hair even stays on... I can comb it and it won't move. I look exactly like a silver sculpture of a man with the suit off."

"I'll be the judge of that," she said with a wink. "Wait... what? Exactly?"

He winked back. Marie's eyes widened.

He took her in his arms and kissed her warmly, oblivious to the murmuring crowd. "Let's go home," he whispered.

*Four months later...*

Rabbit and The Jon were playing with Davey on the grass, while Honeybee looked on and laughed. Rabbit, though not usually considered a responsible person, was good enough with Davey that he had been left in charge of him. He'd made it clear he expected to be paid, but in fact, it was one of his favorite things to do.

Marie and The Spine had gone to an appointment of some kind. Something to do with humans. Rabbit didn't care as long as he got to have horse adventures with Davey.

"Pappy!" cried Davey.

"That's Rabbit!" said The Jon with a grin.

"Wabbit!"

Davey was still a little unclear on a few things. "Pappy" was sometimes Colonel Walter (or the portrait of him), and sometimes Rabbit, but never his own father. Rabbit had decided he liked it this way.

He saw Marie's car pulling in through the gate.

"They're back, Davey boy! Let's go see Mama and Daddy!"

He blew Honeybee a kiss and scooped Davey up. "Time to sit on your royal throne, King of the Beasts!" he cried, plopping Davey onto Honeybee's lap. She put her arms around him, keeping him safe, while Rabbit wheeled them down the long walk to the house, Jon running circles around them the whole way.

Marie and The Spine walked around the side of the house to meet them. The Spine seemed to be supporting her as she walked. Her face was pale.

Rabbit stopped the chair and went closer alone. "Is ev-ev-everything alright?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," said The Spine with a lopsided smile.

At the same time, Marie said, "It's hard to explain..."

Rabbit tipped his head to one side like a little dog and looked at them.
"Look... can we talk about it after Davey goes to bed? It's a bit complicated," said The Spine.

"Sure..."

"Thanks. I believe it's nap time, little man." He scooped up his son, who began to shout in protest, and went inside with Marie. Jon shrugged and started doing cartwheels.

Rabbit stared after them. "Oh, no... She's dyin', Honeybee. That's it. She's sick an' the doctor told her she's gonna die. But... why was The Spine smilin'?"

"You may be mistaken, darling," she said sweetly. "He seemed rather happy, I thought."

Rabbit's boiler fired up and extra steam puffed from his cheek vents. He loved it when she called him "darling"... even while telling him he was wrong.

"I hope I am m-m-mistaken, Honey. Guess we'll find out later."

Marie didn't have much appetite at dinner that night and went to put Davey to bed as soon as he had finished his. The Jon was watching Dumbo with some of the utility robots and didn't come to dinner. The Spine and Rabbit sat at dinner with Wanda and Norman for company, but The Spine, despite being asked several times to stop, drummed his fingers on the table for so long that everyone gave up on food and went into one of the sitting rooms.

"Alright, Spine, give. What's eatin' ya?" asked Rabbit as Honeybee tried to shush him. "Why ya drivin' everyone nuts? She's... It's Marie, isn't it? She's sick..."

Wanda gasped.

"Well, yes... it is Marie, but... I think we should wait until she gets back."

"I'm here," Marie said, walking into the room.

"Oh, good," said The Spine faintly as she joined him. "Well... I'm glad you're all sitting down. We've got some rather shocking news..."

"No... I take it back! I don't wanna hear..." said Rabbit quietly.

"You don't even know what it is, Rabbit..."

Honeybee held Rabbit's hand. "It'll be alright, darling," she murmured. "Do go ahead and tell us your news, brother."

Rabbit twisted around and hid his face against Honeybee's neck. He couldn't face another human dying, not with Peter III so ill. No one expected him to live much longer, though his eyes were still bright when they visited and he always managed a smile. Rabbit was only just coming to accept the inevitable death. How could he watch The Spine lose his wife when he was already losing his human brother?

The Spine said, very slowly, "We're... expecting.

Rabbit looked up in surprise. "Expectin' what?"

"A baby, Rabbit," said Marie, giggling nervously.
"You can't adopt any more, can you? Not without Three's friend helpin'..."

"We're not adopting, Rabbit," The Spine sighed. "Marie is pregnant."

As if only just accepting that what they had said was really what they had said, Wanda dropped her coffee. Norman hurried out to get a towel. Rabbit had the feeling Norman would have run out anyway.

This was thoroughly, deeply awkward.

"Marie... how could you..." Wanda whispered. "Spine, I don't know what to say..."

The Spine looked puzzled. The expression changed to blank shock. "Oh, no, Wanda! No! It's not that at all!"

"Wanda! Do you really think I would do that?" Marie said, her voice breaking.

"Do what?" cried Rabbit at last. "How can you be expectin' a b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b..."

"Baby," said The Spine, putting his hand over his face wearily.

Norman crept reluctantly back in and began to mop up coffee for Wanda, who appeared to have not noticed that there wasn't a cup in her hand.

"Spine... are you telling me that Marie is having... that isn't possible!"

"I'd be inclined to agree with you, Wanda... yet she is."

"But... having... your baby?" she cried, her voice increasingly shrill.

"Yes, yes!" barked The Spine, startling them all. "Marie is pregnant with my child! I can't explain how it's happened, but it has happened! I thought that after the first shock you all might be happy for us!"

"But... Spine... surely you didn't think you could just tell us such a thing and we'd simply accept it! Oh, my goodness. I feel faint..." Wanda groaned.

"I don't feel that well myself," sobbed Marie, clutching at his arm. "I thought this would be difficult but... oh..."

The Spine caught her as she fell and lifted her in his arms. "Thank you all so very much!" he hissed, giving them all a dark look as he carried his wife to her room.

"We're heels," said Rabbit, after they'd gone.

"Yes, we are, darling," sighed Honeybee. "We should have offered congratulations."

This actually made Rabbit feel a bit better. Honeybee had impeccable good manners, by programming. If even she hadn't managed the proprieties, then it must have been a shocking announcement indeed.

"Oh, Rabbit... it can't be, can it?" blurted Wanda. "Marie must have made a terrible mistake and doesn't want to hurt The Spine..."

"I dunno... Wanda, do ya suppose his upgrades...?" He stopped, realizing how very much he didn't want to talk about it.
She shook her head. "How would that make a difference? I mean, they might have given him a... a... well, even if he had one, it wouldn't make it possible to... He just couldn't get her pregnant, for crying out loud!" She put her face in her hands. "He'd have to have the ability to create his half of the formula, and no human can install that, it's just ridiculous to suggest it!"

"Alright, alright! He can't have g-g-gotten her pregnant. But if he wants ta be happy about it, well... a baby's a baby, right? It ain't the baby's fault."

"I'm just so disappointed that she'd do this to him... while he was away getting upgrades, too! Surely only because he wanted to be more human for her. And what about her health? She said she was told never to have children, that there was scar tissue from an infection..."

"Maybe it got b-b-better! Maybe they were wrong. I dunno."

"I hope so..."

They sat in silence. Rabbit jumped to his feet.

"I'm going to apologize."

"Rabbit... Tell her we're sorry..." Norman nodded.

"Tell her yourself," he muttered. Wanda looked shocked.

He wheeled Honeybee out in silence.

He put Honeybee by the door and scratched at it softly. After a moment, The Spine opened it, still glaring.

"I'm sorry, Spine."

"I apologize, brother," breathed Honeybee. "I believe congratulations are in order."

The Spine smiled a little. "Thank you, Miss Honeybee."

"Yeah, mazel tov," Rabbit agreed hastily. "But is Mary alright? Wanda was worried about her."

"Was she?"

"Yeah, 'course she was!"

"Come in, Rabbit," called Marie.

Rabbit looked at Honeybee, who waved him inside. The Spine stepped into the hallway to keep her company and nodded to Rabbit. He crept in, not sure why he was being so quiet... little Davey had his own room and Marie was awake. She just suddenly seemed so fragile.

She was in the bed in her nightdress, leaning against pillows. She held her hand out and Rabbit took it.

"I'm sorry, Mary. I know ya wanna us to b-b-be happy about the baby."

"I do, Rabbit. But I'm so worried."
"On account of ya ain't supposed to have babies?"

"Well, that, and..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "How is it possible, Rabbit? Is it really a baby? The doctor was sure... two months along, he said."

Rabbit stared. "Two months?" But...

"But what?"

Oops. He didn't want her to know what Wanda had said, but he was thinking that it couldn't have happened while The Spine was away. And she really didn't spend much time away from Walter Manor when he was there. She was content to stay there, with him, with all of them. It certainly was an interesting place...

And getting more interesting by the moment.

"I... uh... d-d-don't know."

She smiled. "Oh, Rabbit! Can you ask The Spine to come back in?"

He did so, and The Spine went straight to her, leaned down and gave her a kiss. As he did, something flickered under the light bedsheet that was covering Marie from the waist down...

Rabbit stared as a faint blue glow pulsed at just the place where Marie's child would be growing. The Spine leaned away from her and the light dimmed but didn't disappear, at least, not to his sharp photoreceptors. How had he not seen it before?

"Rabbit? What's wrong?" asked The Spine.

Rabbit jumped. "Oh, I just need some stasis time I guess... I'll see ya in the morning."

He wheeled Honeybee back to the sitting room. Wanda was still there. There were tears on her face.

"Is she alright?" she asked.

"Yeah, she is."

She sighed. "You were right, Rabbit. I do need to apologize myself... I should have congratulated her. The rest is between the two of them..."

"That's real b-b-b-big of ya, Wanda. But that ain't it exactly."

"What else did I do?" she wailed.

He sat by her and hugged her shoulders. "Ya doubted Mary. Ya got a cousin comin'."

"But Rabbit..."

"Trust me. That baby is The Spine's."

"No..." She shook her head. "It can't be..."

"It is. Goodnight."

He'd had enough discussion. He wheeled Honeybee back to their room for the night.
The next morning, he sat alone by Pappy's grave.

"Pappy... how is it possible? How can blue matter do that? Is it hu-hu-human?"

A duck waddled up. The ducks were accustomed to Rabbit. It stopped and waited a minute, then waddled on when no bread appeared to be in the offing.

"Did you know, Pappy? You tried ta make it so he could feel... things. I saw that in the manual. Did you know how far it would go?"

The wind whistled through Rabbit's cheek vents, but no answer came.

Could Colonel Walter have foreseen this? That one day The Spine would find a way to complete his humanity? It seemed absurd that he could have known that blue matter could do something like this, but Rabbit knew his Pappy was a brilliant man.

"Pappy..." he whispered. "What did you do?"

He heard steps a long way off... the measured pace of The Spine. A minute later, his brother sailed into the cemetery carrying Davey.

"Pappit!" cried the boy.

"That's a new one, Davey boy," said Rabbit, taking the child onto his lap. "Everything good, brother?"

The Spine sat heavily on the sculpture they used as a seat. It shuddered.

"Watch it!"

"Sorry. I'm... kind of worried."

"I thought you'd be tha cat th-th-that ate the canary. Be proud, ya lucky son of a... gun. I hear men usually are. Who cares if it's a stu-stu-stupid thing to be proud of? Now you are a man!"

"Don't joke about it, Rabbit..." said The Spine, but a grin had spread itself across his face as if of its own accord.

"Uh-huh, there it is. Most people don't get to see that, do they? Yer like a kid, deep down. I'll bet that gave ya trouble when you was human."

"I was a complete mess, Rabbit. Cried all the time. Slave to my emotions. If I hadn't changed back when I did..."

"She'd have b-b-been pregnant a lot sooner."

"Rabbit!" His glanced flicked to Davey, who was playing with Rabbit's cheek vents.

"Aw, he don't understand it anyway."

"So... you don't think she was unfaithful? Like Wanda does?"

Rabbit shook his head. "I saw... well, I saw enough."

"You saw the blue matter."
"If that ain't proof, well... Ya kn-kn-know it gets brighter when ya kiss her?"

"It gets brighter whenever I'm close to her. I'm not sure what it means."

"I dunno either... but it kinda makes sense. I like it."

The Spine ruffled Davey's hair restlessly. "But what if it hurts her, Rabbit? What if it's poison? What if they both die..." His voice choked off in a muffled sob. He put his hands over his face.

"Stop it, yer gonna scare Davey."

"I'm sorry..." He wiped his eyes hastily on his sleeve. "This is new for me..."

"You and the whole w-w-world, steam powered man. And the trouble is that we have ta keep it quiet."

"You better believe it... No one is gonna do experiments on my wife." His eyes widened. "Anymore..."

"What?"

"Well, if you count this... it was sort of an experiment, what they did. I mean, they only made it possible... built the hardware, connected it to the core... the blue matter did the rest. I guess it just needed that extra... well, you know."

Rabbit squirmed. "I'm not sure I want to know more about that, brother..."

"It was amazing enough, what Pappy did with the strength and sensory adjustments..." The Spine looked off into the distance, his thoughts miles away. He did that sometimes. "I was content with that, with being near her that way. It was already more than I had dreamed possible, that kind of closeness." He closed his eyes and sighed, smiling a little.

"I meant it, I really don't think I need to know any more..." Rabbit scooted away from his brother, as if it would stop him from hearing.

"But then..." The Spine's eyes opened, shining, looking up into the thinning clouds as the sun lit his gleaming face with beams of gold, "then she figured out how to trigger the power surge. That..." He laughed, rather giddily. "That was... amazing..."

"I really don't want to know any more, Spine!" Rabbit almost screamed.

The Spine laughed and looked down at his hands. "Alright... I'm sorry. I can't believe I told you all that..."

"Neither can I!"

"Calm down, Rabbit! Now you're scaring Davey."

Davey was looking up at Rabbit with round eyes. Rabbit, delighted to have a distraction, filled his bellows and let it out slowly, then hastily smiled his most charming, lopsided smile at the boy, who soon grinned back and grabbed his copper nose.

"Gots ya nose!"

"Oh, no! Ya ain't gonna clean it, are ya? Then it won't match m-m-my face!"
Davey laughed a bright, wild belly laugh and held the "nose" high in the air... for him, at least. Rabbit pretended he couldn't reach it. The Spine laughed.

"Are we cheerin' Daddy up? Yeah! We're good boys." He looked sidelong at his brother. "It'll be okay, Spine. Especially if ya don't tell me any more family secrets..."

"Alright, I won't."

"Good. Ya know, it's like a miracle or somethin'. Amazing things happen for a reason."

"That's simplistic, Rabbit..."

"Yeah, I guess it is. But I believe it. It's like ya got a guardian angel."

The Spine snorted. "Do you seriously believe in guardian angels, Rabbit?"

"Well... I didn't, b-b-but when I think about how lucky we are, sometimes I hafta wonder. Ya never know."

Davey plopped his hand over Rabbit's nose. "Dere go. Aw better. Daddy!"

The Spine grinned and caught Davey quickly as the child lunged at him from Rabbit's lap.

"I guess it's okay if you want to believe it," he said. "We *are* pretty lucky."
Waiting

Chapter Summary

The Spine wanted to live like a human, do the things humans do... Funny how these things work out.

Chapter Notes

Curiouser and curiouser.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Every night, Spine? How are y-y-you gonna get through the next six months?" asked Rabbit wearily when The Spine turned up in his room... again.

The real question, though... was how would everyone else get through it?

Every night, The Spine came to find Rabbit. He tried to go into stasis but kept coming back online, worrying. Rabbit had talked him through a couple of weeks' worth of nights and was ready to just shut him down completely.

Every day, he hovered around Marie and made sure she showed no signs of radiation poisoning. When she got morning sickness, to everyone's dismay, his boiler started backing up. There were towels everywhere. Wanda finally sent him outside for most of the day.

They had gone to see Marie's sister Louise and returned with the report that she was angry... very angry. Her first concern was the doctor's advice that Marie shouldn't have children of her own. She now came to the Manor once a week to check on her sister, and eyed The Spine darkly every time he came into the room. She had always liked him before, but now it was as if he had turned out to be Jack the Ripper. Apparently, as much as she liked him as a person, his inability to put her sister into this particular danger had been one of the things she most cherished about him as a brother-in-law... and now he had gone and turned out to be "just another man," however unusual. Worse, her sister now carried a child that sometimes glowed right through her abdomen!

The Spine stayed outside with The Jon when Louise came to visit.

Rabbit finally got some peace the day Marie was examined by the family doctor about four months into the pregnancy, and he declared her to be healthy and fit and coming along exactly as she should be. Louise apologized to The Spine for giving him the cold shoulder and The Spine attempted to apologize for his "indiscretion" and was hastily cut short. Even The Spine had his moments of not quite getting what was acceptable.

A few weeks later, Marie felt the first kick and from then on, The Spine was even more attached, sometimes literally. He would watch television with her, whatever happened to be on, just so that he could keep one hand over her stomach and feel the baby moving. Marie seemed to love it... until her belly started hurting her and weighing on her bladder.
By the seventh month, Marie was uncomfortable all the time. They all knew, because she kept saying so, that her stomach weighed a ton, her back hurt, and her husband was driving her nuts. She didn't actually say the last one aloud... but anyone could see it. They tried to hint to The Spine on several occasions that he needed to back off a little, but the drive to protect and be near her was too strong. They knew something would happen soon, and it did.

Marie blew up one afternoon, somewhere in her eighth month. She had been restless that day, and after he had asked her for the umpteenth time if she was feeling alright, she told The Spine to "for the love of all things good get away from her and give her some peace." Rabbit had the misfortune to see the look on his face when she said it. For someone like Marie, it was harsh indeed. The Spine looked as though she had slapped him across the face with a waffle iron. He walked out without a word, and they let him go.

Rabbit couldn't see leaving him to brood for long, though. He found The Spine eventually in the top floor of the Manor, in a large utility room full of wiring. It had been a shock when he found him... he knew The Spine's head and spinal column separated from his chassis, but before his upgrades, it had only been for maintenance; The Spine was helpless until reassembled.

Apparently the government saw some percentage in creating a robot that could move independent of his body, and had acted on it. The Spine slithered into the dangling, dusty wires after storing his body in an odd sort of recessed storage unit that sank into the floor. When Rabbit looked in and said, "Spine, buddy, you in there?" his brother had appeared next to his ear and given him a pretty good idea what a heart attack must feel like.

The Spine quickly retrieved his body and apologized for the scare. Rabbit would have liked to know more about this new feature, but decided maybe it could wait. The Spine needed his big brother right now, and Rabbit hated to miss a chance to be the big brother.

"She didn't mean it, buddy," he said, once they were sitting on the roof, watching the sunset.

"She did. I've been driving her crazy. Haven't I?"

Why did he have to ask? "Well..."

"I have. I'm still worried, y'know." He pulled his knees up the roof a little and leaned his folded arms on them. "Are all women this miserable when they're pregnant? Aren't they supposed to be happy?"

"Would you be happy carryin' a big, kickin' lump right next to yer b-b-boiler?"

"I don't that's quite the same thing... but I guess I see your point." He stared at the coppery sunset. "The waiting has been torture. We'll know soon, now. She's made it this far, and soon it'll be over... one way or the other."

Rabbit squinted at him. "Sounds like yer carryin' more than she is! Have you spent all this t-t-time worryin' about her dyin'?"

The Spine nodded and laid his head on his arms, shuddering. Oil dripped onto the roof below his face.

"Well... th-th-th-that's just... that's horrible, brother... Yer s'posed to be thinkin' about yer wife havin' a beautiful, healthy baby."

The Spine nodded into his arms and continued to leak softly.
"Poor stupid rob. Yer really in over yer head, ain't ya?" Rabbit scooted closer and put an arm around his brother. The Jon found them there a few minutes later and sat on The Spine's other side, mimicking Rabbit's behavior.

"Marie is lookin' for you, big brother," said The Jon softly after a moment.

"Who?" asked Rabbit.

"The Spine, silly."

"Hear that, big guy? She's probably sorry she made ya cry."

"Rabbit..." The Spine sighed.

"Well, she don't know ya cried. Anyway, g-g-go on down to her. An' quit worryin' about death. Just go live your life."

The Spine mopped the oil from his face with his sleeve. "Alright..." he said meekly. "Thanks, Rabbit." He clambered across the roof to the gable window they used to get out there.

The two of them watched the end of the sunset in silence before following.

Marie shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. She really just wanted to go lay down on her side, the only position she found remotely comfortable, but she had something to do first.

She couldn't get the look on his face out of her head. She had a feeling it would always be there, waiting to break her heart. She wiped her eyes as the tears started again.

He walked into the room and looked at her apprehensively. She held her arms out toward him like a child and he swept her up without hesitation, easily but so gently settling her against his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, love..." she sobbed. "I just want this to be over! I don't really want you to get away from me..."

He rested his head carefully against hers. "I know. You're uncomfortable. I shouldn't bother you so much..."

"It's not that, don't say that! It's just today, I can't get comfortable. It just keeps aching..."

"What does? Your stomach?"

"Yes..." she moaned. "It stops and starts again a few minutes later... oh, no... you don't think..."

"No! It's too soon!"

"Oh! Call the doctor! Please!" she almost screamed.

"Is the pain that bad?"

"No... but... but it's too early! Please..."

"Wanda!" he cried.

Wanda arrived a minute later, out of breath. "What? Is it... is she in labor?"
"I... I don't know! It's too early, isn't it?"

"I've heard it can vary. They don't follow a schedule, you know. I'm no expert, but... Tell you what, I'll call the doctor and see what he suggests." She hurried out.

The Spine sat one the couch, Marie on his lap, and gently touched her now glowing abdomen. They waited. A few minutes passed. Marie felt a fresh spasm and hissed softly. This one was sharper...

He exhaled a soft little cloud of steam, his eyes wide, as the pain passed. "Marie, I think that was one.*"

She nodded and laid her head on his shoulder. "I know, love. We need to call Louise, too. She has a long drive but maybe she can get here in time."

"Maybe... Marie, I... don't know what to do..."

"You don't need to do anything. Just wait."

"I think that's the hardest thing I've ever been asked to do. Marie..." His voice trembled. "Please don't leave me..."

"I won't, love! Don't talk like that!"

"We've had so little time... I can't..." He put his hand over his eyes. "I can't face that now..."

"Ya cryin' again?" asked Rabbit, strolling in. "I thought she was gonna say she was sorry."

He looked back and forth between them, The Spine's freshly leaking eyes and Marie's tear-streaked face. "Yer mopin' about death again, aren't ya?"

"He is," said Marie ruthlessly. "I told him not to."

"Marie, please..." The Spine said, sounding rather sticky. "Rabbit, she's in labor! Wanda's calling the doctor. Can you ask her to call Louise, and Abby?"

"Abby!" Abby was the midwife who had delivered the twins decades before. She was old, but had long kept Walter family secrets. She had agreed to come out of retirement and bring her granddaughter when Marie's time came. "I love old Abby. She always tells people off."

"Usually you."

"But she says it funny so I don't mind."

"Well, can you go tell her, please?"

Rabbit shrugged and slumped off to talk to Wanda.

"Maybe you can shut down while you wait," said Marie once he had gone.

"No! I don't want to come back online and find out... I want to stay near you."

"I don't want you to have to see me hurting, love. You'll blame yourself, and I just might blame you, too!"

"Good! You should blame me. I didn't have to let them change me..."
"No... no regrets. I haven't had any." She kissed him gently as her abdomen tightened painfully once more. She gripped his shoulder tightly until the pain passed, and he, realizing what was happening, held her close.

"Not bad so far," she murmured, a moment later.

"So far, yes..." he sighed.

By the time Louise had arrived, it had gotten bad. Very bad. The doctor said he would be along later, but old Abby and her granddaughter had arrived and were getting things straight. One of the first things she tried to straighten out was The Spine.

"I don't care if she is your wife, Spine. I don't pretend to understand any of this nonsense about you marrying a woman, or about her being pregnant. Even if you were the father you wouldn't be allowed to stay for the birth."

"I am the father!" he cried indignantly.

He was seated on the bed, hat, vest and tie off, holding Marie's hands as she rode out another of the harder contractions that had been tormenting her for the past half hour. He looked at her quickly, his face full of worry. She tried to smile... but it just wouldn't happen.

"And I'm the mother!" Abby quipped. "But as I said, the father leaves. Go on."

"No!" gasped Marie, tears starting afresh. "If he leaves, neither of us will be able to get through this!"

Abby rolled her eyes. "Young woman! Do I have to have Rabbit here drag him out?"

"That'll be the day," muttered The Spine.

"Aw, Abby..." whined Rabbit. "I got no time to try to shift The Spine. I gotta go keep an eye on Davey when he wakes up!"

"What about Wanda?"

"She's no good, either. She's in the kitchen drinkin' the weeks' supply of c-c-coffee in one night, maybe laced with a little bourbon. She's scared. Just let The Spine stay with his wife and baby. You know he was always the best behaved outta all of us!"

She pulled him down to her and "whispered" into his black rubber ear, so loudly that they could all hear. "You don't mean that you think that baby is his, Rabbit Walter!"

"It is, Abby! I promise."

She huffed. "Never mind. Very well, Spine, but if you cause problems I'm shutting you off. Don't think I can't."

"Yes, Abby. Thank you."

Marie hissed in pain and clutched his hands. How could she do this? She was already so tired...

His kissed her clammy forehead and held her.

"Don't leave me..." she moaned.
Rabbit gave Davey toast for breakfast. He wadded it up, mostly, but some of it got eaten. Rabbit had seen Davey eat enough times to know that this was how the child survived... a few bites at a time.

Louise had arrived in the night and joined The Spine at the bedside, supporting him as much as her sister, no doubt. The doctor had come along soon after but was ordered by Abby to wait with Wanda until he was needed. To everyone's surprise, he complied. Wanda by this time needed help herself, having been a bit liberal with the "coffee."

It wasn't until mid-morning that Abby came to tell Rabbit that Marie had given birth to a baby girl. Rabbit whooped with joy until he saw Abby's grave expression. He gasped.

"Is she dead? Is Marie dead? Did someone die? Abby, what is it?"

"Now, now, Rabbit, none of that! They're fine! It's just... I thought I'd seen everything."

"What do you mean?"

"That girl just had your brother's child! That shouldn't be possible!"

Rabbit chuckled awkwardly. "Yeah, I know. We've b-b-been all through that already."

She shook her head. "Well, go on and have a look. Take her brother in to meet her."

"Hey, Davey! Ya got a baby sister!"

"Buggy!" cried Davey. He was admiring a roly-poly.

"How about you play with The Jon for a while?" Rabbit suggested.

He peered in through the doorway at The Spine, Marie, and their baby. They all looked weary, but the two of them couldn't seem to take their eyes off of the infant. He wondered if that was because of the curious blue glow coming from the blanket of the otherwise pink and healthy looking child.

The Spine looked up and smiled. "Rabbit! Come and see her..."

Rabbit crept in and looked down. She was a wrinkly little thing, not particularly impressive. There was a thin fringe of dark brown hair covering her head. Her eyes were dark blue, but he had seen enough babies to know that the real color would show in time. The blue glow was coming from her chest, just where her heart should be. The Spine touched her little cheek, and the glow brightened.

"Still?" whispered Rabbit.

"Hm?"

"Nothing... She, uh... looks just like you, buddy." Oops, that was awkward... He eyed the tiny blue matter core uneasily.

They didn't seem to notice; they were too busy admiring her.

"She'll be getting hungry soon." Abby had come in behind him. "You gonna give her a bottle or
"That's what we did with Davey," said The Spine. "We have everything in the kitchen."

"Good enough. Anna, could you go get one ready for her?"

"I will," said Louise, trotting toward the kitchen.

"I'd better check on Davey," said The Spine. He kissed Marie and left as well.

"Whaddya gonna call her, Mary?"

"We were thinking of Iris for a while, but... I like Lily."

"Lily," he said. "Little Lily. Silly Lily. I can work with that."

"Hm, maybe something else..." Marie looked worried as the bottle arrived.

The baby started wailing as soon as it was offered. Rabbit watched in fascination as they tried to get her to accept it. Finally, Marie began to cry, too. Abby scooped the baby up and popped the bottle expertly into her mouth, looking as if she expected that to be that.

It wasn't.

"Rabbit, she won't eat... Can you call in the doctor?"

"Wait..." said Louise. "Go get The Spine. I have a crazy idea..."

"Should I call in the doctor, too?"

"Not yet. Just The Spine."

He hurried to comply.

"What's wrong, Marie?" he asked when he arrived.

"She won't eat!"

"You try, Spine," said Louise.

"Oh, yeah!" Rabbit cried, understanding. "Spine's boiler puts babies right to sleep."

"I don't know, Rabbit," he said as he took the baby. "It's a lot quieter now than when Davey was a baby."

He settled his daughter against his chest. She turned her little head toward him and fusses hungrily. He offered her the bottle, and she accepted it eagerly.

"I thought so," Louise breathed.

"Why wouldn't she take it before?" Marie asked wearily.

"I don't know..." The Spine murmured.

"Silly thing..." she began, looking at them both. She gasped. "What in the world?"

They all looked toward the baby. A tiny tendril of blue light was curling from the center of The
Spine's chest down to his daughter's.

"I take it back, Rabbit," said Abby. "Now I've seen everything. I wonder how many more times I'll say that before I leave."

"What's going on?" asked The Spine worriedly.

Abby reached up and opened a few buttons on The Spine's shirt. His core was glowing brightly through the narrow cracks in his new plating. The tiny curl of blue seeped between, shifting like a plume of steam before being drawn toward her chest. The baby, oblivious to the sensation she was creating, contentedly thumped her little hand, kitten-like, against his chest plate as she fed.

"I've heard of breast-feeding a baby, but this wasn't what I pictured..." Abby muttered.

Rabbit snorted, but Abby shook her head. She turned to Louise. "How did you know?"

Louise shrugged. "Guessed. I thought it was crazy, myself, but it was the way the glow brightened around him all these months... I thought maybe... She's not a typical baby, after all."

"You said it! Well, now I think it's time for the doctor... The sooner I can get out of this insane asylum, the happier I'll be."

Chapter End Notes

*No kidding, Spine?
Memories of Ocean Waves

Chapter Summary

Back before The Spine and Marie got married, but after Rabbit's core was recovered... a little summer vacation from the sci-fi, in the form of a flashback to a day at the beach for some, and a more difficult journey for others.

Chapter Notes

It's gonna get heavy when the story continues... so... While I was at a water park yesterday, I got the idea to send The Spine to the beach. I couldn't imagine him being anything but reluctant... and that just sounded entertaining. And in the process of writing it out, I realized that not everyone can leave their problems behind so easily.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everyone was sad. It wasn't nice when everyone was sad, even if you understood why.

The Jon shuffled along the longest hallway. He didn't know why there was a long hallway full of empty offices in Walter Manor. Maybe Pappy had been expecting more people. Sometimes Jon would go in and write messages in the dust gathering on the desks, but he knew no one was going to read them.

He ran a few steps and slid the rest of the way down the hall in his stocking feet. He was wearing one red sock and one yellow... like ketchup and mustard. Someday, he thought, I'll find socks with rainbow stripes again! Iris had knitted them for him years before, but no one seemed to know how to knit socks properly anymore and the stores only sold ordinary socks.

Jon thought about Pappy some more. Pappy would be sad about Peter II and Guy dying. But maybe he was happy 'cause they were together now. He didn't know where they were together, but The Jon believed people didn't just stop. Robots maybe... he hoped not. He decided Pappy was up on a cloud with Iris, Two, and Guy, waiting for the rest of them. Then Jon didn't feel so sad.

But everyone else did. Marie was the only one he could talk to some days because she wasn't as sad. She hadn't known Two and Guy. That made it easier for her. But The Spine was sad except when she was there, so she stayed with him. Wanda was trying to be strong but The Jon didn't blame her for being sad, since her husband and father had died. Jon gave her lots of hugs. Four was sad, but he kept busy, working in the yard or repairing the robots. And Three was in a rest home, recovering from his stroke.

Rabbit was the worst. He hadn't moved since The Spine had told them all the bad news..

He'd started with good news. It was weird, but it made Jon happy. The Spine was gonna get married! The Jon didn't really understand why, but he liked Marie and she made The Spine happy. She kissed him. The Spine liked kisses. He'd never told anyone, but The Jon once saw a girl after a concert run up and kiss Spine right on the lips! The Spine had looked really shocked but he had a big
smile as he walked away. So it was a good thing Marie liked kissing, too.

But then he had to tell them the bad news. And Rabbit had yelled at him, and screamed, and cried... it was awful. And Jon had cried too, because he was sad, and because Rabbit thought it was all his fault. They'd had to pick him up and put him onto the couch after, and Rabbit shut himself off. He always did that when he was extra sad. Honeybee sat by him and held his hand. Jon would come in and talk to her. She was nice. And really polite.

One day, about a month later, The Spine got tired of it. He asked Honeybee to leave the room, switched Rabbit on and yelled at him. He did it quietly, but Jon could hear it, and it was a kind of yelling.

"It's not your fault, Rabbit," he'd said. "And I didn't go all that way to bring you both back just to see you sit here like a rock, letting Honeybee waste the time she has left holding your hand while you feel sorry for yourself. You went to save her, and you did. Now it's your responsibility to make her happy."

And Rabbit had cried. A lot. He was still in there, though. He just hadn't shut down. When Honeybee was there, he talked with her and sometimes kissed her fingers. It made a funny plinking sound when he did it. He only had one rubber lip, after all, and the Spine had two.

The Jon ran and slid down the hall the other way.

That was how come The Spine liked kissing, he thought. He had those rubber lips. So that girl had been able to give him a kiss, back when they did that show at the pier... by the ocean...

The Jon grinned.

"I wanna go to the beach, Marie! That would cheer everyone up!"

Marie looked at The Spine. "Well, I don't know about that, but maybe it's not a bad idea to get out, anyway... The ocean waves are so relaxing. Oh, but maybe the water..."

"The water doesn't hurt us!" Jon said. "Pappy made us really well! Only I always have to wash off the salt after."

"Oh, and Rabbit, too... doesn't copper react with salt?"

"The real problem is the sand," said The Spine. "Gets into his joints and his limbs fall off. He doesn't really like the beach." He sighed.

"What about you?"

"It's nice when no one else is there..." He looked at her. "You want to go, don't you?"

"Um..."

He kissed her hand. "You've been cooped up in here with me since you moved in..."

"It's not like that..."

"Let's go to the beach. We'll visit the Colonel at the rest home on the way."

"Yay!" crowed Jon.
Wanda, to their surprise, wanted to go, too. Peter IV was in his swim trunks within five minutes of being asked. The Jon slipped into the sitting room to tell Rabbit and Honeybee.

"It's not your fault, Rabbit. The Spine said so..." murmured the copper robot into the silence of the room. "Ya know he's right..."

That was the trouble, though. The Spine was right. Rabbit had gone to save Honeybee, and in a way, he had. He wanted to feel good about that. But it went deeper now... She had been used to trap him.

She was powered down next to him, charging her battery. He held her hand and watched her artificial sleep. There was a throb in his core, something like a sudden pounding of a human heart, when he looked at her. It made his bellows malfunction and his boiler bubble for just a moment when it happened. It was as human as Rabbit ever got.

"You're worth it, baby..." he whispered.

What she was worth, was what looked like the rest of his lengthy existence spent indoors. He hadn't told anyone else, but since he had stayed awake, he'd had time to think. People he didn't even know had plotted against him. They'd snuck into his home while he was away, laid traps for him. They'd tricked him, caught him, and torn out his heart. They'd tried to steal its power. And when the people he loved had gone to take it back, they had died. It never would have happened if he hadn't left home...

He knew the reasoning was flawed. He wasn't as sensible as The Spine, but he was a robot. He was programmed to reason. And every time he tried to imagine walking out the front door, his reason gave way to blind panic as he pictured evil men in every bush, waiting.

"They're in jail, Rabbit... ya d-d-don't need to be afraid anymore... Ya went to three wars and you were n-n-nevah this scared. Stop bein' afraid already!"

He glared sightlessly into the empty room before him, picturing himself at the front door of the manor, the whole world facing him, and himself, ready to step out into it. His free hand was balled up with determination as he concentrated. Then the door in his mind closed.

He was still inside.

His fist went slack. He covered his eyes as a sob rose in his throat.

The Jon ran into the room. Rabbit hastily wiped two lines of oil from his faceplates.

"Hey, buddy," he said with only a little tremor in his voice. "Ya goin' for a swim?"

"Yeah! The Spine says Marie has been cooped up too long! You want to come?"

"You kn-kn-know what the sand does to me, Jon."

"Yeah, but maybe you could roll Honeybee along the pier."

"Nah, you can all fit in one car without us and Honey's chair. I'll see ya when ya get back."

"Alright. I'll bring you some seashells!"

"Great! Find an extra pretty one for Honey!"
"Sure!" The Jon ran out.

Rabbit stared at Honeybee's shining hand, resting in his, and sighed.

"Maybe... M-m-maybe I should try to take her out, though... If Mary's been cooped up too long... But what if somethin' happens? Bad things happen when I go out..."

He kissed Honeybee's hand. Her eyes grew brighter. She turned and looked at him.

"Beloved... you woke me..." she said almost sleepily.

He waved away the extra steam cloud that came from his cheek vents when she called him that. Honeybee seemed quiet and aloof to everyone else, but she made Rabbit's boiler run double time from her pet names alone.

"Oh, the charging is complete," she said.

"Yeah. Hey... the others are leavin' for the beach."

"Oh... is the beach a nice place?"

"I guess so. I don't work well with sand, so I stay away."

"Oh."

"But if you wanna go..."

"No, not without you, beloved."

He felt a little bubble of pleasure at this, but it was overruled by guilt. She would sit by him until the day she shut down, and from what Pete IV told him, Peter II had said she wasn't built to last. Rabbit tried not to think about it, usually, but what if she had only one more week? Or a day?

He could hear the clock ticking in the entrance hall. Rabbit kissed her cheek with a sound like a marble falling onto a silver dollar and kept his head close to hers as he spoke one of the hardest things he'd ever had to say, "Honey... I want to go out. W-w-w-would you like to see the park?"

Her eyes flickered with surprise. "My goodness! Darling, I'd be delighted to see anything as long as you're there..."

A little spark passed between them, tingling their circuits, as Honeybee detached her power cable from the outlet. They both giggled together. It felt nice.

"Y'know, you're too good for me, Honey."

"Nonsense. Nothing is."

_Hiss!_ He steamed more. The room was beginning to look like a sauna.

"I'd better bring some water along, if yer g-g-gonna keep talkin' like that," said Rabbit with a wink, as he worked his creaky way off of the couch. Honeybee giggled again.

The Spine tugged restlessly at the cut off jeans shorts Peter IV had let him borrow. Fortunately Peter was almost as tall as The Spine, so the shorts covered a lot of leg. The t-shirt wasn't as long as he'd
have liked, though... He knew Peter had some with long sleeves, but he'd given him a light blue one with short sleeves instead.

"You sure you don't want to wear swim trunks?" asked Peter as he stuffed a couple of towels into a bag.

"This is fine."

"Alright." Peter whistled. "Get a load of that, big brother!"

The Spine turned; Marie had just come into the entrance hall in her bathing suit. It set off her figure perfectly. Plumes of steam poured through the t-shirt and he thought his photoreceptors were going to fall right onto the tiled floor.

"Y-y-y-y-you look amazing..."

"That's his highest compliment, Marie. The Spine doesn't come over Rabbit-y without a good reason!"

"Oh, hush!" said Marie pleasantly. She looked at the shorts and t-shirt and sighed. "You sure you want to wear that?"

"Yes." Why were they talking about his clothes? He was much more interested in hers...

"At least take off the shirt, Spine," said Peter.

"You're lucky I'm not wearing trousers. Don't push your luck." He took Marie's hand and pulled her close.

"Guh! I'll go see if Wanda's ready," muttered Peter as she snuggled into The Spine's arms. He strode out of the hall.

"Why not take off the shirt, though?" she asked, looking up.

He kissed her before responding. He had his priorities.

"Because," he sighed a minute later. "I'll blind everyone on the beach."

"Oh... yeah, that is a good point. Maybe there will be some clouds?"

"Marine layer, but not for much longer. And then it'll be like a mirror reflecting direct sunlight in every direction."

"Well, alright..."

The Jon ran in with an old car tire tube around his waist. "I'm ready!"

"Can he float in that?"

"Not for long. He can actually swim if he keeps moving, but if he goes too slowly, his limbs fill up with water. It always happens, sooner or later. I'll be watching, Jon."

"I won't get waterlogged this time!"

"Uh-huh."
"Ready to go!" cried Peter as he and his sister entered.

"You sure?" Marie asked Wanda, putting her arm around her.

"Absolutely. It'll be nice to see the living for a while. And Uncle Peter."

They all left.

After they'd driven away, Rabbit stood in the doorway, just as he'd imagined. With a sharp intake of air into his bellows, he rolled Honeybee’s chair slowly out the door and turned toward the park. His joints creaked awfully from the time he'd spent stationary, and he felt an increasing feeling of dread and a terrible longing to turn back. But when he stopped, unable to take another step, just before exiting the gate toward the park, Honeybee cried, "Oh, I think I saw a squirrel! Do you think there will be more in the park?"

Rabbit let off a burst of steam and tried, trembling, to push down his fear. "Y-you l-l-like squirrels?" he croaked.

"They're perfectly charming! I'd love to see more."

Rabbit shut his eyes, his boiler shuddering as he suppressed a sob, glad she was facing away from him. Just take one more step, Rabbit... then another one after that.

He coughed to clear his voice box. "Then j-just wait," he told her a little too brightly. "The p-p-p-park is f-f-full of 'em, b-b-b-baby. I'll show ya!"

"How wonderful! I so wanted to see the park with you, Rabbit."

"W-w-well, if that's what y-y-y-you w-w-want, Honey, that's what y-y-you'll g-get."

She'd been sitting beside him for weeks. He couldn't just take her back in now. Not after all she'd been through. She was built to make people smile. She made him smile. It was about time he returned the favor. He pushed her chair past the opened gate, cringing and almost crying out as it clanged shut behind them.

Another step, Rabbit... you'll be home before you know it...

A whimper escaped his lips as he walked, but he kept moving.

"Thank you, darling," she murmured, wiping her eyes.

"Come and play, Spine!"

"I'm good here, thanks."

The visit with Peter III had been brief. He was tired when they arrived, and managed to stay awake just long enough to show he was making good progress recovering his speech. The Spine would have preferred to stay there, but Peter III needed his rest, and the waves were waiting.

But not for him. From time to time, one of the others would try to coax The Spine out from under the big beach umbrella, without success. He was enjoying watching Marie play in the sand and surf. It was enough.
She trotted over after a game of volleyball and said, "Are you just going to watch me play the whole time?"

"Yes."

"But doesn't it make you want to get up and do something? What do you consider fun at the beach? Isn't all my running around giving you any ideas?"

"One," he replied, pulling her close again and tipping the umbrella between them and the nearest people.

Marie slipped off his lap a few minutes later, face flushed, and said, "I'm not complaining, but you know I didn't mean that."

"I understand. But stop by anytime if you change your mind."

She laughed. "Alright, if you're happy to watch me bounce around in a bathing suit, I won't stop you."

"Oh, I am. Thank you."

She shook her head and jogged back over to the others. He could swear she was adding a little extra bounce. It made him happy.

He watched her run through the waves contentedly. But he didn't forget the other reason he was staying there, just watching. Experience had taught him not to relax too much at the beach.

The Jon hadn't managed to sink himself yet. The Spine waited.

Rabbit drank the rest of the water in his canteen. He'd have to refill it at the next fountain, if he survived that long. He couldn't break out in a cold sweat... but he was certainly releasing steam at an alarming rate.

"There's another one," said Honeybee.

"Uh-huh..."

They'd spent the last half hour admiring squirrels. Really, Rabbit had never seen anyone this crazy about squirrels, not even The Jon. When had she developed such a mad passion for squirrels?

He mopped steam residue from his face with his sleeve. Ah, there was a fountain! One more refill, and maybe he could persuade her to head home before he actually went stark raving mad.

As he filled the canteen, he looked at Honeybee. She was smiling back. He sighed as he twisted the lid into place. She was really enjoying the walk. She was just happy to be with him. Shouldn't that be a good feeling? Only now it gave him more of a sinking feeling...

"Could we see that pond over there, darling? Then after that..."

Oh, no... no more...

"I think I'd like to go home again."

_Hissssss! "R-r-really?"

"Oh, I am. Thank you."

She shook her head and jogged back over to the others. He could swear she was adding a little extra bounce. It made him happy.

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They'd spent the last half hour admiring squirrels. Really, Rabbit had never seen anyone this crazy about squirrels, not even The Jon. When had she developed such a mad passion for squirrels?

He mopped steam residue from his face with his sleeve. Ah, there was a fountain! One more refill, and maybe he could persuade her to head home before he actually went stark raving mad.

As he filled the canteen, he looked at Honeybee. She was smiling back. He sighed as he twisted the lid into place. She was really enjoying the walk. She was just happy to be with him. Shouldn't that be a good feeling? Only now it gave him more of a sinking feeling...

"Could we see that pond over there, darling? Then after that..."

Oh, no... no more...

"I think I'd like to go home again."

_Hissssss! "R-r-really?"
"Yes, just a little longer, beloved. Just a little longer and then home."

"J-j-j-just a l-l-little l-longer..." He couldn't help thinking of her, wondering how long she had... Well, if she wanted to see the pond, she would see the pond.

"To the pond and then home," she said in even, soothing tones.

Something nagged at Rabbit's awareness, but he was too nervous to recognize it. *Honeybee wants to see the pond. Then I can go home.* These were the words that kept him going.

"Any-anything f-for you, b-b-b-baby..."

In the process of watching Jon come close to oblivion without quite arriving, The Spine noticed a couple of newcomers to the group. A young man had settled next to Wanda on the sand as she helped The Jon build a sand castle, and another was chatting with Marie.

His seat under the umbrella wasn't very comfortable, all of a sudden. And it isn't easy to find a seat uncomfortable when you're made of metal.

"So there's sharks at this beach..." he muttered.

Marie whispered into the ear of the young man next to her. The Spine was across the sand before he even realized he meant to do it. He arrived at the castle as the young man shuffled over to speak to his friend.

"Oh, decided to join us?" Marie asked, hurrying to meet him.

"Well, yes, of course, you... you were..."

"What?" She looked puzzled.

His eyes flicked in the direction of the two young men, who were now staring at him.

"Oh, brother, look at that!" one of them cried.

Marie frowned prettily. "That' is a him. This is The Spine. He's Jon's brother."

"Jon?"

She pointed. Jon looked up and grinned. The young men jumped.

"I didn't even notice! I just thought he had a crazy tan..."

"Jon has that affect on people," said Wanda.

"But this one... Lookit this guy!"

"That's quite enough of that!" said Marie. "If y'all can't stop staring y'all can move on. We're here with them."

"What, these tin men?"

The Spine had heard all he wanted to hear. The Jon was oblivious, but he always was. Like The Spine, though, he'd fought wars for snot-nosed brats like these two...
"I think you'd better go," he said tightly. One of them took a step backward, but the other stood his ground.

"Oh, come on... look, we're sorry, uh... mister. We just never saw anything like you before."

"You've never heard of the Steam Man Band?" asked Marie.

They shrugged. Now The Spine was positive he wanted them to leave.

"Sorry. We're new around here. Whaddya play? Rockabilly?"

The Spine snorted.

"No. Look, if y'all can behave, you can stay," said Marie.

The Spine looked at her sharply, unable to find words for his dismay. The young men grinned, dropped to the sand and started helping Jon build.

It turned out that their names were Teddy and Phil. Phil was the one Marie had whispered to earlier. Consequently, he was the one The Spine would be watching with the most diligence.

And, he decided, he'd be doing it up close, where the roar of the waves wouldn't be enough to keep him from hearing what was said.

The Spine spent the afternoon building a sand castle, collecting shells, and playing volleyball, all while enduring a conversation between Marie and Phil on the subject of her fiancé, David. Phil seemed to think that the apparent distance of this somewhat fictional young man and the lack of a diamond on her finger meant that the engagement was somewhat less of an obstacle than it might otherwise have been. Marie cast him apologetic looks when she was obliged to say that her fiancé was a soldier (though he certainly had been) and that she was a maid at Walter Manor. More than once, The Spine came within a hair's breadth of telling the kid who her fiancé really was before sending him and his friend on their way, preferably with a carefully controlled smack upside the head.

But he understood, much to his frustration. She didn't want trouble, and if word got out that they intended to be married, there would be trouble. She was doing it for them. So he held back, until he saw Phil ogle Marie one time too many. The Spine, in his irritation, served the volleyball well out to sea.

Jon jumped into the ocean to retrieve it before anyone could stop him. When he managed to get himself into a working paddle, there was a collective sigh of relief.

"He can swim! That's amazing!" said Teddy.

"It sure is!" said Marie.

"Not as amazing as you," whispered Phil to Marie.

"Phil, stop it," said Marie. Maybe it was her accent, or maybe she just wasn't as concerned as she should have been, but she didn't sound very severe, The Spine thought.

"No, seriously, baby. I know you've got a boyfriend..."

"Fiancé!"

"Right, but he's there and I'm here, see?"
Marie gaped. The Spine stepped between them.

"She told you already. She's engaged," he said in his most intimidating bass tone. "So you'd better..."

Wanda's cry interrupted him. "Spine! He's sunk!"

"What?" The Spine turned from Phil's livid, frightened face, and realized he could see a volleyball rolling in the waves, but no sign of The Jon.

He sprinted down the beach and straight into the water. When he was chest-deep, he ducked into the waves and looked for his brother. He scanned the area around where Jon was last seen, until his photoreceptors adjusted to the change in light and he saw him. Jon was laying on the sandy shoreline silt, limp from being in emergency shut down mode, shifting gently to and fro with the surf. It would have been terrifying if he hadn't seen it so many times before. As it was, he knew what to do.

He scooped Jon up and slung him over his shoulder, and headed slowly back for the beach.

"H-h-h-honeybee, b-b-baby... ya r-ready to g-go b-b-back yet?"

"Why, Rabbit, darling! Are you quite alright? You're stuttering such a lot."

He was trembling so hard as he sat beside her at the pond that the stone bench he sat on was starting to shudder on its base. He hastily stood.

"I th-th-think I'm r-r-ready to h-head b-b-b-back!"

"Oh, so am I. But maybe we can come back tomorrow?"

"T-t-t-t-t-tomorrow?" cried Rabbit, managing to keep the edge of terror out of his voice through prolonged stuttering. "W-w-w-well... y-y-yeah, I'll try. F-f-for y-you, b-baby."

"Thank you, beloved."

Even through his terror, Rabbit's boiler bubbled and his bellows forgot to pump... just for a moment. Beloved... It never got old.

She was worth it. He'd do it, somehow.

He grabbed her chair and steered her back to Walter Manor as fast as he could go without dumping her onto the sidewalk.

Marie wrung her hands as she waited for the robots to reappear. Maybe the Walters had gotten used to this, but it was new to her. She thought they'd been kidding about Jon sinking...

"What happened?" cried Peter, running up as they all stared into the waves. "Oh, no! Not again!"

"Every time, Pete," said Wanda, sighing.

"He does this a lot?" asked Teddy.

"Yeah, but it's fine. The Spine will bring him back out, same as always."
Phil put his arm around Marie, apparently to comfort her. She slapped it away, fed up at last.

"You don't learn, do you?" she snapped. "I love my fiancé! I don't care how far away he is! Now stop fussin' me!"

Phil took a step away. She sighed angrily and looked back at the waves. Where were they? She fought tears as she waited.

She gasped in relief a moment later when a head broke the waves and The Spine, t-shirt plastered to the sculpted plates of his silver-metal chassis, strode like an ocean god from the water into the bright afternoon sunshine, carrying his brother. Her heart pounded and a sob mixed with a laugh escaped her throat... If he had become waterlogged, too, she didn't know how they would have saved him.

The light struck the silver metal of his skin and the water dripping from the shorts, making it almost impossible to look at him. She squinted and did her best; he really was breathtaking in this light. There were gasps from other onlookers as he appeared, including giggles from a cluster of young women. Marie frowned at them briefly and ran to her fiancé.

"Will he be alright, love?" she cried.

He shushed her quickly, looking around at the gathering crowd.

"Oh, who cares if they hear? I was so worried about you both..."

"Really?"

"Of course, you idiot!" She clapped her hand over her mouth.

He laughed, looked into her eyes and smiled reassuringly. "I'm just fine, love," he murmured. "And he will be, too." Louder, he told the onlookers, "If everyone could give me a little space..."

The crowd moved back and The Spine plopped The Jon onto the sand, where he expertly pumped out the little robot's bellows and restarted his motor. In a moment, The Jon sat up, water pouring from his neck. There was some scattered, uncertain applause from the crowd as the people, uncertain about what exactly they'd just seen, wandered back to their blankets and towels.

"What am I doin' here?" asked The Jon rather thickly. He looked at The Spine. "Aw, not again!"

The Spine nodded. "Every time."

Jon folded his arms and stuck out his lip. "Nuh-uh."

"It's okay, Jon. I'll always pull you out."

"It's not fair!"

"Well, if you don't want to drown, just don't go out too far."

"I guess," Jon humphed.

The Spine helped his brother stand and looked around. "Where's Phil?" he asked.

"I guess he gave up," said Marie. "I'm sorry, love... I don't do well at being severe. I wish I could have just said, 'This is my fiancé, so if you want to hit on me, try discussing it with him!'" She laughed. "That would have been wonderful."
"Why?"

"Well, he wouldn't have bothered me for so long!"

"You could have just told him to go."

"I did! Apparently I sound cute when I say it," she murmured angrily.

"Well, that I believe. Maybe I can give you lessons in sounding frightening and you can teach me to speak gently."

"Deal."

"I don't want Marie to sound frightening!" cried The Jon in a strange voice. He coughed.

Marie looked at him strangely. "Do robots cough?"

"Only when they need to go home and shut down until their bellows dry," said The Spine firmly.

"Awww..." The Jon coughed again.

Wanda and Peter walked up carrying beach bags. "All packed up, Spine. Can you get the rest?"

"I don' wanna go home yet!" cried The Jon. He doubled up with coughing and there was a sound like a toilet plunger getting sucked into a street sweeper. The Jon fell flat on his face and didn't get up.

"Oh, no!" cried Marie.

To her shock, Wanda was laughing. "He'll be alright, Marie. He needs to get cleaned and dried first, though. I think his bellows stuck to itself."

"That's my guess," Peter agreed. "Marie, how much can you carry?"

"I'll make two trips," said The Spine as he scooped The Jon up once more and took him to the car.

By the time they had returned to Walter Manor, Honeybee was sitting in the kitchen with Rabbit, who was drinking a tall glass of water.

"You're out of the sitting room!" cried Wanda, smiling, as she went past toward her room. "Well done, Rabbit!"

"I wonder," said Marie, stopping at the doorway. "I think Honeybee is responsible."

Rabbit sighed. "You bet she is. I c-c-couldn't keep her in there forever. We went for a walk in the park to see the squirrels. And we're goin' again t-t-t-t-t-tomorrow."

The Spine grinned down at Rabbit. "I knew you could do it, Rabbit."

Rabbit stared at The Jon, who was dangling from The Spine's shoulder. "Again?"

"Always, Rabbit." He marched out to tend to cleaning and drying the little brass robot.

"I g-g-guess I'd better help. I'll be back soon, baby." Rabbit kissed Honeybee's hand and marched after The Spine.
"Nice work, Honey," said Marie.

Honeybee smiled. "He did it himself. He was terrified, but he got up and went out, poor lamb... all on his own."

"Uh-huh," said Marie, giving her a sidelong stare and a grin. "All on his own."

"Yes."

"Not even a nudge from you?"

"He was amazing."

Marie gave up. "Have it your way. So, you like squirrels?"

"Can't stand them. I've had too many scurry over me over the years."

"You gonna tell Rabbit that?"

"Never." She smiled again.

"You're my hero, Honey." Marie, chuckling to herself, left to change clothes.

Honeybee, sitting alone, allowed a few oily tears to drip from her eyes. It broke her heart to see Rabbit so terrified... but she knew no other way for him to get through it. If that meant she had to pretend to like squirrels, it was a small price to pay.

Epilogue(because I forgot this before...):

"Marie? He's all cleaned out. Once his bellows is dry, we'll switch him on."

Marie put down her book. "That's a relief. I couldn't believe you were all so calm."

"You get used to it." He sat beside her, dressed once more in his black shirt and trousers. "I have something to give you."

"Something to give me, love?"

"Wanda heard what that idiot was saying to you at the beach... I guess she inherited a few things from Mother... I mean, Iris. Pappy's wife. She gave me this."

He took her hand and put a ring onto it. It was silver with a star sapphire set in an ornate design; simple and complex at the same time.

"It's still not a diamond," he apologized.

She laughed. "It's amazing! Who would want a diamond if they could have this?"

"Well... Diamonds are shiny. I'd heard all women wanted diamonds..."

"Oh, you're a diamond." She thought of the moment he had walked out of the ocean, gleaming in the sunshine, and sighed.
"I am a diamond." He put his arm around her. "By the way..." he murmured casually. "Why were you whispering to Phil earlier...?"

"What? I was warning him that Teddy should leave Wanda alone. Since she's in mourning."

"Ah. Right. Thanks."

She smiled. "Why do you ask?"

"That ring looks a little loose..."

"Uh-huh."

Chapter End Notes

Group hug for Rabbit! Oh, and... I like squirrels.
Chapter Summary

Life goes on... just not always with the same company.

Chapter Notes

Yeah, this is a sad one. I'm assuming everyone already knows about Colonel Peter Walter III dying of unknown complications in 1956, according to the SPG timeline. That's where my head-canon steps in and makes up some nonsense for you to read. It is, after all, a what-if based upon the fixed events listed in that timeline.

Thanks to an anonymous reader for suggesting exactly the right thing for The Spine to say, and the right way for Rabbit to hear it. It has, in fact, become a huge chunk of the story. I could never pass up the chance for Rabbit feels... erm, so to speak...

Come over to the feels... all are welcome... allll are welcome...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So, the doctor said she's dependent on formula and blue matter..."

"I should have known any doctor you'd call in to Walter Manor would be a member of that... that science club," said Louise.

"The Cavalcadium," said The Spine softly. He was carefully settled into a sturdy old rocking chair, holding the sleeping baby while Marie slept. The blue matter coil had dissipated not long after she fell asleep. Apparently, she was full.

"Whatever. So she's healthy, then?"

"As far as he can tell... she's something new." He gently stroked her soft fringe of hair as he spoke. "She's certainly not underweight."

"No, I should think not! Thirteen pounds... But she's so tiny!"

"We can't know yet how much of her is robotic. I hope none... how will she grow?"

"But... that core... Did he say whether... well, whether she has a heart?"

"She does! He heard it. He thinks all of her is human except for her core. I guess I just don't want to get my hopes up."

"Haven't you w-w-w-worried enough, brother?" asked Rabbit.

"He has kids, Rabbit. Worrying is part of the job." She blinked at the baby. "Especially with this one..."
"Um," Rabbit agreed. That was true; he'd seen it with Pappy, and with Peter II.

And it seemed to hold true for uncles as well. He had been sitting by in silence, doing his own worrying. It was crazy enough learning that The Spine was going to be a father. He certainly hadn't expected him to become a mother.

Rabbit giggled loudly, breaking the silence. Louise shushed him, but looked as though she wanted to know the joke. *His buddy.* He'd tell her later.

"Where's Honeybee, metal man?"

Honeybee! "She shut down a week ago..."

"What?"

"Couldn't stand the suspense. I... uh... was just about to go turn her on."

He felt awful. He'd been so worried about his brother's baby that he'd forgotten all about his own! He jogged off to tell her the news.

*The glass room was empty. On its floor lay a set of keys, some buttons, various unidentified bits of metal, a handful of scattered change.*

"Two... Guy..."

"That's all that's left, then. That's all that's left..."

"I told you to stop..." he sobbed, sinking back against the wall. "You jerk! Why didn't you stop? Why do you have to be such a know-it-all?"

Peter Walter III blinked. He must have dozed off.

And had the Dream again.

It had been just five years since his brother and nephew had died, and he had lived. It hadn't been easy, surviving under such conditions, especially with his health the way it was. He wanted to rest, and yet he wanted to carry on living... So much was happening in the family. Rabbit had Honeybee back, Peter IV was graduating college, The Spine had been changed to look almost human and had somehow done the one thing no one expected... become a father.

Peter had once wanted to be one himself. Somehow settling down had just never happened. There had been options. Two had always accused him of being married to his rank. He supposed if he had it to do over, he'd have married one of those girls. Or not. He'd been in love, but he'd never really seen himself spending his whole life with any of the girls who had shown an interest. It was... complicated.

He liked being an uncle, anyway. He'd heard activity in the night... bustling about, knocks at the door, a faint cry. He hoped it meant what he thought it did. He wanted very much, before he died, to meet a child whose father was a robot, especially when the robot was his brother.

And there wasn't much time.
Rabbit slipped quietly into their room, even though Honeybee was completely shut down. He dusted her gently with a spare scarf and flipped her power switch.

When her systems check was complete, her eyes opened.

"Beloved," she smiled. Rabbit giggled. "Is it over, then? Is all w-w-w-w-well?"

Rabbit bit back the cry that rose to his lips as she stuttered. She'd only just started glitching a few months ago, and it scared him right down to his core every single time she did it. It wasn't like Rabbit's stutter. Peter IV had confirmed that it was the beginning of the deterioration his father had warned them about years ago.

"It is, baby," he forced himself to say. "It's all well! They have a little girl named Lily! I'll take ya to see her."

She threw her arms around his neck. He scooped her up, by now well-used to lifting the weight of her steel chassis. He pressed his face close to hers and whispered, "I missed you, Honey. D-don't go away for so long."

"Alright, b-b-b-beloved."

Rabbit closed his eyes and held her tightly for a moment before returning her to her chair and wheeling her out of the room.

The Spine tapped gently at the door of Peter III's room. The door was opened by a woman in a nurse's uniform.

"Hello, Miss Betty. I wonder, is the Colonel up to a visit?"

"Oh, yes, he is, hon," she replied, smiling down at the bundle in his arms. "Is that her, then?"

"Meet Lily."

She leaned in, beaming. She was the first person who didn't appear to be looking for anything robotic. "Oh, she's just precious! How's Marie?"

"Sleeping. She's going to be fine, though."

"Oh, that's neat! Well, how does Davey like having a little sister?"

"He hasn't met her yet. He and The Jon fell asleep in the TV room," he added with a frown.

"Oh, how sweet." She looked up at his frown and stopped smiling. "The Jon let him run around naked again, didn't he?"

"I just hope he doesn't soil the floor in his sleep..."

"I'll help clean it up if he does. Or did you not mean Davey?" She winked. "Well, bring her in, then. I was going to send for you, in fact..."

"Is everything alright?" he murmured, peering around the door.

"I... don't know. He's been fine, but... Well, come on in and see him."
The Spine hesitated before walking into the room. Betty usually came right out with things. She had come to them from working in a home for the elderly. He remembered that she had once said that there was a certain feel in the room when person was close to death... he'd been skeptical at the time.

Peter III sat in a reclining chair by his window. The sunshine was pouring in on his lap. He had a little smile on his face.

"Peter?" The Spine said softly. He didn't know why he called him Peter this time. She was right; something was different somehow...

"Brother... you called me Peter," he replied slowly, tilting his head a little toward the doorway. He could speak, with effort. Though a series of mini-strokes had meant set-backs, he had always managed to regain his speech.

"I brought you a visitor," The Spine murmured.

He pulled up a chair and sat close to Peter, tugging at the blankets around his new daughter.

"This is Lily."

Peter reached out a trembling hand to stroke her little cheek. Then he carefully pulled the blanket a little further down, exposing the blue glow in her chest. He nodded.

"Two would never have believed it." He chuckled, but his eyes sparkled with tears.

"Peter... are you feeling alright?"

"Of course, brother. I'm not in any pain. I can't remember the last time I felt this calm."

The Spine sat back a little, his uneasy joy for a moment forgotten. It was a little thing, he supposed, but it had hit him like a cannonball to the chest.

Restless Peter Walter III was calm. Even after his strokes, it had been hard to keep Peter still. His whole life had been one long search for the next thing that would stave off boredom. He used to cry as a child about sitting still, and wasn't much better about it as a man.

The Spine felt the hot bubbling of backed up boiler water... his equivalent of having a lump in his throat. This was it, then. He tried to tell himself that he was jumping to conclusions, but there really was a feeling in the room... it was almost as if Two and Pappy were in there with them... but of course that was ridiculous. He fought the urge to look over his shoulder to see if someone was there.

And he fought tears. They'd known for months that it wouldn't be long... but it was still too soon. Why couldn't he stay a little longer?

Rabbit wheeled Honeybee through the Manor at a jog.

"She's a r-r-real cutie, Honey. I think she looks like The Spine! I still don't understand it, but they're h-happy, so I'm happy."

He peeked into The Spine's room. Marie was still sleeping. Louise looked up from a crossword puzzle.

"Hey, metal man! Hiya, Honey!" she whispered loudly.
"Hey, where's the baby?"

"Oh, your brother took her to meet her Uncle Peter."

"Right! Thanks, toots!"

"Oh, you."

He grabbed Honeybee's chair and jogged away toward the elevator.

The Spine heard a cry out in the hall. The Jon came in carrying Davey. They were both wearing diapers.

'Daddy!' Davey cried, reaching. Betty shushed him and the boy slipped into a sulky silence as The Spine, grateful for a distraction, shifted Lily to one arm to make room for Davey on his other knee.

"So, Jon," said Betty calmly, without so much as a smile. "Why are you wearing a diaper?"

"He wouldn't put one on unless I put one on too!" said The Jon. He leaned in and whispered, "I tricked him! I don't actually wear diapers!"

"Uh-huh."

Davey was staring at his sister. "Baby!" he piped.

"That's right, Davey. This is your little sister. Her name is Lily."

"Lililily?"

"Right." Close enough.

The child frowned and pointed. "Dat a baby, Dad."

Peter chuckled.

Rabbit arrived at Peter's room.

"That's right, buddy. She's your baby sister," The Spine was saying. "She's ours now, Davey. You get to be a big brother."

Rabbit wheeled Honey quietly through the open door and stood next to The Jon, who was looking on with his mouth hanging open.

"Ya, I a big boy!" cried Davey.

"Yes," said The Spine, holding the boy close. "You are a big boy. But now you're also a big brother, which is even more special. Uncle Rabbit is Daddy's big brother, and I'm Uncle Jon's big brother, and Uncle Jon is..."

Jon squeaked quietly. Rabbit patted his shoulder.

The Spine looked at Peter. "Too complicated," the man said with a smile.
"There's really more than three brothers..." The Spine sighed as Davey reached for the baby's blanket.

"Keep it simple, Spine."

"Alright. Davey? Don't touch... she's sleeping. Davey, you get to be like Uncle Rabbit. You're baby Lily's big brother..."

Rabbit's lip trembled. The Jon sniffled. The Spine continued, apparently too absorbed in trying to explain things to Davey to notice anyone else.

"It's... it's the most important job in the world, son," he explained. "You get to protect her and help her and look out for her."

Davey looked up at him blankly. The Spine sighed. What had he expected from a 2-year-old? Peter reached over and patted the little boy's head.

"It's like being Superman," said Peter.

"Supe'man!" crowed Davey. This meant something to him.

"Peter..." The Spine sighed.

"Superman..." said Rabbit in high, quavering tones, his body wracked with shuddering. The Spine looked up in surprise. Honeybee waved and patted Rabbit's hand.

"Rabbit?" he said. "What is it?"

"Aw... Spiiine..." Rabbit wailed. His shoulders bobbed up and down as he sobbed.

"What's wrong? Is someone hurt?"

"Superman..."

"Superman, Rabbit!" Jon wailed, turning to hug him.

The Spine stared at them both blankly. Betty wiped nonchalantly at her eyes and smiled.

"Well done, Peter, you just reduced everyone to tears!"

Peter grinned weakly. "It's easy to make them cry, Betty. They're the softest men I ever met. Ironically."

Rabbit tried to pry The Jon off half-heartedly, gave up and hugged him back.

"Big brother..." sniffled Jon.

The Spine laughed, possibly a little too brightly as he looked at Peter.

"Sometimes brothers make you laugh, too," he told Davey with effort. "Aren't they silly?"

Betty pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face. He gave her a puzzled look.

"You have your hands full so I thought I'd just wipe up for you." She showed him the oil-streaked cloth. "You're right, Peter. Soft, every last one."
The Spine tried to smile, but his tears were for a different reason. He was half-afraid he'd open his mouth to speak and a sob would come out instead.

"Rabbit..." moaned Jon as he wept. "I miss my little brother!"

"It's alright, buddy. D-don't start worryin' about that again," Rabbit murmured, rubbing The Jon's back. "Hatchy's safe, y'know. We shut him down before we stored him. It's not your fault, ya understand?"

"Uh-huh..." Jon was puffing with childish sobs.

"By the way..." Rabbit leaned back and looked him over. "Wh-wh-why exactly are ya wearin' a diaper over yer clothes?"

"I don't know!" he wailed, plopping his face against Rabbit's shoulder.

"I'll explain it later. Peter needs some rest now, boys." Betty ushered them out the door. Rabbit and The Jon rolled Honeybee out together, since Rabbit still had one arm wrapped comfortably around The Jon's back. The Spine stood, carefully easing Davey onto the floor.

"Come by after my nap, big brother. I'd like to see her when she's awake."

"Of course, Peter." He led Davey slowly toward the door, stopping to look back before leaving.

He didn't want to go. Everything had been so nice for a minute or two, but he was afraid...

"It's alright, brother," said Peter as Lily woke and began to fuss hungrily. "I'll be here."

The Spine nodded.

As he led Davey out the door and gently bounced Lily, he heard Peter chuckle quietly and murmur, "Did you ever see that one coming, Two? Neither did I."

Alarmed, he looked back into the room. Peter was turned away, looking at a photo of his twin brother, Peter II. The Spine tried to relax; he realized he was shaking. You're letting your imagination get the better of you, tin man... no wonder, after all you've been through today.

He finally left, resolving to bring the others back with him when he visited later.

Just in case.

Chapter End Notes

*yes, I was making a sleazy pun, even though the phrase didn't mean that yet as far as I know.

Adding a little brag here... Having Superman in it was spot on, I didn't even realize when I wrote it. The Superman tv series with George Reeves was a big hit in the 1950s. So even a toddler would have known about Superman.
Hound Dog

Chapter Summary

It's been more than two years since Peter Walter III died and Peter Walter V came to live in Walter Manor. The Spine has some fresh problems to face... public school and rock and roll.

Chapter Notes

Everyone knows the canon... Peter III dies, Peter V comes to live at the Manor. Why V wasn't already there, I dunno. I've left all that alone and moved on with my head-canon instead. I know I'm not the only one who figured Rabbit's wiggle would make sense as a product of the birth of rock and roll... it's got an Elvis quality sometimes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Davey! It's time to go," Marie called. "Is Lily ready, love?"

"Ready, Mama!" piped Lily from The Spine's arms as he strode into the entrance hall.

"How do I look?" he asked, looking into the big mirror critically.

"Human," she said, sounding slightly disdainful. He did, too. He was expert with his makeup, and his upgrades had just made it easier. Despite how he had looked when they met, though, she had come to prefer her husband to be silver. The Spine, on the other hand, was pleased with her response, and grinned into the mirror, tucking a loose strand of hair behind his ear and admiring the results. Marie laughed softly as Davey trotted in.

"Ready, Mama!" he cried loudly. "But why isn't Peter going to school?"

"He's going to be taught at home, Davey. The Walters like to do things a little differently."

"But we're Walters, Mommy!"

She looked at The Spine, who shrugged. Thanks a lot, she thought. She decided to take an alternate route. "Don't you want to go to school?"

"Uh-huh."

"And you'll meet lots of other little boys and girls your age. That'll be fun, won't it?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then let's go..."

She turned in time to see Rabbit appear suddenly at The Spine's elbow and sweep Lily out of his
arms. She squealed joyfully.

_Dang it..._ she looked at the grandfather clock impatiently.

"Airheart..." he sang. "That girl was meant to fly..."

"How's that song coming along, Rabbit?" asked The Spine.

"Oh, i-it's fine..."

"It's not gonna be rockabilly, is it?"

"They call it r-r-rock and roll, now, grandpa."

She could tell The Spine was biting back his first response due to the presence of the children. He muttered, "If I'm a grandpa, what does that make you?"

"An immortal I guess." Rabbit winked, put Lily on his shoulder, and looked at Davey, all dressed for school. "You sure about this, Spine?" he asked quietly.

"No."

"This isn't a good time, you two..." Marie sighed. "We decided this... He wants to go, and I'll be with him the whole time."

She turned quickly away from the mournful look on her husband's face. The Spine clearly was suffering from separation anxiety, even though he had agreed with her about sending Davey to public school. It had seemed like a wonderful idea to take a job as a teacher's assistant at the same time as he started kindergarten. She'd wanted to get back to teaching anyway. Money came into the Walter family occasionally, but it was usually from the government, usually involved something too dangerous for human beings to do, and was only ever accepted out of desperation. She liked the idea of having a separate income, maybe a nest egg against the next government request, in addition to her husband's contributions as a performer. And, of course, she enjoyed teaching.

As for Lily, she would be no trouble to leave with her Pappy; she had always been especially attached to him. Possibly it was the special connection that came from the curious way she fed. Marie thought it was strangely adorable, if unexpected, but she couldn't help being a little jealous of that closeness sometimes, even though Lily seemed to adore her mommy, too. In fact, though she was terribly spoiled, Lily loved everyone, with the possible exception of Peter V, who had no use for her either.

Besides her parents, she seemed to love Rabbit especially, and he adored her at least as much as he loved Davey. He had been thrilled when the little girl had started calling The Spine Pappy; she was already special to him since she was, after a fashion, his own "flesh and blood" niece, and because of her eyes. When the usual dark blue had lightened as the baby got older, it was found that she had one blue eye and one green. Rabbit had been thrilled and seemed to take it as a personal compliment. It was Rabbit who had nicknamed her "Airheart" because of her sky blue core, pale in color because it was not self-sustaining, and because she got worked up every time she saw an airplane fly overhead.

His attachment was so strong, in fact, that he'd tried to share his blue matter with her the way The Spine did, but it seemed she only drew from her original source. She still required it once or twice a day; the doctor had given them reason to hope that she might one day become self-renewing, or that she might mature beyond the need for blue matter and the core might actually become superfluous. The tragic post-script to this was that they had to hope for one of these if she was to survive to adulthood without the constant accompaniment of her father. It had been hard, learning that she
might not grow up. They had taken to treasuring every moment they had with her.

But Davey to be sure sometimes resented it. As much as they tried to make it up to him, sometimes Lily just got more time. He got her back, too; sometimes teasing her, or making jokes about her with Peter V. Peter was a nice enough boy, especially considering his years in an orphanage, but even nice people sometimes make poor choices.

The clock chimed and she looked up sharply from her thoughts. Before she could urge the others to hurry, however, Marie was pulled into The Spine's arms. He rested his chin on her head.

"I'm having second thoughts..."

*Oh, for crying out loud! * "Well, have third ones, love. We'll be back around one o'clock. That's not so long, is it?"

"Uh-huh. It's forever..." he muttered into her hair, and giving her a careful squeeze.

"Oh, Spine..."

"I know..." he moaned. "Davey needs children his age."

"Right. So let's go. You'll end up wiping off your makeup, love, if you keep on like this."

"I brought extra," he boasted, turning her gently around. "So I can do this."

Davey covered his eyes as they kissed. She carefully checked for patches of silver and black in his makeup when the lingering kiss had ended... but his disguise was intact.

"Looks fine. Ready?" she asked, swallowing her own rising second thoughts.

"Alright... I guess so." He turned and held out his arms for Lily. "Come on, little one."

"Awww..." Rabbit moaned.

"She's coming with us, Rabbit. She wants to see her brother's school."

"Brudder school!" crowed Lily, launching into the song she'd made up a few days before. Rabbit made a face. "Brudder, brudder, goin' da school! Brudder goin' da school!"

Marie smiled through clenched teeth. She'd hoped Lily had forgotten that.

Rabbit apparently agreed with her. "Oh, alright, if yer gonna start singin' th-th-that again, you can go already!" he cried, grimacing. She giggled as she was almost tossed into her father's arms. Rabbit waved as they walked out the door.

He watched them walk away and ran to his room as soon as they were out of sight.

"It's all clear, baby! Let's head out!"

"Are you sure you w-w-w-want to keep doing this, Rabbit dear?" Honeybee asked as he tucked a blanket in around her legs for appearances and handed her a parasol. Her chassis could actually hurt someone if it got hot enough. "It seems bad form to do it w-w-w-w-without telling anyone."

"I know, baby..." He sighed, doing his best not to think about her stutter. At least it hadn't gotten any
worse in the last few years. Maybe it wasn’t as serious as Peter thought.

"The Spine..." he went on, "you’ve seen how he f-f-feels about it. He can’t stand the stuff. He’d n-never agree to play it."

"That is true," she said, in a tone that suggested she could do without it herself.

"Then let’s go! The guys are waiting."

"It's time to go, love," Marie said as Davey settled into his little desk. He’d already befriended another boy and seemed to have forgotten his parents existed as the two of them giggled together. "We'll see you in just a few hours."

"Five," he sulked.

"Yes, I know." She kissed him. "See you then."

The Spine scooped up Lily, straightened her little jumper to cover any trace of blue light, and waved good-bye to his son before picking his way through an alarming number of small people on his way out the door.

Lily was a welcome distraction as he walked home. She found everything interesting and asked many questions. If it hadn't been for her, he would probably have gone home, wandered Walter Manor for the next five hours, and gone slowly mad.

Home. Come to think of it, he wasn't too eager to go there just yet, even with Lily.

"Would you like to go to the park, Airheart?" he asked.

She squealed with joy. He grinned. "We'll get a snack on the way," he added as he noticed a tiny wisp of blue curling between them.

Lily munched on a packet of crackers as they walked along, admiring ducks at the pond and picking wildflowers in the grass. The Spine heard music as they came around to a gazebo. He could see, between the trees, what looked like a band playing what was unmistakeable rock and roll music. He groaned.

"That'll be the day when you say good-bye... that'll be the day when you make me cry... you say you're gonna leave, ya know it's a lie, 'cause that'll be the day that I die!"

Sappy. Rabbit must have played that one before. Something about it sounded familiar.

"Let's go another way, Airheart," he suggested.

"No, Pappy! Music! Wabbit music!" she cried, shaking her little head until her dark braids were a blur.

He sighed. He was afraid of that. Rabbit had been playing rock and roll for the children. To the Spine's horror, they adored it. He couldn't deny it had a good beat, but... Those lyrics! The one they were singing now wasn't bad, but some of the others were terrible. A whop bop-a-lu a whop bam boo? Ugh...

But Lily wanted to hear it, and he had a weakness for that... But if any of those hoods started wiggling his hips, that would be the end of it.
"Alright, Lily. But it isn't Rabbit this time. It's just the music he likes."

"Uh-huh! Wabbit music."

He scooped her up and walked, slowly, toward the gazebo. A small crowd of mothers had stopped there with babies in strollers, apparently watching the band practice. The trees were blocking his view of the band still, but he could hear one of the band members call out, "Any requests?"

"Airheart!" called a young woman.

The Spine froze. Surely not... "Maybe it's about Amelia Earhart?" he thought.

"Ah, you've heard us before! Alright! Take it, Rabbit!"

"Wabbit!" Lily cried.

Oh, no, there is no way... The Spine strode toward the gazebo. There must be some coincidence... some rockabilly punk kid with a stupid nickname...

"Alright, ladies," said the singer, his voice all at once smooth and flirtatious. "This one's for all of you!" A low giggle rippled through the assembled women.

Or not.

Lily looked toward the source of the voice eagerly. "Wabbit, Pappy! Wabbit!"

"I know, Air... heart... yes. Rabbit."

As he came into view of the gazebo, he heard a familiar, silken voice begin to sing, "Some girls say all they need is dreamin'... but some girls say they ain't got time. But for those who dream, well they just keep dreamin'."

He could see him now. The Spine sped up, growing angrier with each step. Where did Rabbit come off, doing this?

"Do you wanna sail into the sky? Soar across the stars..."

I'll send you sailing into the sky... They were the Steam Man Band, not "Rabbit and the Robots!" They were a family, not some guys who happened to sing together! Why hadn't he said anything?

"Well, I knew a girl, and her name was Lily..." Rabbit sang.

Keep it up, he seethed as he walked. You're already in it up to your neck...

"But her daddy called her something rather silly..."

Rabbit... you're a jerk... He arrived at the gazebo. Rabbit was in the front of a group of young musicians, his head covered only by his scarf, his vest off, and his shirt collar flipped up rakishly. His eyes were closed as he crooned.

"He called her by a name which matched her heart... Come on and fly with me, fly with me, my little Airheart..."

As Rabbit finished a long note, he opened his eyes, tipped his gaze up from the crowd of admiring mothers, and looked right into the Spine's angry face. His voice faltered and trailed off.
The crowd looked back and forth between them for a moment in an uneasy silence. The guitarist whispered something. Rabbit recovered; his face broke into a lop-sided, thoroughly mischievous grin, and he signaled to the band to begin to play.

They launched into a bouncy tune as Rabbit, with a swivel of his hips that would have made a stripper blush, snatched up his microphone and began to sing. Several of the women giggled and murmured.

"Her father fought in the Great War in an aeroplane named Bree... he gave his love to a pretty girl and said, 'Baby, you're the one for me!' And though her name was Bree, he still found it all a shock... when he found out she was an airplane, the stork began to knock..."

Is he trying to get us banned from park performances, wondered The Spine. Those lyrics, that... that wiggle! It was as though he'd combined every rock and roll hip wiggle into one and added a few touches from the burlesque shows they used to follow. If he'd been human, someone would have called a cop...

If it hadn't been for a few important facts... that The Spine was now in disguise as a human, was surrounded by people, and was holding a little girl who was beaming as her uncle sang a song she was sure was just for her, well, he would have grabbed Rabbit by the neck and hauled him home.

"Lily song!" she piped, squirming to get down.

He wasn't so sure. Her name was in it, and her nickname, but it was about a girl who was born of an airplane! Had Rabbit's brain finally corroded beyond recall?

The Spine sighed as she wriggled. She had learned just how to squirm so that he'd have to hurt her in order to keep a grip on her, and the end result was the same now as usual; he finally gave in and set her down. She ran straight for the gazebo, where Rabbit scooped her up. A few mothers gasped, but Lily put her arms around Rabbit's neck and kissed his copper cheek as he finished her song.

The ladies applauded and smiled indulgently as Lily bowed from Rabbit's arms. He grinned as he introduced her to the crowd, and with a twinkle in his glowing eyes, pointed out her Pappy. The Spine, remembering his human disguise, did his best to smile, and hoped he didn't look the way he felt. He was sure it was more of a grimace than a grin. He began to walk slowly toward the gazebo.

"Oh, um..." Rabbit began frantically as he drew closer. "Well, ladies, w-w-w-we'll be performing th-this Saturday so be sure and be here at one o'clock and bring your friends and family. Bye! H-h-here ya go, 'David' ol' buddy."

He tried to hand Lily over but she wouldn't let go. Rabbit giggled nervously.

"So... got a new band, hm?" asked The Spine quietly as the crowd dispersed.

"N-n-n-no, S-Spine..." Rabbit stammered, wide-eyed. "I just thought..."

"You'd sneak out and not tell anyone, and that would make it alright, hm?"

"Aw, Spine!" Rabbit shot back irritably. "What do you care? You h-hate rock and roll!"

"It's nice to be told things, that's all," he muttered, though he was beginning to wonder himself if he really ought to be this angry.

"Hey, Rabbit. Who's the square?" asked a young man with a guitar.
Yes. Yes, he really ought to be this angry.

"Cool it, Jay. This is my little brother."

"The old man or the toddler?" The other band members snickered.

"Nix..." Rabbit muttered, grinning. He looked at The Spine and the smile slowly drained from his face. "I was only kiddin' around. I just m-m-meant that you didn't play new music."

"I play new music! Haven't I been playing that new Kingston Trio song? And I kept asking you to finish Lily's song, but I hear you already have."

"Hey, don't be mad, daddy-o," said Jay pleasantly, shrugging off his guitar strap. "He just said you couldn't handle the style. It's pretty new stuff."

"Oh, it's new. Of course an old man like me wouldn't understand. Rabbit, on the other hand..."

"Spine..."

"I didn't say anything when you brought those records home. I've put up with the noise as long as it wasn't past Lily's bed time. You could have at least told me if you wanted to quit the band..."

"No, Spine!" Rabbit cried mournfully. "It ain't like that!"

"Ya gotta keep moving forward," said Jay as he settled his guitar into its case. "Cats like us, we play what's hep now. I dig Rabbit's old, too, but you wouldn't know it. He gets the scene. Of course, the folk scene is alright, it's just different, y'know?"

The Spine had heard enough hoodlum slang to make him want to throw up... and he couldn't even do that. He wanted to take Lily and leave, but first he had a point to make. He liked to think of himself as the mature brother, the one who let things go, but this was his art they were rolling their eyes at... his trade. And with his own brother dismissing his abilities. It was too much. Irritated, he scooped up the guitar and a pick before Jay could protest.

He usually played rhythm guitar, but now he had something to prove. He launched into Rabbit's song, from memory, playing exactly what Jay had and even embellishing it in places where he had rather thought it could use a little something. A few of the moms who had taken longer to leave stopped to gawk at the newcomer. When he'd strummed the last chord, they applauded as wildly as five women could.

He tipped his hat to the ladies, slung the guitar over his head and practically threw it at the young man. "Come on, Lily," he said, scooping her up against her protests. He nodded toward Honeybee in passing, as she sat beside the gazebo, looking troubled.

"No, Pappy! Wabbit! Wabbit, too, Pappy!"

"He'll be home later, Air... sweetie."

"Not sweetie, Pappy!" she screamed, bopping him on the shoulder with her little fist. "NOT SWEETIE!"

"Yeah, I think you're right about that..." he muttered very, very quietly.

Lily howled all the way home, unaccustomed to not getting her way. He decided maybe it was best if she began to learn that lesson, no matter how uncertain her future was; he certainly wasn't going
back, no matter how much she cried.

The next morning he walked his wife and son to school and went straight to the park.

"What am I doing here?" he mumbled as Lily tossed bread to the ducks.

But he knew the answer. Lily was a bit spoiled, yes; he saw that now. But she also had health problems... and had to be handled with care.

His afternoon the day before had shown that losing his temper could be dangerous. Not in the sense that he himself would harm anyone, but in the sense that he had to keep his wits about him when it came to her. She had cried all the way home, and on arriving at Walter Manor had promptly vomited down her Pappy's front. That he could have handled. But she also began to leak Blue Matter, and that was terrifying.

They'd isolated her from the other children after they arrived home, and called the usual Cavalcadium physicians, who all said the same thing... she mustn't be allowed to cry to that point. It seemed rather obvious, but The Spine had learned since the time of his own Pappy's first serious illness that doctors mostly just confirmed what you already knew and charged money for it.

But there wasn't much he could say, and he was in no mood to talk anyway. All he could think of was the same thing which had tormented him since her birth: that this was somehow his fault. Of course, he'd been involved in that... he had no regrets about it. He had a hard time keeping the grin off his face when he thought about it, in fact. But the memory of what still felt like one of the most human events in his life was tainted with the sinking feeling that he somehow should have stopped it, rather than condemning a child to living with a faulty core that might someday fail. He couldn't have known what would happen, of course; her conception was as yet unexplained, and was still being debated, investigated and studied by Cavalcadium scientists, much to his considerable embarrassment. Still, the guilt hung around his shoulders every time her core troubled her.

So The Spine was sent into the park the next day with instructions to let Lily watch Rabbit practice. Everyone in the house had insisted except for Rabbit, who had hung back, propped against the door frame, unwilling to make eye contact. The Spine knew he would be here, though; even if he had decided to stop before (which was unlikely) he would certainly be there for his niece.

Lily was on the last slice of bread, eating as much as she tossed, when they heard the first chords of guitar music.

"Bop bopa-a-lu a whop bam boo! Tutti frutti, oh Rudy..."

Ugh... Yes, Rabbit was there.

Lily tossed the rest of the bread into the pond and reached up, crying, "Wabbit now, Pappy?"

He picked her up and started toward the gazebo. "Alright... um... Lily."

"Airheart, Pappy!"

He wasn't sure how he felt about her nickname at the moment, but he knew it meant a lot to her. He sighed. "Right. Airheart. Let's go see Rabbit."

"Pappy mad at Wabbit?"
He looked at her in surprise. She patted his cheek. "Love Wabbit."

He laughed in spite of his lingering irritation.

She looked directly into his eyes and frowned. "Not funny."

"No, not funny. Alright, I love Rabbit."

"Good girl," she said, echoing what she heard herself.

He smiled in spite of himself as they arrived at the edge of the usual crowd of mothers. Rabbit and the musicians were just finishing the piece of peppy nonsense that had set The Spine's teeth on edge.

As he finished the song, Rabbit looked at Spine with wide, gloomy eyes, and turned quickly to the small audience. His smile seemed rather forced as he said, "Thanks for c-c-comin' to hear us rehearse! Next we're gonna practice a special song just for..."

"Wait, Rabbit. Hey, old man! Come on up!"

The Spine stared. "Me?"

"Yeah, come on!" Jay slipped off his guitar. "You take it."

"You've hit your head, I assume?"

Jay laughed. "I just wanna hear it again. That was amazing yesterday."

"I told you, Jay. He can play, he just don't like the new stuff. Drives him crazy."

The Spine felt a chill run right up his boiler. Had he heard right?

"Well, yeah, but maybe he can handle it better if he's playing it? That was too right."

Great. More guilt. He'd had all that rage, made Lily sick, all because Rabbit had told the band he just didn't much care for rock and roll.

*Idiot.*

Rabbit, meanwhile, was grinning at Jay. He had clearly taken to the idea.

"Coax him up, ladies!" cried the copper automaton with a look of pure mischief.

The women applauded and some even tugged at his sleeves. He backed away slightly.

"Wh-what about Lily?"

Rabbit's smile broadened to the point that it started to look a little scary. "She can sit with Honey!"

Honeybee, seated in front of the gazebo, turned and smiled.

Lily's familiar squirm began. She adored Honey and often called her Rabbit's wife. Of course, she also sometimes called her Rabbit's mommy. The Spine had told Marie he thought Lily had hit the nail on the head.

Right now, however, she seemed more like the girl in the poodle skirt who waved her scarf to start Rabbit's drag race. Was no one sane anymore?
"Pappy play too!" Lily cried as he surrendered and set her down. "I sit with Honey!"

Betrayed...

A few minutes later, Lily was on her Aunt Honey's lap and The Spine had an electric guitar slung over his shoulder. He played his first rock and roll, not counting his moment of pride the day before. It wasn't so bad... outside of "Tutti Frutti" Rabbit and his friends apparently favored songs that weren't painfully stupid. The Spine found he rather liked Buddy Holly and the Crickets. He lost track of time, interrupted in his playing only when Jay took the guitar to demonstrate something to him, or when Lily needed the potty.

Then, as one kindly mother was sharing her child's lunch with Lily, Rabbit handed The Spine a piece of sheet music and said, "Now we see if you can sing this."

"What?"

"Don't worry, it's a nice little love song. It's a little old... well, to these guys it is. But I've wanted to hear ya t-t-try it ever since it came out. An' I bet Mary would l-l-love it. Honey sure does." He looked down at Honeybee and winked. She beamed back.

"Well..." The Spine said, scanning the page. "Marie does seem to like rock and roll..."

"This ain't even hardly rock and roll, though... the guys will start ya off."

"I've never even heard it, Rabbit!"

"You've heard it... see?" He pointed at the top of the page. "It's just 'Aura Lee' with new lyrics."

"Oh... but you usually sang that."

"You've got the voice for this one, though. Come on." He signaled the band and they launched into the song.

He was surprisingly nervous as he began, "Love me tender, love me sweet, never let me go..."

Marie searched Walter Manor for The Spine. Davey toddled behind her, whistling.

"Davey, please," she said. Just to herself, she mumbled, "Where are they?"

They ran into Peter V as they were heading upstairs. "Peter, sweetie, have you seen The Spine?"

He looked at her askance and shrugged.

Counting to ten in her head, she said gently, "Is that a yes or a no, Peter?"

"Haven't seen him since breakfast."

"Thank you. Maybe that roomful of wires? But he wouldn't take Lily in there..."

"He does sometimes. She likes to swing on the wires."

"What?"

"She's safe," he replied, suddenly enthusiastic. "He can control 'em! It's so neat!"
She leaned back, eyebrows raised. "Can he? That's remarkable..." She'd have to talk to him about that. "Well, I suppose he must still be at the park. I hope Lily hasn't been too much trouble. Do you two want to go to the park?"

They both nodded and the three of them set out.

"So, you like electrical things, Peter?" Marie asked uneasily. She had been trying to draw Peter out a bit over the past couple of years, but though this looked like a means to do it, she knew nothing about electronics.

"I like all that stuff, ma'am. The Spine's been teachin' me to fix robots."

He has? "Well, that's nice. I guess you'll need that, since Walter Manor is yours now."

"Yeah, and the grounds and the duckpond and the robots."

Marie stiffened. "Well, I'd thought they owned themselves, really..."

"They don't. I saw the paper. I own them."

She suddenly didn't much want to draw Peter out any further. It seemed odd now that it had never occurred to her that The Spine was property... She'd have to ask him about it later.

They arrived at the park and hurried to the gazebo The Spine had told them about. Quite a number of young mothers were still crowded around. But as they came nearer, there was a surprise...

"Love me tender, love me long, take me to your heart..."

She came into view of the band and was startled to realize that it was her husband singing, with Rabbit adding harmony. The Spine turned and saw her.

He smiled gently as he looked directly into her eyes and he sang, "For it's there that I belong, and we'll never part."

Everything went tingly. Oh, my...

"Love me tender, love me dear, tell me you are mine."

Yes, darling... She couldn't feel her feet. What was it about a man singing a love song? Ah, but that was a silly question. It was everything about a man singing a love song. Especially this man.

"I'll be yours through all the years, till the end of time."

Mine... or Peter V's? No, don't spoil this, Marie... Besides, she had a feeling The Spine saw it differently than Peter did. She felt tears prickling in her eyes. She'd always liked that melody...

"When at last my dreams come true, darling this I know. Happiness will follow you everywhere you go."

It already does...

The ladies cheered as he slung the guitar strap over his head and started down from the gazebo. Marie pulled out her handkerchief and tried to keep from sobbing like a child. Peter and Davey were looking at her with blank faces.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" asked Davey.
"Nothing, sweetheart. I-I just loved it!"

Peter looked at her askance and said, "I guess it's just a paper, though..."

"What, sweetheart?"

"They can do whatever they want, I guess. 'Cause they're people."

She laughed and hugged him with one arm. He squirmed, dismayed, and was rescued by the arrival of The Spine, who swept her into his arms joyfully as the crowd beamed and giggled.

"You're back!" he cried, grinning. "I missed you... Let's get Lily and head home!"

"Aww..." said the boys as one.

"Maybe after we play for a while," she promised. She squeezed The Spine as hard as she could manage. "That was so beautiful..."

"What? Oh, yes, it's a pretty song, isn't it?"

"Yeah... a pretty song," she said with a faint hiccup. A pretty song indeed... "Aren't you practicing with the band, though?"

"They just asked me to join them today. Lily tricked me into it."

"Lily? But you were wonderful!"

"I was?"

"You can join us anytime," said Jay. The band had followed him down. "Just say the word. Rabbit can't get 'Love Me Tender' right anyway."

"Hey!" Rabbit snapped, but he was grinning.

"Well... maybe sometimes."

"I might play once in a while. Maybe you should ask Jon sometime. He'd like it better."

"He would... but he won't stay in the gazebo. We tried it."

"Oh. Well, Lily likes coming here, so I guess we'll be around."

"Good enough. See ya tomorrow!" He turned and headed back toward the gazebo.

"Right. Tomorrow." What had he done?

The Spine looked at his brother, who was asking Davey about his day, and remembered what he hadn't done. "Rabbit?"

"Huh?"

"I... I misunderstood yesterday. I'm sorry I got so angry..."

"No problem, buddy... I was totally innocent, but I forgive ya."

"Totally innocent?"
“Except for the sneaking,” he added sheepishly. “So, do ya like rock an’ roll now?”

“Well, it’s... it’s so you, Rabbit.”

“Hey, thanks!”

“But... maybe... we could try ’Airheart’ sometimes? Y’know, with the actual band?”

“Yeah. As long as we play it my way.”

“It’ll be a struggle, but I think I can handle that.”

Marie put the children to bed that night. The Spine went into the wire room, but not to hang around. He picked up his guitar and played, trying some new things with an older song. He played as he sang, tapping his foot, getting the new tempo just right.

“Me and my baby love Saturday nights, Saturday ni-ight...”

Marie was reading in bed when he came down. “Practicing?” she asked, looking at his guitar as he put it away.

“Just trying what I’ve learned. I guess I have to move forward sometime.”

“Well, you’re going to be around a long time, after all.” She smiled, even as her observation hit home.

“Marie...” he began, suddenly panicked.

“What’s wrong?”

He lay down beside her and put his head on her shoulder, try to regain his composure. It happened every now and then. He remembered that no matter how human he lived, he was still a robot. And she would grow old... and die.

“Oh... of course. I’m sorry... Look, love,” she whispered, when he didn’t respond. “We have this, now? Understand?”

“I know,” he replied thickly, his voice trembling. “I’ll be alright...”

“I know you will.” She put her arms around him. “So... that song...”

“Which one?” he murmured, closing his eyes.

“The one you were singing when I came along.”

“Oh. You liked it... Rabbit said he thought you would.”

She laughed. “Oh, that Rabbit! He knows it’s one of my favorites.”

“His little joke, I guess.”

“Some joke. He’s made it a very long day for me, you know that?”

“What? Why?” he asked, looking up.
She kissed him. "I had to wait until Lily and Davey were asleep to let you know how I really feel about it," she whispered.

"I'll have to sing it more often..." he sighed, smiling.

"How about now?"

"Well..."

"Just one thing..." She got up and locked the door.

Oh...

"No need for the guitar..." she said softly as she switched off the light.

As she slipped back into his arms, he smiled and resolved to thank Rabbit tomorrow. It would drive him nuts when he didn't tell him why.

Chapter End Notes

I confess, I think Bunny Bennett could murder "Love Me Tender" in the most toe-melting way possible... but then, that sorta means David could, too. doesn't it? Though their in-character singing styles do differ. So sure, why not...
There's a reason Honeybee is so content living quietly with Rabbit, or as quietly as you can live with Rabbit... Still waters run deep, and Honeybee has secrets... some of which even she doesn't know.

No, this fic wasn't done yet! I just knew the next parts were gonna get complicated... but I have more fun little ideas for this already thoroughly weird headcanon. I don't know whether people are going to start getting snippy about stories written about male!Rabbit, but considering the really ridiculous stuff fan fiction offers, I think writing about a previous edition of the character is scarcely disrespectful. Rabbit has always been a danged good character and besides, Rabbit has always been male in this series.

This was originally meant to be a chapter about Honeybee's death, but in the process of writing it I found I wanted to give her more life. I can't make it longer because I set a date in other fics in the series, but I can up the intensity. This will lead in to further stories.

Warning: This chapter contains scenes that may be considered steamy and titillating... if you're a toaster oven or something.

He knew it would happen someday... He should have been ready. But you can never really be ready for some things.

Her first malfunction had been startling. A stutter in the vocal assembly... something the whole family was accustomed to hearing, of course... but from Rabbit. Not from Honeybee. And for the longest time, that was all there was. A stutter, sometimes requiring a reboot or some time offline to resolve. Nothing to worry about in the immediate sense. Nothing at all.

But when Honeybee had been in Walter Manor for eleven years with Rabbit, things began to come apart.

They liked to walk in the park, stopping at the usual gazebo/stage for a little R&R... rock and roll. Well, Rabbit walked... Honeybee, who had never been built with working legs, rode in a specially fitted wheelchair. She could power it herself for a while with a little motor Peter V had built... to much praise from the proud adults of the family. But her stutter extended to her external functions and a stutter while rolling downhill would have proven disastrous. Once Rabbit realized this, he put his foot down and refused to let her drive outside alone.

Not that she ever tried to do so. She had no desire to go anywhere without Rabbit... which made it very easy for her to play her part and simply say, "Yes, beloved," to his show of protectiveness.
So he took her to the park. She liked to watch him sing with his friends... even though most of them had entered college, they still gathered on Saturdays to play.

They were just trying out a couple of new songs from England when Rabbit stopped singing. Something wasn't right...

"Honey?" he murmured into the microphone. She didn't respond. She was twitching... her head turned from side to side... over and over and over...

The crowd, full of local fans who liked to come out and listen, turned almost as one. They all knew about Rabbit's "robot wife" as they called her. He just called her Honey.

"Honey!" he cried now, leaping from the stage and running to her chair.

She still showed no sign of recognition, at least, not of Rabbit personally. If anyone approached her, she would say, "How do you do..." The last word was often lost in static.

He opened a panel on the back of her neck and tapped several buttons. She shuddered.

"How d-d-d-d-d-d-d-d-d..."

"No..." He shut her down, waited, and switched her on again, hands shaking. Waiting for systems verification. Waiting...

Nothing happened.

"Honey! Come on, baby... don't do this..." he choked, hitting the switches again. "Come on... stay with me... You were doin' fine..."

Nothing.

"I gotta go!" he called to his bandmates, trying to stay calm. "Next week, alright?"

He grabbed her wheelchair and bolted for home without waiting for an answer.

Rabbit hovered, feeling useless, as The Spine, Wanda, Peter IV and Peter V examined Honeybee. Marie tried to comfort him but it was hard to comfort a pacing robot.

Lily toddled in while they were rechecking some of the wiring. "Mama?"

"Oh, sweetheart, you shouldn't see this..." Marie said quickly, moving to block her view of the work table. Honeybee was a special favorite of Lily's.

"Is Mama Honey sick?"

"Yes, baby, I'm afraid she is..."

"Is she gonna die?"

Rabbit almost laughed. Kids.

"Lily!" cried Marie, looking at Rabbit.

He leaned against a desk and wiped his eyes. "Lily, baby, come see Unkie Rabbit..." he said, forcing
She ran into his arms and he scooped her up and held her close. He knew Honey sometimes pretended Lily was hers... with her eyes that were colored just like Rabbit's, and her Blue Matter core it was easy to do. She'd said they made her feel as though she was holding Rabbit's child...

"Pappy can fix her, Unkie Rabbit."

"I hope so, Airheart."

There was a quiet beep. "There!" cried Four. "Let her warm up..."

Rabbit watched, barely daring to move. Lily was holding her breath. Honeybee's eyes flickered and lit up. Lily crowed with joyous laughter and wriggled until Rabbit put her down.

"Mama Honey!" she cried. The Spine caught her before she reached the table.

"Whoa, there, lil pardner! Give her a few minutes and let us get her back into her chair, alright? Then you can see her."

"Pappy!" she cried reproachfully, squirming. The Spine had stepped up his game, however, and knew how to keep her up no matter how she wriggled. "I wanna see Mama Honey, Pappy!"

"You can see her already."

"I wanna see her, though!"

"Well, that's good, because we need your help, too..."

That stopped her cold. There was no quicker way to Lily's heart than being made an important part of the machine.

"Yeah! I can give you tools!"

"You always know which ones to give me," he agreed, at last willing to put her down.

She hurried to the toolbox. "Uh-huh! I'll help a lot!"

It was true, too. Lily had a knack with machinery. Louise considered it a nod to her side of the family... a mechanic just like her Auntie. Rabbit considered it to be a nod to his... a machine just like her Pappy.

Now that this was settled, he hurried to Honeybee.

"Baby? Are you in there, Honey?" he whispered, taking her hand carefully.

She turned her head and looked at him. "You've been crying."

"Well..." he began. He frowned and glanced around at the others. "Are you alright?"

"I am fine, thank you," she said faintly. "And how are you?"

"Spine?" Rabbit said worriedly. He didn't know what was more frightening... when she forgot the rote pleasantries that were so much a part of her programming, or when she used nothing else.

"Give her a few minutes, Rabbit. She's had a nasty crash... it's going to take time to reestablish her
personality module."

"Just like Three..." he murmured, closing his eyes.

She squeezed his hand. "I am n-n-n-not myself today. And you are?"

"Stop it..."

"The weather is unusually fine..."

"Stop it!" he cried. He rested his head on her shoulder. "Please stop..."

"Rabbit..." Marie said. "Maybe we should take a walk..."

"I take Honey for walks..." he murmured as Honeybee patted his shoulder in a friendly sort of way.

"I want to take a walk, too," said Lily.

Rabbit forced himself to look up at her. "You want to come too?" he asked, sniffling at a dribble of oil that had dripped along his nose.

She nodded vigorously.

"I really do... this is scary, Unkie Rabbit. Let's go play."

Mommy's little girl. She was full of hooey and he knew it. She wasn't scared two minutes ago...

He sighed. If they were going to try that hard... besides, Honeybee was now trying to discuss whether the sunshine would hold through the weekend. It was ridiculous, and yet it just made him want to sink to the floor and weep. He kissed her hand and laid it on her chassis.

"Yeah... let's give them some space. Alright, Marie."

Marie kissed The Spine and turned to join Rabbit and Lily as they walked out hand in hand. Even though he knew what they were up to, he found he wasn't sorry to leave; the only thing worse than having Honeybee sick was having to watch her that way. He couldn't bear it.

They met The Jon and Davey in the hall.

"How is she?" asked Davey. The Jon was sobbing too hard to speak.

"Aw, Jon," Rabbit sighed, wrapping them both in a hug. "They got her switched back on, buddy. She just needs recalibration. She'll be fine."

He just hoped it was true.

The Jon nodded and they all walked outside together.

After that, Rabbit was a lot more attentive to Honeybee. For a few weeks he was haunted by the dread that every minute could be her last. In time, though, he settled back into routine... especially after she asked him why he didn't play at the park anymore. She loved the park, despite the loathing for squirrels he had eventually figured out she had. It wasn't easy to go back, but she wanted him to do it, so he did. Besides, The Spine had told him that he was almost certain it had been an input problem. They had changed some of her old wiring and it seemed to do the trick. She had no
problems for almost a year.

She had been shut down for maintenance this time. They had a very hard time getting her back online. Sure enough, once again she fluctuated between abrupt statements and polite greetings, seemingly unaware of their responses. The whole thing was corrected before Rabbit even saw her. But he was told, and a full diagnostic was run... without conclusive results.

Not that they needed conclusive results. They all knew the problem. Her brain was never built to last this long... she'd been on borrowed time since they'd brought her back from the abandoned amusement park where Rabbit had found her. The Spine stopped even suggesting that new wiring would fix things. The fact was that every time she crashed, she might never reload... or her memory could be erased. There was no rhyme or reason to it. She would just stop running, and after they flipped her power switch over and over, she would return... muddled, unaware... Everyone soon agreed with Rabbit. It was just like Three and his series of mini-strokes.

Rabbit grew desperate... so much so that he finally made a suggestion he never thought he'd make.

"Honey... I don't wanna lose you," he said gently one night as they settled in side by side. They didn't live like human couples, but they did like to go into stasis together...

"Oh, Rabbit... I know we were apart for a long time, but... we have had far more than either of us thought we ever would."

"Not enough..." he mumbled.

"But I have been so happy! I couldn't ask for more."

_I could. I want forever._  "I'm glad, baby. But... I was just thinking... what if we could find out how your brain was made? Maybe we can learn enough to fix it, make it last like ours..."

"You aren't suggesting..."

"Yeah... we ask the one guy who knows how your brain was built..."

"No... not him, Rabbit."

"Honey..."

"He never cared about me as you do. He was not my father! He was a slave master, with no thought but to use and sell!" Her voice trembled with emotion unusual to her, an anger she only showed to Rabbit. "You love me! He did not! I will not accept his help!"

"Honey, please!" begged Rabbit. As much as he loathed Prof. Geoffrey Secret, he was the only one who knew what they needed to learn.

"Rabbit, beloved... I do not wish to see him! Please do not press me further!"

He nodded miserably, putting his face into his hands.

"Let us be happy while we can," she said soothingly. "Let all my memories with you be lovely ones."

"Until when?" he said desolately. "Tomorrow? Tonight?"

"Rabbit..." She sighed in a crackly sort of way. "Please tell me you understand why..."
"I do, but Honey... I just want to try. I won't make you see him. We'll just ask a few questions."

She was silent for a long time. "Didn't you say he blamed you for my behavior?" she said faintly.

"I can handle him."

She sighed tinnily. "Well... no. No, darling. I have another suggestion. Armand might know something."

He looked up in surprise. "Armand?"

"His lab assistant. Armand Chastanet. I only heard about him through hearing father's... Secret's phone calls. Apparently they had a falling out and Armand was fired. I have a few vague memories of input from when I was just a mind, before my body was assembled. I remember two people inputting information. I had a vocal input system from early on. I remember a voice speaking gently, sometimes lapsing into French. If he made an error, he would apologize. Secret did not treat me as though I understood what I was being programmed to do. I didn't understand it, of course, until I knew more, and then I heard him mention Armand on the phone. He did not seem altogether fond of him..."

Rabbit was excited. Anyone Geoffrey Secret didn't like was good enough for him. "Well, so if he worked on yehr b-b-brain, he'd know... well, something!"

"Oh, yes. He was very clever with machines, so I understand. Even Secret said so."

Rabbit gaped at this and shook his head. "Alright! I'll look for him in the morning."

"How?" she asked as he settled back. He put his arm around her as she wriggled closer. She turned her face to his and he felt a tingling of electricity pass between them. His core flickered in response.

"Honey? Are you..."

"Mm-hm..." she purred, starting on his shirt buttons. "How will you find him, darling?"

Well, they didn't have to go into stasis right this second... "I... um..." It was very hard to think, all of a sudden. Probably due to the tickling caress of the tiny electric sparks passing between her lips and his neck coils.

"Whoo!" he gasped. "Uh, I mean... W-well, we have an international network of scientists in town, baby," he murmured, pulling her still closer as his systems hummed faster. The Cavalcadium certainly would have found this interesting... The Spine wasn't the only robot who had made discoveries in techno romance, albeit somewhat different ones...

But Rabbit, now discarding his bandana and sitting up to let Honey slide the shirt over his shoulders, had no intention of letting them find that out. Her lips met his; gently, lightly touching, little pulses of electricity forming and passing easily along his copper "skin."

"Yeah, so..." he whispered. "If... if he's still a scientist...Um... Oh!" he squeaked suddenly. She was getting a little aggressive with the current. "Gently, baby, yehr made of toughr stuff than I am... A- anyway, th-th-they'll know where to f-f-find him..."

His words were cut off as electricity trickled along his back. He gasped, steam pouring from his lips. Honeybee smiled.
"In the morning," she purred, and turned off the light. They giggled softly in the darkness.

In fact, the next morning they found that several Cavalcadium scientists indeed knew of the man. The information they wanted came at last from an older man known for studying the viability of time travel.

"He's made great strides in the development of artificial intelligence," he said.

Wanda pressed her ear to the phone as Rabbit leaned in close to listen. "He lives in Los Angeles," the man continued.

"So close?"

"Considering the state of things in Europe, he could hardly be expected to return there. He's a nice enough fellow, a bit reclusive after the incident, though. The Honeybee fiasco. I think he'd be willing to speak with you, though, especially if it meant meeting a Walter automaton. I believe the only reason he hasn't yet made your acquaintance is because of his connection with Secret."

He then gave them an address for Chastanet's apartment building.

After a lengthy discussion, or rather an argument, about who should go, Rabbit was surprised to find them all at last in agreement that he should be the one. Honeybee was too hard to transport and too fragile for them to try. The Spine was still required to stay close to Lily in case her Blue Matter levels dipped. Wanda just didn't like to go out much, and Peter IV was preparing for his spacewalk. The solution seemed to be for Marie to call her sister, Louise, and enlist her help. Louise immediately took a couple of days off work and told Rabbit to come on up. They had always gotten along well and Rabbit was glad to have a friend's help.

Marie drove Rabbit to Los Angeles with Davey and Peter V along for the ride (with a promised visit to the La Brea Tar Pits). If all went well, they would be bringing Rabbit home later with some idea how to help Honeybee.

Once Rabbit had been dropped off at Louise's house, they wasted no time in going to see Armand Chastanet. They found the apartment building easily enough; it was a run down old relic in a worn but artistic part of Hollywood. Some work appeared to have been done on the building recently and Rabbit could hear a strange hum coming from somewhere inside the structure.

"He must be doin' experiments," he told Louise.

"In this old dump? He must be desperate for cash. That could work in our favor."

"It could?"

"Which apartment does he live in?"

"Dunno. We just g-g-got the street address."

"Maybe there's a directory inside," she said.

They hurried to the front door and went inside. Louise whistled.

"Would you look at this place! This must have been one of those places where all the old Hollywood actors stayed..."
The entire lobby was decorated in gorgeous art deco motifs, complete with relief sculpture around the edges of the ceiling and tile patterns in the floor. At the back, a man in coveralls was working on an old elevator with an elaborate cage door.

"Sir?" called Louise. "Excuse me? Can you help us?"

The man was already staring at them. "Yes?"

"We're looking for a man named Armand Chastanet. I wonder if you might know which apartment he's in?"

He came closer. "I might. But the lift is broken..."

"Louise..." Rabbit said softly, gently tapping her shoulder.

"What did you want to see him about?" he asked with a smile.

"Oh, it's my friend here who needs to see him."

"Louise!" Rabbit pressed.

"Ssh." She seemed very intent on whatever the man had to say.

"Ugh... fine."

"He would be delighted, I'm sure, to meet such an impressive friend as you have brought," said the man. He extended his hand to her. She accepted it, attempting her usual firm handshake and instead having her hand swept up for a kiss.

"Enchanté."

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Louise... he's got a French accent. Ya get me? How did you not know that..."

"I do now..." she said irritably. "Uh, hi... I'm Louise..."

"Delighted. And you," he continued, turning to Rabbit, "are a Walter automaton. You are, in fact, the very automaton I have wanted the most to meet, and yet most feared. I do not presume you have come to take your revenge, Monsieur Rabbit?"

"R-r-revenge?" Rabbit gasped, puzzled.

"Well, I was a part of a very nasty chapter in your life, yes?"

"Were you?" he asked blankly.

The man smiled and gestured to the stairs. "Come with me."

He led them to his laboratory, which appeared to take up an entire floor. This, then, was the reason they had not been given an apartment number. Chastanet, as he explained on the way up, was fitting the whole building for a single occupant. Not as badly off financially as Louise had speculated.

He cleared chairs for them all.
"Now," he said. "What is this business?"

"Sir," Rabbit began, suddenly nervous. This was his one chance. "I... understand y-y-you worked with Professor Geoffrey Secret back in the 30s."

"I did."

"W-well... I need information about Honeybee."

"Yes, the Honeybee," Chastanet muttered wearily. He rose and pulled open a small cupboard. "Would either of you care for a drink?"

"I'm fine, but Rabbit should have some water."

"I'm okay..."

"I heard you sloshing, buddy."

Chastanet brought him a tall glass of water. He sighed and drank it while Chastanet watched with a look of rapt fascination. "Your throat even moves... you're swallowing!"

"Well, yeah, if I didn't it would come out my nose."

Chastanet resumed his seat. "Just so. Well, then. The Honeybee. I knew it would be about that, really. It always comes back to that. No matter what else I achieve, I will still be the fool who invented the Honeybee."

"What?" cried Rabbit and Louise together.

He frowned. "You didn't know? I'm sorry... I am at a loss. Why would you come to me otherwise? What exactly do you want to know about it?"

Rabbit tried to speak but couldn't. He put his hand to his mouth, trembling. It had hit him all at once... It was too much. If this was her real inventor... then that dirtbag Secret really never was her father, and this man was not just some assistant. He would be the one who could help them!

"Um... Rabbit? It's alright, I got it." Louise looked at Rabbit sidelong as he wiped at his eyes. To Chastanet she said, "It's about the robot Honeybee..."

"Oh, the robot. Well, that's a bit different. I never made a robot. Well, not completely. It was finished without me. I made a brain and designs for a working robot."

"How do you mean?"

"I made a brain, an information storage unit. It was very advanced for its day, meant to have a human like understanding, had it succeeded. Nothing like Walter's work, of course. Something quite new. But I made the mistake of getting the help of that sideshow Barker, that sculptor... he could have made a name for himself with his sculpture, he was truly gifted, but he decided that wasn't enough. He met me and decided we should work together, build an automaton that would make us both famous. I was young, had no friends in this country. I believed him. Then the swine took out a patent on my artificial brain! There was nothing I could do... I was inexperienced in the deceptions of the world. I barely spoke English, had no money to fight him. He took the brain, the unfinished structural designs, and the name. Made it into a hoochie-koochie. He sculpted that bee-girl body based on a couple of his students whose attributes he admired." He winked slightly. "In rather a personal way..."
She did have an amazing body, Rabbit thought.

"I'm speechless, sir..." Louise breathed. "Well, nearly. But I am surprised... you don't seem angry."

"It was a long time ago. Besides, further study proved that the design was faulty, the honeycomb formation was too unstable."

"The what, now?" Rabbit asked.

"That was how she got her name. Her thoughts and processes traveled through the network of honeycombs. But it was fragile. Couldn't have lasted more than fifteen years. I'd be surprised if there's anything left by now. So he did me a favor, in a way. I was prepared to put my reputation, such as it was, on the line for that invention."

"Is there some way to preserve it?" Rabbit asked quickly, fighting the rising feeling of dread these words had inspired. "I m-m-mean, if you were really careful with it, didn't bounce it around or anything..."

"Of course that's important, but the wear on the honeycomb structure would have been the result of repetitive use. The more signals pass along the chambers, the more damage would accumulate. It simply wasn't durable enough to last."

"So anything she thinks, any thought that she has... is killing her..." Rabbit muttered to himself. It wasn't true... there had to be some chance... "Maybe she made it this far because there wasn't much to think about at those carnivals..."

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. "There's no hope... there's no hope!" he sobbed, breaking at last. He put his hands over his face. Honey...

"Oh, dear... Have I said something wrong?" Chastanet asked worriedly.

Louise put her arm around Rabbit's shoulders. "Sir..."

"Armand."

"Oh..." She sighed. "Well, there's something you should know, something we should have told you from the beginning. Honeybee is not gone. She is alive and living in Walter Manor."

He blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Rabbit sobbed quietly. Why had he let himself hope?

"Buck up, big guy," she said. He nodded. "The robot Honeybee is alive. They found her in an abandoned amusement park and restored her the best they could. She has been living with Rabbit for the past eleven years and her brain has begun to fail. We've come to you for help... We're all afraid she's going to die."

Chastanet stared at her, his mouth open. He looked at Rabbit. "Alive... die..."

"Oh, lordy, we broke him..." she drawled. "Do you need some water?"

"She... She? She identifies herself as a female, not merely as a machine?"

"She does," Louise agreed. "She' more feminine than I am, to tell you the truth..."

"She lives... she is a woman... She's alive!" he cried, laughing.
"Scientists..." snorted Louise.

"But this is wonderful! I am a father, yes?"

"If you like," Louise chuckled. She leaned in to Rabbit and whispered, "This is the cutest thing I've ever seen." Rabbit shrugged.

Chastanet looked at Rabbit. "She's been living with you?"

"Yeah," he said woefully.

The man frowned. "As... as what, exactly?"

"Now wait..." Louise began, frowning. "Don't get ideas..."

"My girl, sir." Rabbit wiped his eye. "She's my girl."

"Your..." Chastanet gulped. "She has human-like behaviors? She... feels?" he cried, astonished.

"Uh huh. We're... we're in love, sir."

"She has romantic feelings for you, Rabbit?"

"For some reason, yeah. She loves m-m-me and I can't help loving her back... She's the sweetest girl in the world," Rabbit responded dejectedly.

Chastanet smiled happily. "Oh, but... how very charming!"

"Frenchmen," Louise mumbled. Rabbit noticed her cheeks were a bit pink.

"Does she remember me, then?" he asked eagerly.

"She sent me to you, sir. We hoped you knew how to save her..." Rabbit trailed off and turned his head away.

"She said she remembers two people entering data into her when she was a brain, right, Rabbit?" Louise said helpfully. "I believe she said you spoke to her gently. Was there anything else?"

Rabbit shook his head. "She don't even know that you made the most important part of her. She just didn't want anything to do with Secret."

"I am glad to hear it. That is a tremendous joke, in fact." He leaned back, studying his beverage, a grin plastered across his face. "My word... This is a great deal to absorb. Here was I, repairing the lift, when I receive a visit from a metal man, telling me he is the lover of a daughter I did not know I had. Very like the films of my homeland, oui?"

"Now just a minute, sir... Armand," scolded Louise. "'Lover' seems a bit strong for robots, don't you think?"

Rabbit fought the urge to whistle nonchalantly. No, it did not. The word was just about right... but he wasn't about to say so.

"There's been no funny business..."

Rabbit tossed back the rest of his water hastily, splashing it onto his vest in the process.
Chastanet fixed Rabbit with a puzzled look as the automaton attempted to dry his vest with a drop cloth. "I assure you, I had no idea that there would be, between two automatons, any sort of physical relationship. But I assure you, if there were, they would have my blessing." He looked Rabbit squarely in the eye.

"I'd rather not talk about this," Rabbit said, looking down uncomfortably from the man's knowing gaze. There most certainly had been funny business, and he'd enjoyed every minute of it. He remembered the night before and smiled to himself helplessly. Yes, "lover" was the very word... Funny thing, she was so polite, she always thanked him afterward... He suppressed a giggle.

"Just so. My apologies." Chastanet said, startling him from his thoughts. He would have blushed if he could... the man was looking at him once more as though he knew exactly what Rabbit had been up to with his "daughter."

Rabbit shifted in his seat and wiped his eyes again. This was a very new sensation to him. Unlike The Spine, he didn't cherish everything that made him feel human. He could certainly have done without the "I know you've been having sex with my only daughter" stare, even if he had said they had his blessing. Peter II used to talk about getting that look from his father-in-law...

"Well... If that's all," Louise said, looking at each with a confused frown, "I think Rabbit would like to get back to her. Thank you for your time."

She started to rise and Chastanet leaped to his feet. "Of course! But you will allow me to join you, yes?" he asked, offering her his hand and helping her to her feet.

"Oh..." Louise sighed, her cheeks now very pink. Rabbit almost laughed, despite his own discomfort. The idea of Louise blushing! "Well, I suppose that would make sense... Rabbit? What do you think?"

"Hm? Oh! Well... Yeah. I mean, you'll take a look at her, right? See if there's something you forgot over the years that might help?"

"Of course, of course! First thing... but I must meet her. I remember the face he made for her... he actually asked me which I would prefer of several photographs. There was one who was delicate, almost elfin. I chose that one."

Rabbit rose, feeling choked up... or as close to it as he could. "That's her... She's so beautiful, Mr Chastanet..."

"Now then, don't let's have another scene of emotion. I'm sure you need that oil elsewhere."

He began gathering things into a satchel. Once it was full, he packed a small suitcase (after Rabbit invited him to stay the night at Walter Manor) and they left to meet Marie and the boys and Louise's house. Louise packed a few things herself and they headed for home. She said she was coming along so that she could give Armand a ride home the next day, but Rabbit could see another motivation. In spite of his worry, he was glad. He'd done the math and Chastanet wasn't so very old, really, especially to a 47-year-old woman. It might just work out...

With that in mind, and a roguish grin, he decided to ride back with Marie and the boys.

He spent some of the ride happily contemplating his friend Louise with a French boyfriend, but worry soon came flooding back. By the time they arrived, he was sure a thousand terrible things had happened to her. He was out of the car almost before it had stopped at Walter Manor.
"Honey!" he cried as he ran through the front doorway.

"I'm in the living room, beloved," she called back.

He ran in and found her with Lily on her lap, reading fairy tales. He sank to his knees beside her chair and embraced her the best he could from the side.

"Darling!" she laughed as Lily flung herself over Rabbit's head. "I missed you, too."

"I... oof... Lily, baby, Unkie Rabbit can't move... thanks." He sat up. "Baby, I have a surprise for you. I brought him back."

"Armand?" she asked, surprised.

"Oh! Too much shock... are you okay? Not feeling off or anything?"

"I feel fine, darling! Was he able to offer any suggestions?"

Rabbit looked at her for one long painful moment before turning away. "He's... gonna take a look... if that's okay."

"Alright," she said slowly. He looked up sharply but realized she was just responding to him, not malfunctioning.

"And we have some news..." he murmured. "I wanted to tell you myself but I think he should do it..."

"Rabbit? Where are you?"

"In here, Louise! Lily, can you go out and play? We gotta talk grownup for a while."

"But my story!"

"Maybe you can go find yehr p-p-pappy to read it to ya."

"Nah, I'll find Pappy and we'll play." She hopped down and trotted out.

"That was easy..." Rabbit said.

"He's in that hall of wires again," said Honey. "Rabbit, have you been in there lately?"

"Hm?"

"I just wondered whether you had noticed anything about the room..."

"It's creepy as all-get-out." He snickered. "I hope she scares him out of the wiring again. That was a scream."

"Darling..."

"I know... Oh, here he is!"

Chastanet stepped into the room slowly, looking with a face of wonder at Honeybee. "You... remember me, oui?"

"How do you do, sir? Yes, I do... or I remember you as well as can be expected. It was so good of you to come. My darling Rabbit has been worried to distraction over my illness."
He took her offered hand and kissed it. Rabbit twitched slightly; he'd never quite gotten over the first time he'd done the same.

"Enchanté. Before we go any further... I wish to apologize to you, Miss Honeybee. Had I known how sophisticated you truly were, I would never had left you to the mercies of Geoffrey Secret."

"Don't let's speak of him, please... I blame you for nothing..."

He sank into the chair beside her, eyes fixed upon her face. "Thank you. I do understand. I was loath to speak of him for many years. He did me a great wrong... You see, he sculpted your chassis, but... it was I who created the brain that powers you. Not him."

"Not..."

"I am the inventor of the Honeybee... yours was the first robotic brain I made."

"It wasn't Secret?" Honeybee gasped. She put her hand to her head as though dizzy.

"Honey!" Rabbit cried, alarmed.

"No, beloved... don't be afraid. I am only struck with amazement. Sir... Armand... you made my brain? My processor? Then... why did he claim to have done so?"

"He had the patent. I was deceived, and you were stolen from me. I should have stayed... you would never have been programmed for violence, never been sold as a novelty, had I been there to stop it. I didn't realize..."

He hung his head. Rabbit realized the man was crying. Honeybee gently put her hand under his chin and tilted his face up once more.

"Then you are my father..."

He looked at her sorrowfully. "I would be honored to be so, but I have no right to such a claim."

"And yet it you are. Oh..." She laughed. "What a relief this is! I am... simply delighted... It is too much..."

Rabbit stared. She must really hate Secret, he thought.

"Then... this makes you happy..." Chastanet said wonderingly.

She took his hand and put it to her cheek. "This was the hand that made me who I am. Not his! He was a monster that I foolishly called father, who sold me when I no longer suited his purposes!"

"Was he so terrible to you, Honeybee?" asked the man sadly.

"Terrible... He treated me like a machine, a common tool! He made me nearly kill my darling Rabbit! He didn't understand how I was supposed to function and he almost destroyed everything!" Her voice shook with emotion, crackling and fading in and out. "And when it failed, he discarded me... if Rabbit hadn't come for me... But when he did... he nearly died again..."

"Honey," Rabbit said, forcing himself to sound calmer than he felt. Now she was speaking of a part of their lives he had done his best to forget. "B-b-baby, I'm okay. Remember? I'm tough. I'm r-right here... It's all in the past now. Please don't strain yourself..."

"Rabbit..." she sobbed. He took her free hand and held it tightly, hoping she didn't squeeze back...
her molded steel fingers tended to indent his copper ones.

"Honey... I don't think I've ever seen you cry..." he sighed, as clear oil tears slipped down her face.

"It's because you have made me too happy," she said brokenly.

"Aw, Honey..."

Chastanet was watching them both in silence. "How much I have missed... I created a thinking being, lost her... and yet she has had a life of her own. Life will not be denied. It is... humbling." He wiped his eyes hastily and smiled. "I should prepare for the diagnostic."

"Armand... stay a little," said Honey quietly. "Tell me all you can of the good things about my creation. I have so little memory of things then..."

He smiled. "Very well."

He and Honeybee spoke well into the evening as Rabbit came and went. It was decided, when they stopped late that evening, that the diagnostic could wait until the morning, when the scientist was refreshed.

The following day, Rabbit, once again, paced, waiting for Chastanet to complete his examination. He had tried to remain for the duration but was unable to bear it for long. So he walked the long, darkened inner hallways of Walter Manor and tried to keep a cool head.

Chastanet came for him after a few hours. "There you are. I have news."

Rabbit noticed he hadn't called it good news. The realization didn't hit him as hard as he'd expected. He'd known for a long time.

"There's no chance, is there?" he said faintly. "She's gonna die."

"I am sorry... Yes," the man sighed. "In time... She is not so far gone that she will perish tomorrow, but..." He put his hands together and took a deep breath. "There is nothing that can be done. It is a miracle that she has survived as well as she has. If her brain had not been encased in glass, or if the glass had broken, she would not have."

"How long?" he whispered. "Please, just tell me, don't soften it..."

"I couldn't say. It may be a year, or as many as five. When the processor damage deepens to her central core, where motor function and ignition are, she will have but a few weeks. I expect you will know it is almost over when her speech no longer functions."

Rabbit was oddly numb. He'd once wondered what feelings were like, and then he'd wondered what it was to be numb, to have felt and to have then stopped feeling. Now he knew...

He leaned against the wall, not sure what to do next.

The scientist leaned next to him. "Will you... will you be alright?"

"I don't know," Rabbit whispered. "I'm afraid."

"Of losing her?"
"Of... of living with her and being afraid to love her... She ought to be loved right up until the end, dontcha think? Right up to it and beyond..."

"She should."

*Beyond...* Rabbit wondered that he could even consider life beyond the end of Honey's. He had tried to die the last time he lost her, but his Pappy wouldn't give up on him. But Pappy was gone... his human sons were gone... and soon his Honeybee would be gone as well...

Oily tears began to roll down his face, but still he stood and stared.

"Don't be afraid to love her," Chastanet said softly. "She told me all about you as we examined her. The greatest joy of her life has been living here with you. Did you know?"

"Uh-huh. But it ain't like I had much competition for that... she had such a rotten life, and she can't have babies..."

"She wanted children..."

"Yeah. Even after all that time in carnivals, she wanted kids of her own. She likes to huddle with Lily and pretend..."

"Lily... ah yes, the pale, raven-haired child who was charging about in a pinafore and tights."

"Yeah, I wish she'd put on a dress... You notice anything else about her?"

"That she is a cyborg? That your brother is in actual fact her father? But this I knew. She has been the talk of the Cavalcadium these seven years."

"They better stay away from her..." Rabbit muttered. Scientists from time to time came snooping around, asking to study Lily...

"No one intends to harm the child! But they are fascinated. What the scientists in Washington have inadvertently enabled is remarkable indeed. No doubt they never dreamed the combination of their upgrades and The Spine's own Blue Matter would be sufficient to impregnate a human woman. Possibly they did not realize he was likely to try..."

"Could we not..."

"Of course. I am only saying what was discussed. But there is another subject I notice is missing from chats at the club... No one has mentioned that you have also advanced your programming."

Rabbit froze. "Don't understand..." he muttered. It was true, then. Chastanet did suspect something.

"You and Honeybee. You are in love. You have a closeness that others have seen...and one that they have not."

"Where are you goin' with this?"

"I do have a good reason for asking, which I will explain presently. You and Honeybee... you have... pardon, but you have made love, yes?"

Rabbit's boiler fired up violently. They had, hadn't they? For some reason he hadn't thought of it that way... He'd always thought of it as foolin' around or makin' whoopee... Those sounded fun. Chastanet made it sound... *French.*
"Not in the manner of human beings, I would assume," continued Chastanet matter-of-factly. "I do not ask you to explain any more than you wish, but you have, I am sure of it. There is an intimacy to your responses to one another, one that I have only seen between lovers."

"This is really... I don't want to..."

"Louise does not know, hm?" he pressed. "Nor others in this house, nor the Cavalcadium."

"And they better not find it out either..." Rabbit said sharply. He could just imagine what would descend upon Walter Manor if those vultures found out two Walter automatons had discovered sex. He supposed everyone would start eyeing The Jon next...

"Now do not misunderstand me! I speak as a father, though you are older than I. In matters of love, I suspect you are quite new. A young man who loves my daughter. And yet... you are afraid to do so, afraid you will harm her, shorten her life."

Rabbit stared at him for a long moment and hung his head. "Yeah..." he said, defeated.

"I apologize for speaking about such a... personal matter. But I have been speaking with my... my daughter... and she has told me that she is worried."

"Worried?" Rabbit looked up. As if it wasn’t bad enough that she was dying! "I don’t want her to worry about anything!"

"And yet she does. She is worried about you, and she fears that you will be too afraid to continue living with her as you have been."

"I ain’t afraid of living with her! I love her!"

"You misunderstand," the man said soothingly. "She thinks you will withdraw, will refuse to touch her, for fear of hastening her demise."

"She what?"

"She is afraid you will refuse to..." He muttered for a moment in French, took a deep breath, and continued, "To be quite blunt, she is afraid you will no longer be willing to share her bed, as it were."

"Oh..."

"I want to set her mind at ease, but without knowing how... how you go about it... mon dieu, this has been a strange week!"

"You..." Rabbit began slowly, "wanna know how Honey and I..."

"Make love, yes," Chastanet finished unhappily, putting his hand over his eyes.

"Good grief..."

"I don’t want to pry, of course. But if it is likely to cause significant damage..."

"We can stop..."

"No! No, that is what she most fears... She wants to live her life fully while life remains, do you see? To continue to have the same joy you have brought her these twelve years. And apparently she is particularly adamant that you remain lovers."
Rabbit didn’t really blame her. He had been content to spend his days with her and go into stasis beside her every night. And then one day, Marie got pregnant, The Spine told Rabbit much more than he ever wanted to know about how he’d managed it, Rabbit told Honeybee because he always told Honeybee everything, and Honeybee went to Marie for some girl talk. One thing Rabbit had learned about women over the years… they were real proper when men were around, but when the men left, ladies talked like sailors. He could only imagine what they had said about The Spine in that conversation; but he tried very hard not to imagine it.

The same night, Honey had come to bed full of ideas. Rabbit humored her at first… he didn’t expect any of them to work.

He was mistaken.

They explained the power outage the following day by saying Rabbit had put a fork into a wall outlet. It was a lot more believable than the truth. And after that, they were careful to unplug Honey’s charger before going to bed… The Manor still had unexplained little bursts of power.

And now Honey had become so attached to their intimacy that she would rather die sooner than do without? That would have made Rabbit feel kinda sexy had it not worried him so much.

“What do I do, then?” he moaned. “What if it is hurting her? What if that’s how this started? I’d have to tell her no… but how can I?”

“Can you… tell me whether there is anything involved likely to cause damage?”

“Well… the kissing part is pretty gentle. We don’t have squishy lips so we just sorta arc electricity. And the touching part is just… touching. She’s there, I’m there… just closer together.”

“That could be said of human affection as well. But is there anything that can damage her?” he pressed.

“I dunno…” He looked down at his sharp fingers. “I’ve done some damage to the wall and I broke a window once… um, it was only because she… hehehe… she didn’t warn me and… um, no, no, that wouldn’t hurt her…”

“Well… Is there something you’re omitting?”

What did the man want from him? He was not going to give him a play by play account, no matter what he said…

“Please. I want very much not to be having this conversation, but it really is important.”

Rabbit sighed. “Pwrsrg…” he muttered.

“What was that?”

“Power surge,” he forced himself to say. “Voltage spike. A build-up of electricity… Marie figured out how to do it without getting zapped and apparently The Spine thinks he’s hot stuff now… But yeah, Honey learned how to do it.”

“So there’s a build-up of electrical power in your systems and then it’s conducted throughout the body… but wouldn’t that overload your core temporarily?”

“Enough already!” It did… that was his favorite part. But hearing about it from an outsider felt... wrong.
“Sorry, yes, of course. That was rather personal... I think?”

“Dang rights. Watch yehr mouth.” He felt weird enough...

“Well... as long as it is confined to the wiring...” He stopped and shook his head.

“You don’t know, do you?” Rabbit murmured. “You don’t know if it’ll make it worse.”

Chastanet shook his head. “No. I would not ordinarily recommend a forced burst of electricity in a delicate automaton. But...”

“She’ll be miserable if I don’t do it.”

“Just so.”

“Then... I have to do it, don’t I?”

“There’s no guarantee it will harm her, just as there’s no guarantee that she’ll live longer without it.”

“I know.”

“Rabbit? Bear this in mind. This is what she wants of life. This is the way she wishes to live out her days... as your lover. Do not live in fear. Be with her, sing to her, make love to her... I have not been her father, though she insists on calling me that. But you have been her love, you have given her happiness. Keep giving it. Then at least she can have her dreams fulfilled, and I can know that I did one thing as a father and secured that happiness.

“Can you promise me you will do this?”

Rabbit wiped his sleeve across his eyes. It would make Honey happy. She asked for so little, really... and he realized that he didn’t want to spend their remaining time just sitting together either. She had brought him somewhere new. He couldn’t imagine going back.

It would end when it ended. He would make her feel alive until then.

“Alright,” he whispered, sniffling.

Chastanet stayed several more days before returning to Los Angeles with Louise. Rabbit had a feeling they would be seeing a lot more of each other.

The night after they left, he lay holding Honeybee in his arms. Their human clothing was all draped over a chair, but he made no move to do more than cuddle. He had made his promise to Chastanet but had felt a little funny making good on it while the man was staying in the house. Now that he had gone, it was time to face his fear. Honey hadn’t complained but he was sure she was wondering.

She lay one arm across his boiler and sighed, idly stroking her fingertips along a seam in his chassis.

"Honey?” he whispered.

"Hm?”

"I... don't want to hurt you...”

"Oh, darling... you could never do that."
"Yeah, I could. But... you're not afraid, are you? Of being here with me like this? Even after what your... what Armand said?"

"Not at all. Darling... I don't want you to hold back. I have so little time... I want you to have so many wonderful memories of me."

"I already do."

"There need to be more."

He sighed. "How many more?"

"As many as we can make, even if it means blacking out the whole state."

He giggled. "That only happened the first time, baby!"

"You caught on quickly. Still, that one was special."

"Yeah..." he sighed.

There was a long silence. Rabbit felt an overwhelming pressure to fill it... he knew she was only waiting for him to act. She didn't usually wait... but this was different.

"Alright baby," he said tremulously. "I think I'm ready."

She tipped her face up to his. Electricity crackled between them. She smiled, her eyelids half closed.

"Are you afraid, Rabbit?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I'm afraid something will go wrong..."

"I'm willing to risk it..."

"I'm afraid I'll hurt you..."

"I'm made of steel, darling."

"You know what I mean. So yeah, I'm afraid."

"Do you want to wait?"

"No!" he cried, as little forks of electricity wriggled from her fingertips and onto his chassis. He shivered. "The last thing I want to do is wait... Because mostly... mostly I'm afraid of wasting time."

"Then let's not waste any," she sighed, pressing against him, current once again sparkling blue across her lips. "Let's always make the most of it."

"I promise," he sighed, leaning into the electricity.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so Rabbit got an education. I don't think it counts as a smut fic if they never follow through, and it's inexplicable robot sex anyway. ;) I figured why not get weirder?
Honey seemed like one of the quiet ones who turn out to be, well... Like she is here. I thought it was cute to think of Rabbit being swept away by it. And there's actually a tiny plot tendril leading away from it into later stories... relating to Honey's desire to have a child.
San Diego, 1958:

The wires shifted, seemingly disturbed by a nonexistent breeze. They were coming. More than one this time…

The door creaked open.

“Alright, Airheart, wait here for Pappy.”

“Uh-huh.”

The Spine entered the room and set down a little toy toolbench beside a stack of coiled wiring. He turned and opened a panel in the floor, then stepped onto the platform and removed his tie, loosened his collar buttons. The platform began to descend, taking him with it.

“Pappy! Dop it!”

“It’s alright, Lily! Pappy is going to be a snake for a while…”

“Pappy thnake?” she asked in an exaggerated, shrill questioning tone.

“Yes, baby. See?” Clawed metal arms inside the tube caught his body as it descended, securing it. When it was stable, his head, all on its own, slithered up and out of his body and onto the floor before the hatch closed. The little girl standing in the doorway shook with infant laughter.

He smiled. “That’s right, silly Pappy. Not scary, right?”

“No-o-o-o…” she laughed.

“Good girl. Let me get up into the wiring and then you can come in, okay?”

“Wiring!”

The wires descended and he coiled around them, rising into the upper areas of the chamber. The toddler waddled into the room, staring upward in wonder.
“Baby!” she cried.

The Spine looked down from where he had anchored his spine and interfaced with the hall core system, ready for work. “Baby?” he asked, puzzled.

She was looking into a thick bundle of wires that were wrapped around a Blue Matter containment unit…the core he had installed when he decided to start working from the hall. The core flickered gently.

“That’s just a power core, Airheart. It doesn’t have intelligence.”

“Baby!”

He smiled. When he thought about it, it made sense. She had a Blue Matter core, and the simple power unit in the hall of wires would be a baby, compared to her and the robots of Walter Manor.

“Alright, Lily. It’s a baby. Now play with your toolset while Pappy fixes the short in the kitchen.”

Lily toddled to the curlicue of wires by her little tool table and sat. She pulled out a bin from underneath and produced two little ceramic teacups, setting them on top of the table. She then pulled out a cracked and glued teapot and one tiny spoon. With great care, she pretended to fill the cups.

The Spine peered down from his work. “Tea party today,” he murmured. He had an idea. He directed a wire to snake down to the table, directly behind one of the teacups. Lily looked at it nonchalantly.


Lily picked up her cup and made exaggerated gulping sounds. The Spine directed the wire toward the teacup. The wire missed the handle and slipped inside the cup instead. Before he could direct it to come out, it pulled back as though peering into the cup, then lifted and pointed at Lily.

As he tried to reestablish control, Lily said, “No, baby! Drink tea like Lily!” She demonstrated again. The wire peered into the cup and lifted once more, seeming puzzled.

“Drink!” ordered Lily with infant certainty that her way was law.

The wire whipped aside and dashed the teacup from the table. Lily shrieked as the cup shattered on the floor.

The Spine reestablished control and retracted the wire, then hastily slithered from the ceiling and hurried to the frightened child. He wriggled up the toolbench and she put her little arms around his head.

“Pappy! Bad baby!”

“Calm down, Airheart… the baby’s gone, see?”

“No!” She pointed a chubby finger at the core. “Baby up dere! Bad baby! Baby broke it!”

“Mama will fix it, alright? Just like the teapot.”

As he spoke, he realized something was next to his ear. He looked uneasily to the side.

The wire was back.
“Baby thorry?” Lily asked shrilly. She paused as if listening. “’Kay. We play more?”

The Spine leaned away from the wire. It moved toward Lily.

“No!” he cried sharply. The wire jerked as if startled, then drooped and trembled.

“Pappy! Baby cry!”

“What?” he exclaimed, his voice the baritone echo of Lily’s shrill questioning tone. It certainly looked like it was crying…

“Pappy thay thorry!”

“To a wire?” He was a robot, yes, but this… this was like a human apologizing to a carrot!

“Pappy thcare baby!”

“Oh…” The wire lifted slowly, almost timidly. “I… uh… I’m sorry, wire… I mean, baby. But you mustn’t break teacups, alright?”

He felt like an idiot. But the wire seemed pleased… at least, it lifted once more and coiled around a little plastic hammer. Lily put a wooden nail into the table and the wire clumsily thumped at it with the hammer.

He slithered from the table, mystified. “Aw better,” said Lily. “Bye, Pappy.”

“Right…” He very hesitantly returned to his work, stopping frequently to check on her. She chattered happily to the wire as it helped her build… something… then take it apart again.

He hastily finished the job, retrieved his body and said, “Alright, time to go now.”

“We playing, Pappy!”

“Yes, I know,” he muttered. The wire lifted and turned toward him, seemingly looking him up and down.

“Tall Pappy,” said Lily.

“Hm?”

“Baby thaid Pappy tall!”

“Oh… yes… I am now…”

“Uh-huh. Baby like Pappy tiny.”

“Does it… Well, it’s time for lunch. You can play with baby another…” He hesitated, undecided about making such a promise.

“Play with baby tomorrow?”

“Oh, I don’t…”

The wire rose and wriggled toward him, stopping in front of his face.

“He-hello…”
It wiggled frantically.

“Baby want to! Play tomorrow!”

“I suppose…”

“Dat mean yeth!” crowed Lily, toddling toward the door. “Play tomorrow. Bye baby!”

She turned and blew a kiss noisily toward the wire, then waved. It waved back.

“Um, Lily…” The Spine said as he shut the door on the wire. “Can we not tell mommy about the baby?”

“Thecret baby!”

“That’s right. Baby is a secret.”

“Kay. Tuna fish?”

“Alright,” he said, hoping Lily knew how to keep a secret. He had a feeling Marie would not be thrilled that the wires had achieved sentience.

He was fairly uneasy about it himself.
Chapter Summary

Every exit is an entrance somewhere else.

Chapter Notes

Warning: If you're the sort of person who cries over the song "Honeybee" or "Turn Back the Clock" or the robot malfunction video, you may not care for the middle part of the chapter. I'm pretty sure I succeeded in striking the right tone with it. But there are plot points throughout that come into play later. If feels kill you, you probably didn't get this far, though... But just in case, ima sum the chapter up at the end.

Hard on the heels of the delightfully heart-stomping Honeybee fic by rabbitmaryam, here we go again.

But first, a slightly raunchy, comical call back to Chapter 10... it's actually plot relevant but I also found it amusing... more of Rabbit getting swept away. Hopefully I didn't take it too far...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

San Diego, 1955:

“Rabbit, darling?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I was wondering whether we might try something…”

“Sure, Honey! Whaddya wanna try?”

“Sex.”

Rabbit choked on his own steam. He hadn’t even known it was possible to choke on steam.

“Honey,” he said when he recovered. “I hate to break it to you, but we’re robots.”

“I had noticed…”

“Well… then…”

“I have some ideas. Will you help me test them?”

“I suppose so…”

"Lovely." She started unbuttoning his vest.
"Whoa, what're ya doin' that for?"

"It's cozier this way."

"What, my lumpy skeleton chassis is cozy?"

"Everything about you is cozy."

"The Spine could probably make a list of things that ain't, starting with my flamethrower."

"Good thing he isn't the one who wants to get cozy with you, then. Sit up..."

She flung the vest and then the shirt over her shoulder. He glanced at his trousers, shrugged, and wriggled out of them. They joined the rest on the floor.

"Alright. Now I'm a naked robot. You like?"

"I do."

"Alrighty. Takes all kinds." He winked and laid back, folding his hands behind his head, as she slipped out of the simple sundress she liked to wear. It was more suitable now that she was wheelchair bound and couldn't wear the metal skirt and armor-like bodice from her days bolted to a dais at carnivals.

"Look at you!" he cried as she slipped it over her head. "It's been five years... Why have I never seen you naked before?"

"You never asked," she murmured softly, dropping the dress delicately off the bed and looking at him shyly through her eyelashes. "Do you like?"

He whistled. "Yeah! Whew! Lookit that chassis... Holy mackerel... Bolts in all the right places."

She smiled and looked away as she crept, a little sheepishly, to lay against his chest plate. He smiled. She was feeling shy! That was adorable.

As he put his arm around her cool steel shape, he decided her idea really wasn't all that absurd. In fact, he was fairly pleased with their progress so far...

"Y'know I've always been kinda curious about sex," he admitted brightly. "The whole thing sounds so stupid and yet the fleshies can't seem to get enough of it... So what do we do now?"

"I'll show you."

"Oo, saucy..."

He heard a crackle of electricity.

"Honey?" he said apprehensively.

"Rabbit," she replied, holding him securely. She stroked his back and he felt electrical tingles where she touched.

He giggled. "Say, that feels nice... Little to the left?"

She smiled. One little hand, arcing with current, reached up and pressed against his core.
"Hey, what are you... ou... ou... ou... ou-u-u-u-u..." His optics flew open wide. He gasped, steam pouring from his lips. "Sweetmotherof... ohhh... wow..."

"Now..." she murmured into his ear. "Close the circuit."

He grinned dizzily and wrapped both arms around her.

The Spine gently closed the door of Davey’s room. Marie needed her rest and Davey had put up a fight this time, but at last the boy was asleep. He headed downstairs in the dark for a much needed drink.

He had just reached the kitchen when he heard Rabbit scream. Before he had time to think, “What now?” there was a popping sound outside. He ran to the window in time to watch the power going off all over the surrounding neighborhoods.

He ran up the stairs two at a time. Ordinarily he would have dismissed it as a blown transformer and gone back to getting his drink, if it weren’t for Rabbit’s scream. He didn’t know yet whether to be angry or worried. Maybe both.

He raised his hand to knock on the door of the room Rabbit and Honeybee shared, but hesitated.

They were giggling.

“Rabbit?” he said, rapping lightly on the door. “Are you alright?”

The giggling intensified.

“Rabbit?”

“I’m fine, Spine! I am just fine.” Rabbit sounded as though he could barely speak for giggling.

“Alright, so you’re fine. Only I just heard a scream that sounded suspiciously like you, right before the power went out for miles around!”

This set off a fresh round of giggles and a muffled, “Oops!”

The Spine was feeling deeply uncomfortable. He kept thinking of the day he had caught Peter II with a girl in his room… He couldn’t believe there was a connection. And even if there was… He really didn’t want to know.

“I accidentally stuck my finger in the power outlet,” Rabbit crowed. More giggles.

“Right…”

“We’ll see ya in the morning, Spine! Honey is feeling kinda drained…”

This resulted in unbridled laughter.

The Spine sighed. *Yeah, that’s it. I’m done here.*

“Just be more careful from now on, alright?”

“Oh, we *will*…”
“Goodnight,” he said shortly and headed back down to the kitchen, hoping the power company didn’t have a way to trace the cause of the outage. Rabbit’s explanation was ridiculous, but he suspected the real one was worse.

“Alright, baby,” Rabbit said when his brother had gone, “you win… Sometimes it’s good to try new things. Although next time, ya should probably unplug before we... Yeah.”

"Next time."

They giggled more and snuggled in for the night before their power levels dipped further. Rabbit slipped into stasis and Honeybee sat up and carefully leaned off the bed to plug her power cable into her backup battery before joining him… it would be a while before the electricity was restored.

As the two robots lay still in each others’ arms, a blue light flickered between them and faded.

1965:

“You were right, Rabbit. I’m afraid it won’t be much longer.”

“Oh, Armand…” Louise said mournfully.

He put his arms around her and held her close. Rabbit just held Honeybee’s hand and stared into her eyes miserably. He didn’t want to be right. He wanted to scream at Chastanet for making a faulty brain for her, for not knowing enough at the time to do better. But he knew it wouldn’t be right, it wasn’t his fault.

But it had to be someone’s fault. He couldn’t be this angry and have nowhere for it to go.

They had been as happy as they could manage considering she had only a few years to live. But she had been getting slower and slower and spending more and more time plugged into the wall, and at last Rabbit had come in to find her online but unresponsive. She would squeeze his hand but not much more. That was when he had called Chastanet to examine her. Chastanet, who couldn’t fix it before. Who had found love himself but who couldn’t save Rabbit’s.

The anger bubbled inside him once more. At last he gave up and let it come out in hot, oily tears.

“Honey…” he whispered.

“She should be able to speak,” Chastanet said quietly. “The damage has been most severe in different lobes than I had anticipated. Why isn’t she speaking? Perhaps conserving power? Trying to hang on?”

“She ain’t afraid to die,” Rabbit murmured bitterly.

“I know. I think she is hanging on for you, Rabbit.”

“For me?” But of course she was. That was just like her.
“Is she suffering?” he asked. “Does it hurt?”

“Possibly. I really couldn’t say for sure.”

“Honey… no, baby…” he moaned. “Not for me. Don’t sit there hurting just because… just because I can’t bear to lose you…”

His voice choked off in tears.

“I don’t want that!” he sobbed. “I don’t want to need you so much that you’ll suffer just to stay with me!”

She turned very slowly toward him. “Be-lov-ed…”

“Honey…”

“Tired…”

“Oh! Do you want to rest, Honeybee?” murmured Louise sadly.

“Yes…”

“Then rest, baby,” Rabbit begged. “Don’t do it for me… Don’t hurt…”

“The ba-by…”

“What?”

“Take care of the ba-aby…”

“Baby?” murmured Louise.

“She always wanted kids,” Rabbit choked. “Honey… there’s no…”

He stopped, looking at the two trails of oily tears starting down from her eyes. So she thought they had a baby. Would it hurt her more to just let her believe it, to have her little dream at the last?

“Alright, Honey,” he said as reassuringly as he could. ”I’ll take care of the baby.”

“Rab-bit… sor-ry I ne-ver told you…” she said with great difficulty. “That you are a fa-ther.”

Rabbit’s chin trembled. “It’s okay, Honey. You’ve told me now… And-and you are a mother, Honey. You are a wonderful mother.”

She was, even without children of her own. She had been a second mother to every child in the manor since she came there to live.

She smiled slowly. “You... will love her... Rab-bit... She is be-au-ti-ful…”

“Just like you, Honey,” he sighed, wishing for a moment he could see what she saw.

She managed to squeeze his hand. “I l-l-love y-y-y-y-you…”

“Honey?” he cried. "Is she..."

“I l-love you,” she said again, struggling to keep her words steady.
“Rabbit,” said Chastanet gently. “There isn’t much time.”

Rabbit’s face crumpled. “There never was… never enough.”

“Be-lov-ed…”

He pulled her gently into his arms, sliding her from the bed onto his lap, and nestled her against his chest. “Beloved,” he whispered. “I love you, Honeybee.”

“Sing… my song…”

“I can’t, baby! I can’t…”

“Please, dar-ling…”

He trembled with sobs… he didn't see how he could do it, but he knew she wouldn’t ask it right now unless it was that important to her. Steeling himself, he filled his bellows and sang, in a quavering voice, “You didn’t have to look my way, your eyes still haunt me to this day, but you did… yes, you did. You didn’t have to say my name, ignite my circuits, start a flame, but you did… Oh, turpentine erase me whole, ‘cause I don’t want to live… my…”

He stopped. Not that part… It was too much!

From the doorway, a voice softly continued, “I don’t want to live my life alone, well, I was waiting for you all my life…”

"Bro-ther..." Honeybee said almost inaudibly.

Rabbit looked up miserably at The Spine. His brother nodded encouragingly and Rabbit found his voice once more to sing, “Set me free... my… Honeybee…”

They managed to sing through the next verse. The Spine paused for Rabbit to sing his part alone, but Rabbit just couldn't, not anymore. He stopped and looked at Honey.

She was smiling. Rabbit touched his lips to hers gently. A tiny spark passed between them.

She rested her hand weakly on his chest. “Set me f-f-f-f-f…” she began, caught on the last word.

She shuddered to a halt.

“Free…” whispered Rabbit brokenly, as her eyes flickered twice and faded to darkness. His head sank forward onto hers, tears flowing freely.

He meant to stay here, just holding her, to cry until every drop of oil left his body. He didn’t suppose anyone would let him, but he meant to try. Even though the center of his world had just fallen away, though there was no meaning to anything anymore… He only had this. He didn’t have the luxury of shutting himself down this time. He wouldn’t even have time to cry, soon.

They shipped out for Vietnam in just one week.

The Spine wiped his eyes with his fingertips. That was it, then. There wasn't even anything he could do for Rabbit, now.
They'd known for a long time this day would come. The Spine had lived with the knowledge since before Honeybee had been cleaned and reactivated, while Rabbit still lay on a slab with his core missing. Still, it hurt, more than he had anticipated given the years of warning. She was Marie's close friend, and had loved both of his children every bit as much as their own mother.

He had always appreciated her cool head and graceful manners, and had come to love her as a sister, as his brother's common law wife, if common law applied to robots... Rabbit and Honeybee had decided one falsely obtained marriage license in the family was risky enough. Honeybee had once confided to Marie that they had made their own vows and considered them binding... not that either had ever shown the least inclination to want out of it. It was a charming, romantic notion, though he supposed Rabbit had done it to humor Honeybee... Rabbit didn't care much for laws in general.

But Honeybee, like The Spine, had come to crave at least some of what humanity offered. She never seemed discontent with being a robot, even though it meant she couldn't walk, had spent years as property and was doomed to a shortened life span because she was a prototype made with faulty materials. But she did want things that no robot could have, children most of all. Rabbit had given her all he could of it; marriage of a sort, love of the best kind... even a kind of robotic physical intimacy. The Spine knew well that it was possible, so this hadn't surprised him. But he now understood why Rabbit had gotten so upset when he mentioned his own sex life once... It's one thing to talk about your own, and quite another thing to hear about someone else... especially your brother.

"Are the arrangements made?" Louise asked him very quietly. She had her arms around Armand, who had broken down when Honeybee at last shut off.

"There's a spot chosen beside Pappy's grave. The other affairs are in a folder in Pappy's old study. You know the one?"

"I think so. Why?"

"I can't do anything right now. I have something very important to attend to. I was hoping you could help Marie make the necessary calls."

"I'll make them for her. She's going to be dealing with the kids. Poor babies... They're gonna be just crushed, bless their hearts!"

"Good. We really appreciate this." He turned to go.

"But... Spine, what are you doing that's more important than this?"

He hesitated. "I can't really talk about it. Just trust me, what I have to do is the most important thing I can be doing right now. Thanks again for helping out."

She sighed. "No problem, of course."

He patted her shoulder and hurried out.

Funeral arrangements were important, of course; but given the amount of warning they'd had, it had been a simple thing to make arrangements in advance.

Right now, The Spine's top priority was to prevent another death, one that would devastate him if it were to happen.

Lily still needed his blue matter. She was only nine years old and though she needed only a little infusion each day, every attempt to wean her from the substance had left her weak and sick; They were too afraid to wait it out, in case she should be weakened to the point of death. The longest they
had made it so far was three weeks.

But with the robots going away to war, they would surely be gone much longer... and all attempts to remedy that situation had failed.

The trouble was, money was tight once again. The various forms of income they had, put together, still weren't enough for four robots and six people. Parts were needed, oil and hydraulic fluid, food and clothing for the humans, and Norman's prescriptions; his injuries had left him with extensive medical problems. So when the US government had called, they had little choice but to accept.

Rabbit had tried to make calls on his own, hoping to arrange things so that The Spine would be exempted from service. But the government made it quite clear that if there was just one robot they would expect to show up ready for battle, it was The Spine. He had been fitted with top secret upgrades to the tune of one million taxpayer dollars in cost, and they had yet to see a return on their investment. Rabbit had said a few choice words at that point that had likely put him at risk of being investigated by the CIA.

Poor Rabbit, he thought as he climbed the stairs. He'd tried so hard to help his niece, and this was his reward. But he'd feel that much worse if anything happened to Lily. So what The Spine had planned could help there, too.

When he got to the Hall, it was unusually dark. He didn't question it, however. He preferred what he did to be as secret as possible.

He sat on an old wooden cable spool and picked up an ornate platinum pendant. He'd crafted it himself from melted down jewelry that had once belonged to Iris Tonia, the woman he had called Mother. It was an exact replica, in miniature, of his own Blue Matter core.

Or it would be... once the last component was in place. He was about to add it... and let the consequences follow.

He hadn't discussed it with anyone. He knew they would try to talk him out of it... and he didn't want to be talked out of it. He knew there were risks and he was willing to take them. He unbuttoned his shirt and opened his chest panel.

In the flickering blue glow of his exposed core, he raised the pendant and held it close to him. He pressed a small lever and it opened and began to hum. Blue Matter began to curl lazily toward it from his chest. He trembled but willed his hands to remain steady.

The blue tendril curled into the tiny chamber, gaining momentum, drawing more matter along behind it. He smiled grimly. It was working!

The Hall began to grow lighter. The wires shifted but The Spine didn't notice... it was almost full now, but it seemed to be obscured by spiderwebs. His head buzzed. He struggled against the dizziness, holding the little core in position.

At last, it reached capacity and snapped shut. He lurched to his feet and staggered to the toolbox. Snatching up a pair of wire snippers, he sliced off the lever in one swift stroke so that it couldn't be opened again.

The room tipped sideways. His hand closed over the pendant as he groped with the other for something to steady himself and met only air. He was falling through the dimness...

It seemed to him that strong but gentle hands caught him a split second before he blacked out.
He woke on the floor of the Hall. His chest panel was closed. He couldn't remember having closed it... He opened it and peered down at his core. It was a shade dimmer, and periodically shadows would appear to swirl through it; little bubbles, tiny empty pockets left when he filled the pendant. He closed the panel with shaking fingers. He would survive with less. It was worth it.

He still felt light-headed as he buttoned his shirt and checked the tiny core. It glowed beautifully in his hand. Even if it wasn't self-renewing, it should still last Lily around five years, by his calculations. It was tiny, but would provide the little wisp of matter she needed daily; a small amount, but enough to mean the difference between life and death.

He slipped the pendant onto the delicate silver chain he'd bought for it, then put the necklace into a little red velvet box. He had good-bye gifts for each of them... he just hoped no one would ask any difficult questions about Lily's.

He stood and put his hand to his head. He hoped it wouldn't take long to regenerate the missing matter; he hadn't expected to be hit quite so hard by the loss. Once he felt steady enough, he headed for the door. He stumbled a little as he went and noticed, out of the corner of his eye, the wires shift as if disturbed by wind.

He paused at the door. He'd known for a long time that there was an intelligence developing here. Lily had stopped talking to the baby several years ago, but he had still seen the evidence of its presence. He had developed a few theories about it but nothing he could prove. One thing was clear... it knew him, it was watching, and he was certain now that it was concerned about what had just happened. He strongly suspected it was what had caught him and closed his chest panel.

"I'm alright," he said, turning toward the little core in the ceiling. He was never sure whether he was imagining it, even now. He had interfaced many times with the hall and never received any attempts at communication. But he had seen too much to believe it was entirely imaginary. "Lily needs it. She'll die without it. Do you remember Lily? She comes here sometimes still. You used to play with her..."

He stopped. It felt silly to be talking to it like it was a child, some old friend of Lily's... He frowned and stared up at the wiring. "Do you have a name? Lily just called you Baby..."

*Take care of the baby...*

The Spine's eyes widened. He shook his head. No. It was ridiculous. The thing, whatever it was, had been around for years... Honey wouldn't still be calling it a baby if... No. Not possible.

The wires wriggled in random directions, as though uneasy. He thought. He couldn't pinpoint how; it just struck him as being uneasy. Or perhaps it only seemed that way because he was.

"Thank you... for helping me when I fell. Goodbye." He left.

In the empty Hall, the wires reached for the door, withdrawing as it closed behind him. They curled away, trembling, into the shadows of the ceiling, and darkness resumed.

Chapter End Notes
Rabbit and Honey try something new (Sex. Sort of. No we don't get a play by play, just a lead in, it was covered pretty well two chapters ago), Rabbit responds to the new experience rather more loudly than intended, The Spine overhears a little and does his best not to realize it. Ten years later Honey malfunctions for the last time, and some of her last words are to tell Rabbit to take care of "the baby". Rabbit humors her and says he will, and sings "Honeybee" to her (with his brother's help) as she fades away. The Spine hurries up to the mysteriously darkened Hall of Wires to prepare something to help Lily survive while the robots are sent to Vietnam... he passes out in the process and something catches him, but he doesn't know what does it... until he realizes it's the wires.
And I Think It's Gonna Be a Long, Long Time...

Chapter Summary

Oh, it's such a shame... of all the things to go wrong while out in space...

Chapter Notes

I realized I forgotten about a certain event that would have been very shocking indeed in the Walter family. It's a brief chapter, and a painful one. You've been warned.

Walter Manor, 1962:

"Ignition sequence start."

They clustered around the radio, The Spine tuning it carefully to get the clearest signal. Lily yawned and rubbed her eyes; it was past her bedtime, but he knew she'd have a fit if they tried to make her go to bed before the launch sequence was completed.

"Lift-off! We have lift-off!"

"Yes, folks, that's right, you heard it here... The spacecraft Asteroid I has launched. We will be following the entire journey of Commander Peter A Walter as he pilots the second orbiting spaceship around..."

"If they were following the entire journey, they'd shut up and let us hear it," muttered The Spine.

"Yeah!" Davey agreed grumpily.

"Shush, both of y'all. Peter's heading into space! That's exciting whether we can hear it or not!"

"Yeah!" Jon agreed. "Space, Spine!"

He grinned. "It's unbelievable, isn't it?"

"Maybe you'll get yehr chance someday, buddy," Rabbit said softly as the broadcast resumed.

"I've got too much reason to stay here," he responded, stroking Lily's cheek.

They'd had the opportunity to go to the launch site and see him off, but it hadn't been practical for them all to go, so they had opted instead to stay home and listen to it, as they had during John Glenn's flight earlier in the year. Peter had called the night before, nervous but enthusiastic. The Spine had to admit he'd been a bit jealous, but he was happy for Peter. He'd wanted it so badly, and when they'd chosen him it had been his dream come true.

The Spine sighed. "Well, I really hate to say this, but it's late and children have school tomorrow."
"Awww..." said the kids as one.

"Awww..." echoed The Jon.

"Hush, Jon," said Wanda.

"Come on. Lily's almost asleep already."

She was... nodding and jerking upright as she sat on Rabbit's lap. Marie picked her up and Lily cuddled against her mother's shoulder.

"You two, come on, bedtime," said The Spine firmly as Marie walked out. He looked longingly back at the radio as he led the boys out. Rabbit gave a little salute; he and the others would keep up on events while The Spine was busy.

"Are you gonna stay up and listen, Dad?" asked Davey.

"I think so. I'll let you know how it goes."

Davey sighed. "Alright."

"He'll be fine," said Peter V. "He's brilliant. He was telling me all about the mission the last time he was here. Well, the stuff he's allowed to tell, anyway."

"He always was very bright," agreed The Spine. "Lucky thing, too. He did most of the work when we had to reattach Rabbit's core."

He remembered how upset he had been at the time. He'd been human then, just for a few fleeting days. And he'd managed to fall head over heels in love in that time... He almost laughed. He'd been so sure that she'd find his robot body repulsive and would leave him forever. And here she was, his wife of eleven years, two beautiful children... He hadn't lost a thing in being true to himself and saving his brother's life. All thanks to Peter IV.

"Will you tell us that, Dad? That story?"

"Another time. It's late."

"Dang it!"

"Besides, it's pretty dull compared to what's happening right now."

He stood by and made sure teeth were brushed and lights were out before checking on Marie and Lily. No trouble there; Lily was fast asleep and he soon found that Marie was, too. He smiled, gently kissed each one, and hurried back to the library.

"Marie having trouble?" asked Wanda.

"Trouble staying awake," he replied with a half smile.

"Ssh!" said The Jon, his ear close to the radio even though it was loud enough for all to hear.

"He's already gone almost all the way around once, Spine," Rabbit told him. "How many times is he supposed to orbit?"

"They're going for five this time."
"Well, that's gonna take a while, then." He produced a deck of cards from somewhere on his person and shuffled noisily. "Old Maid?"

"Old Maid?"

"You said you didn't want to play Fish..."

"I want to play Fish!" cried The Jon.

"Ya don't use real fish, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Hush, listen!"

"...Just wanted to say hello to the family back home."

"Peter..." Wanda murmured.

"Spine, I made it!"

The Spine smiled.

"Wanda, Norman, Rabbit, Honey, Jon... Hatchy... Peter, Davy, and Lily... Hey, guys! I'll see you when I get back!"

"That's it?" muttered Rabbit, wiping at one eye. The Jon sniffled. Mentioning Hatchworth, the malfunctioning brother who had been stored for safety reasons in a lead-lined vault, always made them a bit emotional.

"Oh, hush! He never was flowery..." Wanda said, dabbing at one eye.

The technical jargon resumed. As the night wore on, they played cards and talked. Wanda chuckled about the things Peter IV said he wanted to be when he was small... a cowboy, a scientist, a race car driver, a surfer, Superman. Rabbit snorted and said he'd managed to become all of them at once.

Somewhere around 4 am, as Wanda dozed on the couch and Rabbit was scooping up a pile of cookies he'd won at cookie poker, they heard it.

"Commander?"

Static. "Bermuda..." Static. "...Something's wrong..."

"Spine?" Rabbit murmured worriedly.

"Ssh..."

"Asteroid One! What's your situation?"

"...muda..." Static. "...Error lights... yaw is off..."

"Asteroid?"

"Switching to manual..."

"Can you regain control?"
"Control of what?" asked Jon loudly.

"Can't..." Static. "...control! Bermuda... The fuel..." More static.

"Asteroid One! Asteroid! Commander Walter, do you read?"

"Peter!" cried Wanda, wringing her hands.

"...Tell my..."

Static.

The Spine stood up. He didn't know what he intended to do. He just... stood.

"Asteroid One! Say again!"

Static. Nothing but static.

"Commander Walter, respond!"

"No... please, no!" Wanda sobbed.

"It's alright, maybe they just lost the radio signal..." Rabbit said quietly, optics wide. Honeybee clutched at his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, do not be alarmed..." intoned the station reporter. "We have reports that contact has temporarily been lost with Commander Peter Walter. We have instructions to resume regular programming until contact has been reestablished so as to avoid any misunderstanding. This is just a little communications failure, folks. Commander Walter will be back in radio contact shortly."

Wanda sighed with relief as music began to play... The station put on one of the songs The Spine had written years before, "That'll Be the Way Home."

"Just because he's a Walter," Rabbit muttered.

The Spine still stood. This was wrong. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen...

"Your deal, brother," Rabbit said tremulously.

The Spine sat slowly, looking at Rabbit. Rabbit looked back and shook his head ever so slightly.

"You, too?" whispered The Spine. "You think..."

"I dunno," Rabbit whispered back. "I d-d-don't know what to think. But something stinks..."

"I wish they'd hurry up and get back in contact with him," Wanda said restlessly. She stood and began to pace.

"Wanda..." The Spine said, very softly. He put down the cards.

"I don't want to hear any more," The Jon mumbled.

"Jon?" Wanda said, half-laughing, a note of hysteria in her voice.

"No more!" Jon ran from the room.
"Wanda, please listen," The Spine said quietly.

"No."

"What?"

"You heard them, Spine. They said they just lost radio contact. He's fine."

"There's s-s-something all wrong about this," Rabbit told her tightly.

"Stop it!"

Norman, silent until now, stood and gently guided her back to the couch. She looked at him strangely for a moment, then smiled in a shamefaced sort of way and followed.

"Rabbit," The Spine said quietly. "Let's just wait."

They played cards methodically, routinely, going through the motions as the music cycled from theirs to other folksy pieces. A song ended. There was silence. The Spine looked up, tensed, waiting for the blow that he no longer doubted would come.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer began gravely. "We have just been told that as of 4:37 am Pacific Standard Time, the spacecraft Asteroid One is no longer appearing on radar. Repeat, Asteroid One, and its pilot Commander Peter A Walter IV, are lost. Mission control is currently trying to establish what went wrong and determine Commander Walter's final moments..."

A ragged scream tore from Wanda. She sank to the floor in the next second before either of the stunned Walter automatons could catch her. Norman looked at his deformed arm and then at The Spine, a pleading expression on his strange features.

"Petes..." Rabbit breathed, his voice thick with emotion. Honeybee put her hands over her face and Rabbit put his arms around her. "It's alright, baby..." he whispered.

The Spine, too stricken to react for himself, rose, lifted Wanda onto the couch, and made her comfortable. Norman sat by, looking at her worriedly.

The radio announcer plowed on. "...that we all honor the sacrifice of the entire Walter family and offer them our sincerest sympathies in this tragic hour..."

"Thanks..." The Spine whispered dully.
Over There

Chapter Summary

Leaving for Vietnam...

“Time to go, buddy…”

No response.

"Spine?"

The Spine didn’t want to hear. He stood, holding Marie, Davy, and Lily in his arms, and tried to find the will to let them go.

“Spine… come on…” Rabbit said without conviction.

“It’s okay, love,” Marie said in a trembling voice, pulling away slowly. “We'll be alright.”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of Mom and Lily, Dad,” Davy said, following his mother's lead and letting go. He rubbed his eyes briskly, as though they itched.

Lily, however, clung tighter. The Spine put both arms around her and kissed the top of her head as she rested it against his chest.

"Lily…” Marie murmured, stroking her back. Lily clung tighter.

“Say… doesn’t Unkie Rabbit get some of that sugar, Airheart?” Rabbit asked pitifully, leaning in close.

Lily peered around The Spine’s back and waved Rabbit closer as though inviting him to join their huddle.

“Oh, no. No, I ain’t takin’ scraps. I want a whole one just for me.”

Lily at last released her pappy and slipped into Rabbit’s arms instead. He held her close, much as The Spine had. Though she was nine years old, she was small for her age and he was able to lift her every bit as easily as when she was an infant. Though he would have been able to do that anyway…

The Spine wiped his eyes. “Write me as often as you can, all of you!”

“Of course, love!” Marie sighed. “We’ll write all of you, won’t we?”

“You bet we will,” said Wanda soothingly as she stepped in for her hug. “Oh, Spine… you look so strange dressed like that!”

“Jon looks stranger,” said Davey.

The Jon, wearing a regulation short hair wig with his uniform, was working his way around the room, hugging everyone. “No one touch my long hair while I’m gone!” he ordered.
"I’m just glad we have uniforms," Rabbit muttered. “It wasn’t easy to convince them we wear clothes.”

"You all look very handsome," Marie told them firmly.

“The jeep is waiting,” said Wanda. “I hope it’s a tough one, considering it’s going to carry all of you!”

They all walked out together. As the others walked on ahead, The Spine stopped Marie and pulled her into his arms.

“Marie... I don’t know how I’ll survive this,” he murmured, kissing her.

When he leaned away to look into her eyes, she said, “You’re a seasoned campaigner, surely, after so many wars. How did you survive before?”

“It was different then,” he said miserably. He held her close, stroking her hair. “It was hard, but this is like dying.”

“Oh, poo… neither of us knows what that’s like,” she said a little too cheerfully.

“Marie… Don’t. It won’t make it harder for me to know you’ll miss me, too. I need to know it... I know you’ll survive because you’re strong, and you have the children to keep you going. It’s okay not to put on a brave face… please…”

She pressed her face against his chest and said in a low voice, “Love… I feel like I’m dying even now and you know it! I know it won’t make it harder. It’s Lily I’m thinking of… she needs to see a brave face.”

“Does she? Maybe she needs to know she’s not the only one who’s having a hard time.”

“Maybe…” she breathed, caressing his smooth cheek. He held her carefully, in just the right way, not too firmly but not too lightly. He leaned in to kiss her again, and again after, knowing each one could be the last... storing the memory to carry for as long as it took to get back to her. Then he looked at her face, storing the memory of that as well.

"You're so beautiful..." he whispered.

"Me?" she sighed. "I'm getting old..."

"I have top quality photoreceptors," he said with a smile. "They don't lie."

She laughed, only for a moment before breaking down. “I miss you already!” she sobbed against his chest a moment later.

That was more like it, he thought. He wasn't proud of himself for feeling that way, but it was how he felt about leaving her, too, so at least there was one more thing they shared.

“Marie…” he sighed, knowing time was running out. "I love you so much."

She took a deep, shuddering breath and squeezed him tightly. He settled his arms around her and pressed his face to her hair.

“I love you… Spine," she whispered.

She had long since left off calling him David. It had only been a disguise, after all, and she had at last
decided she would call him by his real name when he wasn't wearing his human makeup in public somewhere. He was surprised to realize how happy it made him... she accepted him for who he was. She loved him, not the soft human he had been for just a few days.

He wondered where the others had gone, just a little, as he drew his wife in for one last, lingering kiss.

"Hey, Spine... Oh! Sorry!"

It was The Jon. Peter V tugged at his arm.

"Come on, Jon. You get first pick of seats," he said.

The Jon brightened. "Shotgun!" he cried, bolting for the jeep.

The Spine reluctantly released Marie after holding her for one last moment so as to breathe in the scent of her hair. He looked around. "I’m surprised Rabbit hasn’t called shotgun… Where is he?"

Rabbit was standing a little way off, still holding Lily, looking toward the cemetery. The Spine exchanged glances with Marie. As they turned to walk toward him, Davey trotted past them, reaching Rabbit first.

He wiped at his eyes and smiled down at the boy, then knelt between them and began to whisper something to them both. As The Spine drew closer, he could hear Lily whisper, "We will, Unkie Rabbit.” Davy nodded.

"Thanks. I won’t feel so bad knowing you two are taking care of the ducks, and visiting Honey and Pappy for me. Take Honey some flowers sometimes, too, okay?"

"What kind?" asked Davy.

"Oh, you know honeybees…” he murmured, smiling at the boy. "She’ll like anything that smells sweet.”

Lily hugged Rabbit around the neck at this. Davy clapped him sturdily on the shoulder and walked stoutly away. Marie squeezed The Spine’s hand, then collected Lily and went to wait by the front door.

Rabbit stood, not noticing The Spine, and looked once more toward the cemetery.

"That’s it. Nothing to keep me here now.”

He turned and at last noticed The Spine, and smiled sheepishly as he put on his hat.

“Nothing, Rabbit? Not even the kids?” The Spine asked.

“It’s not the same. Nothing’s the same anymore.” He sighed.

“Rabbit…”

“Come on, we gotta go.” He walked away, The Spine close behind, shaking his head sadly.

They reached the jeep and each returned the driver’s salute. The robots had resumed their old military ranks… Rabbit and The Jon were lieutenants. The Spine had made Captain.

Peter embraced Rabbit quickly, then moved on to The Spine.
“You’ve grown since you came here, Peter,” The Spine said, leaning back to look at the boy. “I don’t just mean in height, of course…” Peter V was nearly as tall as The Spine.

“Yeah, almost old enough to join you, right?”

“Look, it’s only right that I tell you, Peter… part of our agreement with the government, something I arranged personally, was that you would no longer be eligible for the draft.”

“What?”

“The family needs a Walter. And we’re running out of them.”

“But Spine… you three have been Walters for a lot longer than I have!”

“In name only, and technically not even that. You’re flesh and blood. We’re your property…”

“Spine,” Peter groaned. “Don’t say that…”

“We are. Look, it doesn’t bother me. No Walter has ever taken unfair advantage of it. I just mean that you’re the head of the household now, and as such you’re responsible for every living creature in the Walter family… including the automatons… and their families. Do you understand now?”

“Oh, yes… I understand.”

“It’s going to take everything in me to get into that jeep and ride further and further from all of you. I used to have no trouble. I was focused on the task ahead. I need to be that way again. Take care of them. If I don’t come back…”

“Spine! Stop talking like that…”

“Peter, please. If I don’t come back, I want to know you’ll take care of them.”

“Of course I will, Spine! I said I would. You don’t have to tell me…”

The Spine sighed. “I know, Peter. But I needed to say it.”

"Oh... well... Alright, Spine. Don't worry, alright? I'll keep an eye on things. As for Lily..."

"It's taken care of," The Spine said quickly, his voice low.

"Is it? But..."

"Just trust me on this. It's taken care of. Please don't ask any more."

"Spine?" the boy said, his voice apprehensive. The Spine clapped him gently on the shoulder and turned away, climbing into the jeep carefully. As he eased his considerable weight into the back seat, he felt the wheel opposite lift for a moment and thump back onto the driveway. The driver let out a muffled squeak of alarm.

"Sorry," The Spine said sheepishly. He avoided catching Peter's eye as the jeep started and turned to wave at the others.Peter, shaking his head, walked over to join them as they waved back.

The jeep started forward. With a scream, Lily ran toward it.

“Lily!” cried Marie, reaching helplessly after; the girl had bolted too quickly for her mother to stop her.
“Stop the jeep!” Rabbit cried to the driver. The jeep stopped short.

"Lily!” The Spine cried as she reached him, tears dribbling from her chin. He reached down, scooped her up and held her close. “I’ve got to go now, Airheart.”

“I know, Pappy!” she sobbed. “But I forgot to thank you for the necklace!”

“Oh, Lily,” he sighed, hugging her. “Do you like it, little one?”

She nodded. "It's beautiful..."

"Just remember, don’t take it off, alright? Not even for swimming or washing.”

“Alright, Pappy. I love you!”

“I love you, Airheart,” he murmured, kissing her soft little cheek. "Hug your mama for me, alright? Every day?"

She nodded again as he carefully eased her to the ground, leaning over the door of the jeep as he did so. As she walked slowly away, he clung to the side of the jeep, fighting to conceal the wave of dizziness that hit him as his core swished with the change in position. He had been getting them occasionally since filling her pendant. Fortunately, they always passed quickly.

He waved again as the jeep pulled forward and out of the driveway, smiling the best he could, and watched them until he couldn’t see them anymore.

Rabbit turned from doing the same and gave him a long stare. “So…” he said quietly. “You feelin’ alright there?”

“A-ok,” he responded dully. “Considering I’ve just left behind most of my reason for existing.”

“Me, too,” Rabbit sighed. “But I mean, you seemed a little dizzy there.”

“Hm?” he asked carelessly, watching the passing buildings. He hadn’t realized it showed…

“That little necklace you gave Airheart… interesting stone you put in it.”

“It’s actually a tiny blue matter core. I think if she gets used to it, she’ll be able to draw energy from it instead.”

“Oh? That’s an interesting concept. But, y’know…”

“It never worked before, so why would it now?”

“Yup.”

“She’s a strong girl…”

“On the inside, yeah. She’s a brick. Except when you take her Pappy away.”

“Rabbit, please…”

“I'm just saying that she loves you, you lucky stiff. You got a little girl of your own to love you. Little girls ought to love their fathers. Not every guy gets that.” He sighed. “Yeah, you’re a lucky guy.”
The Spine smiled a little. “I’m surprised, Rabbit. You?”

Rabbit grinned down at his hands. “Honey used to talk about what it would be like to have our own little girl. Lot of romantic hooey, I guess, but she made it sound pretty sweet to have a little daughter to call ya Pappy… I guess I came to like the idea, y’know, of a little girl like Honey loving me the way Lily loves you.”

"She loves you, too."

"I know, but... It's different, right? That's something none of us ever expected, you havin' your own actual daughter. I guess I'm a little jealous."

“Oh…” He didn’t know what to say. His thoughts drifted back to Honeybee’s deathbed request, and to that little AI in the Hall of Wires… The impulsive, playful, helpful yet moody presence that had been Lily’s playmate and that sometimes helped him make repairs. He hadn’t missed the pronoun Honey had used for her imagined baby… she.

He hesitated, considered saying something, then quickly pushed the thought aside. There was still no reason to believe… no. Even if it was true, this was no time to find it out… now, while Rabbit was traveling ever further from what might be his… No, best to leave it for now.

Still, he resolved to send Peter V a letter as soon as he finished his debriefing and ask him to quietly look into it.

“But yeah,” Rabbit was continuing, unaware of his brother’s suspicions. “She’s a strong kid… inside. Outside, though… y-y-y-you know as well as I do that she’s like a kitten, Spine. With no claws.”

“I realize that, but what choice do I have? I can’t just leave her to slowly die! I had to try something…”

“I know. I know, Spine. I know you found a way to save her life. I know what’s really in that ball.”

The Spine paused, steam sifting thoughtfully from his lips. Trust Rabbit to work it out. He he avoided looking at his older brother as he said, almost inaudibly, “Did you tell anyone?”

“No! You think I want that on my conscience? Lily ain’t afraid to die, just like Honey. I guess you get that way when you always know you’re on borrowed time... Sorry, but you know what I mean. She’s not afraid she’ll die, she’s afraid her Pappy will.”

“Well, so… you’re the older brother here. What do you think? You think it was the right choice?”

Rabbit exhaled a long plume of steam; his habit when he was taking a little extra time to think about his response.

“It was the only logical step to take, the way I saw it,” The Spine explained. “I weighed out all the options. It was down to three. Go and let her die. Stay and risk the whole family. Or give her enough of my own core to maintain life for around five years and pray that she either loses the need or we come back before that. You see?”

“I do see. But buddy, don’t kid yourself. Your logic circuits are on the blink.”

“What?” The Spine hissed.
“Logic would have suggested that the weaker being had less chance for survival. It would have told you that a Captain needs to be in fit shape to command those under him. It would have calculated the chances of saving the maximum number of people, including your family and your platoon, and you would have chosen to protect yourself so that you had a better chance of protecting them. Logic don’t make room for protecting the weakest individuals in the group. Not c-c-cold logic, not if yehr goin’ full robot. And that’s how you used to function.”

“Well…” he spluttered. "I couldn’t just…”

“Of course not. Between you an’ me, Spine, from where I stand on it, you made exactly the right choice, yeah. I love Lily, too, and I know you can handle losing some of your core. But you're not at full capacity now. The logic you used was tainted. That can work for or against you.”

“Tainted by what?” he asked indignantly.

“Love, buddy,” Rabbit said soothingly. "You were using pappy logic. You were saving your baby first.” Rabbit grinned. “I'm s-s-sorry if I sounded harsh. To tell you the truth, it’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh…” He’d known, of course, that things were different now for him. He just hadn’t quite seen the full picture. He felt all at once pleased with himself, and apprehensive. At last he was a man… just when his platoon needed him to be a robotic soldier.

“So just take it easy, alright?” Rabbit murmured. “Keep safe. Don’t make me have to bring your family the news that you got dizzy and got blown to pieces. I don’t wanna have to see their faces when they hear something like that… I don’t wanna see Lily’s face when she realizes you did it to save her life.”

The Spine sighed, pained. Good old Rabbit… he always assumed he’d come back alive even if no one else did. But his words were sobering. "Alright.”

"I only wish I knew if the stuff regenerates. If not, I guess you'll have to get used to living the rest of your life with dizzy spells."

The Spine snorted. "I'm sure you can give me lessons."

"Sass..." Rabbit said, drawing the word out as though tasting it. "Guess ya didn't lose too much of yourself..."

Marie stared after jeep even after it had passed from view.

He was gone.

She'd been away from him for three months when he was upgraded, but that was the most they had been apart since they'd met. She felt as though what was left behind was nothing but a shell of Marie Walter, all the important parts taken away to Vietnam...

Lily clung to her and sobbed. She stroked the child's hair worriedly. The Spine had told her the night before that Lily would be alright. She'd asked how and he'd simply kissed her by the faint, flickering light of his mostly concealed power core, and neither of them had spoken after that... not until morning.

She shivered and forced herself to trust that he knew all would be well. What else could she do?
Even if it wasn't true, she was helpless.

Davy kicked the gravel beside the driveway and said, his voice surly, "I'm gonna go feed the ducks like Rabbit asked me to."

Lily looked at him sharply. "Unkie Rabbit asked both of us!"

"Unkie Rabbit, Unkie Rabbit!" he scoffed, running toward the house. "Crybabies can't feed ducks!"

She ran after, snuffling as she went. "Yeah, they can too... and I'm not a crybaby!"

"Davy, don't call names!" Marie called, not too angrily. It was actually comforting to see them like that, spirited and bickering as always.

She was startled by a muffled sob near her.

"Wanda!" she exclaimed, turning.

"Oh, Marie!" Wanda cried, hugging her. "It's going to be so quiet!"

"It sure will..." she said faintly, aching far more than she showed. As if it wasn't painful enough already, she realized she would still have to figure out how to get to sleep. She'd grown accustomed to falling asleep to a sound not unlike an idling sports car... a sort of sexy purring sound. And she was woken in the morning by the sound of his boiler softly firing up as his internal clock woke him for the day.

"Wanda, didn't you once tell me you had a recording of The Spine's sleep mode? I'm gonna need that... And an alarm clock."
The Child in the Attic

Chapter Summary

In the top of a large, old house, a child is crying alone... or is she?

Chapter Notes

Sorry, went Moffat all of a sudden. Just yanking yehr chain. Totes not scary.

Lily was alright. Not great, but not bad, all things considered. She and Davy had fed ducks for a while, getting along reasonably well for a change, and she had wandered inside around mid-afternoon to do some reading. It was only when she got to the library that she remembered her Pappy had left; the two of them usually read together in the afternoons. It made a pleasant pastime out of her daily infusion of blue matter.

She stood in the doorway of the library, her chin trembling. But she didn’t want to cry anymore right now. She wanted to read… even if her pappy wasn’t there, the books were, and it would almost be like being with him to have their daily reading time. Almost. She knew he had all the stories memorized anyway… possibly she could write him and tell him which portion she had read, so he wouldn’t be left behind!

Warming to the idea, she sat in the big easy chair he favored, sinking into the indentation his heavy chassis had gradually left. The book they had been reading was waiting… he usually left out the current book so that they could return to it easily.

Lily picked up The Adventures of Robin Hood and opened it to the page marked by the attached ribbon. She was just reading the part where Robin Hood shot an arrow out the window to show where his grave should be, when she heard a tiny hiss.

She looked around sharply, wondering if a little snake had gotten inside, and realized the hiss had come from her necklace. A tiny coil of blue matter was twisting and winding its way between the pendant and her core.

Stillness except for the whisper of the flowing matter in the silence of the library. Lily's eyes widened.

“Pappy!” she shrieked, leaping from the chair. The book hit the floor in a messy heap as her black Mary Janes sprinted past.

Lily ran through the halls of Walter Manor, screaming for her mother. Marie stepped out of the kitchen, hurriedly wiping soap from her hands with a towel, just in time for Lily to plow full on into
“Lily!” she cried, crouching beside the distraught child. “You’re white as a sheet!”

“Mama!” howled Lily, shaking violently. “It’s his heart! It’s his heart!”

“What?” Marie gasped, holding her tightly.

“It’s his heart! Mama, he put his heart into the necklace! He needs his heart! He has to come back for it! Make him come back, Mama!”

“Lily, calm down! There must be a mistake…”

“No!” she sobbed. “No, he’s their Captain! He needs this! Mama, please!”

"No, Lily… it's just blue matter, not his actual blue matter…"

"It is, Mama! It came to me all by itself in the library! I was reading in our chair and it fed me just like Pappy does!"

“What… what are you saying…?” Marie gasped. She gently opened Lily’s trembling hand and stared for the first time into the tiny core.

Marie clapped her hand to her mouth.

“See, Mama?” she whimpered, hiccuping. "He needs this, doesn’t he?”

“Oh… baby, he… he wouldn’t have done it if he couldn’t spare…”

Her voice trailed off. Her eyes seemed to unfocus.

“Mama?” Lily asked, worried.

Her mother's face was very pale. The next moment, to Lily’s dismay, Marie slipped from her crouched position to the floor in a dead faint.

Wanda and Peter came soon in response to Lily's screams, and Marie was placed on a couch in the library. When she regained consciousness, she asked Wanda to take Lily to another room while she spoke to Peter. Lily looked miserable as she walked out of the room, but she cooperated.

“Oh, Peter… What has he done?” she moaned, pressing a cool cloth to her forehead.

“It’s brilliant work, Marie. I don’t know how he was able to fashion a blue matter vacuum so small…” He looked at her indignant expression and shrugged hastily.

“I realize he’s brilliant,” she sighed. “But has he put himself in danger to save her?”

He looked at her askance. “Would you be surprised if he had?”

She sighed. “No.”

Peter nodded. “Well, according to this manual, he can handle losing up to half without becoming significantly impaired. This thing sure is dog-eared. You must use it a lot.”

“With good reason,” she muttered in long-suffering tones, and closed her eyes. “Peter, how much did
“He give her?”

“I’d guess about one fourth.”

“And when you say ‘significantly impaired’ does that mean he’d be at least partially impaired if he lost a quarter of it?”

“That could be… I don’t really know.”

“Oh, Spine…” she groaned. “Y’know, I’ve known big, strong men who have fainted just from donating a pint of blood…”

“This isn’t blood…”

“It’s his blood!” she snapped, opening her eyes again.

He sighed. “Calm down. I know it is. I wish I could give you more hope. I can only promise he wouldn’t have done it unless he saw no other solution. He mentioned it before he left… without specifics,” he added quickly, as she opened her mouth to interrupt. “He just said it was taken care of.”

“That’s essentially what he told me…”

Lily ran into the room, with Wanda close behind.

“Sorry, she wanted to come back.”

“That’s okay. I’m feeling much better. Thank you for getting help, Lily. Come here, baby.”

Lily climbed onto the couch beside her mother. “Is he coming back for it, Mama?”

“No, sweetheart. He gave it to you willingly. He wouldn’t take it back even if we asked him.”

“But…”

“Would he? Hm? You know he wouldn’t, not when he’s so worried about his little Airheart. It’s not his whole heart. He kept much more than he gave you.”

“But he needs all of it!” Lily said, starting to cry once more. “He needs to come back for it! He’ll be in danger if he doesn’t have all of it! You get dizzy when you don’t have enough, Mama!”

Lily certainly knew more about the subject than anyone, Marie realized. She did her best to hide the rising panic Lily's words had caused her and said, "But he hasn't, love. He knows what he's doing."

Lily stared at her, her lips pressed together hard. "You're not even gonna call him..."

"No, baby..."

"He's gonna die and it's gonna be all my fault!" Lily screamed.

"Lily!" Marie cried, as the child leaped from the couch and ran, wailing, from the room. "Lily!"

She started to follow but Wanda stopped her. "Don't... You still don't look well. Let me go..."

"I'll go," Peter said casually, tossing The Spine's manual onto the couch. "Give her a few minutes to cool off, though."
"Oh, I don't know..." Marie said worriedly. "What if she runs off or something?"

"No sweat. I know where she is."

Wanda smiled. "Of course."

Marie looked back and forth between them before it hit her. "Oh. Right. Silly me..."

Lily ran inside the Hall of Wires and slammed the door behind her, then sank to the floor against it, sobbing.

Her mother wasn't even going to call him! He wouldn't be coming back...

She'd really hoped he'd be coming back.

She hadn't been trying to play a trick on anyone, though, just to get her way... she really was worried about him. She kept seeing him and her uncles being blown apart, all because he was too dizzy to take command, to fight the enemy... and it was enough to fuel her sobs for quite a while, until her head ached, her mouth was sticky and her nose blocked.

As her tears were gradually spent, the hall hummed slowly to life around her. At last she grew too weary to weep. She rubbed at her eyes. There was a knock at the door, and she noticed something at the edge of her vision as it jerked sharply away. She looked up, surprised.

She was surrounded by dangling wires. They waved softly, as if blown by a breeze. But there was no window in the Hall of Wires...

They moved slowly closer until the knock came again, and they jerked away as if startled.

"Lily?" called Peter, turning the doorknob.

She scooted hastily against the door, eyes fixed on the wires. "Go away!"

"Come on downstairs, kid," he called through the door. "Your mom's worried."

"I'm okay here!" she said shortly, gazing around her in wonder. Hadn't her Pappy been controlling the wires?

"Lily..."

"I want to be alone!"

"Alright, Greta," he replied huffily. "Fine. Come down when you're ready. At least I can tell your mama I tried."

"Bye!"

"Don't mess with anything in there."

"I won't."

She heard him walk down the hall, and then down the stairs.

She looked at the wires. She could swear they were looking back. One in the center lifted and
bobbed to one side as though cocking its head at her in curiosity.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

She heard something whisper back. Lily squeaked in alarm. The wires recoiled slightly and the whisper came again.

"I don't understand you..."

The wires pulled back a little, then sagged and began to drift away.

"Are you... sad?" she asked.

She scratched her leg and stared. She didn't suppose there was any of her Pappy left behind here, too; at least, she hoped not. But these wires had worked with him for years. She had to know more, but the whispers were impossible to understand. They weren't exactly words... just a sort of signal. She'd sensed eagerness, but more than that was just not clear.

She looked around the room, her glance stopping on a shadowy corner on the far side. Ah, that might work...

"Can you type?" she asked suddenly. The wires paused.

Lily wiped her streaming face on her sleeves as she got to her feet and ran to the little alcove where her father kept a small office. The desk there was a bit too much out of the way for the wires, she decided. She cranked the lever to lower the desk chair, which was set quite high for her Pappy to use for correspondence. Then with great effort she hauled the heavy, antique typewriter onto the rolling chair and trundled it to the middle of the room where a large wooden cable spool sat. She wrestled it onto the spool and fitted it with paper.

"Like this!" she announced, as the wires, like a curious cat, drifted toward it and began to gingerly stroke it's metal surface. She struck a key, but it left no mark.

"Ugh, it's so old!" Her father, of course, could type on it with ease. She jammed her finger hard onto the key and with a brisk "chuff" the machine produced a clear letter L on the paper. She typed her name.

"See?" she said, smacking the carriage return. The paper advanced to the next line. The wires gave a tiny jerk upward. "You can make words. Try it!"

A wire prodded a key softly. Another struck more firmly, this time leaving a mark. All the wires lifted, and then set to work, punching keys with what looked to Lily like joyous abandon. She squeaked and fell backward into the rolling chair, giggling.

When the paper stopped at the end of the line, she ducked in to read what it had said so far.

The paper read, "stygdkubngfyjpkgyghyyjhdjlfjldstikdshxiihsbljvfvjkkjgxx..."

The rest was much the same.

"Oh," she said quietly. The wires tapped the keyboard lightly, impatiently. She wearily hit the carriage return and it launched into another sequence as she sat back in the rolling chair, sighing. When the paper had been filled with a second line of gibberish, it stopped, waiting for her the advance the paper.
Well, it had learned that she had to advance the paper in order for it to keep going. It could learn... but so could a dog. It wasn't very encouraging. She'd really had her hopes riding on this, on there being a someone here, a friend who knew her pappy...

She took a deep breath, swallowed a fresh round of tears, and asked thickly, "Can you spell words? Real words?"

A wire tapped impatiently at the keyboard. Apparently it was really enjoying itself.

"Here," she said. "I'll show you."

The wires clustered around her shoulders as she typed, "My name is Lily," reading it as she typed. "See? You hit one at a time and make words. My name is Lily. What's your name?"

The wires lifted from her shoulders and swung uncertainly toward the little machine. One tapped without much apparent conviction at the letter D.

"Go on," she encouraged. "Type your name."

It still hesitated, flopping aimlessly over the keys.

"Start with the first letter... then, well, you just type all the letters in order." It was really not that complicated...

It punched the Q.

"Good!" she said.

It typed, "w... e... r... t..."

"No!" she laughed. The wires paused. "All the letters in your name, silly, not all the letters on the typewriter!"

A wire irritably thumped the side of the machine. She heard a distinctly irritated tone in the whispers.

"I'm sorry..." she sighed. It had felt good to laugh, though. "I guess I confused you. Try again!"

The wires made no move to continue. They swung beside the typewriter in a careless sort of way, as though thoroughly indifferent to the entire business.

"Well... I want to call you something instead of just 'the wires...'" She looked at the keyboard and smiled. Punching the next letter, a Y, she said, "How about Qwerty? That's like a name."

There was silence. Then a wire swung over and typed, "Y... i... s..."

"Yis?" she giggled. "Hi, Qwerty!"

"Hi" it typed. There was a pause, then it carefully picked out six more letters. "erhart"

Her giggles stopped. It knew her nickname... and she could guess why. She remembered very quickly why she had begun this.

"Qwerty, do you know my Pappy?"

"pape"
"Pape? Oh!" Qwerty did not seem to have a very clear concept of language outside of basic letter sounds... "Yes, Pappy. The man who comes here all the time."

"silvr man"

"Yes!" Lily cried. "The silver man! That's my Pappy!"

"wer iz silvr man"

"He's... he's gone. Far away. I miss him so much already..."

"pape"

"Yeah, Pappy..."

"qwerty 2"

"What?"

"qwerty mis pape 2"

"You do?"

"qwerty miss silvr man 2"

"Yes, Pappy..." she said, a little impatiently.

"No mi pape"

She frowned. "I don't understand. Do you call the silver man Pappy, or are you calling someone else Pappy?"

"sum 1 els"

"Do you mean Colonel Walter?" She supposed it could have been around for that long... maybe he invented it.

"qwerty pape"

"You have a pappy?"

"yis"

"Is he here?" she gasped.

"no pape gon"

"Where did he go?"

"duno"

"He disappeared?"

"yis"

"When?" she cried, enthralled. This was going better than expected!
"2 day"
"Today?"
"yis"

She sat back on the rolling chair and stared at the typewriter.

"You have a pappy. And he left today..."

"yis"

It can't be...

"Qwerty? Does your Pappy have a name? Besides Pappy, I mean?"

"yis"
"What is it?"

"rabit"

She clapped her hand to her mouth to keep from screaming. When the first shock passed, she removed it and breathed, "Rabbit is your Pappy?"

"yis"

"But... that's not possible... is it?"

"yis"

"And that means that your mama was... Oh, Qwerty... you poor thing!"

"mama" it typed slowly.

Lily clouded up once more. "Mama Honey..."

"mama gon"

"I know..." Lily said in a trembling voice.

"mis mama" it typed. The lights in the room flickered and the wires trembled.

It was the saddest thing she had heard in her young life. The idea that whatever inhabited the room was her cousin wasn't the difficult part. She had a very peculiar family. But knowing that someone had lost her mother and father, one way or another, all in the space of a week, and was left alone in the attic... that broke her heart. Its mother gone for a whole week and no one to comfort it... Although her Pappy had been in the room, he had been with his children more, comforting them. Rabbit had spent most of the week out at the cemetery. Why hadn't he come up to be with his child? It hurt. She realized why; she could hear, in the incoherent whispers Qwerty was sending, a heartrending sobbing... one not so very different from her own cries earlier in the day. At first, she wanted to run from it, to go to her mother and never come back here. But then Qwerty really would be alone, crying. She didn't want that to happen again.

And besides... Lily still had questions. But first things first... She reached out, uncertain how to hug a
bundle of wires. The response came quickly; Qwerty sent the wires to her, wrapping around her like a blanket. It was surprisingly cozy.

"It's alright..." she said soothingly, the way her mother did when she was upset. She felt a pang in her chest at the thought, remembering the way she had shouted earlier, and resolved to say sorry to her mother as soon possible.

"Why didn't they tell anyone, Qwerty?" she continued. "Why didn't they tell anyone they had a baby? How could Unkie Rabbit just leave his child alone and not tell anyone?"

A wire disentangled itself from the hug to type, "rabbit not no"

"What?" She thought about it for a moment. "Rabbit didn't know? About what?"

"qwerty"

"Wait... Mama Honey never told Rabbit about you?"

"yis"

This wasn't an improvement.

"Qwerty, why? Why didn't your mama tell her own husband?"

"huzbnd"

She assumed Qwerty was asking a question. "Well, that's kinda what he was." Her mama never did answer questions about that. "Why didn't Honey tell Rabbit?"

"mama skerd"

"Skerd?" She rolled it around her head for a minute. "Scared? She was scared?"

"yis"

"Of Rabbit?"

"hoomnz"

After another moment's pondering, she said, "Humans... but Rabbit's not human!"

"hoomnz sel mama"

"But not the ones here! No one here would sell her!" Lily cried, hurt. "We loved her! And Unkie Rabbit would never have let anything happen to either of you!"

"duno"

Apparently Qwerty didn't understand it either. That made sense; after all, Qwerty had grown up here, like any other Walter child. Whatever had troubled Honeybee must have happened before, when she was sold to carnivals and circuses. Everyone in the family knew about that.

"So Rabbit has gone away and doesn't even know he has a... are you a boy or a girl?"

"duno wut iz b b b dunno"

Apparently Qwerty's spelling didn't include diphthongs.
"Hm... maybe I'll bring some toys up and see which ones you like best... Although I like to play with tools..."

"wut"

"Never mind. Well, we have to tell Rabbit!"

"pape"

"Yeah! Your Pappy needs to know! This is serious!"

"ok"

"But... maybe I should tell my Pappy and have him tell yours. This is too serious for me. I'm just a kid..."

"not kid Lily frend"

Lily giggled. "Yes, I am your friend. We're cousins, too!"

"Cozinz"

"Yeah, that's family. Hey, speaking of family, what about my mama? Can I tell her? And Aunt Wanda?"

"no"

"Why not?"

"qwerty skerd"

Lily sighed. "Why?"

"hoomnz"

"I'm human," Lily challenged.

"big hoomnz"

"Oh, Qwerty... Alright. But I can tell my Pappy? The silver man? You aren't afraid of him, right?"

"no"

"Good. I think I'd better go now."

"pla 2 moro"

"Yes, of course! I'll come back every day, I promise! I won't let you be alone anymore."

A wire stroked her cheek as they all slithered up and into the ceiling space of the HoW. Lily hurried to the door, waving before she headed downstairs.

"I think we'd better have the doctor in tomorrow, if we can get him," Wanda was saying.

Marie sighed. "I'm alright. It was just a shock."
"I know, but... Look, I'm starting to get gray hairs, but Marie..."

"What?" she asked irritably.

"You're starting to get blue hairs..."

"I like them."

"You don't think it's kind of a bad sign?"

"It's a sign that I live in a very strange place. Shouldn't I go check on Lily?"

"Peter says she's fine. You, on the other hand..."

Marie clenched her teeth. "I don't need the doctor."

Wanda threw up her hands, exasperated. "Ugh! Save us from Southern grit..."

"Wanda!" Marie cried, half hurt, half amused.

"You have two children! Your husband is fighting for your country and expects to come home to his loving family. Humor me at least!"

Marie sighed, a long, frustrated sigh. "If you call the doctor, he'll say I'm fine, need to lose a few pounds, and that the blue hairs bring out my eyes."

Wanda rolled her eyes. "Marie..."

"Mama? I'm sorry..."

"My goodness. Come on in, baby..."

Lily shuffled in and climbed onto her mother's lap. "I love you, Mama..."

"I love you, too, Lily."

"I'm glad you're still here..."

"What?" Marie asked, startled. Lily put her arms around her and hugged her. "Lily..." She kissed the top of the girl's head and sighed. Looking at Wanda, she gave a weary nod.

Wanda smiled.
Chapter Summary

The calm before the storm. Things aren't ideal, but they're coming along.

The Spine read his letter soberly as his back was carefully replated to allow his spines to extend smoothly and swiftly. While other soldiers were sent to boot camp, he and his brothers were each being upgraded for swamp combat. Rabbit hadn't been happy about it... until they had assured him it was just his weapons. This didn't bother either of them as much; malfunctioning weapons were a threat to everyone.

"You're keeping the other pieces somewhere safe, I hope," he said firmly as the scientists worked.

"They'll be stored on site, Captain."

He smiled to himself. As much as he wanted to get home, he did like being called Captain, or Captain Walter, instead of just The Spine. It felt like getting an upgrade to human.

The smiled faded, however, as he looked back at his letter. To some people, he didn't need an upgrade to be human. He reread the last line, aching inside.

"PS: I found out what you did for me, Pappy. Mama says you won't take it back but I don't want you to be sick because of me! Please come back and get it so you'll be safe!"

"Lily..." he murmured.

"Who's she?" asked a young woman working on his left shoulder.

"Oh... just one of the Walter children," he said, hastily folding his letter. The movement brought frustrated cries from other members of the upgrade. "Sorry... well, anyway, she's grown rather attached to me."

"Wonder why..." she murmured in the same tone they all had, the tone that suggested they knew everything already. He wasn't surprised. The government had a way of finding things out. And the thought that they might know about his wife and children was enough to secure The Spine's participation in the current war. What they had done went against legal and moral practice, and the people who had performed his upgrades could make all of their lives Hell if they decided to stop looking the other way while it happened.

But there was no sign of threat or animosity here. Each of the scientists working on the Walter robots was ecstatic to meet them. They had competed and been chosen to take part in the work and were sometimes beside themselves with delight about it. It was flattering. They'd had fans for their music and they'd had nosy and even condescending scientists around, but science fans were less common. He wished his Pappy could see them.

"Is Rabbit coming in next?" he asked, careful not to wiggle.

"No, lunch is next," she said with a smile.
"Of course... I tend to forget."

"Naturally. Did you want to see Rabbit?"

He thought of the news he had for him, debating whether to tell him yet. It had stung him to know that Honey had chosen to conceal this Qwerty from all of them until the day she shut down. He'd spent many long hours with his... he supposed it was his niece, considering Honey had told Rabbit they had a baby and referred to it as a "she." If he had known, he could have treated her like the family she was, like the child she was. But he'd thought she was a utility, an assistant, an experiment long forgotten, something installed by a past Walter. He'd even shouted at her, he realized with a pang of guilt. Why hadn't Honey warned him? But he supposed he couldn't understand fully what it had been to her... He'd thought they had become her family, but it seemed that she had spent too long as a talking doll, as bound property, to fully trust anyone, even the man she loved.

But if it hurt him, what would it do to Rabbit? He'd just lost her... and he was bearing up bravely. They had no choice about going to war. Would it do him any favors to learn of this now?

"Well..." he said slowly. "Maybe later."

Peter V knocked on the door of the HoW. "Lily? I just had the weirdest letter from your Pappy..."

He heard her shout through the door. "What? Did I get one, Peter?"

"Yeah, but..."

The door flew open. "Where is it?"

"Your mama has it, but..."

"No!" she cried, starting to run past him. He caught her easily by the arm. "Let me go, you big bully!"

"Shush! Listen a second! There's nothing to go ape about, it says so right here in my letter!"

"Stop it!"

"He sent the message in my letter dumbhead, not yours! Stop screaming a minute!"

"He did?" she gasped, craning her neck and standing on tiptoe to read his letter.

"Hey!" he cried, holding it against his chest. "My letter!"

"Peter..." she chided as he released her arm. He lowered the letter, smirking.

"Look, he told me about this AI you found in the..."

She jumped for the door and slammed it shut.

"Why'd you do that?"

"Are you kidding? She barely let me tell Pappy!" she hissed. "She's too scared of anyone else. I guess she got used to him being up here and stuff."

"Oh... well, now I know, too. So you found out she's a girl, huh? Your Pappy figured that out too."

"Of course... I tend to forget."

"Naturally. Did you want to see Rabbit?"
Not sure how that works. Well, do you think she'll talk to me?"

She looked at him askance. "Why?"

"I do own this house, or I will in a few months... I should know who's living here, don't you think?"

"I guess so..."

He waited. She made no move to invite him inside.

"Technically I could just go in..."

"Don't you dare." Her tone was surprisingly ominous.

"Look... He wanted me to tell you that he isn't going to tell Rabbit yet, alright? She's going to have to be happy with us for now."

"What?" she cried, grimacing. "Why won't he tell Unkie Rabbit?"

"Rabbit needs to be able to fight, Lily! He can't just go to Vietnam knowing he has a kid he never knew about, back here where he can't get to her! He'd feel torn in half. It's gonna be bad enough when he finds out that his... his wife hid the kid from him."

She sighed. "I know... it's awful. How could she, Peter?" she asked with a tremor in her voice. "Qwerty would have been alone if I hadn't found her... or if she hadn't found me, I guess. I was just laying there..."

"Look, she did tell him, right at the end. Rabbit thought what everyone else thought... that she was malfunctioning. She was. But she wasn't imagining things... she didn't have time to explain. She even apologized for hiding Qwerty, she just never said why."

"Oh! Go away, I have to tell her this!"

"I don't want to go away."

"But she's so shy!"

"You have no idea how many more questions you raise every time you talk about her. Here we are talking about her like she's an actual flesh and blood girl and I don't honestly even know what she is."

"She is an actual girl! She just has wires for arms and talks with a typewriter."

"What? Oh, please, you've got to let me in."

She turned away slightly, glanced back at his letter, sighed, and opened the door. The hall was humming quietly; no signs of life.

Lily walked in and called, "Qwerty? I brought someone to meet you. You don't have to say anything if you... Um, come on, Peter."

"You sure?" He peered around the doorframe.

"What's wrong? Why won't you come in? You begged me to let you come in!"

"Well... I'm feeling a little uneasy all of a sudden."
"Oh, don't be a baby. Why would you be nervous about meeting Qwerty?"

"Well..." He stepped into the room and was immediately surrounded by a mass of dangling wires.

"That's why..." he breathed, looking cross-eyed at one with a hook-like end to it.

"Qwerty, stop! This is Peter!"

He heard a chuffing sound coming from a typewriter in the middle of the room. Lily looked at it and snorted. "Silly Qwerty. He's not a man!"

"Hey!" he cried. Seventeen was old enough to be called a man... "Can you quit shaming me and call her off?"

"He's my friend, Qwerty!"

This apparently was the magic phrase. The door slammed behind him. Several wires coiled around his wrists and yanked him forward before he could scream. Fortunately, they were only pulling him further into the room. He staggered with the sudden forward motion and barely kept his feet.

"She's accepted you!" Lily cried, pleased.

"Thank goodness for that!" he cried. "I'd hate to see what she's like if she doesn't accept you..."

"Yeah, you would. Qwerty, I have some bad news. The silver man is not going to tell your Pappy about you yet."

"The silver man?" Peter murmured even as the lights began to flicker. "What's going on?"

The wires typed something. He inched forward to look.

"pape com hom silvr man com hom"

"No, they still have to go fight. That's why my Pappy won't tell yours. If your Pappy knows about you, he won't be able to do his job because he'll want to see you so much. And maybe he'll be sad because Mama Honey kept you a secret. Remember, none of us knows why she didn't tell him. He'd feel just awful."

"pape" The lights flickered wildly.

"Lily?" he said nervously.

"Don't cry, Qwerty! I know," Lily said, and Peter realized she was crying, too. Silly little girls... but of course. Qwerty was an AI, yes... an AI of a little girl. Just like Lily... only a bit more challenged.

"Qwerty..." he began cautiously. "I don't want you to have to be alone anymore, up here by yourself, when you have a family downstairs. You have and aunt and another cousin, and while the cousin is kind of a toerag right now, your aunt is a sweet lady. I'd like you to meet her."

This, to him, was the solution. He felt bad for these crying little girls, but he wasn't really the one to hug them and make it better. Marie, though... she had it. She was pure mom. She was the kind of person he'd dreamed about in the orphanage. If anyone could soothe a crying child, it was a natural mom like her.

Qwerty typed again. "skard"
"Yeah, I heard. What about that... What are you scared of, Qwerty?"

"perj"

"What is that, is it code or something?"

"She can't spell very well. She spells words the way they sound."

"Oh, makes sense to me. I can't spell either. Let's see... pear... purr. Ipair... pearj... purrj. Purge... Oh, she's afraid of a system wipe! She's afraid of being erased." He swallowed. "She's afraid we'll kill her."

"What?"

"She's afraid we'll wipe her from the wiring, kid. That's what a purge would do."

"I don't understand. Why would anyone do that?"

"Well, if they thought she was a piece of faulty programming, something wrong with the system. This whole place is wired together, thanks to past Walters and your Pappy."

"Qwerty... can you travel to other parts of the house?"

"yis"

"Why do you stay here then?"

"saf"

"Oh... wait, is that how you know your Pappy, Qwerty? Because you've seen him in other parts of the house?" Lily said. "I was wondering why she missed him so much if she never knew him."

"luv pape"

"Awww..."

Peter stared at the typewriter, unimpressed with the sentiment. "I can't help thinking there must be a better way to interface with Qwerty. This typewriter thing is clever but it can't be easy."

"yid"

"My point exactly. I'll have to put some thought into a suitable substitute. Maybe after that we can see about getting Qwerty to meet her family."

He turned to go but a wire wrapped around his arm, dragging him back to the typewriter.

"Qwerty, stop!"

"nonononononononononoonnooo"

"Whoa!" shouted Peter, pulling against the wires which, to his surprise, had only a gentle grip on him and loosened immediately. "I won't tell anyone yet, okay? But no one is going to purge you from the house, Qwerty. This is my house. I am the heir to this estate. Do you understand what that means?"

"no"
"It means that no one is allowed to do anything to this house without my permission. I'm Peter A Walter V. I promise you won't be harmed. To be honest, I'm the only one here who knows how to purge you anyway. I promised the silver man that I would protect and care for the families of the Walter robots. That means you, little girl. You're safe, Qwerty. If your mother had just trusted me enough, I would have made her the same promise. I'm sorry you had to live this way."

"no sore i hape"

"Yeah, the sooner I find a better system, the better."

"She said not to be sorry because she's happy living here."

"You got all that from this?" he asked, pointing at the paper.

"I... feel it, too. Like we're connected somehow."

"It's that core of yours, I'll bet. You're probably thinking it's some kind of psychic knowledge bonding you to your cousin but..."

"No, I figured it was the core."

"Little scientist," he chuckled, putting his hand on top of her head and wobbling it gently about.

"Stop it, Peter!"

Qwerty slapped his hand.

"Hey!"

"rud"

"Yeah, that's Honeybee's kid, alright. Ugh! Emily Post. Can't scratch your own butt without getting called out and calmly corrected. I almost wished she'd yelled, honestly..."

"Watch your mouth in here, Peter," Lily hissed. The wires were twitching in an agitated manner.

"Um, I'm terribly sorry for my rudeness. Honeybee was a lovely woman and not a manners vigilante at all."

"You're making it woorse..." she sang.

"I'd better go," he said, backing toward the door. "I'll be back if I get more news or find another way for Qwerty to talk."

"Don't hurry."

"Got some fancy new gear, there, Jon?"

The Jon closed his arm panel and nodded, but he didn't look happy. Rabbit gave him a sympathetic shoulder hug as they headed for their crates.

"Still dunno why we have to travel freight," Jon muttered.

"We're top secret now, buddy, just like The Spine."
Jon brightened a little at this. "We're super spy gadgets?"

"Yup, just like James Bond's martini shaker pen."

"He never had a martini shaker pen, Rabbit," said The Spine, who had come up while they were speaking.

"Sh! You tryin' to wreck the boy's illusions, Spine?"

"He's sixty-nine, Rabbit."

"Not touching that one." He winked slyly.

"Nice to know your dirty joke protocols are still functioning, considering you're heading into a war zone to work with hardened soldiers."

"Yeah. Still have all my cussing files, too."

"You've been using those anyway."

"But I got a couple of new ones. Wanna hear?"

"I'll pass."

"Well..." Rabbit sighed. "Into your crate, Jon. You get to visit a new country. Exciting, huh?"

"Yeah," Jon said weakly. Rabbit knew why. They had all been debriefed about the state of things in Vietnam. Terrible things were happening. They were supposed to be the secret weapon, but how could they help when what they wanted most was to stop people from killing, and the only way to do that was to kill the killers? Jon, he knew, hadn't been able to go into stasis for a week after the information had been uploaded.

"It's okay, Jon. They'll be shutting you down for the trip."

He nodded and walked slowly toward his tech. They each had one assigned to them.

"So, how you feeling, Spine?"

"A-okay."

"That your new thing? You say it a lot."

"I'm fine, alright?"

"Any more dizzy spells?"

"No..."

Rabbit raised an eyebrow at him.

"A few. Nothing serious or you would have heard about it."

"You managed to keep it a secret from all these nosy scientists?"

"See? Can't be too bad, can it?"

"I guess... I hope. You got people who love you back home. Not everyone has someone to go back
to."
The Spine looked pained. He didn't say anything for a long moment.

"What?"

"Rabbit..."

"Something wrong?"

"No... not wrong at all. I just... though you should know..." He sighed. "Of course you have someone to go back to. The whole family would be heartbroken if anything happened to you. You know that."

"I guess that's true."
The Spine sighed in a deflated sort of way. "Yeah, it is."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, just... it was hard enough leaving, but now they'll be so far away."

Rabbit once again found a hug was in order. "I know, buddy."

"Lily found out, y'know. About the necklace. She wanted me to come back for it."

"Poor thing. I bet half of that was just her hoping you'd come home early."

"Yeah, I guess so. I hope she knows there's nothing I'd like more."

"Well, let's get into those crates. At least you'll get some rest and won't have to think about it until you get there."

"Alright."

"I'll see you on the other side of the world."
Chapter Summary

Each night before you go to bed...

Chapter Notes

Because I heard they used to sing this for the troops... ;)

Also, drug use warning... Vietnam, y'know. Not justifying it or glorifying it. I hope that I managed to balance humor and the really creepy, wrong feeling you get from being around someone who isn't right because they took something that changed who they are, even if only for a while. I've been there... there's nothing funny about a relative who used to be nice and now scares you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"While I'm far away from you, my baby... I know it's hard for you, my baby... because it's hard for me my baby... and the darkest hour is just before dawn."

Rabbit and The Spine came in after The Jon's rather quavering beginning, accompanied only by the ukelele The Spine had borrowed for the purpose. But the soldiers listened intently, even those who were somewhat the worse for homemade booze. The hardened soldiers shed tears without shame. The automatons singing leaked oil from their eyes as they sang, which some of the soldiers found disconcerting... but they laughed at themselves in the next moment. Robots didn't cry, right?

The song ended, wrapping up an impromptu concert put together by Rabbit himself upon The Spine's arrival in Khe Sanh. It was a fairly large group now, composed of the many soldiers now stationed there. The military had been expecting an attack there for months and for the first time since they arrived in Vietnam, the Walter robots were stationed in the same place.

The Spine wiped his eyes on his sleeve as the crowd applauded.

"I gotta go back with my platoon," The Jon said sadly as the crowds dispersed. "The guys want to hang out tonight."

"Yeah, about that, Jon," Rabbit said, catching him by the arm. "What do you mean, 'hang out?' I know what it means... But you always look a little... funny... yeah, you look funny when you mention it."

"What do you mean, Rabbit?" asked The Spine, frowning.

The Jon had been there the longest. Rabbit had joined him a month before, but The Spine had just arrived. The last time he had seen either of them had been last summer when he'd been called to stop Rabbit from playing "A Whiter Shade of Pale" over and over... Which he had done not to be a pest but because the strain of seeing people suffer and the repressed grief for Honeybee had finally
become too much, and he had at last just stopped and given way to the pain. The Spine had been able to get him to the point that he was able to carry on, not because he thought it was the right thing to do but because he knew full well that the government would never send Rabbit home because of battle fatigue. Angry as it made him, he'd had to help his brother get back to work.

And now they were together, and while he had been happy to see them, and happier still that Rabbit was once again bearing up under the strain, there was a tension between his brothers that troubled him. Rabbit had already mentioned his worry, but hadn't had time to elaborate; The Jon had seen suffering, as they had, but there was more. Something he wasn't sharing.

"I'm fine, guys," The Jon said quietly. "I gotta go."

He hurried toward his camp, joined as he went by a small cluster of soldiers, laughing and clapping him on the back (and shaking their hands in pain soon after, having briefly forgotten he was made of metal).

"What's worrying you, Rabbit?" asked The Spine, even though he had his suspicions.

"They're doing something... I dunno. Something he's having a hard time with. But Jon wouldn't care about dirty pictures, or booze, or gambling. He's seen his share."

"Drugs, maybe? That's a big problem out here..."

"He's seen that, too. Why would he feel like he had to go, anyway? It's not like he can use 'em."

The Spine stared after them. "I've got a good mind to follow them and find out what's going on..."

"You're a Captain... No one's gonna stop you, right?" Rabbit said coaxingly. He had clearly been hoping for exactly that.

"Alright. I'm going."

"Captain! Major Norwood wants you to report to him immediately!"

The Spine sighed irritably. "Son-of-a..." He glanced at the corporal that had brought the message. "Tell him I'll be right there," he said, saluting.

"Yes, sir!" He hurried away.

"All of Norwood's people spy for him, everyone knows it. Best not to say anything that'll get back to him in front of one of his stooges," he told Rabbit. "I have to go."

"What about Jon?"

"I'll talk to him tomorrow."

"Over here, Jonny boy!"

"Look at the colors..." sighed a soldier as The Jon passed, his chest panel opened wide.

"Hush, Bobby."

"Why do you keep doing this, Hank?" The Jon said unhappily as he stood before him.
"Can't face this sh** without it, Jonny boy..."

"I know, but..."

"The fish is singing to me..." Bobby crooned.

"Shut up, Bobby!" Hank snapped.

"Can I hold him?" Bobby asked, staggering toward the vortex. "C'mere fishy..."

"No!" The Jon cried, backing away. The door to his vortex swung wildly. "You can't touch her! That was part of the deal!"

"He's so pretty..."

"It's dangerous. It's really dangerous, Bobby..." The Jon whispered, trying not to cry.

Another soldier was staring intently at his face and grinning. "Look how the light hits his nose, man... It's huuuge..."

The Jon touched his nose, frowning.

"Sit down, Freddy," said Hank. "Come on, Jonny boy. You're a good boy to do this, y'know? It isn't like those jerks who shoot smack. It's transcendental, y'know? It's not something bad like they want us to think, man. It's beautiful, and you're beautiful, too, man..."

"Thanks..." The Jon muttered, miserable.

"Hey, Hank! Hank! What happens if we give him some?" Freddy cried.

"Nothing, stupid. Quit distracting me." He lifted the little orange pill to his mouth.

"Like, does he get high?"

"I said shut up!" Hank hissed. "Someone might hear you!"

"I can't get high. I'm a robot," Jon explained.

"He'd have to swallow it, man," Hank said. "But he doesn't have a stomach."

"Well, what about that?" Freddy asked dizzily, pointing.

"My vortex?" Jon asked, looking down.

"Yeah..."

With surprising accuracy considering the condition he was in, Freddy snatched Hank's orange sunshine and slung it into The Jon's vortex.

"No!" shouted Hank.

The Jon looked up sharply and stared at them as though he'd just been shot in the chest but still hadn't quite registered the fact. For a split second he was glad that Hank wouldn't be able to take the pill and start acting crazy like the others.

He looked down again in time to see his koi whip around and snap the pill up.
"No..." he breathed, as his vortex suddenly began to swirl with rainbow streaks.

"Whoa, man..." Bobby breathed ecstatically.

"Freddy, you ***hole!" Hank hissed. "That was my last one!"

"Lookit that..."

"Go take a nap or something!" Hank snarled, pushing him away. "Jonny boy? Jon?"

The Jon could feel the apertures on his photoreceptors opening, shutter by shutter. Light filled his eyes... his vortex, his source of life, unique among the Walter automatons... created in a time of pain to become a joy to others...

"Live, dammit!" sobbed a voice.

"Pappy?"

"Open your eyes! Live! Live even though she's dead..."

"Pappy... stop..."

There was a flash of light. It was beautiful... bright and broad and swirling. It made the pain disappear. His vortex... it was different now. Everything was different now...

"You idiot!" someone hissed. "It actually took!"

"Cool, man..."

"Not cool! If something happens to Jon... have you seen the size of the other two, man?"

"They're just machines, man..." the second voice said.

"They get angry! He told me..."

The Jon began to laugh. He didn't know why. It was all different, all so funny... He had been given something that shouldn't affect him, only his fish had swallowed it... and it affected her... which did affect him. He looked at his fingers, at the little facets of light reflecting from them, and laughed.

"We're screwed..." a voice muttered.

--------

"Corporal Nelson... you realize it's four in the morning? What..." The Spine stopped short, staring.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Captain. I was told to send for you if he malfunctioned and well... Look at him."

The Jon was chained to a tree at the edge of camp, giggling at a joke only he knew, his arms outstretched toward a campfire nearby. The Spine wanted to find it funny but it gave him the creeps... and a surge of regret. He should have put Major Norwood off for long enough to make sure his brother was alright. Now...

"What happened? Was there some damage in the last skirmish? He seemed fine at the concert."

"Well..."
"Yes?"

"I can feel the starlight!" Jon crowed. "Starlight..."

It wasn't like any malfunction he'd ever seen. "Corporal?" The Spine pressed sternly. "I want you to tell me exactly what's been going on around here and then I need you to send for Lieutenant Rabbit Walter..."

"Over here, b-b-b-buddy..."

"Rabbit?" The Spine knelt at the foot of the same tree where Jon was singing a song to the starlight. Rabbit's photoreceptors were so dim that he hadn't noticed him sooner.

"What happened to you?" he cried in exasperation.

"H-him," he muttered, jabbing a thumb toward The Jon. "They c-c-called me first. I hadn't even g-g-gone into stasis yet, d-didn't have t-t-t-time to fill my b-b-b-b-b-b-b-boiler or t-top up my oil for the night..."

"Rabbit..." he breathed, pained. "You need to rest..."

"T-t-took e-e-every ounce of strength I had to ho-ho-hold him while this d-d-dummy chained him up... wh-when did he g-g-get so strong?" he chuckled weakly, his throat dry. The Spine could hear his gears straining. "S-S-Spine, what're we g-g-gonna do? He's b-b-b-b-b-been here for hours and h-he ain't come down yet..."

"Stasis, Rabbit. I've got it now." Rabbit nodded and his head dropped immediately.

The Spine stood in one smooth motion and rounded on the corporal, who took a step backward. "Answers, now, before I call the major in to ask a few hard questions of his own!"

"D-don't! Man... look, I'll tell you what I told the lieutenant, Captain Walter. It was orange sunshine..."

"LSD?" The Spine gasped.

"Yeah... Jon lets us look at his vortex, y'know, 'cause of the lights... and keeps an eye on everyone to make sure no one tries to sleep naked in a tree or anything like that... so I still had mine and one of the guys took it and threw it into his vortex..."

"No."

"H-he did, and The Jon, he just started tripping..."

"H-he can't, Corporal Nelson."

"H-he did! Look at his eyes!"

"Dilated pupils are a biological response!" The Spine snapped. What was this little piece of crap covering up?

"But..."

"It's impossible. You know and I know it."

"He did!"
"Stop lying!" The Spine barked, grabbing him by his stained t-shirt and holding him right up to his face. "What really happened? What made him like this?"

"I swear it's the truth, Captain!" Nelson gasped, his voice trembling. "I swear to God it's the truth! His fish swallowed the pill and... and... I swear I never thought it would hurt him..."

The man was sobbing. The Spine felt a pang of guilt and dropped him hastily to the ground. He sometimes forgot that he didn't inspire fear of authority so much as fear of bodily harm in the troops under him. One of the joys of being a robot...

He stared at his younger brother. Jon grinned at the embers rising from the campfire, not a care in the world. Maybe he was lucky.

"I want a list of everyone in your platoon who's using, Corporal," said The Spine through clenched teeth.

"No, sir! They'll know it was me!"

"Then tell me where it's coming from."

"Look... alright, I'll give you the guy who gets it for us... just please don't tell them I said it... some of these guys, I swear they'll put a bullet in the back of your head right on the battlefield and say you were running away from the fight when you got shot..."

"Alright, alright... How long ago did he get the dose?"

"About six hours."

"How long does it take to wear off?"

"It should be wearing off pretty soon... I mean, with a human... I dunno about Jon..."

Exactly what The Spine was worrying about. "Okay. Get back to your camp for now. And you tell no one about this, understood?"

"Yes, sir!" he cried, pathetically saluting as he scrambled toward his camp. "Thank you!"

"Just get out of my sight..." The Spine muttered, turning to Jon.

As the corporal vanished into the early morning dark, The Spine groped for the nearest tree and clung to it for a moment until the dizziness passed. He'd managed to conceal it for long enough to get the information, at least.

The spells had grown less frequent over the last few years, but unfortunately had not stopped. The current situation was sufficiently upsetting that he had expected an attack. This only served to give him hope, however. If Blue Matter was so slow to regenerate, then maybe it was also slow to deplete. Letters reached them less often now, but he'd heard nothing from them to suggest that Lily was unwell. Still very small for her age, but fit. It had been worth it.

He looked worriedly down at Rabbit. He still hadn't told him, didn't dare tell him, about his daughter. Not here, not with the suffering of little children they saw every day. He had enough to endure.

Peter V had apparently found an old teletype machine and made it a hobby to try and add new features to the HoW to make Qwerty more efficient at communicating. They each had told him that the timid AI was growing more receptive at last to the idea of meeting other members of the Walter
household. They all knew about her now, but she had remained wary of the adult humans... even though Peter himself was now twenty years old. But The Spine knew that if they once got Qwerty and Marie together, his beautiful wife would soon bring her around. He couldn't imagine anyone not loving Marie.

He pulled a weathered photo from his pocket. She had sent it to him last year. It was black and white for some reason... but he still adored it.

He put it into his pocket as he walked closer to his brothers, the firelight reflecting off of the angles of his face. The Jon looked at him raptly.

"Beautiful..."

"Thank you, you idiot," The Spine said without anger. "I guess we brothers will have to stay together until this wears off."

----------

The early morning wore on, but The Jon seemed no more lucid. Rabbit woke. The Spine was leaning against the old tree beside him.

"How is he, Spine?"

"You haven't been in stasis long enough, Rabbit..."

"How is he?" he pressed.

The Spine sighed. "He can string two sensible words together. I was thinking of how to get him back to my tent without anyone noticing he's loopy..."

"Won't his platoon miss him?" Rabbit asked as Jon's giggles started afresh.

"I'll square it. The major has been talking about some special missions slated for us... it would make sense for us to bunk together."

"Special missions?" Rabbit asked wearily.

"That's what he called them. So yeah, I'll insist on joint quarters. Jon needs one of us with him at all times."

"I'm fiiiine..." Jon crooned softly. "I'll be okay. Everything is okaaay..."

"Well, you're right," Rabbit said dryly. "He can form sentences... What happened to him, Spine? That idiot with him said something about acid..."

"What he told me."

"But it ain't possible, Spine... is it? He's not high, is he?"

"I think he is, yeah. Or his koi is."

Rabbit looked at him askance. "Wanna try that again?"

"I don't know. It's insane... he apparently got some acid tossed into his vortex and the fish ate it."

Rabbit whistled. "That's new." He stretched his joints and said, "You do maintenance on me or
something? I remember running low on everything."
"I had some time to kill. So I added some water and oil."
"Why didn't you get some rest?"
"Too much on my mind."
"You're a robot. You can just go into stasis. Worrying don't keep robots awake."
"I know."
The Jon shrieked. "They're coming for me!"
They both hurried around to try and soothe him. He was being way too loud...
"Quiet, Jon!" The Spine hissed.
"The dragons are coming! They want my koi!" The Jon sobbed. "Don't let them get her!"
"Hush, dummy!" Rabbit cried.

There was a faint whistling sound.
"They're diving! They're diving!"
"Spine?"
"Hit the dirt!"

Khe Sanh exploded.
"What the..." Rabbit gasped, getting up from where the concussive force had knocked him. The Jon was still screaming about dragons.
"We have to get Jon into the bunker!" The Spine gasped, fighting waves of dizziness as he struggled to his feet. More bombs were going off all around them. "We're under attack!"
"No kidding?" Rabbit cried, standing. "Come on, we have to snap this chain and get him loose!"
"On it!" The Spine grabbed the chain with both hands and pulled hard. A link popped open and Rabbit caught hold of The Jon.

Another bomb struck and they heard screams in the distance.
"Get him back to your quarters!" Rabbit cried. "I'll go and help!"
"Take care of yourself!" The Spine called as Rabbit sprinted away.

Chapter End Notes

In honor of the first fanfic I couldn't stop reading... Seven-Point-Eight. May it someday be finished. But as it is, it's still worth reading and the most pressing tension points in the
plot have been addressed. I decided to work in the part with Connie's husband. Rabbit wasn't able to save him in Khe Sanh. Maybe there's a reason Rabbit couldn't do it...
And the Darkest Hour Is Just Before Dawn.

Chapter Summary

How do you capture three battle robots? Suppose the entire attack, one history still considers a bit of a mystery, was set up for a purpose...

Chapter Notes

The Tet Offensive. A real and important part of the Vietnam Conflict. And history books do indeed state that there are a lot of unanswered questions about it. Enter the fan fiction writer...

Credit, once again, to TheTetrarch for placing Rabbit at Khe Sanh. A lot of troops ended up there so it made sense to bring the brothers together. If you haven't read Seven-Point-Eight, do it. It's a mad mixture of feels, glory, hurt and comfort and I love it.

Rabbit made for the screams, dodging flack and descending shells. Men were diving for cover all around him, shouting to others to get inside, but he couldn't stop. Someone hadn't made it inside and in his experience, this was where he came in.

From a distance he saw that a radio shack had caved in, and a jeep was flipped over. Rabbit checked the jeep and was relieved to find it empty, with no one underneath.

"Over here! They're trapped!" screamed a young soldier. Rabbit turned on a dime and ran for the shack.

"How many?" he screamed as he ran.

"I dunno... seven... eight?"

"Stand clear..." Rabbit fell silent next to the wreckage, listening, trying to determine the best location to start the rescue. He heard the telltale whistling of falling ordnance and screamed, "Incoming!"

The soldier turned from the building and threw himself to the ground as the bomb hit... directly on the shattered radio shack. Rabbit screamed as he was thrown backward... not from fear for himself but because there were men in there...

- - -

"Sir... um... robot..." said a voice. "Wake up, sir!"

Rabbit sat up, realizing he'd been knocked offline when he hit the ground. His elbow trembled as he lifted himself from his side to a sitting position... there was at least a loosened screw in there.

The shack was a crater. The soldiers couldn't have survived it.
He heard the whistling again.

"No more..." he whispered, even as he grabbed the young soldier and shielded him with his body. The kid screamed, whether from Rabbit's ungentle rescue or fear of the approaching bomb, he didn't know.

The world shuddered but luckily nothing heavy struck them.

"Get inside!" screamed Rabbit, releasing the boy. "They're... they're gone..." He swore under his breath, slamming his fist against the packed earth beneath him. Gone...

He turned to the soldier. "Get under cover!" he barked.

He heard a stifled sob as the soldier ran for the bunkers. Rabbit stared after him, wondering. Had he known the guys in the buildings? How long had he been in Vietnam, anyway?

Before he could take any more time to think, the next bomb hit and the screams began anew.

He was up and running in an instant. The Spine joined him soon after but there was no time to ask him about The Jon. They spent the next few days crossing paths, shuttling men from place to place and helping repair damage in a way no human soldier could. Fortunately the bombing stopped after that, but somehow there was still no rest for the robots, no time to discuss their brother.

----------

Rabbit had sunk to the ground a few days after the bombing began, his back against a bunker, hoping for a few minutes of needed stasis when he heard yelling. He made his way as quickly as he could manage to the location and saw that an unexploded mortar lay half embedded in the ground next to the hospital.

"Get back!" roared a familiar voice. Before Rabbit could take any action, The Spine sprinted past him, scooped it up, and heaved it outside the base.

There was a distant explosion and the soldiers cheered. The Spine stood very still as the rest of the camp continued in their hasty rebuilding and tending to the wounded. Rabbit hurried up to him.

"Nice throw, buddy. I would've had to walk it to the gates and toss it from there..."

The Spine didn't respond.

"You okay?" Rabbit asked worriedly as his younger brother closed his eyes and reached one arm out toward him.

"Don't be conspicuous, okay?" he said in a very low voice. "Help me to my quarters."

"What's wrong?" asked Rabbit worriedly, taking his arm in what he hoped was a friendly, nonchalant fashion. "You ain't been resting enough, that's it, isn't it? You need oil or... wait a minute..."

"Rabbit," The Spine whispered. "Please just start walking..."

"Fine," Rabbit huffed, moving forward. This would be discussed.

The Spine started to tip toward him as they walked. Rabbit staggered momentarily, but with effort managed to keep him upright.
"Sorry..." The Spine murmured weakly.

_You will be..._ Rabbit thought wrathfully. He knew what it was now... and it still gave him the same overwhelming mixed feelings of fondness and exasperation that it had the day he had figured it out.

He struggled to keep his brother upright until they reached the bunker. He eased The Spine into a chair next to the cot where The Jon lay powered down. That explained that...

Rabbit hastily shut the door, then stood with his back against it, staring down at The Spine. "You're still getting them, aren't you?"

"Rabbit..."

"Dizzy spells! Right?"

The Spine nodded and looked guiltily at the far wall.

"And yet you're still on active duty?"

"They need me..."

"A lot of people n-n-n-need you, but they need you in good shape, not in pieces! Why didn't you tell me you were still having them? How have you been k-k-keeping them a secret for _three years?_"

Rabbit cried, his anger rising with every word.

"I have no choice!" The Spine said through clenched teeth. "Get off my back!"

Rabbit leaned away, startled and rather hurt. But he never could stay mad for long. He sighed and sank into another chair. "I'm just worried about ya, you b-b-big dummins! Family back home waitin' for you to come back and yehr runnin' around tossing bombs over walls and fainting like a French maid!"

The Spine snorted. "French maids are tough, Rabbit."

"Are they? That ain't what I heard. The fellas were tellin' stories the other night..."

"I'm dizzy enough without hearing any dirty stories, thank you."

"I thought they were very educational. Not much use, but..." He sighed. "I gotta go back out, see if anyone needs anything..."

"I know. I'll be out in a few minutes."

"No."

The Spine sighed wearily. "Jon's already out of commission. If I don't go, people will want to know why only one automaton is in service. Maybe with two of us, they won't miss a third."

The most infuriating thing about this statement was that Rabbit couldn't argue with it. "Fine. When the spell passes completely, okay? I'll tell people you needed maintenance."

"Thanks."

Rabbit walked out, casting one worried look back at his brother, who now sat with his face in his trembling hands. It wasn't right. He'd done it for the right reasons, but... somehow it seemed like it just never should have been necessary.
The camp had begun to settle back into a routine when they got word that the Viet Cong had attacked towns all over Vietnam on the Tet holiday, and been driven back. Rabbit suspected the special missions The Spine had mentioned wouldn't be long in coming, and he was terrified. His brothers were in no state to do anything... The Spine seemed fine but it was clear that high stress brought on his dizzy spells and that meant he needed to stay calm, if it was possible to stay calm anywhere in Vietnam.

And The Jon? They'd been afraid to even switch him back on until shortly before Tet. When they did, they found him back to his old self, even subdued... when he found out that they knew what had being going on. He wanted to help with the cleanup effort but Rabbit was afraid some of his buddies would get their hands on him again and insisted he stay in The Spine's quarters.

Unfortunately, Major Norwood noticed he hadn't been working and insisted he come out and assist. This had gone well until someone had called for help lifting the overturned jeep. The Jon ran to the man's aid, leaping over craters and debris. By the time Rabbit caught up, it was clear something was wrong. Jon was staring at his hands again, grinning. Rabbit managed to get him to help with the jeep and then marched him back to their quarters, just in time as The Jon proceeded to have a full blown acid trip right before his eyes... at least, until Rabbit caught him in both arms and switched him off.

"Is it still in there?" Rabbit cried, exasperated, after describing the events to The Spine later. "I thought that crap ran its course and went away. Is he gonna be on a permanent trip until the day he stops running or what? He can't digest it but I thought maybe the koi..."

"The nature of that fish is still a mystery. Pappy had endless theories and no solid conclusions." The Spine sighed. "What brought this one on?"

"He ran! That was it! He jogged over the ground and when he stopped, he was already getting loopy."

"That would explain why he was fine after stasis."

"What? It doesn't explain anything..."

"The jogging. I think it's like shaking bottle of root beer, Rabbit. Stirs it back up."

"Yehr crazy..."

"Am I? I think it fits. It's just the sort of ridiculous thing that would happen to Jon... And at least we have something we can do about it. If he lays still long enough, the acid settles down for a while and he's back to his old self."

"That won't help in a pinch, though. What happens if they order us on these special missions, whatever those are? What then?"

"I don't know."

Unfortunately, within the week, they found out.

"My younger... The automaton Lieutenant The Jon is malfunctioning, sir. Request permission to leave him powered down in my quarters with the lieutenant here, while I complete the mission alone."
"Nothin' doin'!" Rabbit cried. "Yehr not goin' alone!"

"Quite right. All three robots are required for this mission, Captain." He said "captain" with a little lilt to his voice, as though amused by the use of it. Rabbit remembered hearing the same tone from people talking about a dog someone had made a corporal. He fought the urge to pop this Major Norwood straight in the kisser.

"Sir..."

"You have three days to make repairs to Lieutenant Jon. Debriefing will be at 0600 the day of the mission. Dismissed."

The Spine hesitated. Norwood raised an eyebrow.

"Dismissed, Captain Walter," he said coldly, the snide tone unmistakeable this time.

A sharp plume of steam shot from the back of The Spine's neck, but he turned to go, followed by Rabbit who muttered angrily the whole way back to their bunker.

"Son of a... Captain Walter!" he sneered, mimicking the major's tone. "The old toad..."

"Hush, Rabbit. We'll do it. I don't know how, but we'll find a way."

"Dang right. We'll chain The Jon to us if we have to. I don't like the idea of leaving him here with that jerk, even with his power switched off."

--------

"Spine?"

"Rabbit."

"Jon?"

"I'm here."

"You both feeling okay?"

They nodded. They looked so strange, covered in camouflage paint like any other military machine... but then, so did Rabbit.

"Alright. Let's do it."

They climbed into the Huey, one of several on the pad. Most held 6-8 soldiers versus this one, which would hold only three of them, and even then it would be a strain on the engine. The Jon climbed in carefully, trying not to bounce around. They had explained things to him the last time they had powered him on. There had been tears and apologies from The Jon, but they had reassured him that they weren't angry, just worried. It wasn't quite honest, however; Rabbit was very angry, but not so much with Jon as with the whole, ugly, stupid world.

He was pretty sure, for example, that robots or not, none of them would be coming home. This war was too hateful, too bloodthirsty. These humans didn't care who or what got in the way of what they wanted. They hurt little children, used them as spies. What was worse was that he had found out that The Spine had befriended several local children, refugees from the destroyed village of Khe Sanh. He couldn't be surprised, knowing his brother had kids back home that he missed horribly. But everyone knew you couldn't trust the locals... it wasn't their fault, they lived in fear and did what they
had to do. But you couldn't trust them. He could only imagine what secrets they had gleaned...

"Approaching drop zone," announced the chopper pilot far too soon.

"Here goes," The Spine muttered, nervous steam escaping his lips. He shook his head slightly, as though troubled by something.

"Are you..."

"I'm fine."

The Jon stared at them both with wide eyes.

And then it was time to jump down. They did so, one by one, from the rails of the wobbling Huey. It moved off and another, full of human soldiers, slid down nearby as gunfire broke out all around them.

"Ambush! We have enemy fire!" Rabbit cried over his radio.

"Pull up! Get out of here!" roared The Spine. "Prairie fire! They were expecting us!"

The Hueys pulled up and away, taking the soldiers away from the ambush. The robots weren't surprised; it was standard procedure in the event of being overrun to pull out human troops, leaving the robots to fend for themselves. They had wholeheartedly agreed to this from the start; they knew they could take more punishment than the soldiers. They turned now to face their enemies, concealed but continuously firing.

"Stay low! We can fight our way out of this!" The Spine barked. "Shoot at anything that moves. We'll work our way back toward the clearing."

"But..." Jon began.

"I didn't say you had to hit anything..."

"Roger, Silver!" the chopper pilot responded. "See you there."

They cut their radios so as to draw less fire. There was a rustling in the grass. Rabbit fired across the top of the brush. The Jon stumbled and fell back against him.

"Steady, buddy."

"Right."

They crept through the undergrowth in comparative and unnerving quiet, startling enemy soldiers with oddly accurate shots that almost never actually killed anyone, firing only when fired upon. Rabbit knew this was a breach of orders, but none of them had ever had the heart to kill unless there was a risk to the human soldiers in their unit. Still, the occasion shot did reach a target; they didn't like it, but there was only so much they could avoid.


"Rabbit..."

"Shush, Jon..."

"Rabbit!" The Jon cried, his voice high and terrified.
"What?" Rabbit hissed, unnerved, looking all around him.

The Jon was staring at the sky. "Streaking..."

"No..."

The Spine glanced around. "Jon, just stay with us okay? Stay close."

"I can see it... Help me!"

Rabbit gripped the Jon's collar. "Stay close," he hissed. "Shoulder to shoulder..."

"Help me!" The Jon shrieked, standing upright, holding his arms in front his face.

"Jon, no! Shut up and keep down!" Rabbit cried. Bullets pinged off of The Jon's chassis. He cried out and started to run. Rabbit tackled him as The Spine fired in the direction of the shots.

"Incoming!"

"What?" Rabbit gasped. They didn't usually rush you, not if they could attack from cover... He looked up in time to see a Viet Cong soldier burst from the bushes. To Rabbit's surprise, he didn't shoot. Before The Spine could respond, the soldier brought the butt end of his gun around and slammed it endwise with precision into the middle of The Spine's chest... exactly over his Blue Matter core. The Spine gasped, his eye shutters flying open sharply.

Rabbit screamed and started to get up, but realized he was the only one left who could keep The Jon from bolting into the forest... with no guarantee they'd find him again. Ever. Sobbing in rage and frustration, he watched helplessly as The Spine, his face a mask of shock, stood very still for a very few seconds before he trembled and pitched sideways to the ground, like a marionette with its strings cut.

"Spine?" he cried.

His brother's staring eyes flickered and went dark.

"Spine!" Rabbit shrieked. Was he just shut down? Malfunctioning? If they had killed him... Rabbit suddenly didn't feel so troubled by the idea of taking a human life.

The Jon was alternately laughing and crying as he held him, watching the soldiers emerge from the bushes behind The Spine's attacker, their weapons trained on the remaining automatons. If it had only been rifles, they might still have had a chance, albeit slim. Rabbit would have given it a try, at least. But they had much heavier weapons, far in excess of what was needed to attack human beings. The bazooka aimed at Rabbit's face at the moment could take his head right off his shoulders...

They had come prepared for robots. They had known about The Spine's weakened core. They'd never had a chance. It had been an ambush, alright. Specially designed to stop exactly three robots. In this event, they were supposed to self-destruct, rather than allow their tech to fall into enemy hands. Rabbit had wondered what he would do if it came to it...

Time seemed to slow down... The enemy was shouting at him in Vietnamese, telling them both to get up and come along without a fuss.

He thought of what would happen if he triggered the self-destruct sequence. His core would implode. How much of Vietnam would go with it?
He wasn't afraid for himself. If Rabbit died, maybe there was a Heaven. Maybe Honey was there waiting. Maybe in Heaven a robot could have a baby if she wanted one... Rabbit could have what he had never known he wanted until she entered his life... to be like his Pappy, to have his own children. What a strange time to be feeling it so deeply... death suddenly looked so kind, so attractive. Even if it was oblivion, at least he wouldn't miss her anymore... wouldn't have to see any more suffering...

He looked at The Jon, who looked back with terrified eyes despite his mad laughter. He looked at The Spine, now being loaded onto a strong stretcher... further proof that it had all gone according to plan, that they had counted on having a half-ton silver robot to haul home. He looked at that poor, stupid robot and thought of Marie, Davey and Lily, waiting for him to come home... The Spine's family, the indirect reason that he had put himself into the hands of the enemy, because of those stupid kids that The Spine had befriended. One of them must have noticed his dizzy spells, maybe even asked him questions he knew better than to answer, and had most likely had tipped off the enemy that the silver soldier, the one they really had to fear, the piece of tech they no doubt wanted to capture most of all, had a weakness in his power source.

Poor, stupid robot. Poor, stupid kids. His pain would be over, but they'd all be destroyed if he followed orders... Not everyone welcomed death the way he had realized he did... and none of them really deserved it.

Rabbit rose, shaking, hauled Jon to his feet, and miserably raised his hands to surrender.
Chapter Summary

Marie fights battles of her own.

"Peace, mom..."

Marie sighed. "I never thought I'd get tired of hearing that word..."

"Like, no war. No hate. And it's just a party."

"Dave..." She sighed. "Please, just stay home tonight. Alright? I promise I won't mention your hair or your clothes."

Dave looked uncertain, which gave her hope. She hadn't expected his teens to be all sunshine, but he was too young for these kinds of problems...

"I'll be here, Mama," Lily said soothingly, putting her arms around her mother.

"Thank you, baby. But..."

Dave glared at them both. "I'll see you later," he snapped.

"Be in by twelve!" Marie called as he slammed the door. What had happened? He had looked like he was thinking it over...

"Come on, Mama. Come and meet Qwerty."

"We've tried every day this week, baby," she said distractedly. Would there be alcohol at the party? Drugs? Brownies? She'd heard about the brownies...

Spine... love... What am I going to do? I need you here!

"She means it this time!" Lily was saying.

"Alright..." Marie decided she could use a distraction.

Dave came in late. Very late. She smelled alcohol on him but couldn't get near enough to find out whether it was on his clothes or his breath. The stagger in his walk could just be weariness...

Her visit with Qwerty had been another failure. She had spoken with the young AI for a solid half hour but fear had won out and she had remained unresponsive. Marie read the last message on the teletype machine... it certainly indicated that she had intended to speak to her this time. But when it came to it, silence had reigned. Marie had gone downstairs, sighing about the damage done by her dear friend's own fears, passed down to her daughter. And then she had settled in to wait for Dave.

The next morning brought no new letters from Vietnam. She dressed and went in to the school to get her classroom ready for Monday.
She had gone to teaching full time this year, and it was saving her sanity. With Wanda teaching Lily at home, Marie was able to get out and do her own things during the day without being out for so long that she lost touch with her children. At least, not Lily, who remained, largely due to her ill health, manageable and well-behaved. She got sick more often these days, but seemed to recover well enough. Her hair had taken on a bluish cast, or maybe it had always had that. Wanda, too, though she claimed to have gray hairs, had blue streaks instead. What was more, she did not appear to be any older than when they had first met.

Marie rather wished she was so lucky. As for her own blue hair, which at least hadn't gotten much worse, properly placed hair dye kept it in check. She was determined that when The Spine returned, he wouldn't know that she had blue hair at all. She had no intention of worrying him. He would have enough to deal with as it was.

She found a few cars at the school, other teachers in to prepare for Monday. She met one in the hall, a new teacher at the school. At least, he was new back in the Fall. He greeted her with a smile.

"Mrs. Walter. You too, huh?"

"Just trying to keep ahead of the kids, Mr. Andrews."

"Good luck," he laughed. "I've been trying that all year and they always outrun me."

She smiled. It was nice to meet a teacher with a sense of humor. A lot of her colleagues were older teachers, severe women who believed in leading through fear and who demanded unfailing obedience and a rigid standard of good behavior. One of them passed by with a look that suggested she didn't think much of anything they were doing or were likely to do.

"Well, I'd better head to my classroom," he murmured after she'd passed. "The hallway suddenly got awfully cold." He winked.

She waved as he left, chuckling to herself.

Dave stayed in that night, but he stayed in his room playing music that sounded like Rabbit had the time he got hiccups and his vocal assembly flipped upside down. There were people back home in Louisiana that would have said the record player was possessed by the devil... The weird thing was that she could swear she heard something resembling the national anthem in the middle of the cacophony. She supposed the musician meant well, but she didn't feel it was very patriotic.

On Monday, she felt it was an accomplishment just to get Dave to go to school. Peter was a big help, though he never would admit his methods. Marie very much feared that money was involved.

She chatted with Mr. Andrews at lunch about the problem.

"My sister's son is pulling the same nonsense," he sighed. "Same crazy music, same crazy parties, if you can call them that. I had to go bring him back from one of them... bunch of hairy apes laying around, stoned out of their minds."

Marie gasped. "Do you think that's what Dave is..."

His eyes widened. "Oh! No, I'm sure if he's coming home at all, he's not a part of that!" He sighed. "But if you need help with him, ever..."

"I couldn't impose upon you..."
"No, I'd hate to think of you trying to bring him home alone."

"I do have Peter and Wanda..."

"Well, someone has to be with that sick little girl of yours, right? And Peter might not be enough to bring Dave home."

"Thank you, Mr. Andrews."

"Don't worry about it. Y'know, I think half of it is that crazy music... all the bands getting into drugs. The Beatles, for example. I don't say they were ever exactly a good example, but more recently they've become the biggest part of the problem."

"Ah, yes... Ringo and Paul were very nice..."

He stared, "That's right, you're husband is a musician, isn't he?"

"A soldier just now, actually," she sighed.

"So you met The Beatles?"

"He did. He said John cracked jokes about them and George wasn't much better. Like they were still teenagers. I guess they weren't much older."

"What's he like?"

"Hm? Which one?"

"Your husband," he said, chuckling.

"Oh!" This could get tricky. "Well... he's very tall... handsome, strong, intelligent... and serious. Not stern, mind you, not really. But he's responsible. Makes sure everyone is provided for."

"Sounds like a good guy. He write you a lot?"

"Well, I haven't had much lately..." Any. She hadn't had a letter in two weeks. For him, that was a long time.

"Oh, well, things are pretty messy in a war. I'm sure he's just a bit busy."

"Yeah."

--------

Over the next few weeks, she saw a lot of Mr. Andrews. Circumstances always seemed to throw them together. She felt a little uncomfortable about it after a while. He was so nice... It was good to have a friend she could talk to, someone outside the Manor, with different interests than those who lived there. But the appearance of inappropriateness of such a friendship weighed on her mind.

She wrote to The Spine every day, but the letters from him didn't come. She fought the urge to assume the worst; it had happened before, when the military had him in an isolated area. She did her best to explain to the children that their father wouldn't stop writing unless there was a good reason. Lily would hug her and Dave would roll his eyes. He'd taken to sassing her about The Spine being his father, pointing out that she wasn't even technically his mother but at least she was human.

She was grateful that she could get out sometimes. And more and more, she found her chats with Mr.
The night of the school's open house had come and gone. That evening, she was busy cleaning up fallen papers and straightening chairs when Mr. Andrews peered around the doorframe.

"Need help, Mrs. Walter?"

"I surely do! The little dears don't seem to believe in pushing chairs back in if school isn't in session."

He grinned and got to work, helping to straighten the room. They were finished within a few minutes.

"It's late, the others have left. I'd better walk you to your car."

"I'd appreciate it, thank you."

They chatted about the parents they'd met as they walked, laughing at some of the stranger comments and concerns.

"And she asked me whether I thought little Bobby had such poor penmanship because he's destined to become a physician."

They laughed. Marie said, "Why not? Give him something to work toward. We all need something to dream about, don't we?"

"Mm. Though some dreams may not be the best ones to have..."

"What do you mean? Oh, this is my car, by the way."

He opened the door for her. She hesitated, reminded forcibly of a time years ago when another man had opened the car door for her...

"I only mean that some dreams aren't meant to come true," he said softly. "I... I have one like that."

"Do you?" she breathed. The lamplight hit his face just so... He looked earnest, no longer laughing.

"I dared to let myself dream for a little while that your husband might not return. I confess it honestly, Mrs. Walter, because you and I are friends and I believe friends should be honest."

"Why, Mr. Andrews! What a terrible thing to say!"

"I apologize. I mean no harm or injury to Mr. Walter. I only meant that I nurtured a selfish hope of which I have since repented."

He was so formal! That reminded her of The Spine as well. But was she hearing right? What was he saying?

"Mr. Andrews... I don't know what you thought would come of telling me this..." she said breathlessly, her heart in her throat.

"I don't know either," he sighed. "It doesn't matter. I apologize once again. Perhaps I have taken honesty too far. Goodnight, Mrs. Walter."

Her heart was pounding. She felt a deep disappointment that he had stopped. She felt a deeper
disappointment in herself for wanting him to go on. He turned to go.

"Mr. Andrews!" she cried suddenly. He turned back, looking at her sidelong.

Their eyes met in the dim glow of the street lamp. Marie swallowed hard.

Unbidden to her mind came a memory, something The Spine had said before he left.

I know you'll survive because you're strong...

I don't feel strong...

"What is it?" asked Mr. Andrews.

She took a deep breath.

"I'll see you tomorrow. Drive safely."

He smiled and shook his head. "Mr. Walter is a lucky man." He walked away.

Marie practically leaped into her car and raced home, trembling. So close! How could she have even for a moment... She felt horrible. She hoped the children had gone to bed so that she could take a cool bath and have a good cry, but Dave was out again and Lily was playing her father's records in the library. Marie heard a song start, one of their favorites.

"Close your eyes, and I'll kiss you, tomorrow I'll miss you, remember I'll always be true, and then while I'm away, I'll write home every day, and I'll send all my lovin' to you..."

She broke down in tears at last. Lily ran out into the hall.

"What's wrong, Mama?" she cried, throwing her arms around her. "Did you have a hard night?"

"It's just been a long day, baby." She wrapped her arms around Lily. His daughter. Their daughter.

Spine, why haven't you written?

She sent Lily off to bed and wrote The Spine a long letter, confessing everything, or everything she thought needed confessing. Then she crumpled the whole thing and threw it into the furnace. She wanted to tell him everything, but the thought of the hurt it would cause him nearly broke her heart. She couldn't do it. She didn't know why he hadn't written, but she resolved not to weaken again. She would always be true... And he would surely be back soon. She would make that her dream, one that simply had to come true.

The telegram arrived the following morning.
P.O.W.

Chapter Summary

The Walter automatons have been captured by the enemy. Chassis will be removed, and troubling things heard as their jailers attempt to turn them against each other...

Chapter Notes

The only chapter that could be more painful than the last few... so far.

Rabbit lay curled on his side.

He didn't want to know how long he'd been there, but he was clockwork... unless he'd been shut down completely, he always knew the time.

It had been almost six weeks.

The Spine lay beside him, looking like a titanium model of a skeleton except for the cases which still held his working parts. Most of his chassis had been methodically stripped away. With his sound-proofing gone, he made a sound like a very old man wheezing while driving a very old Ford jalopy.

Rabbit's brotherly instincts, the ones he wasn't supposed to have, told him to tend his brother, to comfort him.

But a stronger feeling remained in control... one he wished he'd never come to feel, to understand so vividly.

Rabbit closed his eyes to keep the oil from leaking out.

The Spine hadn't been with them in the cell for the first few weeks. When they had arrived at the camp, Rabbit was ordered to bring The Jon into a closed, windowless cell and shut him off. Rabbit had complied because he was hoping their men would soon track them down, and because the bazooka that had once aimed at his head was now trained on The Spine, who lay unresponsive on a reinforced gurney.

Under these conditions, Rabbit had been forced to submit to having all of his weapons removed or deactivated. But they weren't content to disarm him; he was stronger than any human man even without them, and so they chose to make sure he could not escape by rendering his legs immobile. But with all the information they had clearly managed to obtain about them, they either did not know, did not believe, or did not care that the robots could feel pain. There, alone, without the fear of his brothers hearing, Rabbit screamed in agony when the wire cutters bit through the wires that sent signals to and from his legs... signals to move, and signals of pain.

When it was done, he lay on the floor of the cell, sobbing, trying to pull himself together by thinking
of other things... What they had known so far, how they could possibly know it. But he had no
energy to come up with any answers.

They left Rabbit and The Jon in the cell while they rolled The Spine out. Rabbit, not caring who
heard him, not caring that they were sadists who probably wanted him to suffer, screamed and cursed
at them as they took him away. Left alone again with his inert brother, he lay shuddering with pain
until he fell into exhausted stasis.

When he woke, to his relief, his pain protocols had adjusted to the lack of signals from his legs. They
were, effectively, numb. He wished all of him could be numb... but the worry and fear remained.

He looked over at The Jon and thought of switching him on. He could creep over there well enough
and do it, but then there would be two of them scared and miserable. On the other hand, if he left him
shut off, he would be theirs to take when it suited them. Maybe they would cut The Jon's leg wiring
and rip out his weapons... Rabbit heaved a shuddering sigh. Not Jon. He had an idea.

Rabbit started crawling toward his little brother, hooking his fingers into the floor, his legs dragging
behind him. He knew how he could, at least for a little while, protect one brother. Rabbit found the
power switch and pried it into the on position with his sharp fingers.

Jon was lucid when he woke. He saw Rabbit, propped up on his elbows, oil streaks on his face and
oil stains on his uniform where they had cut out his weapons, and began to cry.

"It's my fault..." he whimpered. "You're bleeding..."

"Don't cry, buddy. I don't even feel it anymore," croaked Rabbit. His vocal assembly had been
scratched when they pulled out his flamethrower, but he could still speak.

"Rabbit... they hurt you... even your voice. I love your voice..."

"I'll get it back someday. Pete Five will fix me right up, okay? But I need ya to d-d-d-do something
for me."

"What is it?" The Jon asked softly.

"Jump around. Jump around every time you come out of stasis. Scream, yell, dance, leap, just get
moving."

"But Rabbit! That's how..."

"I know. That's the idea. You were trippin' when we got here and they were afraid to get anywhere
near you. They don't know what to do with a robot on an acid trip. That's how yehr gonna keep safe,
alright? For as long as we can get away with it."

The Jon began to sob. "You'll be alone, Rabbit. I won't even know who you are most of the time!"

"I'll still have you with me, and I'll know they can't hurt you. It's worth it, alright? I'm already
worried sick about The Spine. Do this for your big brother, okay?"

The Jon nodded. Trembling with misery, he got up and jumped up and down. Rabbit watched
soberly as he did it, as the effects kicked in gradually. Then The Jon's photoreceptors dilated until his
blue eyes were almost black and his tear-streaked face grew dreamy.

"Hello, flowers..." he sighed, sinking down beside Rabbit and putting his arm around him. "Will you
be my friend?"
"You bet, buddy," Rabbit sighed. "If you dance your craziest dance for me every time someone comes through the door."

"Uh-huh. I like dancing..."

"Good boy."

When The Spine was brought to join them, three weeks later, Rabbit wept with both relief and sorrow. He pulled him close and held him like a child as The Spine weakly told Rabbit that he didn't remember much but that he ached all over.

And no wonder, considering he'd been pulled apart. His hair was gone, a smooth metal dome covering his brain. His face reduced to the simple lines retained from his first build. He looked like a baby to Rabbit, who had seen him this way when he was first activated. This only deepened the pain of seeing him suffering... But The Spine's biggest complaint was being naked, which meant they had taken keepsakes, photos of Marie and Dave and Lily. The Spine could, of course, remember them perfectly, but it gave him comfort to see the photos.

They left them there for another two weeks, occasionally providing water and oil. Rabbit was taken a few times and examined, measured, and studied. Rabbit supposed they'd be peeling him next. The Jon, at least, had danced and flailed every time they came near, and this time, when they ordered Rabbit to shut him down, he had refused. They had threatened to injure The Spine, and been laughed at by both brothers. A dark sort of humor had settled over the two of them; even The Spine thought that death wasn't such a terrible thing anymore. And as the two of them had talked it over, and now that they knew they'd be leaving in pieces, they had concluded there was no percentage in trying to make nice. If The Jon could drug-trip his way through this, they wouldn't stop him. That would be something, because neither of them expected to see home again.

And to his surprise, they gave up. Rabbit, far too jaded to hope anymore, suspected they had something ugly in the offing to quit so easily.

And he was right... the next morning, the gurney returned for Rabbit.

"Lieutenant Walter!"

"That's right. You get that and my serial n-n-n-number, maybe my birthday, and that's it. So you might as well start ta-ta-taking me apart and cut the crap."

"All in good time."

Rabbit laughed mirthlessly as he lay there, his legs still useless, staring up at bright, white lights that obscured everything else in the dim room. Someone he couldn't see in the strange lighting was speaking near his head.

"We would like to know what is wrong with your youngest brother. Your silver brother has been most helpful, but there are still unanswered questions."

"That's a l-l-lie right there. The Spine didn't tell you jack!"

"Not directly. But we were able to glean a great deal from his reactions. It wasn't easy. He is strong, your brother. And yet... he has his weaknesses..."
Rabbit was through playing along. "Lieutenant Rabbit Walter..."

"His family, for example..."

"Service number..."

"It must have come as a shock to his brothers when he married a human woman."

"Three three..."

"And impregnated her."

Rabbit had expected this. They were going to have to do better than that. He pressed on. "Six five six..."

"An even greater shock, I am sure, than when you and your wife successfully produced a child."

Rabbit began again. "Lieutenant..."

He stopped.

"Your daughter, I understand, misses you very much."

"My what?"

"Your daughter."

Rabbit opened his mouth but couldn't speak. He shook with rage. How dare they... how dare they bring that into it...

"Do not worry, Lieutenant. She is in no danger from us..."

"Shut up! I don't know what you want from me, but making this crap up about a daughter ain't gonna get it for you, so you can just quit wasting your time. Take me apart if you feel like it, I don't care. I'm kinda sick of life anyway."

"Could it be true, then? That you do not know your wife had a child?"

"There ain't nothin' ta know..."

"Possibly it is not yours?"

Rabbit snorted in spite of himself. "Suggesting that Honeybee stepped out on me and got knocked up is about the only thing more ridiculous than the daughter."

"You think we are inventing this child, then?"

"I think ya got yehr dirty information from the wrong place. Honey thought she had a baby at the end. Joke's on you. She was malfunctioning. Didn't know what was real anymore."

"I think not." A woman stepped into the light. She held a folded piece of paper which she opened and held before his eyes. "Is this not the hand of your brother's unnatural child?"

"It's the writing of my brother's daughter, yeah," Rabbit snapped angrily.

"Read it, if you please."
"You brought me here to read letters from home?"

"Please, Lieutenant. I think you will find it informative."

"Suit yourself." It took Rabbit only seconds to read the page, even with Lily's crazy handwriting, but he stared at it for longer...

It couldn't be...

"Dearest Pappy,

Today Qwerty finally talked to Mama! She just said, 'Hello!' but I cheered! I know she's going to love Mama, just like you said. I'm trying to teach her to spell better, but she isn't very interested. You'd think she could just link into the dictionary computer Peter installed in the HoW and spell any word she wanted, but she's always in such a hurry to talk that she never does.

"Peter and Dave came up with a theory about why Mama Honey never told Rabbit about her. Mama told Peter that when she was expecting me, you were worried sick about her. And she said that she was afraid at first that I wasn't a baby at all, but some kind of Blue Matter sickness. So maybe Mama Honey realized she was going to have a baby and was afraid that Rabbit would think Qwerty was a malignant program. Maybe she was afraid Rabbit would be so worried that he'd ask you to fix her, and Qwerty would have died before anyone even knew what she was. Well, except for Mama Honey.

"Don't you think that makes sense? I know Mama Honey was never silly and usually trusted Unkie Rabbit, but if she was worried about her baby, and thought he wouldn't understand because he'd be so afraid for his wife, well, she wouldn't act like her usual self. Maybe that's why she didn't tell him until right before she died. Can't you tell Rabbit now, Pappy? Tell him that, and maybe it won't hurt him so badly that he can't keep going. Qwerty wants her Pappy to know about her. She used to slip into Mama Honey's chassis just to hug him while they were sleeping, did you know that? So Mama Honey wouldn't catch her... I guess that sounds a little weird, but I think it's cute! And she loves him and misses him and says..."

The letter continued on the other side but Rabbit didn't ask to read it.

"Honey..." he whispered, his eyes brimming with tears. "Take care of the baby..."

"Your brother has seen fit to conceal her from you," said the woman. "Your own child."

Rabbit stared at the lights, too overcome to speak.

"You do not know her but it seems she knows and loves her father as a daughter should..."

"It's not possible..." Rabbit whispered.

"For your robot wife to bear your child?"

Rabbit, upset as he was, felt an almost painful surge of warmth on hearing this. Honey carrying my child...

What was she like?

"And yet she did. We have many questions as well. We would like you to try and find out more. In return for this information, we will consider releasing you and your brothers while you are still functioning... once we are done learning what we need to know."
Rabbit glared at her. "I ain't gonna tell you anything!" he said thickly.

"Very well. Take the the time to accept that your brother betrayed you, and your wife betrayed you. Consider the offer again once you have come to understand that this is a very thought-provoking combination."

"What are you saying?"

"Forgive me; I take no pleasure in dishonoring the memory of your sainted wife, but I only mean to say that when a man and a woman together conceal a child, there is often a shared shame between them..."

"Stop it..." choked Rabbit.

"It is also a fact that your brother, unlike you, is capable of the act of love and procreation..."

"Shut up!" Rabbit began to struggle against the straps binding him to the table. "Get me out of here before I take this place apart!"

"If you stop struggling, we will return you to your cell," she said gently. "May you find the answers you seek."

She walked out of the light and he was rolled from the brightness of the room into the dark hall. It seemed a lot darker now, and not just because of absence of bright lights.

Rabbit let the tears flow freely. He had thought the cold snip through the nerves of his legs was the worst agony they could inflict.

It wasn't true. It made no sense. It just wasn't true! The last bit especially... Never mind what The Spine may have had, before their captors had stripped his upgrades away. It wasn't as if Honey had a... No, stupid to let them get to you...

And still it bore into him... That sweet-voiced little demon's barbs had struck true, and she probably knew it. Rabbit had spent his life playing big brother to a perfected version of himself. He was the prototype, kept running out of love or pity, or because Colonel Walter had found, to his surprise, that Rabbit was a being, an intelligence, rather than just a faulty design to be scrapped or discarded when it had outrun its usefulness. He was more alive, more human, than anyone had anticipated.

Just like Honeybee.

But The Spine... suave, debonair, tall... so danged tall. With a million dollars packed into his gleaming masculine chassis. How they had made a fuss over him in Plifterston back in 1956! Not only was he shown in his striking black suit, but a part of the presentation had involved displaying the silvery plating of his body. The sight of him in tight little wrestler's drawers, posing for the audience in that big red velveteen tent, had left Rabbit and The Jon nearly paralyzed with laughter for a week... but the attention he got from the ladies afterward had brought him closer to divorce than he had ever been before or since.

Honey had smoothed it over... Marie was emotional after Lily was born, but Honey also comforted The Spine. She understood what he was going through better than anyone... She had always been fond of him...

Rabbit closed his eyes, told himself they were just saying it to drive a wedge between them... told himself to not to let them win so easily...
But he found, to his horror, that no matter how he tried, the only thing he saw when he closed his eyes was Honeybee swooning in his brother's arms.

"Rabbit?" The Spine murmured.

Silence.

He didn't know whether Rabbit couldn't or wouldn't respond, but it had been a week since any of them had been taken away and in that time, only The Jon had spoken to him. They chatted briefly when the little robot came out of stasis, before he triggered his regular acid trip. The Spine had gotten very curious about how long one dose of orange sunshine was supposed to remain in the body, and whether a robot was capable of a psychosomatic response... it would be just like The Jon to imagine himself into hallucinating.

But now the little brass robot lay in stasis, his short curls resting close to The Spine, who sometimes reached out wearily to touch his brother's head protectively. The Jon was so human, really... though sometimes not in the best ways. And his curls reminded The Spine of Dave, when he was a little boy. They were just as soft, even now...

"Rabbit, can you speak?" he asked dully. He wasn't sure why he kept asking. If they had done something to his brother, rendered him incapable of responding, asking again and again wasn't going to make a difference.

The Spine filled his bellows; a deep, shuddering breath he didn't need. "I suppose either way it was something they did to you. Something that broke you so completely that you can't speak."

He stroked Rabbit's back absently; a habit he had developed with his family. It seemed to comfort them when they were sick, or hurting. "I was lucky. I was shut off when they took everything. I didn't have to feel it. But I wish you would speak... Jon isn't here really, just his body. It's so lonely..." He stopped at the catch in his throat, cleared it and continued, "I said I was ready to die, but I'm not. I thought they'd taken everything, but if I could just get back, maybe Peter can get my old plating back from the feds..."

"Won't be such a ladies' man then, will ya?"

"Rabbit!" he cried joyously. "Rabbit! I thought..."

Rabbit wrapped his arms around his legs and pulled them to his chest, curling into a tighter ball. "Spine... I can't stand it anymore," he croaked in a trembling voice. "Even if it's true, I gotta know..."

"Know what?"

Rabbit sobbed softly.

"What did they say to you, Rabbit?" The Spine asked, trying to keep the rising anger from his voice.

"They showed me a letter... one of Lily's..."

Oh... There wasn't a letter Lily had written in the last three years that didn't talk about Qwerty, and most included a plea for him to tell Rabbit the truth. "Rabbit... I'm sorry. I..."

"You didn't tell me about her."
"I know."

Silence.

"Why?"

"You were hurting so much already..."

"And you didn't want to hurt me more," Rabbit said flatly. "Yeah..."

"It's not that I didn't think it was good news. I know how much you wanted a daughter. I just thought... Well, we were all hurt, when we found out she'd hidden her from us. We thought she'd come to trust the family enough to... well, anyway, I figured it would be that much worse for you, knowing she concealed your own child from you..."

"She hid her?" Rabbit interrupted.

"Well, yes. Honeybee told her to hide from us... said humans were dangerous. Qwerty had lived for years in that Blue Matter reactor I fitted into the HoW, sort of made it her own, blending in mostly." He recalled the times she had played with Lily, and the day Qwerty had caught him in mid-fall and put him safely on the floor. "She's just made of energy, both Blue Matter and electricity so Peter tells me, doesn't have any kind of a body to speak of..."

Rabbit rolled with difficulty toward The Spine and stared, wide-eyed. "What do you mean, she hid her? Honeybee? Just Honeybee?"

"Well... yes." Who else would have? "I thought the HoW had developed sentience all these years. Stupid, huh? It was because she never spoke to me once in the time I was there, no signals, nothing. Turns out Honeybee..."

"Was afraid we would kill her..."

That was the last letter he had received from Lily. The one presenting the theory about why Honeybee had hidden her baby. "I thought that was a good guess, myself," The Spine murmured. "Lily's quite right, it doesn't hurt so much when you think of it that way. It's rather touching, isn't it? The sort of thing a mother would do. Instinctive. She always was a naturally motherly type..."

"Yeah," whispered Rabbit, pulling his dingy sleeve across his eyes. "She deserved a baby of her own... our own..."

"It wasn't about us, it was, well, all those years living like a slave. She never really forgot the helplessness I suppose." The Spine sighed. "This is the closest I've ever come to understanding how she must have felt..."

"She's mine... she's really mine... I don't know how, but..." Rabbit whispered. "She's my baby..."

"Rabbit?"

"Oh, Spine... buddy... I'm sorry..." He put his arms around The Spine and held him. The Spine squeezed back, relieved, as Rabbit shuddered with misery. He was afraid to ask again just what else they had told him... there had to have been something more, something that had been eating away at him for the past week. But if Rabbit was hurting too much to say it, he didn't have it in him to try and draw it out.

"Please..." Rabbit said softly, when he had recovered enough to speak. "Tell me all about her, Spine.
Tell me about my little girl."

The Spine held Rabbit and began, telling him everything they had learned about Qwerty since the first day he had realized there was an intelligence besides himself in the Hall of Wires. His smile wasn't as visible on his stripped robotic face... but for now, it just felt good to have a reason.
Chapter Summary

Interlude: They're living their nightmares. Sometimes they'd rather stay in their dreams... but sometimes you have to take action to make your dreams come true.

Chapter Notes

It was all a dream... No, not the whole story. Just this chapter. What they dream, on a good night... and when it's time to wake up.

"Come on, baby! Come to Pappy..."

The baby toddled noisily across the room. Her rubberized soles padded softly but her hardware tended to rattle. Her copper ringlets were especially musical. Rabbit loved the sound.

She was almost to Rabbit when she tripped on the edge of the rug and fell. He scooped her up, laughing.

"Ya did it, baby! What a good girl!" He tossed her in the air and she squealed with joy. She descended rapidly. Too rapidly. Almost too late, Rabbit remembered Qwerty weighed more than a human baby, with her copper and steel construction, and grabbed her in both arms just as she passed between them. Qwerty, oblivious to her close shave, giggled madly.

"Here's her bottle, beloved," Honeybee murmured as she entered the room.

Rabbit, relieved that she hadn't been there to see him nearly drop their daughter, kissed her and they sat together while he gave the baby her bottle of oil. Qwerty's photoreceptors... one blue and one green... slowly closed. At last she stopped sucking and oil began to dribble from the corners of her mouth. Honeybee smiled and wiped her gently.

Once Qwerty had been carefully placed in her stasis crib, Rabbit scooped Honeybee into his arms. "I missed you so much!"

"Why, beloved! I was only out of the room for a few minutes..."

Rabbit realized he was crying. Why was he crying? "It... it seemed longer, baby..."

"Darling Rabbit."

She brushed her lips against his with a spark that set his insides on fire. He hastily turned down his boiler and held her again his chest.

"She's so beautiful, Honey. Just like you." He grinned. "Ya think someday she might get a little brother?" he asked.
"If she does, I hope he looks just like you."

Rabbit giggled. "I wouldn't wish that on anybody!"

"Don't insult the man I love," she teased.

"Oh? Ya gonna get mad at me?"

"I might. But I can tell you what I'd rather do..." She pulled his head closer and whispered in his ear.

His eyes widened. "I could let you do that..." he breathed. His boiler cranked up all over again.

"Well, then..." she whispered, looking into his eyes.

"Oh, baby..." Rabbit didn't need to be told twice. He swept her up in his arms and headed for their bedroom.

"Rabbit?"

"Yeah, baby?" he sighed happily.

"What?"

The Jon was shaking him. "I just wanted to say hi before I... y'know."

"Mmm-hmmm..." Rabbit sighed, eyes still closed, pulling his legs closer to his now partially stripped chest, clinging to the moment where his dream had been interrupted. It was just getting to the good part. "Have a nice trip."

"That isn't funny, Rabbit," The Spine scolded, but he heard The Jon giggling. Rabbit had hoped he would. He was in no mood for jokes himself...

The sad truth was, he had no plans to ever laugh again, at least, not until he was with Qwerty. She was all that was left... well, there were his brothers, the family back home, but she was all that was left of Honeybee. He hadn’t had any hope of that until a few weeks before. Now that he knew, even though Qwerty was an AI about Lily's age instead of the little metal toddler of his dream, still Honey was a part of her. Their family carried on... And he had to hope he'd survive this, he had to keep going, for her.

But it would be a lot easier to keep going if he could see how that dream ended...

He drifted back into stasis and dreams of moments that would never come as the real world faded from hearing... the sound of The Jon's laughter becoming dreamy and The Spine, who hated Jon's trips, sighing profoundly.

"She should sleep for a couple of hours, beloved..." Honeybee purred as he shut the door and locked it.

"Two hours?" he replied huskily, slipping out of his vest. "I think that should be enough... barely."

"Rabbit, darling..." she sighed as he took her in his arms.

Rabbit smiled in his sleep.

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The Jon was back in Walter Manor. He leaped for joy and ran inside. The Spine was in the kitchen, reading the paper.

"Cookies!" Jon cried. Someone had baked a fresh batch. He took six.

"Now, Jon, are those good for your boiler?" asked The Spine.

"No..." he pouted.

"Just one. That's messy enough."

"Okay, but, I had the weirdest dream. I keep having it, too. I dreamed we went to war again and I ended up on drugs!"

The Spine chuckled over his newspaper. "A robot can't be on drugs, Jon."

"That's what you said in the dream. You were really mad."

"So I would be."

The Jon munched his cookie. It tasted just like he remembered...

"It was so real...

"How do you know you're not dreaming now?"

"That's not funny."

"Sorry. But if it was so real..."

"Oh, it wasn't as real as this. It's kinda blurry, and I see weird things, and someone is taking you and Rabbit apart... and I'm scared all the time. It's awful. Something like that just can't be real."

The Spine lowered his paper. "Well, that doesn't sound right. How about Peter and I do a diagnostic later, see if we can find the problem? Then there would be no more nightmares."

"Thanks, big brother!" He skipped away to find someone to play with.

Rabbit looked at The Jon. He was smiling in stasis. "Whaddya think he dreams about?"

"Don't know," replied The Spine. He had wondered the same thing about Rabbit, but he was careful not to ask. "After all the hallucinating he does while he's awake, I just hope for his sake that it's something quiet."

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"That's the last of the boxes, Mr. Walter."

"Thank you," The Spine said softly. He said everything softly, these days. "I appreciate your help, Mr. Sibley."

"Shoot, don't nobody want to cross Miss Marie or she might give their kid an F."

"Aw, yeah, I'm a big bully in school. Give out Fs right and left," Marie laughed.
The Spine fought the urge to sweep her into a kiss. He had that urge every few minutes so he was getting used to fighting it.

"You?" he said instead. "You're so sweet, I'll bet it's all you can do to correct them when they're wrong."

She laughed and he got that urge again. He beamed down at her. His wife. He had never believed this day would come, but it had at last, after the months of helping Rabbit recover and bringing Honeybee back a second time from the abandoned amusement park. Fortunately she retained the repairs made by Peter II. After his ordeal, he wasn't up to doing them all over again.

But now things had been arranged, now he had his bride! And the extra time had been well used; he'd needed it to get used to just being a man. Now he felt almost as if the years of being a robot had been a dream...

"Well, now, she's a sweet thing alright. You got yerself that, Mr. Walter. Cain't cook worth a dang, though."

"Oh, I warned him, Mr. Sibley. David wanted me anyway."

"Smart man."

"I can cook," The Spine said. "My father uploaded..."

Marie coughed.

"Taught me how to cook, sir."

"A feller who can cook, huh? Well, now, how good are ya?"

"I could cook in a restaurant if I needed to... I can prepare a number of local dishes..."

"Whoa! Can you make pecan pie?"

"Well, yes..." He didn't mention that baking was still risky since he tended to forget he needed oven mitts...

"Sheee-oot! Is it good enough to beat my old Mamaw's pecan pie in the county fair?"

"I don't know..." He was new to taste and he'd only ever eaten pumpkin pie...

"Oh, you should try it, Sp... David. She's so vain about her winning streak that you'd be the local hero with the ladies if you managed it."

"Jest don't tell her I put you up to it," Mr. Sibley laughed.

The Spine smiled. It was so different, being human. Everyone was so friendly! They seemed especially indulgent toward them as a young married couple as well, cooing over them the way people coo over new babies... a few people had even mentioned babies! If it weren't for Marie's health, he would have seriously contemplated them himself.

He looked at her and his heart jumped. It did that a lot. She'd explained that it was normal... apparently the same thing happened when she looked at him. The thought made his boiler work overtime... no, wait. It made him warm all over. That was how they said it.

Sibley chuckled and said, "Well, I can see Mr. Walter wants me out of the way, so I best be going."
The Spine blushed fiercely. He had lost track of the conversation entirely in favor of smiling down at his wife... "Oh, I didn't... I'm sorry."

The older man laughed heartily. "Just back from your honeymoon, boy. I know how it is and you couldn't pay me to stay in this house any longer than I have to. Mrs. Sibley'll be over around seven with some supper... jest make sure yer dressed." He winked broadly and was out before they could so much as offer him a glass of water.

"Well, honestly!" she said, bright red but amused, as she closed and locked the door. "You'd think they expected us to spend the whole day in bed!"

The Spine laughed weakly. Was that an option? Well, maybe not all day, but...

He noticed she'd locked the door. Did they usually lock the doors in small towns?

She turned and smiled at him and he succumbed at last, drawing her close and kissing her passionately.

"Oh!" she gasped when he gave her a split second to manage it. "I need..." she ventured at the next break. "A shower!"

"I don't care..." He tugged at her blouse. "I need one too I think..." Why were bras so complicated? "I don't care about that either..."

She melted into his arms and he wondered distractedly if that Mr. Sibley was psychic...

"Oh... Spine..." she sighed. "I mean..."

"Spine is good." Kiss. "David..." Deeper kiss. "John Foster Dulles..."

The last hook finally gave way. He was pretty sure he broke it. He hoped she wasn't mad later.

"Upstairs... now..." she gasped, mid-kiss, backing him clumsily toward the staircase.

"Mmm-hmmm..."

A long while later, they lay side by side in her rather frilly bed. He liked it... being together in her boudoir, among the feminine trimmings she had chosen... Two human lovers. Marie played aimlessly with The Spine's hair. It tickled.

"I hope you don't end up regretting this," she said quietly.

"Perish the thought..." What a time to suggest it! At the moment, he could only see good things coming of his choice to live with her in the pink house in Louisiana. His first resolution: stay home a lot. Life as a human man had been a shock, and sex had been... well, the first couple of times had been terribly embarrassing, and would have been worse if she hadn't had some experience, and if human men didn't have certain pre-programmed responses. Otherwise he would have been hopeless at it.

That was a week ago. He was pretty sure he'd gotten the knack of it... He'd certainly warmed up to it, anyway. He remembered the talk Peter IV had given him about taking cold showers when the feeling seized him. He never wanted to take one of those again.

"So, do you miss being made of metal?" she sighed.
He made a valiant effort at not laughing out loud and failed. "Right now?" he giggled. "Well, no!"

She shoved him in the chest and blushed. "Alright, stupid question."

"No, it wasn't, love," he said warmly, kissing her.

"Do you ever miss it, though?" she murmured when they parted.

"Sometimes... not much, though." He touched her back, feeling the softness of her. The sensitive human skin on his fingers could feel the warmth, the soft little hairs that covered even the smooth flesh of her neck and shoulder, the way she shivered gently at his caress. It made him want to... well, never mind. They just had, and there were boxes to unpack...

"How about your family? Rabbit and Jon and the others?"

He sighed. "I do miss them. A lot, sometimes."

"Just sometimes?"

"When I'm not distracted too much," he said, stroking her cheek. "But you're a great distraction..."

"Poor love." She slid closer, into his arms. He pulled her close against him and sighed, content.

"Marie... Is there a limit on how often you can..."

"A little," she said, smiling mischievously, "but I think it's safe to say we're clear of it..."

He smiled, a little embarrassed. There went the pre-programmed responses again... "I don't know, though," he murmured. "Isn't it possible for me to... I mean, I can, now... I could m-make you..."

"Pregnant?"

He nodded, now profoundly embarrassed.

"I was thinking of seeing a new doctor about that. I think they may have overreacted. Or maybe I healed since then. Or there are new treatments. There has to be something. With all these scientific advances... surely there's a way that I can have children in this day and age."

"I hope so..."

"So do I!" she said emotionally. "I want to carry your child, love."

And it struck him forcefully, as they melted together once more, how much he wanted it too.

"Spine?"

"Rabbit." The Spine was awake. They were in the cell.

He was made of metal... and precious little of that.

But Marie still loved him. They had spent all day in bed before... She had carried his child. It was hard to regret anything knowing that.

He realized Rabbit was speaking.
"What?"

"I said the bombing's stopped, buddy. I didn't want to wake you if you were sleeping through it... by
the way, could you shut off your radio signals when ya go into stasis?"

"Oh, good lord..." The Spine groaned.

Rabbit snickered weakly. "Just kidding. I knew it. I thought I was the only one."

"Only one what?"

"The only robut that had d-d-dirty dreams."

"They're not dirty..."

"Confirmed." Rabbit laughed and began to spasm, his whole body jerking as his bellows puffed
violently, trying to clear the mold that had begun to grow there in the last month. The Spine, used to
it, put his arms around him and held him tightly until the fit had passed.

"Idiot. Making stupid jokes at a time like this."

"I gotta do something," Rabbit wheezed. "It's gonna be over soon."

"Shut up."

"I'm rotting from the inside out. I think the mold is making holes in my bellows. And the mold is
there because there's a slow leak in my boiler, don't you understand that? And they stopped bringing
water when the bombing started."

"Maybe now that it's stopped..."

"No. Listen. I haven't heard a sound since the last bomb hit. Just dead silence."

"We never heard much anyway..."

"But the machine hum... the signals... even those have stopped."

The Spine listened. Rabbit was right.

"They're either dead or they took off, Spine. Our guys must have run them out. They grabbed what
they could and abandoned us. If we're lucky, our guys might find us, but who knows how far in we
are, whether they have the room hidden..."

He started coughing again.

"They'll hear that a mile away," The Spine joked, holding him.

"Spine? Are you up to trying to escape?"

"Sure I am. They screwed up a lot of my connectors but I can still break a lock, I think. I couldn't
take on the pack of them plus weapons but I can get us out where the guys will find us..."

"Get Jon out first, alright?"

"All of us," The Spine said sternly.

"Look at me," croaked Rabbit. "The whole package, buddy."
The Spine forced himself to do it. Rabbit was beyond stripped. He was the stuff of nightmares. They had apparently wanted all of the copper... Rabbit was a skeleton of a robot, like The Spine, but while The Spine's framework still had a certain smoothness to it, Rabbit was all bits, bolts, hooks, gears... Rabbit nodded, seeing The Spine stare. Little flecks of black mold floated through the air as he coughed.

"Rabbit..." His voice broke. One last piece of programming they had left behind, one last little human trait... simulated emotional response. Triggered by his real robotic emotions, at least.

Because seeing Rabbit this way broke his heart. He knew Rabbit had meant for him to see the state he was in so that he wouldn't waste time trying to save him. But it had the opposite effect. Rabbit would be rescued, even if he had to carry him out himself.

"You need a little time in the garage, I'll give you that," he said as lightly as he could manage. "But you're somebody's Pappy, Rabbit. I couldn't face her knowing I left you behind. Got it?"

Rabbit's eyes blinked rapidly and stuck halfway open. Rabbit swore softly, his throat raspy and dry.

"They didn't bring oil either... Rabbit, shut down. My reservoir is larger. I'll get this hellhole opened and find a jeep or a truck to siphon or some cooking oil, I don't care. And then we'll get out of here."

Rabbit nodded meekly, his fight gone. He shut down.

The Spine looked at The Jon. He would wake him when it was time to walk out; it would give him less time to start tripping.

He sat up, shuddering violently. He was glad Rabbit was shut down... He didn't want him to see this. He had expected it to be difficult...

Hooking his fingers into the walls, he clawed his way up and stood, waiting for the dizziness to pass. When would the Blue Matter regenerate? Would it ever?

His core settled and the room stopped whirling. He walked slowly to the door. If they were still there, still alive, he would pay for this...

He wasn't sure he cared anymore. The choice was to lay down and die, or take the chance of getting home, getting back to her. How many times he had seen it in his mind... calling her when he reached the U.S., telling her he was on his way back, hearing her cry for joy... the only tears he'd ever want her to cry. And walking in the front door, straight into her arms.

He hesitated. In his dream, he had been human, soft... That man would have died here long ago. She had said so many times that she loved him the way he was. She no longer even called him David.

And yet the man she loved was now a metal skeleton. The man she had sent to war, robot though he was, looked like a man, felt like a man in her arms, was able to make love to her like a man...

He closed his eyes. Marie... will this be the limit? Will it be the one thing that you just can't overlook?

And in that moment, he could swear he heard her voice, from almost twenty years before.

"It’s going to be hard. Remember, I’ve been there. I lost the man I loved. I thought he’d be back, just like you said in your song, but he never came back. There wasn’t even a body... Please don’t make me go through that heartache again."
"Marie..." he whispered.

He remembered Lily's letters... two little girls waiting for their fathers... Counting on them to return.

He looked back at The Jon... innocent, with the strength of a small army and the heart of a child. He shouldn't be here in the first place...

The Spine pulled back his good arm, the one with all the connections still in place. He clicked it back and released it at the door with all the strength he could muster.

Going home...

The door exploded.

He cringed in pain, clinging to the battered door frame. Now that the heavy door was removed, he could hear distant voices. They were speaking English.

"Hey!" he barked. He stuck his head out into a long hallway.

A soldier ran around the corner and aimed a rifle at him. "Don't move!"

The Spine almost laughed. "Please don't..." he said wearily. "I'm Captain Spine Walter, one of the Walter automatons."

The man lowered his rifle. "Lieutenant! You won't believe this..."

Another man stepped around the corner. "What in the name of Hell happened to you?"

"Good to see you, too," The Spine murmured, relieved. He'd served with the man before. "We're gonna need a heavy stretcher and a lot of muscle..." Well, maybe not so much muscle...

"Get on it, Corporal!" The soldier ran off. "You wait right there, Captain." He left.

The Spine sank back against the door frame, all of it catching up with him at once. It had been so close! They had been right around the corner... Would they have come all the way down? And he hadn't been able to hear them at all... which meant the room was sound-proofed. Which further meant that if he hadn't broken the door, the three of them would have run down and been essentially dead. And he almost didn't... until he'd remembered...

It was too much. He fitfully wiped tears of oil he could little spare as he sank to the floor. "Rabbit! Jon!" he cried in a trembling voice, forgetting that his brothers couldn't hear. "We're going home!"
The Walter automatons are no longer fit for war... and if they have anything to say about it, they never will be. It's time to go home.

Taken from an actual anecdote told by a Vietnam pilot... who was able to make a call home one day when his chopper was in the air and got a really good signal...

"So... you and Norman, hm?" asked Marie slyly.

Wanda blushed a curious shade of purple. Marie wondered whether she should be concerned about that.

"I'm surprised myself," she replied softly. "I know... Peter already said it. How can I fall in love with a man who looks like a Picasso?"

"I was more surprised that you could forgive his part in... well, you know."

"I do, though. I can't explain it... He's obviously changed, not just on the outside. He's tender and gentle... I believe he must have done what he did in fear of Ingatius, do you know that? I don't think he ever tried to hurt anyone."

Marie smiled. Peter III had told them all otherwise, but it was true that something had changed about Norman that day... inside as well as outside. Peter III himself had been the one to suggest taking him in... explaining that Norman, too was a victim of hatred and the only cure was love and forgiveness. It was quite a leap from the life of a warrior Peter had led until then. Marie was very pleased when he'd done it. Who could look upon Norman Becile and not feel pity?

Well... apparently Wanda. It was heart-warming. And Marie wanted a lot of heart warming right now. Her heart had been trying very, very hard to go cold and never grow warm again...

"It's hard to imagine," she agreed with a smile. "I've only ever seen him being a sweetheart."

Wanda studied Marie for a moment. "Are you sure you want to talk about this?"

"About what?"

"Me being engaged to Norman. Love and romance. I don't want you to have to think about..."

"But I want to. I want to remember that there's still love in the world, and that people go on finding the best in each other..."

Wanda blinked back tears. "I understand."
"And he's coming home, Wanda. Never suggest otherwise to me if you want to remain my friend."

"I never would, Marie! I want them to come home, too! It's just that... it's been six months..."

The doorbell rang and Marie jumped so violently that she dropped her teacup.

"Oh, my! I'll take care of it, Marie!"

"I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me..."

"I do," Wanda murmured, wiping up tea with a dish towel.

"Someone should get the door," Marie said faintly, turning. "It... it might be a telegram..."

The two women looked at each other. Neither moved to answer the door.

The doorbell rang again and Marie trembled.

"I got it!" cried Peter, trotting blithely past.

Wanda reached out as if to stop him. The door opened. They heard murmuring voices. The door closed.

The phone rang. Marie ran to answer, trembling. Whatever the telegram said could wait a little longer...

"Walter Manor," she said tremulously.

"Hello? Hello, may I speak to Marie Walter?" shouted a voice.

"Goodness! I'm Marie Walter!"

"Oh, good! Ma'am, I have a call for you. Alright, Captain! She's listeneing! Go ahead!"

Marie's heart jerked sideways and she nearly dropped the phone. She felt a little sick...

"Thanks!" cried a familiar voice. There was a noise like a helicopter in the background. "Marie! Marie, say something!"

"Oh my lord!" she cried, clinging to the door frame.

"Marie! What is it?" cried Wanda, hurrying from the kitchen. In the same moment, Peter rushed into the hallway.

"They found them! They're coming home!" he roared, waving a telegram.

"Marie, are you there?" The Spine cried anxiously. "I'm sorry, I didn't know how to warn you gently..."

"Spine..." she gasped. "Oh, my love... is it really you..."

"They're on the phone?" cried Wanda. Peter rushed to them, grinning. He and Wanda leaned in around her, listening.

"Oh, Wanda, I think I'm going to faint or be sick... Spine!" she almost screamed. "Spine, darling! I... I can't speak... I don't know what to say..."
"Recite the Gettysburg Address, then! Just keep talking!" he shouted, loud enough to be heard by everyone. "I've waited so long just to hear your voice again..."

"I love you!" she cried.

"I love you too... Marie... I'm coming home!"

"Oh..." she breathed, her hand on her throat. "Oh, Spine..."

"We all are! We're in a chopper heading for the airfield and the pilot said we might be able to reach a ham radio operator in the States so we tried it and... and it worked, I contacted some lady in Fresno and she called you for me... She thinks I'm just a soldier calling his wife."

"That's what you are, silly!" Wanda cried. There were tears streaming down her cheeks. She laughed and hugged Marie, who was still in shock.

"Thank him for me," she said weakly, leaning on Wanda. "Oh, love... I thought... I thought I'd never see you again..."

It all hit her at once. She burst into tears.

"I know, love," he said as gently as he could over the sound of the chopper blades. "I wasn't sure myself. I..." His voice cut off sharply.

"Spine?"

"I'm here..." he choked. "I missed you so much..."

"It's alright... you're coming home..." she sobbed.

"But... Marie... I'm not the same. They... the enemy took my upgrades... my chassis..."

"Aw, crap..." muttered Peter. Wanda shushed him.

"I... I hope you won't be frightened when you see me..."

"Just come home, I don't care how you look!"

"Oh, Marie..." he said faintly, sounding relieved. Had he been afraid of a different answer?

"Where's Rabbit?" Peter cried. "Can we talk to him and The Jon?"

"Um... no... they're shut down..."

"What? Are they okay?"

"Yes, they're... they're functioning. It's complicated, actually."

"Alright," Peter said. "We'll talk later..." He laughed weakly. "It's good to hear your voice, old man."

"Yours too, Peter. Wanda? Did I hear your voice, too?"

Wanda surprised them all by becoming completely speechless with tears. Lily pelted into the hall in the next moment.

"Pappy!" she wailed. "Mama, is it really Pappy?"
Marie laughed through her tears and nodded, hugging her daughter. "Qwerty knew?"

Lily nodded brightly. "Is he...?"

"He's on his way! Your Pappy's coming home, sweetheart!"

"Whoo!" shrieked Lily.

"Lily?" The Spine cried. They gave her the phone.

"Pappy! You're alive! You're alive! I knew it!"

They could hear The Spine laughing. "Of course you did!" came his voice from the receiver.

"I'll get Dave," Peter whispered.

He hurried out while Lily crowed into the phone, "Did you tell him, Pappy? Did you tell Unkie Rabbit about Qwerty?"

"He knows all about her now, Airheart. He's very happy to have a little girl of his own and he wants too see her more than anything."

"Oh, boy! I knew it! He's gonna love her, Pappy!"

"I think he already does."

Lily giggled. Marie looked around anxiously. How long would they be able to maintain the signal? Peter at last returned with Dave.

"Lily! Dave's turn..." she pressed.

Lily held out the phone and Dave looked uneasily at it.

"Dave, honey. Talk to your dad," Marie pleaded.

He took the phone slowly. "Hey," he murmured.

They could hear The Spine clearly. "Dave! Oh, I'm so glad to hear your voice!"

"Yeah..."

"That's all you have to say? How have you been, buddy?"

"Fine. I... I'm fine... um... Dad."

Wanda looked as though she wanted to slap him. Marie shook her head. She hadn't even hoped he would call him Dad. It was something.

"You sound so grown up! Seems like we just brought you home with us... You were so tiny..."

"Dad..." groaned Dave.

"It was one of the happiest days of my life."

"Yeah?" Dave sounded bemused.

"Yeah. You taking care of the family like you promised?"
Dave snorted. "Yeah."

"Great! I'll see you soon, son!"

"Yeah..."

"I love you!"

"I... love you, too."

Marie put her hand to her mouth.

"Can I talk to your mother again?"

"Yeah, um... Hey, I'm glad you're okay..."

"Thanks Dave. I'm glad you're okay too."

Dave smiled. Marie gently took the phone as Dave put an arm rather roughly around his sister's head.

"Hey!" she cried, shoving his arm off. "Your hands are greasy!"

He chuckled.

"Spine!" Marie cried, clutching the phone like a lifeline.

"The pilot has to land, love... we're going to lose the signal."

"Alright," she said in a trembling voice. "I love you so much! Come home quickly!"

"I will. I love you, Marie!"

"Wait!" Peter cried, leaning toward the phone. "Spine? Your old set of plating..."

"I'm going to ask about it, Peter..." crackled The Spine's voice.

"I'll see what I can do from here. I'll bet it's in storage somewhere."

"Thanks. I gotta go..."

"Bye! See you soon!"

Wanda burst into fresh tears at this. Marie laughed and hugged her.

"Bye, love!" She reluctantly hung up the phone.

They stood, looking at each other, sniffling. At last Lily leaped into the air and whooped. "Pappy's alive! Unkie Rabbit's coming home to Qwerty! Everything's going to be good again! I gotta tell Qwerty!"

She bolted toward the stairs. Dave shook his head and started to walk out of the room, but was intercepted by his mother. She put her arms around him and hugged him the best she could; the family that had given Dave his genes must have been at least as tall as the Walters. She brushed aside a lock of his blonde hair and looked into his face. "Thank you, sweetheart."

"Aw, Mom..." He grinned sheepishly. "I'm going to get back to work on the car."
"Peter," she sighed after he had gone. "Is it going to be good again? His chassis is gone... What about the others? Were they dismantled too? Maybe worse?"

"Oh, Marie, surely..." Wanda faltered. "I guess he couldn't have said anything in case the children heard."

"He wouldn't have lied outright," Peter said. "I'm sure it's manageable, whatever it is."

"Oh... alright. Oh, my, I haven't told Norman the good news!" She rushed from the hall.

"We have a lot of spare parts here, and schematics," Peter went on. "If anyone can put them back together, it's... well, I guess mostly it's me. At least, I'll do my best, and The Spine knows as much about their tech now as Col. Walter ever did. We'll get them back together even if they are taken apart."

He was so grown-up now, she thought. How surprised The Spine would be when he saw him! She nodded and Peter gave her a quick hug.

"I think we should celebrate," he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "I'll be going to meet them as soon as I find out more about where they're going. But just tonight, how about we all go out?"

Marie smiled. "For the first time in three years, that sounds like a good idea."

The Spine handed the radio back to the pilot who looked at it for a moment as though it had sprouted wings. "Captain, that was the damnedest thing I ever heard. You do radio shows or something?"

"No, sir, that was real. I know it must sound peculiar..."

"Not really. If you was a human being, that is. Your wife a robot, too, sir? And your kids?"

"That's an awkward question, Lieutenant..."

The pilot chuckled. "Alright. World's full of strange sights. Don't nothin' surprise me anymore."

"By the way, if you could refrain from mentioning my family to anyone..."

"Oh, so that's how it is..."

"Lieutenant..."

"No, don't get me wrong. I ain't gonna tell anyone, sir. I figure, your wife there, if she's that happy to know you're coming home, even without yer dangd skin, I ain't gonna screw around with that. World needs more happiness. I got me a wife and kid, too. We gotta take care of them. If all it takes to make them happy is to get our sorry carcases back home, who am I to stop it?" He chuckled. "Even when the carcase looks like a science fair project." He suddenly stopped laughing and looked at The Spine sidelong. "Sorry, sir."

"Don't worry about it," The Spine laughed.

Nothing could bother him right now. She wanted him home no matter how he looked! The man could call him a metal freak and he'd laugh it off. He might even be able to walk in through the front door with his old chassis and at least be able to hold her in his arms and kiss her. He tried not to get his hopes up but that one really hit home...
Still, more sobering was the bleak prospect of waking his brothers, hoping the government would let them take Jon home in his condition and that Rabbit's chassis could be recovered or replaced. Then the real healing would begin...

Rabbit had been through so much more pain than either of them, what with his leg connectors snipped without his power being shut off first, and the cruel suspicions they had put into his head even before removing his armor plating. It had been very faint through the soundproofing, but The Spine had heard enough to know that Rabbit had been left powered on for most of that, too. He still heard the screams sometimes in stasis.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Why? Why had they done it? Punishment for his lack of cooperation? Because he was just a robot? In order to observe his responses? The torture he'd endured... and then come back smiling, trying to act brave, even as his stutter made it almost impossible to complete a sentence and his whole frame shuddered with pain. The Spine had opened his head plate and disconnected the pain receptors twice before Rabbit came back with his head plates welded shut... They knew he felt it. They made sure of it...

He wiped his eyes. It was over now. Rabbit would go home to his daughter, that little presence in the HoW, all at once wild like her Pappy and demure like her mother. Hopefully they would forget the years of suffering together. Maybe Peter could even figure out to wipe Rabbit's memories of the past six months.

But, he realized, Rabbit wouldn't let him. Then he'd forget everything The Spine had told him about Qwerty.

The helicopter landed and a jeep arrived to shuttle the three of them to the plane. The Spine started to walk and felt his knee hardware give way. He fell forward against the back of the jeep with a deafening clang. The service men stood staring uncomfortably, unsure what to do.

"What's the matter with all y'all?" called the pilot. "Help him into the jeep! He's been a prisoner, he's weak. Get on it!"

Many strong hands came to his aid then, lifting him carefully under the arms. He heard one man mutter, "He?" but the rest remained quiet or gave directions to others as he was placed in the front passenger's seat. The Jon and Rabbit were loaded onto the back like a stack of rifles.

"Sir, is this alright?" the driver asked uneasily, looking at them.

The Spine smiled. "Whatever it takes to get home, Private. They don't know the difference. Just get us to the plane, please."

The Private smiled nervously and hurried to comply. He hesitated as someone shouted, "Hang on, Private!"

The chopper pilot jogged over. "Got 'em. Here, sir. Fresh uniform."

"It's just going to hang off my frame," The Spine murmured, taking the clothes.

"Better than going around naked. You're a Captain, you shouldn't be treated like a buck private."

"That was a pun..." He glanced back at Rabbit. The driver noticed and pulled a blanket out from under the seat, throwing over Rabbit and Jon.

"That good enough for now?" he asked as the pilot helped The Spine to dress.
The Spine ignored how much it looked like two covered corpses and nodded. The uniform did hang off his body, but it was still an improvement. More than that, having someone care about his dignity moved him almost to tears.

"Good luck, Captain," said the pilot, saluting. The Spine returned the salute and they drove the short distance to the airstrip. There the process resumed until all three were loaded into the cargo plane.

Once they were at last settled into the back of the plane, all three strapped into place due to their weight, The Spine, relieved, let himself go into stasis. And as he did, he made himself a promise... one that had been nagging at him for months. If they ever got out alive, he had decided he would never let himself or his brothers be sent to war again. They'd deactivate first. Four wars was more than enough for one lifetime.

The engines started, lulling him like a child as he allowed stasis mode to engage... He liked to let it activate slowly, as though he was falling asleep. And as it did, he repeated in his thoughts, the words...

Never again. Never again...
Be a Man

Chapter Summary

For some people, going home is as simple as walking in the front door. For The Spine, there's a stop to be made first.

Chapter Notes

Admit it, you were wondering how it was possible... this is only part of the puzzle, however...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"A vow of peace?" barked the general.

The Spine sat on a high examination table in a large lab, his brothers each still deactivated nearby. His wiry legs swung gently when he spoke. An angry old soldier was staring him down but The Spine returned his gaze calmly.

"We're done, General Hawkins. Court-martial us or sue us or scrap us if you like. Just don't repair us and send us back and expect our cooperation. You won't get it."

"Dammit to Hell, Captain! The U.S. government put a cool million dollars into your sorry metal chassis..."

"Which is now property of the Viet Cong, along with a lot of those fancy upgrades."

"Don't act like you're not sorry to lose them..."

"I wouldn't dream of it. I miss some of them a great deal. I can't slither out of my chassis anymore, I can't tell the time, I can't even..." The Spine bit off the last of the statement.

"If you were gonna say what I think you were gonna say... To be honest, Captain, I was never crazy about the idea of the government paying to make you more of a man. I've been even less certain since I found out what you went and did with it!"

This was embarrassing... "Sir, could you please refrain from..."

"No, no..." The man's manner softened abruptly, as though he'd flipped a switch. "I do understand. As much as I can, anyway. I have to represent the military but... I haven't forgotten. We went through a lot together back in North Africa." To The Spine's relief, he snorted with laughter. "I suppose they hoped you'd become a spy at some point, wear makeup and play baccarat and seduce Russian spies for their government secrets. If they knew you the way I know you... The idea of them expecting you to become James Bond!"

The Spine grinned, glad that his old face plates at least had been recovered and installed so far. His smile had frightened people all the way back from Vietnam, not that he had smiled much. "I don't
"I could have told them the first thing you'd do was settle down and start a family. They might as well have sent you on your way with a china service and a bunch of diapers. Espionage... hmph."
The man sighed. "Well, it'll be hard to convince some of the brass, but I think enough of them had their butts saved by you and your brothers back in World War II that we can get you three back to San Diego within the week. Well, maybe two of you... Are you determined to have your old chassis fully installed before you go?"

"At least," The Spine said meaningfully.

"Ah. Well, um... yes. Well, I suppose if it means that much to you..."

"It means a lot to someone." The Spine looked at his hands, embarrassed. "She accepted me the way I was, sir. I let them make the changes without telling her but... well, now that she's used to a complete husband..."

"No, please, don't explain." He wiped his brow but looked oddly amused. "Any man living would have to understand, Spine. No explanation is necessary. I'll have a chat with the techs, see if they don't have a few spare parts laying around... these nerds never throw anything away. I don't know how much we can restore, though."

"My needs are surprisingly few, sir."

"Spine, you don't have to call me sir. You outranked me when we first met, for crying out loud."

The Spine smiled.

"And if I think you're going to stop I don't know you very well, is that it?" He laughed again. "Never believe anyone who says you aren't human, Spine."

"Me, sir?" He looked at his hands again, still skeletal and a little rusty at the joints. "I don't feel human."

"I beg to differ. You've as good as told me you aren't going home until you at least look good for your wife, and preferably have the ability to take her to bed." He put his hat on and stood. "Don't get any more human than that."

The Spine watched him as he opened the door and said quickly, "Do you think they can..."

"I'll give them the orders myself," he said quietly. "And see if they can fix your clock and see about that weird snake thing you do..."

The Spine chuckled. "Thanks, Jimmy."

The general raised his eyebrows. "The world is full of wonders! You're welcome. Oh, and that Walter kid is coming out to collect your brothers. Says we have to okay to restore your chassis but he doesn't want us anywhere near the other two. Won't even let us switch their power on."

"I agree with that. It's going to be hard enough on them."

"I don't know, though, him bossing around the federal government. Hard nosed little brat. You should have let us draft him, Spine. Would have done him a world of good."

"Or gotten him killed. There are four graves in back of Walter Manor bearing the names of previous
Peter Walters. Half of those graves may be empty but they represent dead family. I don't want there to be a fifth any sooner than necessary." He smiled grimly. "Quite apart from caring about his welfare, the whole family needs that hard nosed little brat."

Peter sat on an airplane, curled up over a journal. He had needed some way to pass the time, and had been intrigued from the moment he saw the cover.

"Additional studies and experiments into the nature of Blue Matter with a focus on its ability to produce human-like traits, by Colonel Peter A Walter."

He'd expected more insight into the Walter automatons, maybe some clues about how a robot could end up high as a kite on LSD. He was genuinely at a loss about that one. But as he read, he realized there were answers there beyond his expectations... information that explained some very puzzling developments in the family.

"To further explore the ability of Blue Matter to produce and organic sentience in the subjects, experiments were performed toward ascertaining its connection to electrical energy..."

He skimmed ahead through various experiments involving laboratory rabbits.

"Thus leading to the conclusion that Blue Matter, when heated and released, will be attracted to the nearest source of electricity or heat. The temperature is critical, however. The Blue Matter is drawn to a rise in temperature, whether in an electrical device or an organic source of heat, such as lab rabbits. The greatest surprise in the series came when one of my rabbits appeared to conceive offspring following exposure to Blue Matter. All the indications were there. I discontinued exposure and within a week, the rabbit had miscarried the offspring. Examination of the carcasses showed each contained a tiny amount of Blue Matter, then inert. Continuous transfusions of the substance were, I must speculate, necessary to maintain life in these unnaturally conceived young... possibly for the entire duration of their lives in the absence of traditional fertilization."

"Lily," Peter murmured. Then The Spine really had saved his daughter's life! But what had they all endured because of it?

"This has not, however, led to further insights into the emotional range of my robotic sons. To that end, I performed tests on electrical targets. Blue Matter was connected to a power source. Electricity was fired into the core. The contents pulsed in response..."

"Whew!" muttered Peter. "It's like dirty stories for robots..."

"When a large scale surge of electrical power was pumped through the core, the core developed a temporary leak as a result."

Peter, to his embarrassment, blushed. That sounded almost like... ugh, no! But he realized it was consistent. He'd spoken to Honeybee's father recently about what went on in Rabbit's bedroom... a part of his research that he reluctantly realized had him very curious... but still left him feeling deeply uncomfortable.

"When the same power surge overcame its conductor and arced into the battery, the Blue Matter leak arced with it and was drawn into the battery. A blue flicker developed on the leads of the battery for several days. I found it had disappeared as soon as the battery ran out of power. During that range of time, it responded to various stimuli; touch, the introduction of patterns, even simple words, in a manner that suggested awareness. I can only speculate that the battery experiment, like the organic
experiment, produced something with sentience. It did appear that the Blue Matter on the battery would have remained indefinitely where the Blue Matter in the bunnies was burned away. So organic life forms process or burn through the substance where electronic life forms are self sustaining."

"And Qwerty..." Peter murmured.

"I believe this gives a clue to the effects of Blue Matter in my automatons, and their remarkable sentience, though it also leads me to wonder what this could mean to them in the future. Is it possible that one of them could impregnate a woman? Or even an animal?"

Peter shuddered. He hadn't thought of that. Ugh. That was just nasty.

"And what would occur should one of them receive an excessive jolt of electricity? Human sexual response occurs along the nerves and vessels of the body. Would then this be an equivalent? What dangers does this represent should one of them discover it?"

"What indeed?" murmured Peter, tugging at his collar.

"But with respect to these findings, I can no longer in good conscience continue in my experiments, as to all indications life has been produced, and allowed to die. I know it is considered acceptable for the purposes of science to do so, but not in my lab, not if I can help it. I will continue to observe my automatons in various settings and monitor their responses, with caution. May this information dissuade others from repeating these experiments and tramping where only God may tread.

"I have not achieved the results I had hoped to gain but those must take second place to my conscience. It is enough to have established that Blue Matter is able to grant life, in at least a transitory form. With the remaining ingredients provided and the correct triggers, with regular infusions of Blue Matter, life can be created and maintained. If my sons someday evolve to this point, they may even be able to have families of their own."

Peter closed the journal and stared at the seat in front of him. He felt frazzled and uneasy with the realization that this was pushing beyond the academic and connecting far too intimately with the bedroom habits of family members. He wasn't happy.

But he couldn't just walk away from it, much as he desperately wanted to do. It was a fact that his robots (he had trained himself to think of them as his; he needed to have that attitude when facing off with the military) had produced offspring. He had to understand how. It just wasn't responsible to have them running around knocking up women... or so he had overheard someone saying at the Cavalcadium. He had been angry, but he had also recognized the truth of it. He could understand why people might be alarmed at the thought of The Spine being able to... well, it made sense.

The stewardess leaned over him. "Would you like a... oh, my, are you alright?"

"Hm?"

"You're bright red!"

"Oh, I'm just fine..."

"Alright... would you care for a drink?"

"Cool water, please."

She brought it and he took a quick gulp as she walked away. Now for the really uncomfortable
part... applying all this to The Spine and Rabbit and figuring out why Marie was able to get pregnant at all, and why each only did it once. It was going to require sending his thoughts in directions he had never wanted them to go.

He stared out the window and pondered what it all meant.

"Peter!" cried The Spine arrived at the laboratory.

"Spine! At long last... this place has so many levels and steps just to walk inside..."

"Welcome to Area 51." The Spine grinned. Peter was pleased to see him looking so cheerful.

"Mr. Walter," said a tech who was installing The Spine's arm plates. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Did you bring the schematics?"

"Yes, but only for The Spine..."

"I wish you'd let us help with Rabbit as well... I've drawn up some designs. Incorporating the same copper elements, we could bring him up to the same level as The Spine. General Hawkins has given us an open ticket..."

"He's always been touchy about new hardware," Peter interrupted. "Doesn't like new things. I'm afraid he'll be waiting for the return of his old chassis, and he won't want to be worked on by anyone who isn't a Walter."

The tech looked at Rabbit longingly. Peter smiled. He knew that Rabbit always felt second best. If he knew these young scientists admired his fundamental design and were practically begging to polish and replate it...

"What about Jon? Why is he still offline? You said if he remains still he isn't affected."

"That's the trouble, Mr. Walter. We switched him on and, well... he doesn't seem to be able to remain still."

"Oh. Yeah... that makes sense."

"Well, then, maybe you can help us get The Spine into good working order. As you can see, we've found his earlier armor and have polished and pared the edges to make it fit better. He should look almost human when we're done. As for the replacement upgrades, we have the latest micro-atomic clock design. The public doesn't even know we've perfected one this small. We'd be honored to install it in The Spine."

"Oh, well, I really appreciate that..."

"Also we'll be installing the servos into his spinal assembly tomorrow and I honestly think you need to at least observe so as to be able to maintain it at home..."

"Agreed."

"Finally, the... um... the special order..."

"No..." The Spine said slowly. "No, you don't want to do that part."

"What part?" Peter asked. The tech looked a little pinkish... Peter's eyes widened. "Oh... Oh! Yes, I
can skip that..." He blushed bright pink as well. He turned to The Spine. "A word privately?"

The tech nodded and slipped away, smiling awkwardly.

"What's wrong, buddy?"

"You realize that thing is the reason Lily exists?"

"Thing?" The Spine stared at him for a long moment, then snorted with laughter. "Oh... Well... That's usually how it works, Peter."

"For a human! They made the thing..."

"Can you stop calling it a thing? Come on."

"Well, it's just... what else am I supposed to call it?"

"Call it by name. I heard them say it. It's a scrotal assembly with extendable..."

"Oh, good lord, no! I mean... Look, I know that it's hooked up to your core! It has to be, it's the only explanation..."

"I'd already worked that out, silly head. You've been trying to figure it out, too?" he asked, smiling and patting Peter's shoulder. He seemed deeply amused.

"I ought to know, don't you think? Whether I like it or not..."

"I suppose it could be important. I hadn't solved all of the mystery... didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth." He laughed softly.

"Um... yeah... so anyway, the temperature change during ovulation is minor. The only way Marie could have become pregnant is if the Blue Matter was present inside of her... her, um..." He rubbed his neck, deeply embarrassed. The Spine's mouth formed an O. That was odd. "Look, it's just way too realistic, dang it! It's too much like the real thing."

"I thought it was the real thing." He chuckled. "Well, it's good enough for me..."

"Oh, would you stop that? I thought you were the reserved one, Spine!"

"Aww, we're all guys here. You get used to gutter talk in the military... I'm just glad to be alive, you know? It's good to be alive, Peter. Good."

"Naturally..."

"When I walk in that door... that front door, Peter, I'll be able to hug my kids, kiss my wife..." He grinned roguishly. "And then when the kids go to bed I get to..."

"That's okay... I don't need a description..." Why did he choose now to open up? "I just... I just don't know what they think they're doing..."

"What are you talking about, anyway? You learn something new, Pete?"

Pete? "I did! I found a particular science journal... one of the Colonel's. He studied it!"

"What?" The Spine squinted at him.
"Are you photoreceptors bothering you?"

"Nope."

"Oh... Well, he studied the effect of Blue Matter under certain conditions. It's all there, the explanation for how Lily was conceived, why she needs infusions. Based on his data, I've formed a theory about how Honeybee was able to create an artificial intelligence... It was a shared power surge, Spine."

He puffed steam vigorously from his stacks. He smiled dreamily. "Oh, mama, one of those! I know about the power surge."

"Odd... I thought that would bother you. I certainly wasn't thrilled about it, myself, studying the most intimate parts of your life. But I need to understand how this happened, for the greater good."

"Well... okeydokey, if you think so. So... hey, how did Honeybee have a baby? That was weird..."

"She had the electrical portion in the form of her backup battery, and she received the Blue Matter component from Rabbit, naturally."

"Rabbit, you sly dog..."

"Well.. sure, yes. Since he leaked Blue Matter each time they... well, y'know."

"Hoo, boy!"

Peter was deeply uneasy. The Spine couldn't have loosened up this much. "Yeah, that is awkward."

"You're telling me. I do the same thing..." The Spine said slowly.

"Right, yes, same as you. So the power surge overloaded the core, overloading the core resulted in a... an ejac... no, I refuse... a release of Blue Matter. And then, well, evidently you each had a female close by in a state of rising temperature. Col. Walter said that was part of the scenario, rising temperature. So then the hyper-stimulated matter was drawn to her increasing warmth, resulting in the combination of the activated Matter and the egg and electrical charge respectively. The sentience is a part of the Blue Matter, but in Marie's case, it bonded with the organic matter and stimulated it's inherent programming to form a fetus... Why are you smiling?"

"Am I?"

"I'm serious."

"I know... I'm sorry. It just... It's just amazing, Peter. Just like a human."

"Well, I'm glad you're so delighted with the advances in your gadgetry, but I just don't know about this."

"Don't worry, I'll be careful with it." The Spine winked.

Peter gaped for a long moment. "Did they do something to your brain?"

The Spine laughed. "If I don't laugh I'll scream, Peter. You ever heard me scream?"

"What? Why?"

"They said I can have the parts. I'm taking them. I had them for years. I can deal with it."
"I realize that, but the responsible thing..."

"To Hell with the responsible thing!" The Spine cried, tipping sideways slightly.

"Spine?"

"It may sound nuts to you, big boy, but this has become a big part of our marriage. I love being able to make love to her. It's fantastic... You have no idea..."

Thank goodness for that, he thought. He started looking around for the tech. The Spine was clearly suffering a malfunction. "That's very touching..."

"No, you don't understand!" The Spine intoned, prodding him in the shoulder. "It's been three solid years, Peter. Did you know that the original hardware came with a 'male drives' protocol? I thought they were crazy but they said without it the protocol it was just gonna be a fancy hood ornament..."

"I think I'm too young for this..."

"Guess what the Viet Cong didn't manage to locate?" he drawled. "The one upgrade they left installed? That's right, baby. I have the protocol and no hardware!" He jabbed his finger firmly against his temple. "It's part of my brain, Peter! Male sexual drives... It's just like those three days when I was human..."

That explained the rumors that The Spine had kissed Marie in the airport in front of half of San Diego after his upgrades (some versions reported he had his hand on her backside). Wanda had told him that The Spine had carried his wife over the threshold of Walter Manor and straight to their bedroom without even saying hello to anyone... "Um, Spine..."

"You wouldn't believe the dreams I've been having... Couldn't even try a cold shower! I want her sooo muuuch..." The Spine cried wildly, clutching Peter by the collar.

"Oh my lord..."

"They don't work as well on robots anyway... I can put it out of my mind, control it, even shut it off, but it's like it's just waiting there, reminding me, counting the number of days it's been since..."

"Alright, alright! You can have the hardware! Geez!"

"Is everything alright, Mr. Walter?" asked the tech, smiling.

The Spine let Peter's collar go and draped an arm around his shoulders instead. "Jus' a little guy talk..."

"No, it's not..." Peter gasped, realizing how frightened he had been. He looked at The Spine, who was staring at the floor, then back at the tech.

The man laughed. "Oh, the suppressors must have kicked in!"

"The what?"

"The plating is superficial, but we need to connect the sensory leads. And we need him to be able to respond to stimuli to make sure the leads are fully connected and functional. But I know he can feel pain as well, so we hooked up a neural suppressor... takes the edge off but it makes him fairly loopy. It takes a while to fully install..."

The Spine put his other arm around Peter and pulled him in for an awkward side hug. "Look at
"Please..." Peter sighed, "let's get this done as quickly as possible. We need to get them home." So The Spine was basically drugged for a surgical procedure, but meanwhile he had gotten to hear just how human the automaton had become, and he had realized something.

He really preferred robots that acted like robots. This, the silver figure that was now humming softly to himself, was more like some kind of weird, horny uncle, and Peter was just not enchanted. But it occurred to him that there was something he needed to do, something The Spine would likely do if he could. He was the man of Walter Manor... he took care of his own.

But he had never even considered the need for this...

"How long do you think it will take to complete the work?" he asked the tech, who was peeling The Spine's arms off of Peter.

"If all goes well, and working steadily? Three days maximum."

"Right. Do that. Oh, um..." he said. "Is there a phone I can use?"

"See ya later, kiddo..." The Spine called lazily as Peter was led out of the room.

He was escorted to an enclosed booth with a telephone. He called the operator and asked to be connected to the Hotel del Coronado.

"Yes, I'd like to book your honeymoon suite. Yes... Oh... how long?" He pondered. Finances were reasonably good. He could still feel The Spine clutching his collar...

Who installed a sex drive into a robot? He was delighted he hadn't known sooner... Maybe The Spine was dopey, but Peter didn't doubt for a second that he was also every bit as hot and bothered as he said he was. He was danged if he'd be taking that straight home...

"A week, please. Yes, for Mr. and Mrs. David Walter... Champagne? Yeah, and plenty of water."

After a quick call home tell Marie to pack for a week, he hurried back to enjoy dopey Spine... now that he understood why he was like that, it was a lot funnier.

Chapter End Notes

Drunk Spine just never gets old...
The Spine looked in the mirror. If he'd been human, he'd have said his heart was in his throat.

He looked... pretty good. Not as sleek as he had with his upgrades, but better than he had before them. By rights he should still have been in pieces like Rabbit, but while the government officially appeared to feel no obligation to any of them, individuals in it had pulled strings he didn't even know existed. He'd made friends over the years. He fought tears... but then, the techs had assured him that was going to happen for a few days as his systems recovered from the neural suppressors.

He shuddered remembering those. Unlike a human, he could remember everything he'd said while "drugged" and he couldn't bring himself to look Peter in the eye...

Peter wasn't trying to look him in the eye, however. He had other business.

"Here goes."

"Are you sure, Mr. Walter? You might just as well take them home, seeing as how they're already shut down. The travel crates are prepared..."

"People need to know the passage of time. Think how you'd feel if you went to sleep one night and woke up in Paris a week later."

To his surprise, the tech giggled. He glanced at her sidelong, a little smile quirking at the corner of his mouth, then turned back to the robots.

"Yeah, I didn't really think that through. I'm saying it would be a shock. Even with the prospect of having had a gloriously wild time during that week, you'd still feel disoriented. And these two... Rabbit last shut down from lack of oil and water in a prison cell. And I just want to let Jon know what's happening next. Because I don't know what's ahead for him..." He sighed. "I hope we can find a solution so that he can get back to normal... such as it was. He was never sharp as a tack... But he was reasonably manageable, once. Now... Well, here we go. One at a time."

He started with Jon. When the little robot came online and opened his shocking blue eyes, there was a little cluster of techs gathered around like curious birds. He looked at them and smiled.

"Hello," he said warmly. They murmured return greetings and his smile brightened. He turned his head and laughed joyously. "Peter!" He sat up.

"Now, take it easy, old man! Don't shake yourself up."

Jon's smile faded. He looked down. "Peter... I'm really sorry..."

"Jon... don't. Don't be upset. Don't apologize. I know it wasn't your fault."

"I didn't tell anyone, though... I should have told, before they... They didn't want me to tell..." Jon said pitifully, tears starting. "Now... I'm a junkie..." He put his hands over his face.

"Jon..." Peter sighed, slightly amused despite the pity he felt.

"Poor guy..." said the tech next to Peter. She sniffled.
"He likes hugs, y'know..."

"Does he really?" she asked. "An automaton?"

Peter leaned down and whispered, "So does The Spine."

The Spine, studying himself in a mirror at the back of the room, turned with a frown.

"Would it be alright if I..."

"I wish you would."

The tech stepped forward, hesitant. She reached up and stroked Jon's hair gently. Peter had brought his favorite wig, the one with the long, wavy real human hair. Jon looked up at her touch. His lip trembled and he put his arms around her automatically.

"Oh, my..." she breathed as she was wrapped in his embrace. "Oh, he's so gentle..."

Jon buried his face in her shoulder and cried. The techs sighed as one.

"Isn't he sweet?" another sighed.

"I never would have imagined... Such human-like behaviors!" said one of the men.

Peter smiled. He was a long way from being the Peter Walter who had made them, but he still felt pride in the accomplishment.

"Jon?" he said. "I have to tell you. You know we're in a lab in America right?"

"Mm-hm."

"I'm taking you home. But I don't know what's going to happen after that. If you start tripping, it could be dangerous..."

Jon looked up soberly. "I understand. You can deactivate me if you need to..."

The techs gasped as one and glared at Peter. They really were like a flock of birds. He looked back sheepishly.

"Now, Jon, it isn't going to be like that," said a deep voice. The Spine had walked up behind them. He stepped forward and tousled the little robot's curls.

"Brother! You look like you used to..."

The Spine smiled as the techs murmured admiringly. "That's right. I'm better and you're going to get better, too. Okay?"

Jon smiled. "Okay!"

Peter looked sidelong at The Spine, who turned and wiped hastily at his eyes. He had just lied to comfort his brother... and The Jon had swallowed it. The Spine glanced guiltily at Peter.

"Thank you," Peter whispered as he passed. The Spine nodded, not looking at him as he went back to composing the loose hairs of his freshly washed wig.

"Time to go back to sleep, Jon."
"Aww..."

"When you wake up, you'll be home."

Jon sighed. "Okay..."

The tech held his hand as he lay back down. He stared at her face as Peter switched him off.

"He's just darling..." she breathed, gently laying his hand down and closing the shutters on his photoreceptors. "Please let us know if you find a cure, Peter."

"Tell me if you find one, too..." he sighed. He turned to the next table, leaving the techs to crate The Jon.

Rabbit didn't activate on the first try. Peter wasn't terribly surprised. They had cleaned him, mended damaged parts, replaced his moldy bellows, buffed away rust and applied oil. But he dared do no more with the techs there; The Spine had assured him that Rabbit had submitted to the weapons upgrades for the greater good and with a great deal of persuading. After his ordeal, the last thing he'd want is to be tended by military scientists. The finer work would have to wait until they got home.

He flicked the power switch again. There was a creaking, grinding buzz and Rabbit's eyes lit. The techs, now gathered once more, sighed with relief as Rabbit began to look around. One look at the assembled group in lab coats brought a reaction that Peter, thinking about it later, realized he should have seen coming.

In seconds every piece of glass in the room was in slivers on the floor from Rabbit's shriek, and Rabbit was on the floor with them. He tried to crawl away with his fingertips, sobbing in terror.

"No! No, we was g-g-g-goin' home! We was escapin'!" he screamed. "Spine! Where are you? SPINE!"

"Rabbit!" The Spine cried, running from the back of the lab. He slid to the floor and scooped Rabbit up in his arms, holding him firmly against his chest as the once copper robot struggled. "I'm here! I'm here, Rabbit! Look at me! Look, Rabbit!"

Rabbit, rattling violently, looked up and clutched at his brother's fatigues. "S-S-S-Spine..." she gasped. "Spine... yehr back together... D-did I dream that, too... only m-my legs... my l-l-legs still d-don't work... It was real! It was real... They cut me up... Don't let 'em g-g-get me..."

"Rabbit! We're at Area 51!"

"We are...?"

"We're back in the states... We're going home, Rabbit. Back to Marie and Dave and Lily... and..."

"Qwerty..." whispered Rabbit. "Honey's baby... My baby girl..."

"That's right. She's waiting, buddy. You're going to be together."

"B-but..." He looked down at himself then back up at The Spine. "You look normal again... I'm a monster..."

"No..."

"She'll be afraid of me..."
"She won't..."

"She's just a kid, Spine! She'll..." He shuddered with sobs.

"Rabbit..." Peter knelt beside them, still shaking. "I'm sorry, both of you. I didn't think... I should have made sure The Spine was right beside you before I switched you on. Look, these people are willing to fix you before you go home..."

The Spine stood, lifting Rabbit easily. He started to put him back onto the table. Rabbit glanced down and shrieked.

Of course, Peter thought. Lab coats, lab tables. Why hadn't he realized? According The Spine, he had been powered down for much of his ordeal, and The Jon had never entered the lab, but Rabbit... "I'm an idiot. Keep holding him, Spine."

"I was going to already," he murmured, holding his brother close. Oily tears had started down The Spine's face.

"Rabbit... they can fix you," Peter repeated. "They want to. Would you like that?"

Rabbit looked up shakily, glanced at the techs once more and closed his eyes. "No..."

"They'll give you a new chassis, a copper one just like before, even add a few new..."

"No!" he screamed.

"Rabbit..."

"Get 'em away! G-g-get 'em away from me!" He clung to The Spine and wept. "D-don't let 'em touch me, Spine... I w-w-wanna go home..."

"It's okay, Rabbit... We're going to switch you off. We'll take you home, okay? Peter will switch you on there."

Rabbit nodded, eyes shuttered tightly. The Spine reached up carefully and gently flipped his power switch. Rabbit went limp. He placed the frail form of his brother into the crate, tucking the foam padding around him himself, refusing all offers of help.

"Spine," murmured Peter, stepping close. "I'd like you to stand by when I switch him on at home..."

"Of course..."

"But if he panics there, I'll wait until you get back from your trip, okay?"

"My what?"

"Sorry, your week with Marie... I made reservations for the two of you at the Hotel del Coronado... A week in the... well, it's the honeymoon suite."

The Spine looked at him sharply, eyes wide.

"Look, I realize you're embarrassed by what you said, but there's no taking it back now. I'm the Peter Walter in residence, even if I'm just a child to you. And I understand... you're more than a robot now. You're... well, you're a husband. And when a husband comes back from the war... Honestly, man, and I mean brutal honesty here... from what I hear, goal number one is to get laid."
The Spine put his hand over his eyes and groaned softly.

"If I'm wrong, tell me. I'll cancel the reservations right now..."

He looked up. "No! I mean... it'll be nice to get some time with her..."

"Right." Peter carefully suppressed a smile. "So until you get back, I'll keep them offline. I don't dare do this without you."

The Spine nodded. "I couldn't agree more. If Jon got too wild... or Rabbit panics again. No, you're quite right."

The Spine attracted curious looks on the flight back, but he didn't care. He could have come back in a crate like the others, but he couldn't bear the thought of Marie standing in the front hall, waiting for her husband to be unpacked so that she could hug him. He was so much more now... he couldn't go back. He had dreamed so long of this moment...

When they drove up to the Manor at last, he sat in the car and stared for a long moment. It almost seemed impossible. In all the times he'd been away, coming home had been a joyous thing, but this... it was overwhelming. The people he loved the most in the world were inside...

"Spine? I'll need your help..." Peter began.

Before Peter could finish, the front door flew wide and Lily ran full tilt toward the car.

The Spine hastily got out, just in time to sweep her into his arms. "Lily! Lily... You're... you're a little woman, look at you! You're so tall!"

Peter snorted. Lily was a scant 5'1".

"Pappy!" was all she could manage. He carried her inside and found the others just reaching the door.

"She must have been sitting at the window, waiting for the car!" cried Wanda. "Oh, you look wonderful. Here, quick hug, I don't want to get in the way!"

The Spine gave her a quick squeeze. To his surprise, Lily hastily slipped down from where she had been clinging and backed away.

And there was Marie. She smiled. She was so beautiful... like an angel... like a dream... He trembled, his face plates shifted and he began to cry like a child. Stupid neural suppressors, he thought.

She ran to him, pulling his face down to hers, cupping his cheeks in her hands as the sobs overwhelmed him. "Don't!" she crooned, pulling him close, holding him tightly. "No... You're back, you're home... It's alright now."

And as he wrapped his arms gratefully around her, sighing with deep relief, he realized she understood. It wasn't the neural suppressors; at least, not entirely. He'd been trying to stay strong for everyone else as usual, through their entire tour. He had even lied to them, telling them he'd been shut off for most of the time the enemy had been removing his upgrades. Oh, he'd been offline for a lot of it... but not quite as much as he'd implied. He hadn't been through as much as Rabbit, but he'd hurt so much, been so alone... for the first few weeks, while they pulled him apart, he didn't even know whether Rabbit and The Jon had survived...
"Marie..." he whispered brokenly. "I was so afraid..."

"I know... so was I. But I know it was worse for you, poor love!"

"I missed you so much!"

"Me too... I thought I'd die of loneliness..."

It was only then that he noticed the others had slipped out of the room. Marie looked around and laughed through her tears. The Spine watched her, drinking in the sight. She looked up at him; their eyes locked for a heartbeat... she pulled his head down to hers and they melted together, kissing with a desperate passion, the longing of years of separation. He fought to stay in control, to be gentle, but he'd never found it so difficult. It was so powerful... almost painful! He wished they were already at the hotel... he wouldn't have hesitated to act upon the feelings surging through him.

There was a creak and a thump and the sound of swearing. Marie jumped and The Spine looked out the door quickly, feeling like swearing himself.

"Are they crazy?" he cried, realizing with a pang that he had completely forgotten about Rabbit and Jon... all because of his installed libido. The more human he got, the more embarrassed it seemed to make him...

"They didn't..." she gasped, still catching her breath.

And with one look at Marie, his embarrassment evaporated. They had gone out to start unloading the crates because they believed a married couple needed a few minutes alone after a long separation. There was no reason to be embarrassed. He was a robot, yes. He was also a man.

He laughed. "They did! Of all the stupid nice things to do..."

"Come on!" she said, leading him by the hand as Peter tried to lift one end of the half-fallen crate by himself. They ran out to stop the others from any further attempts to carry the crates inside without The Spine's help.
"Do you think he'll change his mind, love? She wants to see him so much!"

The Spine sat, hands folded in his lap, as she drove. He was certain that if he touched her even a little, he wouldn't be able to stop. *Soon, Spine. Soon...* He really wished Peter hadn't winked as they left, though. But he wasn't going to let it stop him.

Sometimes he wondered if the drives protocol had been some kind of sick prank...

"I don't know... Maybe not until they find his chassis."

"But... what if they never do? Goodness knows where it might be! And copper... suppose they melted it?"

He'd worried about the same thing. "I wish I could be sure. But for now he's calm. He was just relieved to be back. We put him into one of the oldest labs. He's not up to going back to their room yet. I wish he would see Qwerty, though. She's a sweet little thing. A bit odd..."

"Well, I should say so! She's a mind with a room for a body! And yet she's a little girl. It's the strangest thing yet, and that's saying something. Living here has certainly been an adventure!"

He looked her and sighed deeply. "Marie..."

"Hm?"

"You're so beautiful..."

She snorted. "You always say that! Can't those photoreceptors see wrinkles and fat?"

What fat? And the wrinkles... sure, she had a few lines, but really... "Do you want them to?"

"No! I like things the way they are." She beamed. "I see all those things enough myself. I'd rather spare you the ordeal."

"Marie, I have to warn you..."

Her smile faded. "What is it?"

"I just wanted to let you know that am going to be able to hold myself back just long enough for you to be able to adjust my settings. And then I may end up destroying whatever you're wearing..."

"Oh, that kind of warning. Well, that's different. I can work around that. First step, don't be wearing anything."

"I'm serious... I can barely keep my hands off you."

"I know, I believe you. Wait... do you still have the controls? They took so much from you..."

"Peter checked that for me. The knobs were gone so he asked one of the techs with smaller hands to replace and test them. They worked right up to the top setting."

She frowned. "Top setting?"
He grimaced. That was awkward. His top setting gave him a sensitivity level she referred to as "lips." Trouble was, it was over his entire body...

"All she did was tickle my stomach..." he said, patting her hand. It was so soft... Oops. He reluctantly pulled his hand away, a little tremor passing through his body.

"Alright. It's fine. It's not like you were alone..."

"Are you jealous?"

"Of course. And rightfully so. You're enough to make any lady scientist swoon."

"Marie..." he sighed blissfully. "You're really making this hard..."

"I just don't want you to cool off before we get there."

"No chance... In fact, I'm tempted to have you pull off the road right now."

"I'm tempted to do it."

They drove on in silence. He tapped his fingers on the door.

"How far is it?"

"We're there already."

He sighed. There hadn't been anywhere secluded enough anyway. But it had sounded so delightfully filthy.

"Don't worry, love," she said, as though reading his mind. "Tomorrow we'll take a drive somewhere with woods and you can have your way with me in the back seat."

He snorted. "To be honest, I've never been able to figure out how anyone fits back there."

She laughed and pulled into the hotel driveway.

Lily was pouting. Not only had her Pappy turned around and left after being home only one day, but Qwerty's Pappy wouldn't go see her at all! He wouldn't let anyone except her Pappy and Peter see him. Peter wouldn't even tell her which lab he was in.

But she knew who could.

Qwerty scanned the house carefully. "Ther's xtra powr beeng us3d in lab 3," she reported. Her spelling was improving, and she was learning capitals and punctuation, but she still had a long way to go.

"Great! So what's our plan?"

"Duno."

"Me neither."

Lily sat with her chin in her hands. Qwerty swung her wires in a careless sort of way.

"We could send him a message?"
"Yeh! How?"

Lily pondered. "A note. I'll give Peter a note. Maybe Unkie Rabbit just needs to know you want to see him."

She wrote a note, asking Rabbit to come visit Qwerty in the HoW, and trotted downstairs to give it to Peter. She and Qwerty had agreed that they need not tell anyone they knew where Rabbit was just yet.

But Peter wouldn't take it to Rabbit! "What he needs right now is some time, okay? To get over what happened to him."

"What about his daughter? She needs time, too! She's been waiting for so long!"

"Lily... look, just give him a couple of weeks! Seriously, he just got here!" He walked away.

"Stubborn jerk," muttered Dave, sticking his head out of the library.

Lily's chin trembled.

"Oh, no. No. Don't start with the waterworks."

"He won't even try!"

"I know! It's stupid. But crying won't fix it."

"I know," she growled.

He sighed. "Come on, shrimp. I'll go with you to tell Qwerty."

"Whatever."

Back in the HoW, they resumed their planning meeting with Dave sitting by, rolling his eyes.

"If you know where he is, then just go talk to him!"

"What if... what if gets mad, Dave?"

"So he gets mad. So what?"

"I can't bear to have Unkie Rabbit mad at me!"

"Ugh! You're such a weenie!"

"Dave!"

Qwerty slapped him in the back of the head with a wire.

"Hey! Keep your wires to yourself, twerp."

"Down, Qwerty... he can't help being a creep. He's a boy."

"You want my help or not?" Dave asked.

"Help? All you do is call people names!"

"But I have an idea."
"What?" she asked doubtfully.

"Set the house on fire. Then Rabbit will have to come out."

"Are you retarded?"

"It was only a joke."

Qwerty typed rapidly, "Its not fare! I want to see mi Pappy! Hes al I hav left of Mama!"

"Qwerty..."

"I lov him! Y dosnt he lov me?"

"He..." Dave sighed."Got a fix for this, shrimp?"

Lily was feeling angry. She agreed with Qwerty. He should love her enough to come see her.

She stared at the teletype machine, scowling. The she reached out and ripped the paper off.

"Why'd you do that?" Dave asked.

"I'm through with waiting around." She ripped of Qwerty's last few lines and folded the piece of paper in half. She wrote, "Unkie Rabbit, this is what Qwerty said when she found out you weren't coming to see her. Love, Lily."

"Love? That's kinda nasty for love..."

"It's all about love, Dave. Where's lab 3?"

Qwerty didn't respond.

"It's going to be okay, Qwerty. He won't get mad. It's just a little note."

"West wing."

Rabbit sat curled up in his Pappy's old chair, eyes closed, wrapped in a blanket. It was so cozy there... Peter told him he couldn't feel cold but he did.

Though maybe the cold was his imagination... maybe it was coming from inside... maybe it was just a representation of what he felt every time he looked at the familiar rooms and halls of Walter Manor... and knew that she wasn't there.

He hadn't needed to deal with it before. He'd only had a week of mourning before shipping out, a week that was busy with preparations. He'd sat by her grave and wept, where no one would see... But that had been alright. He was used to sitting there and crying when things became too much, or when he was missing his Pappy especially.

But inside the house...

It had happened each time a member of the family died. Those walls and rooms, mocking him with a particular cold emptiness, be they ever so full of people, because of the one person who wasn't there anymore. But not since his Pappy's death had it hurt like this.
The difference was, back then he had sat with his brothers and mourned. They had all shared the same loss. Now it was just Rabbit. The Spine had left, Jon was shut down, and the humans... he was afraid to let most of them see his skeletal face. He was alone, a widower... That was weird. The Spine liked almost anything that made him more human, though he supposed being a widower wouldn't be one of those things... but it was what Rabbit was. Their vows had been private, secret, but binding. And though Rabbit had rolled his eyes at the time, wondering why she felt the need for them, he had said them sincerely, looking into her eyes, choked up with feeling. How could he not swear to be true? He loved her. He never even looked at the toaster after she came back into his life...

And now he couldn't bear to look at the rooms where they had spent the few years they'd had. The playroom, the garden, the library, the bedroom... the bed... But she was gone. Nothing left but a few slivers of metal on the floor, from maintenance checks during her last days there.

He pulled the blanket tighter and closed his eyes. He said he didn't want anyone to see his face. He didn't. But more than that, he just wanted to hide away from the memories.

He opened his eyes suddenly. He heard footsteps. They weren't Peter's. There was a little rustling noise and a tiny slip of paper was pushed under the door. He slipped out of his blankets and went to pick it up as the footsteps retreated.

Curling up in the blanket once more, he read Lily's writing.

"Qwerty..." he whispered.

He opened the paper and read it... looking at it for a long time.

"All I have left of Mama..." he murmured. "Mama..." It still made him feel warm to think of Honey that way...

He sat for a while, until his internal clock told him it was around ten in the evening. Then he rose and adjusted the military issue t-shirt and pajama pants that hung on his scarecrow form. Pulling the blanket around his head, he sighed and trudged toward the stairs.

The climb was easier now that he was so much lighter. He opened the door to the HoW and peered into the dimness. Lily was sleeping on the old sofa The Spine kept in his little office at the back. Rabbit stepped into the room slowly, the blanket wrapped around his head and upper body.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting. It was late, and though she lacked the physical needs of a human girl, for all he knew, Qwerty went into sleep mode at night when Lily slept. The Spine had said they sometimes had "sleepovers" like other little girls, but right now it was hard to believe there was anyone here besides his little niece.

He ventured close enough to take a look at her. She was so much bigger! But then, she had to be, what, fourteen? He wasn't sure when girls did all their growing, but she had definitely had some of it. She even had a little bust. Rabbit thought it was rather cute but he supposed it was one of those things he wasn't supposed to mention.

He turned and looked at the teletype machine they'd mentioned, surrounded by chairs in the center of the room, and went back to look at it. On it was half a conversation.

"Wat time is it?

Oh.

Wat time is it now?
I kep asking becuz maybe my clock isnt working.

I no. I just thot he'd come.

Maybe.

Are u tird? Its ok, you can slep.

Goodnite."

The steady hum of the room grew a bit louder. The machine typed a message and scrolled it up for him to read.

"Pappy?"

He put his hand to his mouth and sank into one of the chairs. "Qwerty?" he whispered. "Is that you, baby?"

"Pappy! You came!" The HoW grew suddenly lighter, then just as quickly dimmed. "Oops! Lilys asleep. Shed be so happy to see u! Thank u for coming up to see me Pappy!"

Polite... and no patience with learning to spell. Just like her mother... Tears leaked from his eyes and dripped through the skeletal frame of his face. He pulled the blanket closer. "I'm sorry I didn't come sooner, Qwerty, baby... It's just... I can't stay. I'm broken... I look like a monster. I... I w-want to stay with you but you'll be afraid if you see me."

"No I wont Pappy. I love you."

Wires snaked around his chest compartment, startling him. He clutched at his blanket as her curious embrace jostled it. And then he was wrapped in what felt for all the world like a crushing hug. He wriggled nervously for a moment, but it was so warm and safe... He relaxed in spite of himself into the layers of wires, resting his blanketed head on an up-looped coil.

"Qwerty..." He was speechless. She loved him! The Spine had tried to explain what it was like to be a father, and Rabbit had certainly had experience at being an uncle. But here he was... a sweet little AI gushing and calling him Pappy, hugging him the only way she could, saying she loved him... He closed his eyes and smiled. "I love you, too, baby girl," he whispered. "I just wish... I wish I'd had the chance to love you for your whole life." There was a little tremor in the wires and he put his arm over them, hoping she could feel the hug he was trying to give her.

"O Pappy. Me, too. I knew u but Mama was so scared... Im sorry I didnt try harder to talk to u."

Now the wires trembled in earnest and the lights flickered. He could almost hear a child's voice crying... and something clicked inside him. It felt right, instinctive. As strange and abstract as she was, she was his child. Somehow she was his...

"No, don't be sorry, Qwerty! It's okay, baby. She wanted to keep you safe. Don't cry now... Pappy's home..."

They sat for a long while, rocking a little. Rabbit hummed a soothing song; Peter had already replaced the damaged fibers in his vocal assembly and his voice was as clear as it had once been.

"I have something 4 u, Pappy," Qwerty told him at last. "Mama asked me to give it 2 u."

He sat very still. He hadn't been prepared for that. "What?" he gasped.
"Mama left something for you."

"Oh... baby... wh-wh-what is it?"

"It's memories. She wanted u to have them, so I have been storing them intil you came home. I hav
to connect to ur brain to give them to u."

He was a little afraid, but even more than that, he desperately wanted to see what Honey had left
with their daughter. He shook and whispered, "How?"

"You have to take off the blanket, Pappy."

"I can't..."

"Peepl are al the same to me, Pappy. I don't evin have a face at all. I wont be scard."

He realized it made sense. She wouldn't be so easily frightened. He slowly lowered the blanket.
Without comment, Qwerty swung more wires to him. He started a little as two connected abruptly
with ports on his exposed skull plate.

"Thank you, Pappy!" cried a voice, young and sweet. "Can you hear me?"

"Qwerty! Is that you, baby?" he cried. He hadn't realized she could do that!

His view of the HoW dimmed as his awareness was shifted elsewhere. Before him he now saw a
blue room. In it stood a ch... well, a bit older, like Lily only taller, with pale skin and golden-
blonde hair... no... it was steel plating and brass wire hair. Another image formed... tall, broad-
shouldered, copper face plates, wearing a scarf and a vest and black trousers. Rabbit moved forward,
puzzled, to look at it. In a flash, he became one with the figure.

"What?" he gasped as the girl ran to him and threw her arms around his waist.

"Welcome to my world!" she cried. "This is my core! It's got Blue Matter the Silver Man gave me,
and the Blue Matter mama got from you."

Rabbit, despite the relief of having, for a little while, a whole body, grew uncomfortable. "That's not
really the right talk for a kid, baby..."

She laughed and held him tighter, and he sighed and picked her up the same way he picked up Lily...
or tried to. He hadn't lifted Lily since she was nine, and even now she was petite and thin and human
and likely wouldn't be any harder to lift than she ever was.

But Qwerty had had the presence of mind to craft for herself a form that was a fusion of her mother
and her father. Her eyes were bi-colored, just as he had dreamed. She was tall, like him. Her hair was
brass and her skin was steel, just like Honey's. And she had a core gleaming through the center of the
fluffy red and white dress she wore. But more than that, she had programmed the two of them to
have weight. And Honey had always weighed a cool half ton, just like The Spine. Rabbit actually
found it amusing...

Bracing both feet, he reached down and scooped her up the way he had lifted Honey, and was more
successful. She threw her slim arms around his neck and snuggled close. He rested his head on hers
and decided he could happily stay here forever.

"So..." he murmured at last. "What did your Mama want you to give me, baby?"
"Oh, yes!" She sprang to the floor as lightly as a kitten and turned toward him, holding out a letter. He laughed. "A letter? Ya had to link with me to give me a letter?"

"It's not a real letter, silly Pappy. Mama sealed everything she wanted to give you into a smaller piece of code. When you take the letter, it will be sent to your brain. When you open the letter, everything she put inside it will open up so that you can see it."

He looked admiringly at the letter. "She came up with that? That's amazing!"

Qwerty beamed shyly. "Actually, it was me, Pappy..."

He gaped, and then grinned proudly. "You smart girl! Of course you did. You have smart parents."

She laughed and held the letter closer to him. He realized he'd been stalling a little... it sounded brilliant, but was it safe?

"Have you... uh... run this by Peter?"

"I tried to explain it but he's still having a hard time with the science."

Smart enough to stump a Walter! That was impressive. He looked at her and saw her eager face, then sighed and took the letter. The room whirled for a split second and the envelope vanished.

"Oh! Did something go wrong?" he cried.

She laughed. She put one finger to her head, looking up at the ceiling. "Hm... yes, there it is! It's stored in your memory, Pappy."

"Is it..." he responded blankly. How did she do that?

"Just look in a sector labeled "Honeybee."

"I have a lot of sectors labeled that way," he murmured sadly.

"You'll know this one, Pappy. But wait until you're alone."

"What? Why?"

"Mama told me it wasn't for children."

Good grief, was it dirty pictures? "Alright. Guess it'll have to wait, then. I'd like to stay here with you for a while."

Qwerty laughed and hugged him again. He wrapped his arms around her, content for the first time in years.

"That's just what I want, too, Pappy! I've known you since I was a baby, but you don't know me. I'm not letting you leave until you know me better than anyone else does. That's how it should be."

He saw the blank space around them resolve into a room with chairs, tables, games... just like the playroom downstairs.

"Do you like chess? I beat Peter every time..."

As a robot, Rabbit found chess as tedious as tic-tac-toe. They'd have stalemate after stalemate... Then
he looked at her, remembered the futuristic technology she had crafted as a mere child, and had to wonder.

He smiled. "I have a feeling you could mop the floor with me at chess, baby. But let's see how you are at checkers."
Rabbit spends time with his daughter... and postpones opening Honeybee's letter a little longer.

"Rabbit?"

Peter stood in the doorway, astonished. Rabbit had been adamant about remaining there, alone. He'd actually been a little scared of him after the stern look in his eye. He didn't know Rabbit did stern. He hoped he'd never do it again.

He decided to start the search alone. It was still early and there was no sign of foul play. Probably Rabbit had just gone to the duck pond. The family had told him about that.

Ten minutes later, he was back in the same doorway with dew on his sneakers. No sign of Rabbit at the pond. Not even tracks. That was when he saw the paper. He scooped it up, hoping it wasn't a suicide note. A quick scan on its contents left him seething.

"Lily, you little brat..."

At least he knew where to go now. As he started up the stairs, he found himself less and less angry. It had worked, hadn't it? It seemed harsh, but Rabbit wasn't a subtle guy. Maybe the "needle jab in the backside" approach was the best one for someone like him. Lily certainly was close enough to Rabbit to have the measure of him, even with the years they'd been apart.

Peter at last staggered, panting, through the already opened doorway of the HoW. It was dim and quiet. Lily slept soundly on the couch at the far end. But what caught his attention was in the middle.

Rabbit, wired up to the room... and therefore to Qwerty. Peter felt a little stab of good-natured jealousy. He suspected there were worlds within worlds in Qwerty's computerized mind. Just the little bit of technology she had attempted to describe to him had been enough to blow his mind wide open. He was pretty sure he understood it... though it would have helped if Qwerty didn't think she was too good for good spelling. She had no patience with spelling it right if they all got the point already. He walked closer, wondering how it was going.

The teletype machine came to life. "Good morning, Peter."

"Good morning to you. How's your Pappy doing, little girl?"

"Weer snuggling."

"Uh-huh. I see. You certainly have enough wires wrapped around him. Don't bend anything, alright?"

"I meen weer snuggling in heer."

"I'll take your word for that. But shouldn't Rabbit get some rest?"
"Hes been in stasis all nite."

"Oh. Good," he said faintly, puzzled.

He'd begun the think the sign Lily had asked him to hang over the door, the one that read "H.O.W." was meant to be "How?" because he had been asking it almost daily since Qwerty was discovered.

"Peter?" said a sleepy voice.

"Uh-oh!" Peter said, pulling the blanket over Rabbit's head as Lily ran to them.

"Unkie Rabbit!" she squeaked. "Why is he under there?"

"He's in stasis. He came up to see his daughter, thanks to a meddling little gremlin."

Lily put her hands on her hips. "You wouldn't take him my note!"

Peter sighed and grinned at her. "No. Sorry, kid."

"I'm not a kid, Peter."

"Whatever. Anyway, he doesn't want to scare anyone, so I'm helping him out."

"I won't be scared," she said defiantly.

"Sorry, that's up to Rabbit."

"Ugh!" she huffed.

Rabbit held Qwerty close.

"It's late, baby. Don't AIs need rest too?"

"Not sleepy..."

He wasn't sure how it worked out in the HoW, but in here, she was definitely losing the war... Her head rested heavily against his chest and when he leaned a little, he could see her eyelids blinking slowly.

"I'll come back tomorrow, baby. In the morning, so that you can get enough rest. Okay?"

"No... stay, Pappy..."

He stroked her hair. Honey's hair had been fine enough to cut skin, but to him it just felt soft. Qwerty's did, too.

He kissed her head and said, "Go on to sleep, baby. Pappy will be back this afternoon, but you're not staying up all night again."

"I love you, Pappy,"

Rabbit sighed deeply. He would never get tired of that. "I love you, baby girl."

She squeezed his middle and vanished.
Rabbit's eyes flickered and lit. He looked around in surprise as the wires detached from his head. "Oh! Hey, Peter..."

"You okay, Rabbit? I was worried when I didn't find you downstairs."

"Oh, yeah, sorry about that... I wasn't even sure about what I was gonna do so I couldn't leave a note... I didn't expect to be gone so long."

"Oh, don't apologize! This is a wonderful development. Qwerty hasn't stopped asking for you in three years."

"Unkie Rabbit!" cried Lily joyously, lunging at him.

"Oh!" he cried. She'd been on the side, away from the blanket's opening. He sat stiffly as she hugged him around the blanket. He hoped the frail form beneath didn't distress her too much. "Hey, Airheart... How's our little miracle?"

"Not so little now! Oh, I'm so glad you came up! Qwerty, isn't it wonderful?"

As if in response, the HoW lights dimmed.

"She stayed up all night, Airheart... I was a stupid Pappy and didn't come up until ten. I told her I'd come back in the afternoon. She needs her stasis."

"Oh. But just look at this... oh, I see, you've seen it," she said, reading the writing on the paper. "Clever, huh?"

Peter beamed.

Rabbit peered at the teletype machine. "Oh, that was clever, Peter. You hooked that right up all by yourself so she could talk to you..."

*All by myself?* Peter got the feeling he was being handled. "Thank you," he said a little flatly, his smile fading.

"I mean it, that was smart."

Peter sighed. He *was* being handled, and he knew why. It was only right since she was his daughter, still... "She's bright, isn't she? Of course, she has the resources of the entire Manor at her disposal too..."

"But you also need imagination, Peter," Lily said.

"I have an imagination!"

"But you couldn't even begin to understand it when Qwerty said that if you just knew the right way to go about it, you could even fly just because Earth wouldn't be able to hold you back..."

"Look, I get the theory well enough, but really. Seduce gravity?"

"I don't think any of you should be talkin' about seducing things..." Rabbit said hastily. Much as he loved a good seduction himself, he had just spent all night settling into the role of being a father and this seemed... inappropriate for children.
Lily laughed and said, "But Peter is clever, Unkie Rabbit. I bet he'll have you fixed up in no time."

"Maybe... He did reconnect my l-l-l-legs." It was hard to even mention them without feeling a twinge... to think of repairs was to think of how they got damaged in the first place. He wasn't ready for that. As it was, he remembered, he had a letter to read... one that filled him with both longing and dread.

But he didn't mention this to Peter as he helped him back down the stairs; climbing had been easy but stepping down made his knee joints threaten to collapse. Lily had insisted on one hug, blanket or no blanket, and he had enjoyed it. But he didn't know when he'd be willing to do it again...

He asked Peter to leave him alone for the rest of the day, saying he had a lot to think about... which he did. And more was coming. Peter oiled his joints and topped up his water and left.

Rabbit settled into the big, old, safe chair and pulled his blanket back around himself. He closed his eyes. He shifted his scope from photoreceptors to his internal map and studied the sectors of memory until he saw it... a brand new sector labeled, "Honebe."

She was right. He couldn't miss it. He took a deep breath he didn't need and opened the file.
Chapter Summary

Honeybee's letter... and her apology... and much, much more...

Chapter Notes

*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ej9hYC1-_RI

The song they dance to... I figure Rabbit probably used to sing it to her... and that he might have sounded a bit like Billy joel. ;) He would have had a long list of love songs to draw from, but I think this one has that tiny bit of sadness without being outright a sad song.

Pardon the length of this part... I've been building up to it since chapter 10. Saving a few dozen reveals. And it even continues into the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Rabbit..."

He stood before a door. Someone was saying his name. Someone? He knew that voice; it was as much a part of him as his Pappy's was, now...

He turned. She stood before him, just as she had when she was young, even though she looked the way she had at during their years in Walter Manor. Of course; there was no reason she couldn't stand, here. She could be complete, just as he was.

Qwerty had included the same figure for him that she had in the HoW. He stepped forward into it and became one with it as before.

"Honeybee..." he breathed.

"Rabbit, beloved... If you're seeing this, then I am gone," she said.

"No... you're right here..."

"I left this with our child to explain..."

"Of course," he sighed. It would have been so easy to let himself pretend...

"In order to access these files, you must pass the security check."

"Huh?"

"Dance with me, Rabbit."
A soft melody began to play.*

"I don't understand, Honey."

"Dance with me, and you will be able to see my message."

Of course; Qwerty had said that Honey didn't want her to see the message. But how could dancing with her establish anything about who he really was?

Well, nothing for it but to try. He walked to her and put one hand on her waist... and hesitated. He'd never danced that way with Honey. They had danced, but since her legs didn't function...

He smiled. Now he understood. He carefully lifted her in his arms and began to move to the music. She nestled against his shoulder, just like she always had. He sighed and pressed his face to her hair. It wasn't her... but it had been once. She had made this. In that sense, it was her.

At least, that was what he was telling himself.

"Honey... I know you can't really hear me... but I've missed you. I don't know what you're gonna say to me but I could stay here for the rest of my life and not complain." he sighed, closing his eyes. "I miss you every day..."

The song ended. He opened his eyes and looked at her. She smiled and kissed him with a gentle spark.

"Security check passed." She faded away.

"No!" he gasped... and saw that the door was open. He stared at it for a minute or two, not moving, fists clenched, snuffling softly.

He had expected it to hurt. He shouldn't let it stop him when it did. But it hurt so much... Still, if it hurt, it also felt glorious. Three years and this was the closest he'd felt to her...

Besides, he had to see what was beyond that doorway.

"Alright, Rabbit. You can do this..." he muttered, hastily wiping his eyes. He walked into the opening.

It was dark. He heard her voice, close to him, say, "As I make this recording, I can no longer speak easily, but I had some things I wanted to share with you. So I'm leaving them here, in a file created for me by our child... as actual memories, they'll be clearer than if I describe them anyway.

"I did you a terrible wrong, Rabbit. I want you to understand why. I don't say that this could ever justify it. But maybe you'll see the reasons behind it and find it in yourself to forgive me."

"Honey, baby... what kind of guy could stay mad at you...?"

Before him appeared a series of lights. As they brightened, he was able to make out shapes. Each was an object, laying on a pedestal.

"This is the entry," she told him. "In order to view each memory, pick up the object and examine it. Each is something that will serve to explain a step in the process... from my creation to the day that I became a mother. Behind them, set back at a greater distance, is my gift to you, one that I hope will make amends for the harm I've done. Each can be viewed only once... after which it will disappear.
But of course, then it will be a part of your memory, which is imperishable... far more so than my own. Even now I find I lose fragments and so I quickly, with the help of our very brilliant daughter, attempt to translate and preserve them here.

"You may wonder why I didn't find a way to upload my own AI into memory."

To his embarrassment, it had never occurred to him. For the Walter robots, memory was only part of what they were; their cores bore the personalities and character. Their Pappy had established that long ago. But for Honeybee... it was true, everything she was dwelt in that decaying brain structure.

"I tried, beloved. But even our clever darling was unable to find a way. Papa's brain construction was incompatible... Each little portion would have had to have been painstakingly translated. It would have taken years... years I now realize I don't have. Even now, you are preparing to leave for war, in just a few months. I suspect I will not survive long once you leave..."

Rabbit rubbed his hand across his eyes. At least he'd been able to say goodbye...

"What I have had time to do is this... translate these few memories, and craft a limited AI of myself to interact with you as you view them. In those memories I have of you, I have enabled you to step into the memory and take your place, should you so choose. I will be able to respond to you, but I will be bound by the actions already chosen. However, it does enable me to explain... and to tell you I love you, Rabbit... I always have, since the first day we met."

"Oh, Honey..." He'd taken a bit longer... though even when he thought she might just be a statue he hadn't been able to get her out of his mind. He wasn't proud of that... after all, Secret had made her chassis. But it wasn't until they communicated that he fell in love.

"It will work best if you view them in order. And the last, I warn you, will seem to last for years... but will really only take about the length of one day to transfer. It will mean reliving some of our years together..."

"Oh, baby..."

"In order to give you what you missed. Now I must try to do what I have been unable to do for years... summon the courage to tell you about her. If you are seeing this, it means I have done so... I hope it was not too much of a shock, beloved. And I know you will love her as I do, though she is an unusual child..."

He laughed messily through his tears. "Yeah, baby. She sure is."

"I love you. I'll see you soon..."

This startled him momentarily, until he realized it was true, for her. And maybe she was also talking about the memories...

He stepped forward. She said it was best to view them in order... The first one was a wrench. He picked it up and looked at it. Small, delicate tool... who would need one so tiny?

The room went dark.

"Honey?"

"I forgot about this moment for some time. Darling helped me to find it last summer. I suppose you would call it a glimpse into my infancy."
That sounded... well, cute. But... did she call Qwerty 'darling' as a description? It sounded more like a name.

"Allo..." said a man's voice in the darkness.

"Allo..." buzzed a static-filled speaker.

"Non... difficile... HEL-lo..."

"Armand!" murmured Rabbit. He sounded so young! Only why was it dark? Ah, but this must have been before she had photoreceptors...

"Hel-lo."

"Bon. Very good."

"You needn't praise it, surely?"

"It is an artificial mind, Secret, not a broom. Les enfant... the... a child."

Secret snorted. "The day that's a child..." he scoffed.

"But it is a fitting... metaphor. It will be able to make choices. And it is going to learn the good manner, oui? One must lead a child by example... Bring it up in the right way."

"Yes, you Frenchies do so well at that..." The sarcasm was unmistakeable.

"Pardon?"

"Never mind. While you're having a tea party with it, I'll just be making sure it looks beautiful. The customers will not be interested in a clever mechanical child. She needs to have It."

"It? Ah, yes... Americans. Not too much It, eh? Or they may not buy for the right reasons."

Secret snickered. There was the sound of footsteps.

"Mon dieu... I apologise for his uncouth words. From all this, you will grow."

"Yes, Papa..."

Honey spoke again. "I believe I must have always called him Papa at that time, and that Secret clumsily wiped most of that memory away. He did teach me a great deal about manners, but little else. I was a cold steel goddess when you came along, Rabbit... not because it was my personality, but because I knew nothing about... anything, except etiquette. The real me is... warmer. I think that comes from those early months learning from Armand. But I first began to realize it because of you..."

"I never knew you any way but warm, Honey..."

"You would have, Rabbit... I only ever had warmth for you."

The pedestals returned. The wrench was gone. He picked up the next item... a top hat.

"Oh..."

Another recording began... this time with video.
"Good afternoon, Honeybee."

"Good afternoon, sir."

"How do you do?"

"How do you do?"

"Alright."

A clock struck twelve. The man grabbed his coat and flipped a switch on the robot facing him, then hurried away.

*Oh, fiddlesticks.*

It was Honey, back at the World's Fair. Rabbit liked this better. He knew what was coming. She had come to a halt facing the railing... and sure enough, up strolled Rabbit, younger, in better repair, wearing one of his older faceplates, but still himself.

She'd said he could take his place. He stepped forward uncertainly and felt a tugging toward the Rabbit that stood at the railing. With a snap, he was looking up at Honeybee. He swallowed the surge of joy that threatened to overwhelm him. He knew something had to be different this time around, and he soon found out what.

The difference was that this time he heard her voice...

*An automaton, like me! Oh... only... oh, isn't he handsome...*  

Oh... He struggled to play his part, pulling up the memory file.

"Hello? Switched off, huh? Yeah, that happens." He chuckled. "Sometimes they d-d-d'on't even ask. Guess they don't think of us as people. Who w-w-w-wants to be people anyhow?"

*I am people. Aren't I?*

He hesitated, wanting to respond. But she was bound to the script, so he might as well continue. "If I s-s-said you a beautiful chassis, would you hold it against me?"

*What does that mean?*

This was even more fun that he'd expected. He laughed quietly and said, "The Spine... that's my little brother... he says the l-l-ladies don't like lines like that. He says that now, anyhow! Guess he's embarrassed. I talked him into trying it at a nightclub in Paris b-back durin' the Great War and I think it worked a little too well... Pretty sure that one dame left a few dents, anyhow!"

*He has a nice voice... I wish I knew what he was talking about...*  

He laughed and turned to watch a woman hurrying her child away.

"Hm... *that* happens too. Guess it does look kinda crazy, me tellin' dirty stories to a statue. *Are* you a statue?"

*Of course not! What are dirty stories, anyway?*

With a barely suppressed snort of laughter he choked, "Well, I guess I'll just have ta enjoy the view."
Does he mean me? He thinks I'm a view... Why is he looking at me like that?

Because you're beautiful, silly... "I wish you could talk. I bet you have a swell voice. If you're real. Those wings are cute but I bet you can't fly."

I have wings?

She didn't know? "I'd like to fly someday. Maybe someday I'll get a plane or something. If I do, will you fly with me? I could take you places..." He winked.

Is his eye malfunctioning? It's a different color from the other one...

"I'm all talk, baby." He was. "But I'd love just to take you for a walk. Maybe in the park. Parks are nice."

I've heard of those...

Poor baby. "Yeah... you could tell me all about yourself and how come you're so beautiful."

Am I?

Seriously, hadn't that jerk heard of mirrors? "Really lovely..."

Oh...

"My name's Rabbit, by the way. Weird, I know. It was my first word and it just stuck. I guess I'll have to do without knowing your name."

_Honeybee!

He leaned on his hands and gazed up at her. He ended up staying an hour, gazing up at her, murmuring about her beauty, enjoying every minute and hearing her sweet, naive responses. And she had spent that hour looking back, feeling stranger by the second as she looked into those eyes... or so her narrative told him. But the time came when he knew it had to end.

"I guess I better get going soon," he said with even more reluctance than the first time he'd done so. "I got a matinee in an hour. Maybe I'll come see you again. Won't matter I guess, if yehr j-j-j-just a statue."

But I'm not! Don't go!

Honey... she was begging me to stay! Rabbit felt a stabbing feeling right in his core. He gulped unnecessarily. How do I make myself go? But it'll end no matter what...

"Why am I still standing here?" he said suddenly, looking her up and down. "She can't hear me... Maybe she ain't even a robot..."

I am! I don't know who you are, but I am a robot, like you! Please don't go yet... oh, why can't he hear me?

Just shoot me right through the heart... "But she sure is pretty..."

_Rabbit! RABBIT! Oh, bother!

He shook his head and jiggled his audioreceptor as if something had tickled it, then walked out of the Hall of Science.
He stood facing the pedestals again.

"That hurt, baby."

"I know, beloved. I thought it might, but I wanted you to see where I began, sheltered, ignorant, vulnerable. I thought of telling Father... I mean Secret... about you, but I'd heard him say he wanted no one to talk to me, that he was afraid they would taint the learning he had so carefully guided. There wasn't much to taint! I learned more from you than I ever did from him. And the day you said you loved me, I almost felt as if I could leap down from the pedestal into your arms and run away with you without a single quiver of remorse. But he was my father, or so I thought. I didn't understand why you were so angry the day you finally met him face to face. But I didn't understand a lot of things. The next memory, I'm afraid, will make you angrier... but please look at it anyway. It will all make sense later."

"Alright, baby..." he said nervously. The object itself was unnerving. It looked like a fist... The memory began almost immediately.

"Strike, Honeybee!"

"Why, Father?"

"It is a new program. You will strike when the human has a weapon."

"What is a weapon?"

The man tore at his hair and hissed, "Aggression. Do you understand aggression?"

"You have not taught me..." she began, fighting tears. He didn't like her to cry.

"I don't have time for this! The demonstration is in two days and I have it on good authority that you'll be perceived as a mere shiny toy unless you can serve a greater function. I crafted you from the finest steel. You could take on an army."

"What is an army..." she asked timidly.

"Enough! I can broaden your scope later. For now, I need you to learn the basic motions to show your ability to take on robbers."

Robbers? She didn't understand but was afraid to ask any more questions. Rabbit, seething from what he had seen so far, sincerely wished he had popped the man one when he had the chance.

"When the human lunges toward you..."

"Lunges?" she almost whispered.

"Like this." He moved toward her rapidly. She flinched. "If he uses his hands in an aggressive manner... aggressive means with force... pretty much... Then you bring your arm toward him with force."

"Like a handshake?"

"No! Well, possibly, but faster. More vigorously. In this manner."

He swung his fist toward her chest, punching her lightly in the chassis. "Only harder. Much harder."

"But..." She was distressed. This sounded bad! Honeybee trembled, afraid he would be angry, but
forced the words out... "You instructed me to be gentle with the people. They are fragile and I am strong..."

"Then we need someone tougher. I wonder if that great brute on display does greetings..." He shrugged. "I'll work it out later. Learn this and I will be pleased, Honeybee."

"Alright, Father..."

"Show me the motion."

She put her arm out uncertainly.

"With more force."

She did it again.

"This is going to take some time..."

Rabbit swore loudly.

"Please, beloved!"

"Sorry..."

"This was how it had always been with Secret. You saw him trying to teach me. You saw how I was treated. I had no idea that it was wrong. I thought I wasn't trying hard enough. And when the three of you came to demonstrate, I was happy at first, until you grabbed my hand. And I looked at Father... wondering what to do... and he nodded. He nodded!" There was a sob in her voice. "For all his warnings, telling your Pappy to stop you, he never really wanted you to stop. You were his test dummy... You could have died... you did die... I never blamed you for not looking for me, Rabbit. I should have refused to follow his directions! And I have never been able to forgive myself..."

"Honey... why didn't you tell me this..." he said weakly, "when I could have told you I never blamed it on you, ever..."

"Rabbit... I know. You never showed any anger toward me. But I have it toward myself.

"And you know the rest," she said. "The day you came to bring me home was the happiest day of my life to that date... it meant that you forgave me, that you loved me enough to brave time and distance and hardship just to find me. I hadn't known I could feel such joy! Except that you were attacked, of course... and once again my burden wore on me. Once again, I was the cause of your suffering."

"No, baby! They did it! Those... those... oh, Honey, it was never you that hurt me!"

"But still you loved me, and how I loved you... and from the day you lifted me in your arms at last and carried me out to visit the Colonel's grave, I wanted to show you the strength of my affection, and couldn't... I burned with longing, I knew the way, and neither of us was capable."

Rabbit blinked in surprise. "What? Knew what way?"

"The way to express intimacy, Rabbit."

He snorted. "You knew how humans... but how? How much can you learn about sex standing in a carnival?"
"View the next memory," she said shyly.

"Oh, brother..." he murmured. On the pedestal that appeared hung a gleaming white bra. He picked it up, bemused.

"I had witnessed it back at the World's Fair... I apologize in advance..." she said quickly as the room lightened.

Honeybee stood in a curtained area. Rabbit recognized it... the demonstration area at the World's Fair, prepared for the unveiling.

A young couple slipped, giggling, through the curtains.

"We did it, Norma! The guards didn't notice!"

They kissed passionately. Honeybee was shut down but, as usual, still alert. She watched with bemusement. What was the function of this activity?

"Bill..." the girl gasped. "Bill... are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Never... never said it was a good idea..." he responded.

"But..." she gasped. "Do you think we should..."

"Hey, we're married, aren't we? We're allowed!"

"Of course, but... when you said... that you wanted to honeymoon at the World's Fair..."

"Ssh..." He tugged off her sweater.

She held his hands still for a moment and took a deep breath, continuing, "You didn't tell me you meant you wanted to really honeymoon at the World's Fair!"

_Honeymoon?_ she wondered.

Rabbit snickered. Fleshies were hilarious. This explained a lot about Honeybee as well... He recognized some of her moves...

"No one will catch us if we're quick and quiet..." he said, kissing her neck.

"Ohhh... I'm not sure I can be either..."

He put the sweater into her mouth and grinned, then started on her bra. "I'll manage one if you can manage the other!"

Rabbit rolled his eyes.

"It's exciting, though, isn't it?"

She nodded, teeth clenched on the sweater. The clothes were soon scattered around the small stage, and the couple was... well...

Honeybee watched their activities in bewilderment.

My goodness... _would you look at that! They have buttons? Oh, my, I didn't know they had interlocking parts... Oh, dear... is he hurting her? Oh, no, she's not hurt... What in the name of Emily
Post are they doing now? Is that... oh, they've stopped. Father wouldn't like this, I'm sure of it...

Rabbit, in his simulated body, was bent double with laughter. She was always adorable!

"Hush, beloved," came her narrative voice, sounding embarrassed.

The young couple dressed hastily, giggling softly as they did so. Honey was still puzzled. What function did their actions serve?

They smoothed their hair, using Honey's chassis as a mirror. Then they crept to the curtain to peek out.

"He's almost far enough..." the man said, watching.

His wife pulled him back and kissed him. "I love you, Bill!"

"I love you, baby!" He looked out. "All clear!"

They hurried away.

Love? That's an expression of love? But... it's not in any of the etiquette books! When is it appropriate to display such affection? It seemed very... intimate. They hid before engaging in the activity, and no wonder, since they removed their clothing! They pressed close together... They said they loved each other... I heard them saying it even while they were... whatever that was.

I love Rabbit... and Rabbit said he loves me...

Rabbit could almost hear the gears turning in her head as it all became clear.

Oh... Oh, my...

"Honey, girl, I had no idea... What a way to learn about the birds and the bees..."

"You see, I didn't just come to bed one night and seduce you out of the blue..."

Rabbit smiled. He had no problem with it if she had...

"The first time we made love, I was fulfilling a life dream. During those weeks when you remained in stasis, heartbroken about the deaths of your loved ones, I searched the Colonel's library and sat beside you reading books on human biology. I learned that it was the act of biological procreation, and the human act of love. As such it represented two things I wanted more than anything... To grow still more intimate with you, and to have children.

"And I learned that neither one was possible for us. I cried, alone, because you needed me to be strong. By the time you were well again, I was resigned. I was glad for The Spine and Marie when they married, and I was pleased that you had found his manual, that the Colonel had given him a way to enjoy the intimacy I could never have. He was a kind person and deserved it.

"And it made me wonder if there might be an answer for us as well."

"Trust you to find it..." Rabbit sighed. "To think, under all those good manners was a hot little firecracker... but then, I already knew that."

"Oh, Rabbit."

"Well, I can't wait to see what you have to follow that..." he said. But all that stood on the pedestal
was a teacup and saucer. He picked them up, puzzled.

"What's this all about?"

The scene lit. Walter Manor, the play room. Davy rolled on the floor with his hands full of Play-doh. Rabbit frowned. He hadn't been thrilled when The Spine brought that back for the kid after his upgrades... but Davy had adored anything he could tear apart and build up again.

"Marie?"

"Hm? Oh, Honey! Come in..."

"Are you feeling alright?"

"A little queasy. I suppose it'll get worse but for now that's all it is. What brings you in here? You usually stay with Rabbit..."

"I asked him to pick some flowers for me... I... wanted to speak with you privately."

"I had a feeling that was when you did it," he chuckled. He'd known about this conversation, after all.

"Sounds serious." Marie smiled.

"It is! Oh, Marie... I have wanted for so long to have what you have!"

Marie looked shocked. Honeybee knew why; she seldom gushed or lost control. But she had to talk to someone...

"Honey... You have Rabbit... you live here, you're safe... What could you..." She hesitated.
"Children? You want to have a baby?"

"Yes..." Honeybee sighed miserably. "And more... but I know that's impossible. I could be content if Rabbit and I could... If we could find the way... to at least be..."

"Oh my goodness..." Marie breathed.

"I know. It's terribly uncouth to ask such things..."

"Don't hold back, baby..." Rabbit whispered.

"Honey!" laughed Marie. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Are you telling me that you want to know about sex?"

Rabbit grinned.

Honey nodded vigorously. "I know we can't... We can't do what humans do. But Rabbit told me... The Spine mentioned a power surge."

"Did he?" Marie asked, one eyebrow raised. "Boys telling tales..."

"Hm?"

"Never mind. Girls can tell tales too. Alright, Honey. You've been here about five years, and I assume you consider yourself to be pretty close to Rabbit..."
"We're... we're married. Sort of. We made vows to one another."

"Oh, that's precious! Well, no reason to hold back, then. Let me tell you how I did it back in the beginning... and then maybe you can find your own way."

"Back in the beginning?"

"When we were first married. He... oh, dear. Well, there were some upgrades and..."

Rabbit fought the urge to cover his ears and sing.

"Well, it's just easier now. Anyway... Yes, I think I can help. I mean, I can't do anything about the children. But the other thing, sure. And with two of you... my goodness, well, you could create a circuit..." She laughed and patted Honeybee's hand in the warm, familiar way she had. "Honey, girl, there'll be fireworks!"

"There were..." Rabbit sighed dreamily, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Marie sure is a great lady..."

The memory faded, leaving only Honeybee, sitting, looking at him.

"There's so much more I could tell..." she said. "The years in carnivals, passed from hand to hand... but I won't think of that anymore, I won't let it taint what remains of my life! I don't want to dwell anymore on the years of waiting, wondering if you hated me..."

"Never... never once..."

"But I promised you a gift. I denied you something, beloved. I kept you from the joy of watching our darling grow... of knowing you were a father. I have tried so many times to tell you and I can't... I just can't... from the day I learned I was pregnant even until today."

"But why, baby? Why couldn't you let me in until the very end? I know you were afraid of people but why me?" he cried. He forgave her, and yet... he still felt the injustice, the jealousy. She had so often spoken of their having a little girl but never until the end did she ever admit there was one.

"I was a slave, beloved. My life and will were not my own. I was taught that I had no rights... and even when we at last were here, together, safe... I fought the secret fears that it would be stolen from me. I was helpless for so long, kept a prisoner, bound and weak. I don't want to be weak again. I hope you can understand that..."

He looked down at her with a stricken face. It felt as though she had seen straight through him... she often did. "Yeah, baby. I do understand. Too well..."

He hadn't even spoken to The Spine about what had happened in the prison laboratory. He had done his best to laugh off as much as he could, or to take it like a man. But now he saw that he and Honey had both been victims. She had suffered imprisonment and mistreatment for years without hope of escape. He had endured imprisonment and torture beyond any pain he had yet experienced. Yes, he understood.

"It was that much worse when I had a child to protect. I could face my fears when it was only me. But the baby had to be protected. I was afraid you would tell the people, and they would purge her from my systems..."

"Just like you told Qwerty," he sighed.

"...And I couldn't chance it, beloved. I hope the last memory, the longest, will make it right. Open the
book, beloved. I have waited since the work was complete on this simulation, tucked inside that tiny file, to show you..."

"You were aware, Honey? You, here, in this memory? I don't understand... if you're dead... how can it really be you?"

"Open the book..." She vanished.

He looked at the book without picking it up. "Darling's Baby Book," he read.

Her name was Darling? No wonder she agreed to be called Qwerty...

This was the last one. After this, Honey really would be just a memory.

"How can I pick it up, baby? It'll be over... This has been... It's been more than I ever hoped for. It's been like having you back again."

Oil dripped onto the floor. Qwerty was thorough... at least he couldn't run out of oil, here, from crying too much.

He stood in the silence, the dark, staring at the gleaming, lace-trimmed pink book.

"She wants me to know her better than anyone else..." he murmured. "'Cause I'm her Pappy."

He picked up the baby book and opened it.

Chapter End Notes

Rabbit, babbie...
You, and Me, and...

Chapter Summary

Honeybee's last message... Saying goodbye, but not too quickly.

Chapter Notes

Very long chapter. In which I stretch science and fantasy and feels and stuff everything else into it that I can squeeze in there. In short, a life. But first, a little sex. (sort of, I never get too explicit, do I?) Which is how lives begin, really... sometimes even for robots.

I struggled with this one. I could have included years of events, milestones in their lives, but I had to trim it down to the really relevant stuff. I think it got the point across, and that it's happy, funny, and sad by stages. I do enjoy wrangling Rabbit about. He's a little more mature here than even fanon usually makes him, but I've always favored the Rabbit of Seven-Point-Eight... childish, but usually for a reason, filled with a sense of wonder and thoroughly neurotic, and who would cheerfully throw himself in the path of death to save a life. I've just added romance... If The Spine would embrace sex, you can bet Rabbit would, just not the same kind.

Theme song of the chapter: Here, There, and Everywhere by The Beatles, and Isn't Life Strange by The Moody Blues. In case the chapter doesn't jerk you around enough as it is. :)

Note: The chapter has received slight edits in my effort to make the fic more appropriate for younger readers. It's still mature and the plot points remain but it spends a bit less time lingering over the actions involved. And yeah, I know it's not exactly a porno anyway but the edits make me feel better. 10/7/2019

Peter strolled into the lab that evening. Rabbit would be upstairs with Qwerty, so he could work on the replacement plating without disturbing him...

Or not. Rabbit was still in his chair.

"Sorry... Rabbit?" He peered into the automaton's skeletal face. It didn't frighten him; he found it fascinating usually. Now, it was worrying. Rabbit's boiler was working full time, his core pulsing as thought Rabbit was up and walking around, but Rabbit himself was unresponsive. Peter sighed and pulled out a screwdriver, walking around to the back of the chair. A few problems were to be expected... he'd helped Peter IV and The Spine make repairs, but he was still relatively new at this.

The phone rang. He dropped the screwdriver in surprise and it fell inside of Rabbit's iron rib cage. Swearing under his breath, he picked up the phone.

"Hello?"
"Peter! It is Armand..."

"Armand! Nice to hear from you..."

"From me? I believe someone at your home called me a moment ago."

"What? Who?"

"I couldn't say."

"Why? Didn't they say anything?"

"I heard only static. The operator assures me the call came from San Diego."

"I don't understand." He reached carefully into Rabbit's frame, trying to reach the dropped tool.

"I think, perhaps, it was my granddaughter."

"Oh..." Armand had found out about Qwerty at some point... he hadn't really said when. "But why would she call if you can't understand her?"

"Because she is very distressed about something, I think. Peter... I am worried. Could you please...?"

"Of course... let me call you back once I check on her."

"Thank you. Goodbye."

"Bye." He hung up, shook his head, and punched the button for the HoW. To his relief, Lily answered.

"Qwerty says don't mess with Rabbit."

"Hello to you too! Only did she have to call Armand? You could have called me... heck, you could have called Armand for her..."

"She what? No, she didn't... wait..." He could hear the teletype machine in the background. "Qwerty, you did?"

"What's going on? Why is Rabbit still here?"

"Something's not right... it should have completed by now..." It sounded like she was reading. "What is it, Qwerty? What should have completed?"

"Lily?"

"Mama's letter? Mama Honey left him a letter? In his brain? I don't..."

"I'll be right up. This is driving me nuts."

Peter was able, through trial and error, to get the full explanation. "Qwerty, are you nuts? His processor is older than General Motors, for crying out loud! You could have done permanent damage, little girl! What were you thinking, doing this without telling me? If anything happens to him..."

The lights flickered wildly.
"Dang it, Peter!" cried Lily. "Now you made her cry! She's upset enough as it is!"

"You're the darndest little girls!" he roared, censoring himself just barely. "What now? I don't dare interfere with it, I don't even understand it! And without The Spine here..."

"Call Qwerty's grandpa back! Maybe he can help..."

"Right, I said I would..." he said, trying to calm down. "Just... Look, I'm sorry, Qwerty. I'll do everything I can... you didn't do a bad thing, really. Rabbit wouldn't have opened that letter if he didn't want it."

What he didn't add, as he hurried downstairs to call Armand in private, was that if she had set out to ensnare Rabbit and trap him inside his own head, she couldn't have found more effective bait.

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The baby book vanished. The room grew lighter.

"Darling crafted this program for me, and taught me how to fill it in..." Honey murmured, "though I couldn't let her see much of it."

She was sitting on their bed.

"It begins here," she said. "The other memories having been leading you to this, beloved. Our first time. Neither of us knew what would happen that night... neither of us knew even after it happened. Not right away. I figured it out, in time... but to us, then, it was... well..."

"Amazing," he breathed.

She smiled. "I want you to be able to have that again..."

She wasn't suggesting... was she? She wanted to... surely not... Rabbit was sure he was dreaming. But Honeybee always had been crazy about it...

She held her hand out him. "Come to bed, Rabbit."

He wasn't dreaming...

"Don't tease," he whispered, stepping closer, as if unable to resist.

"Come to bed with me, beloved..."

"I can't, Honey..." he sighed, fighting the urge to leap into her arms. "I want... man, do I want to! But... it ain't real..."

"Of course it's real," she replied.

He sat beside her. "But... it isn't really you... is it?"

"Yes and no..." she sighed sadly, taking his hand. "Remember, we tried to upload all of me, Darling and I... oh, she was so heartbroken! Rabbit, reassure her if she ever mentions it, tell her she did all she could to save her mama..."

"Alright, baby..."

"But I am me... in a manner of speaking. There was so little time! In building this AI, I made copies
of my personality files, language, memory... everything I could duplicate. It's almost as though I
crafted a twin of myself... but my functions are limited. I remember everything I need to complete
your gift. It's enough... I will fulfill the function of filling in the gaps left by my original self... and
then I must go."

"No..." he moaned. "Why can't you stay? You're here, you can answer me! I can feel you..." He
caressed her cheek. She closed her eyes and smiled. He leaned in close. "I can even smell you...
You're everything I remember... You're my Honeybee!"

"I'm not, not really," she said soothingly, looking at him again. "I seem complete, but I am not all that
Honeybee was. Rabbit... this is very important to me... when these memories end, when my message
is delivered, I want you to let me go and move on."

"No..." he insisted irritably. "It's enough... it's you..."

"Please, beloved. I'm gone now... and you have such a long life ahead. And your heart...
figuratively speaking... has room to give so much love."

"But... Honey..."

"Rabbit... This is one last moment for us... real while it lasts, but I would hate myself for it if I
thought it would keep you living a life that no longer exists. I am so happy that you love me still and
want to remember me... but you know it isn't enough, don't you?

"I, as you see me, am a part of the person I once was, a last extension of my intelligence, crafted to
deliver messages; some very sophisticated, and all very much from my heart. I will show you the
past, and talk to you as if it was the present. You'll hear things you never could have heard, even if I
had been willing to share them with you, and I will tell you whatever you can't see or don't
understand. I'll love you, same as always. But I am limited... I am not the whole woman. My main
purpose is to share this... Like I told you... it begins here."

"What does?" he breathed.

"Her life, of course. Our baby."

"What... how..."

She pulled him close. Their lips touched, little curls of electricity from hers caressing his. He sighed,
his eyes half-closed, and little arcs curled into his opened mouth and along the inside of his throat.
Steam poured from his cheeks as his boiler fired up in response. He still wasn't convinced, and yet...
Honey knew he loved it when she did that. It's what she would have done to seduce him... not that it
was ever difficult.

He was so confused now... in one moment she told him she wasn't real; the next that she was. He
pulled her against him anyway, stroking her hair.

"Honey, baby... It's been so long, and you know how much I want to... But if it isn't real, if you're
not really... well, you... It won't be right. I don't wanna cheapen what we had..."

"This is real, beloved. It is us, together... You're just a little late. But I've been waiting patiently for
you." She sighed, resting her head against his shoulder. "I've been aware, in little sparks, from time
to time, tucked in Darling's little storage unit. How I have longed for this moment..."

"So have I..." he murmured. Or at least, he had missed it.
He'd made up his mind. He was satisfied with her explanation. It felt real. She loved him... He was done arguing. She felt so real in his arms, and that kiss... He still felt it tingling. He almost didn't care anymore if she was really herself... no, that wasn't true. As much as he wanted her right now, that was the most important part...

But even that ceased to worry him. He rested his head against hers, breathing in her scent. Various metals, machine oil, metal polish... not what a human would consider feminine aromas, but ones he had always associated with her, from the first day they met in Chicago. To him, it was roses... It was her... this was her... the last trace, but still her, fulfilling her purpose. And her purpose, among other things, was to make love to him.

The Spine would probably resist, in a similar position, would take the moral high road and refuse to take part. Rabbit had never had much use for the moral high road.

He began unbuttoning his vest with his free hand. She noticed and took over, finishing the job and starting on the shirt. When that was done, she slid them off together and embraced him. Her lips touched his neck with a spark.

He tugged at her strap with a fresh surge of longing and heard it rip... straight down the back seam. He yanked it free and tossed it aside.

"Oh, Rabbit..." she sighed. She raised her head and kissed him with a wild flash of sparks.

He gave way at last to his feelings, brushing his doubt aside. He was with her again. He didn't know if this would be the last time, or if her memories would include more of the same. But even if they did, none of them had ever been quite like this one... while it had lasted. Which hadn't been long, as he remembered...

So, naturally, this time around, he made it his business to make it last as long as possible. Time passed in a haze of bliss, neither of them speaking or questioning the differences between what had passed before and what was happening now. She had said she was bound by the actual events, but apparently there was a lot of wiggle room in the definition... The five minutes of startled ecstasy that had been their first time had become hours of electric kisses and gentle caresses, during which she showed every indication of being his own love.

Even so, the time came at last when he heard building of electricity crackling between them and knew what was approaching. He wasn't sorry by then, and yet he was so very sorry for it to end... But now he noticed what he had always been too engrossed to see. He saw it now because he was watching everything she did, determined to take in every moment, to hold it forever... but he saw something he hadn't counted on... Blue Matter, coiling from his core. He sometimes had little leaks, he knew, but this, simulating their first time, was a little frightening. There was such a lot of it...

He watched the blue tendrils drift toward her, then get swept into coils of arcing power and drawn inside her chassis. They didn't pass back out again.

"Honey..." he gasped, shaking.

"I know..." she murmured.

"Is that how..."

And then he was beyond words. Events played out as they had before... but now Rabbit could see the terrifying amount of Blue Matter being caught up by the arcs of electricity as the lights all around went out.
How could I have missed something like that? he wondered. But it explained why he'd screamed... he didn't actually remember that part very clearly...

"Beloved... thank you..." Honeybee sighed rapturously, as she would every time since, resting her head heavily on his arm, as the last arcs flickered back and forth and dissipated at last in the now darkened room. The only light came from their dim eyes.

"My... uh... pleasure," he replied, then snorted with laughter.

They giggled, heads pressed together. There was a pounding on the door. Rabbit jumped a little. Of course, The Spine had come to find out what was wrong. He hastily sent him away again, giggling uncontrollably.

"That was almost as funny as last time," he sighed, once 'The Spine' had gone. "I love you, Honey."

"I love you, too, Rabbit."

"Does it end here?" he asked, worry cutting abruptly through his happiness. Was she going to disappear now that it was over? He wasn't ready...

"No, it doesn't end here... not until you've received the rest of my gift."

"Can we stay like this for a while?" he murmured.

"All night. This is our lives happening again, in a way... a little more time together, this time sharing our child's life..."

She sighed happily, her head resting against his core, and he realized that, despite her limitations as an AI (which limitations he had yet to find... she had none in bed, that was certain) she was as pleased to be here as he was.

"Thank you, baby..." he said, voice choked with emotion.

She reached down and plugged herself into her reserve battery and they went into stasis.

----------

Armand turned up just two hours later with Louise. Peter was astounded at their speed but suspected Louise had bent a few laws driving down and made no comment.

Lily led them in, bringing a pitcher of water and a sandwich and looking contrite, as though she was the one who had given Rabbit the letter.

"Mon Dieu..." breathed Armand. Louise was unimpressed. She saw machines without their chassis all the time and had helped repair Rabbit on several occasions.

"Thank you for coming down, but I've been thinking it over," Peter said, as they helped him fill up Rabbit's boiler. It was a lot easier when Rabbit was able to operate his own throat valve. "He has been like this all day, by my reckoning. Nothing has changed. So if this is what the letter was supposed to do to him, well... I say we wait it out. Qwerty never got to test this invention of hers anyway. Suppose she just didn't anticipate the amount of time it would take to unpack it all? She's more advanced than her Pappy... she may have seen his specs but the hardware itself has been patched and repaired again and again since Colonel Walter wrote it all down."

"There's sense to what you say..." Armand said slowly, staring at Rabbit. "I hope you are right."
"Besides, I really don't know how to stop it outside of shutting down the power. Suppose the entire letter is lost in the process? At best, he'd be devastated. At worst... I just don't think it's a good idea to try it without The Spine handy."

"Then we wait," Louise agreed. "Poor kid. He must have wanted so much to see that letter..."

"As do I," Armand murmured sadly. "Possibly he will tell me about it, hm? If indeed it is not all like the stag film."

Louise chuckled but Peter blushed. "Doesn't that make you uncomfortable?" he asked. "She was your daughter, or you saw her that way..."

"I am pleased to know that the being I crafted is capable of love, and that she was able to share it with Rabbit in such a physical..." He paused and glanced at Lily, who was frowning. "Yes, it pleases me that she was happy," he finished lamely.

Lily rolled her eyes. "I know about sex, okay?"

"Shush, girl!" Louise said, but she looked amused.

"Look, Mama told me a long time ago. I have a Blue Matter core. She knew that would raise questions. So I figured Qwerty didn't just happen either, come on!"

"That doesn't mean Rabbit and Honey... did it that way..." Peter muttered.

"Only they did, didn't they?" she said, folding her arms and glaring at Peter.

"Sort of..."

Armand cleared his throat. "If I am not needed here, I believe my granddaughter needs a comforting presence, hm?"

"Good idea."

He and Louise left and Peter and Lily sat down to stare at each other.

Rabbit vented a thick puff of steam. Peter, fed up with the entire situation, shrugged and bit into his sandwich.

"Should we worry about that?" Lily asked.

"Nah," he said through a mouthful of ham and cheese. "Probably just reacting to the water I added."

----------

"Good morning, beloved."

Rabbit sighed, smiling, and opened his eyes. Honeybee sat on the side of the bed, working her dress over her bust. Relieved to see her still there, he reached over, resisting the mischievous urge to take advantage of the situation, and tugged the sundress down for her. He was surprised, though; he could have sworn he'd ripped it in half... but since he hadn't done that in real life, he supposed it didn't count. He'd enjoyed it, though...

She leaned backward into his arms, pulling them around her like a blanket. "Thank you."

"So, last night, huh?" he said experimentally, uncertain what day it was.
"Mm-hm..." she breathed, wriggling against him.

"Wanna do it again?"

She giggled. "They still haven't got the power back on, beloved. I have to conserve energy."

"Oh, alright." That told him what day it was, at least.

She lay very still. "Rabbit..."

"Yeah, baby?"

"Did you... did you notice that?"

Had she said that before? "Notice what?" He remembered... she had said it. Why? There hadn't been an earthquake that day as far as he could recall.

"A signal..."

"What kind of signal?"

"It was very faint... Ah, well, we probably just overdid it last night."

He sighed deeply. "Worth it, though, baby."

"Oh, Rabbit! I'll let you know if they continue, alright?"

"If what continue?"

"The signals, of course."

She hadn't said that before, he was sure of it. His eyes opened wide. Of course! She'd been afraid to worry him, the first time, the real time...

And later on she'd told him nothing because the signals were from the baby and she'd been even more afraid! So now, in the memory, she was sharing what she had hidden before... It hit him at last. He was going to relive part of his life, now with his wife and his daughter!

"Honey..." he whispered, excited.

"Yes?"

"Oh... yeah, let me know." He didn't want to spoil it. It wouldn't be a surprise, of course, but... he still wanted to pretend it had really happened this way.

---------

The days passed the same as they always had. It felt so real, except that he knew everything that was going to happen. Well, almost everything. Instead of hiding what she was noticing about the baby, Honey told him all. She had been so frightened in real life, she told him, sure that they would find out and she would lose her child. She was enjoying living it over, through his eyes. The events remained the same, but now he knew about them... the night she noticed that Blue Matter was passing between them, the day she came to grips with the truth... To his joy, she whispered it to him a week after that first night.

"Rabbit..." she murmured as he was pulling her into his arms. One of the most wonderful features of
her gift was that she had included every single time they had made love. He wasn't surprised, given her particular interest in sex. She was so like she had always been, that he had lost his qualms about it early on...

"Yeah, baby?" he whispered, his lips touching her head as he held her close.

"I have something to tell you... I've always wished I had said this before, it would have been so lovely, so I'm doing it now..."

He suspected what it was, but he said, "Go on..."

She closed her eyes and said, "Rabbit... beloved... I'm going to have your baby..."

He giggled. "You're right... it was lovely... What's it like, baby? What's she doing right now?"

She smiled and rested her head against his shoulder. "Nothing much, yet. She's just a little signal. She flickers when I'm charging or when she gets Blue Matter."

He giggled quietly.

"Beloved?"

"That's so cute..." he whispered thickly.

---------

As the weeks passed, the signals grew more complex. Honeybee told him that the baby had started fussing when it was time to eat... or at least, that she grew agitated before charging. She was also especially active after receiving Blue Matter. Rabbit found that a little disquieting... he hoped she wasn't aware of how she was getting it! That just seemed wrong...

Three months in, she told him the baby had started using rudimentary language... simple patterns of communication. Though Honeybee was, in her own way, pregnant, her baby was not like a human child. She hovered near Honey's battery during charging, shifted to her breast for Blue Matter, and moved to her brain to communicate with her mother.

Qwerty learned her first actual words, communicated through binary code, a few weeks later. Her first human word, spoken this way, was Mama, which pleased him. Her second was Pappy, which pleased him even more.

One day, they sat with The Spine and Marie, watching a movie on TV. It was a western, which was The Spine's favorite, but he barely noticed it; he had his hand on Marie's growing belly, feeling Lily kick. His eyes were shining, even more than usual. He lay his head over the spot and grinned.

"Stop, love! You're heavy!" she giggled.

Rabbit remembered this, as he did all of the real time events Honey had included so far. He liked seeing Marie happy about the attention, but he knew it wouldn't last. She was still comfortable and The Spine's attention was still a novelty. Rabbit knew that in another month she be groaning about the length of pregnancies and gently asking The Spine, through clenched teeth, to keep his head off her belly.

But for now, they were as content as they could be... Davey was asleep, a western was on TV, the bun was in the oven and all was right with the world.
Honey held Rabbit's hand. She lay it over her own abdomen. She had started doing that around the
time Lily had started kicking, to his bewilderment. He was happy just to be near her, so he hadn't
complained. Now he froze in amazement as realized why she'd done it. Now he could feel it...
vibrations, little buzzings around her battery. He could feel his baby moving... just like The Spine
could feel Lily! Why hadn't he noticed?

He sat, smiling much like his brother, enchanted. "Baby... she's so active... this is amazing!" he
whispered.

"She can feel you, too, you know."

"What?"

"She can tell you're close. She doesn't know exactly who or what you are, but she senses you. She
responds to your voice..."

He rested his head on her shoulder and stayed there, his hand over her battery, forgetting the movie,
forgetting everything except the baby and her mother.

-------------

A few weeks later, Marie was growing impatient with everything as her pregnancy became
uncomfortable. But the real surprise was Honeybee. She had seemed subdued at the time, but now
that she was telling him all, he realized that she was growing more and more distressed, but couldn't
seem to explain why. He had his suspicions, though. At some point, Qwerty was going to come
out... he had no idea when. He supposed it would be upsetting to her, but he took comfort in the
realization that, unlike Marie, her life would not be at risk, and it wouldn't hurt. Qwerty had only to
slide away through the wiring as she did now, after all.

Still, it wasn't easy, waiting through the last week as she became irritable and distant. Finally, on the
day that she had asked to be shut down to await Marie's delivery, he gave in and asked, "You feeling
okay, baby?"

"Rabbit... I feel so uneasy... Marie... I'm worried about her."

"No," he murmured, kissing her gently. "That was what you told me then. Not this time. Tell me
what's really happening, baby..."

"I don't feel right, beloved. Not right at all. I feel... bound... as though I'm being pressed..."

"Pressed? I don't understand..."

"Squeezed... as though... I don't know! Like a waffle..."

"A waffle," He blinked at her.

"In a waffle iron! Something's not right! The baby... the baby is trying to... it feels like she's pulling
from me..."

"What? Where would she go, baby?"

"Toward more power, beloved. Oh, Rabbit, don't let her do it!"

"Let her do what?" he asked, alarmed. "But..."

"Don't let her get out!"
"This is it, isn't it?" he asked. "It didn't take as long as it does for people... Today's the day... She... the baby is gonna be born. I guess that's the right word..."

She nodded. "Any time..."

"I'm staying, okay? I want to be with you..."

"Oh, Rabbit... it'll only upset you..."

"What? How could it upset me, seeing my baby born?" He chuckled. "It's not like it hurts... Does it?"

"I don't know..."

"Whaddy'a mean you don't know?" he demanded, frowning.

"Please, Rabbit..." she moaned.

"I'm sorry, baby! I just mean, if you don't know, who would?"

"I know, but... it's just that I don't think it would have hurt but... I fought it... I thought she wasn't ready..."

Uh-oh. That sounded ominous. "Ready for what? Oh, right... But why not?"

"She..." She grimaced and cried out. "Oh! Stop it, darling..."

"What is it? Is it starting?"

"Rabbit... Rabbit, she doesn't have a body! How could she survive outside of me? I was ready to keep her with me forever! She was so little..."

"But she can..."

"No, darling! Stop! I can't let you..."

"What?"

Honeybee cried out sharply, startling him. "Oh! It hurts!" she cried, clutching at his hand. She groaned; a shuddering, agonized sound.

"Honey! What's happening?" he cried, terrified. She'd never made a sound like that, not even when he had touched her... well, she'd just never made one. "I still don't understand! How can it hurt?"

"Hold me! I was so alone... Don't let me be alone this time!"

He put his arms around her and held her tightly. "Baby, you're not alone now. But what's going on?"

"She wants out, you idiot!"

Ouch... He bit his trembling lip, feeling the strangest urge to burst into tears. She'd never spoken that way to him...

Honeybee seemed unaware that she'd been rude to him. "No! Not yet!" she cried miserably. "Stop it! Stop trying to get out! Oh!" She grimaced, gasping, "It's hurting Mama, stop it..."

"Let her out, then!" he almost screamed, terrified.
"She'll die!" sobbed Honeybee, shaking. "No! Stay here!"

She's forgetting or something, he thought worriedly, as she cried out again. But of course... she had said she was bound to the actions of the past. She would hold Qwerty inside her until the moment... well, until whatever had caused her at last to let go and give birth to their child.

"Don't fight it, Honey!" he begged, all the same.

"I have to!" she screamed.

She pressed her face against his shoulder, clutching at his shirt, as ragged sobs tore from her. He remembered hearing the human women of the manor giving birth... it sounded just about the same... The mother's body, used to having kept the child safe inside, resisting its own impulse to give birth. Honey's struggle was different, and yet parallel. The child would be born, willy-nilly, but not easily, not without resistance, and to resist was to suffer...

He hadn't anticipated her suffering so much, or how much it would hurt him to see it. But more troubling was the fear... if it hurt her, would her life also be in danger? He knew she survived, and yet he still felt the cold terror of losing her... intensified by knowing already how it felt to lose her.

He pushed those painful memories aside, held her tightly and said into her ear, "Honey, listen to me. She ain't gonna die, baby. She'll be okay. Let her out..."

"I can't! I just can't..."

"Let her out. Please..."

"No..." She doubled over, shuddering.

And he felt, as much as heard, the tiny signals he had sometimes detected over the months, now insistent, urgent in their pulsing.

"Let me out, Mama..."

"No! No, Darling... you'll die outside of Mama..."

"Won't," it beeped calmly.

"Baby... I hear her..." he whispered in wonder. She squeezed his hands, hard, and his attention snapped back from the child to the mother.

"Make it stop..." she gasped. "I can't..."

"I don't know what to do!" he wailed.

Honey let out one last, drawn-out, sobbing scream, clutching at him so hard it hurt. "No..." she moaned, wild-eyed. "Come back! Darling, come back!"

"What..."

With a sob, she went limp in his arms.

"Honeybee!" he cried, "Wake up, baby! Honeybee!"

The room was very quiet now. He realized in the silence a hum was missing. He rocked gently, holding her close, reminding himself that he knew she would be alright... hating the feeling of
helplessness.

He didn't understand. Where could the baby have gone, when she was so little? But as he did his best to calm down, he remembered. Honey was plugged into the wall, and Qwerty now lived in the HoW... So what with one thing and another, she would be alright, and he knew where she would go...

But he wondered... had Honey endured all that alone, offline, unable to cry out? If she had screamed like that, someone would have heard it, to be sure.

He stroked her hair and sighed miserably. "Poor baby... Why'd your life have to have so much hurt in it?"

"Darling! Please come back!"

Rabbit jumped so hard his chair rattled. It hadn't been words, more like the simple signals she used to talk to Qwerty.

"No, mama..."

His vision blurred and twisted. "What's going on?" he gasped.

The next second, before he could so much as cry out, he was pulled from himself and into the household wiring.

"I don't like this!" he roared as shimmering lights flew past faster and faster, and his voice sounded like electrical feedback. He heard, somewhere ahead of him, the same crackling shouts...

"Darling! It isn't safe here! Come back inside..."

"Not safe inside!" piped the response in sharp electrical pulses.

He was level with Honey now, dragged along in her wake, seeing what she had seen as she forced herself, riding a stream of electricity, after her child. Qwerty was a little flicker of blue ahead of them, zipping in and out of rooms and always keeping ahead of her mother. But Honey, driven by desperation, kept up the pace. He had never known she was capable of this... But hadn't she said she wasn't compatible with the household wiring?

"Go back, mama. Darling is well."

"No... you'll break down here, you'll die... please..."

"Mama will die! Go back!"

Whatever The Spine had seen and endured when Lily was born... Rabbit was sure it wasn't half as traumatic as this. Qwerty was just a baby, really, but given her intelligence as an adolescent, it seemed likely that she knew what she was talking about now... Which meant Honey was putting herself into terrible danger trying to bring her child back. He knew she would survive but it didn't stop the crushing anxiety he felt for her as they flew deeper into the coiling wires of Walter Manor.

"It's alright, beloved," came Honey's voice from outside of everything. "They're just memories."

"Honey?" he crackled. "How are you able to do this? How can you leave your body..."

"I'm not..."
They had stopped. Qwerty was next to a deep blue gleam. "House! Darling house!"

"Please come back..."

Honey's signal was weak. Qwerty swept back down the wiring, engulfing them, and they flew, faster than before, through the circuitry. In a flash, Rabbit was back in his avatar, clutching Honey's limp chassis.

A split second later, Honeybee jerked awake, startling him. "Honey!" he cried. "I was so scared... How did you do that?"

"I can only do it a little... I can't survive long... my code breaks up... that was why I was worried about her. I thought she was the same way... but she's not, she's different. She's... I don't know. She can slide along the wiring and not break up at all. I don't understand it. It's scary..."

He knew Qwerty would be alright in the wiring, but it was still strange and terrifying to have his infant daughter sliding around the household circuitry. It was like the time Davy decided to go out on the roof... when he was three. "What was that blue glow?"

"The Spine has installed a Blue Matter core in the attic..."

"I didn't know he'd already done that... but, wait... is she there now?"

"No," she said, her voice almost purring with contentment. "She's right here... beside me."

Rabbit looked and frowned. "Where?"

"In the wiring, beloved. Just inside the wall. She's brought me back when I weakened and now... Oh, beloved, it's so sweet... she's feeding from the charge cycle. Like a human child..."

"But she always did that..." He stared. Like a human child? How in the world was that like a human child? Then it hit him. "Wait wait wait... are you telling me she's nursing?"

She smiled and rested her head on his shoulder. "What an adorable way to put it..."

"Yeah..."he murmured uneasily, looking into her face. The mothers in Walter Manor, throughout history, had sported that same goofy, contented look when they nursed their babies... and now Honey looked the same way. Maybe he had it about right... He pictured The Spine holding Lily, giving her a bottle while Blue Matter coiled from his chest. It used to be a lot funnier... "I guess it ain't the weirdest thing that's happened here..."

She laughed weakly.

"But why did she leave? Did she know she could live in the HoW?"

"No, Rabbit. She left because she had grown so much that she was becoming the dominant intelligence in my body."

"Say that again?"

"If she had stayed, I would have been forced out. I am nothing but electricity etching patterns into this failing brain mesh. She is electricity and Blue Matter. She's stronger than I am... I could never have resisted and would have been deleted piecemeal. Just as you and your brothers can subsist as cores, retaining who you are, so Darling can survive as long as her Blue Matter is secure. At the time I make this, she is situated permanently in the core in the HoW, and controls and views the activities
of the Manor remotely. I believe she has finally stopped growing, however."

"That's a party-sized relief," he breathed. "So she left you even though she though she might die..."

She nodded wearily against his shoulder.

"She saved her mama... What a good girl..." he said thickly, surprised at the surge of emotion this brought.

Honeybee twitched. "Oh, I'm so tired, beloved. I need to rest now."

"I can understand that..." he said blankly. She'd just had a baby... "I guess that was why you stayed offline for so long... Well, that and I was supposed to wake you... and got distracted... heh..."

"I'll see you after Lily's born, beloved," she prompted.

"But... doesn't Qwe... doesn't Darling need Blue Matter? Y'know... from me?"

"She has the core in the attic, remember?"

"Oh," he said, deflated. He'd sort of figured she would still need Matter from her Pappy while she was still small...

"She does still need yours, beloved," she murmured, guessing his thoughts. "But someday she'll be self-sustaining..."

"But how... how will she get the Blue Matter? I don't want her to be here when we... y'know..."

"Sit by me sometimes... It takes care of itself."

He snorted. "I would have noticed that..."

"You're wonderful, Rabbit. But you do overlook so many things..."

"I know you're tired, baby, but tell me one last thing... Why'd you name her Darling?"

"She named herself... I called her darling and she thought it was her name."

He laughed. "Oh... Makes sense."

She twitched again. "So tired..."

She slipped into stasis, but she stayed running, or at least part of her did. Her charger hummed doubletime as it fed both her and their baby.

The world blurred abruptly, and a new memory appeared. He blinked. Of course. If she was offline, she wouldn't remember what was going on. Naturally, there'd be a gap.

But she wasn't awake, and the scene was the same. Only the time of day had shifted. It was night. He had come to sit beside her every night to go into stasis... Only how could that be in her memory if she was unconscious?

Unless... it was in Qwerty's.

The lamp flickered, and he realized his little one was there, even if he couldn't see her. He was used to that. He heard a soft hiss and looked down. Blue Matter began to coil gently from his core,
"Qwerty?" he whispered, even though he knew she didn't answer to that name yet. "Hungry, huh?"
He grinned. Just like The Spine. Who knew? He felt as if he could almost hear the eager, fitful
 gulping sound Lily had made while The Spine gave her a bottle in the wee hours of the night while
her mother slept...

"Man, as weird as life here is... turns out I didn't know the half of it."

He went into stasis, lulled by the soft hiss of the Blue Matter, a goofy, contented smile on his face.

---------

The years passed by in pure bliss. It seemed she had included almost exclusively happy memories...

at first. He heard about the first time Lily and Qwerty had played together, felt the strange hugs
Qwerty would give him by briefly borrowing her mother's chassis, heard about the wonderful game
she made of keeping The Spine from knowing just what was helping him in the HoW. Honeybee
called her Pappy's little girl at times like that... Indeed, Rabbit felt guiltily proud of her mischief.

But even Honeybee's altered history wasn't free of sad times. Peter IV died, Honey began to
malfunction, and Qwerty learned one day that those malfunctions would someday lead to Honey's
death as well. She had stayed in the HoW for two weeks after she finally understood it, before
coming back down to apologize to her mother. But there was a change to her behavior after that; a
feeling of tension between them.

Rabbit understood. As time went on, his greatest dread was facing what he had barely survived:
losing Honeybee, all over again. And the closer they came to the end of her simulation, the closer he
came to losing the last particle of their life together. He fought his fear and savored every second,
engaging her in conversations that had never happened before, making it last. He'd accept it when it
finally ended... for Qwerty's sake. He loved his little girl now more than ever, the way he should,
knowing her inside and out, remembering her funny childhood moments and her true character.

But he couldn't help trying to hang on to his Honeybee as long as possible. While he would be glad
to spend more time with his little girl, out in the real world he had to contend with questions and
interference, with the memories of Vietnam (though it now seemed long ago), the worries of life...
and the worst part of all, the part he was still struggling to face.

No Honeybee.

But one day, as they sat together, she said to him, in a slow and weary voice, "I will have to augment
the rest with Darling’s memories, beloved. Mine are beginning to fail me... The rest is complete...
Darling will finish this portion and seal it."

He sighed and nodded, clutching her hand as if he could keep her there just by holding on tightly.
His viewpoint shifted to the swirling electrical vortex. Qwerty rocketed through Walter Manor as she
saw fit, slipping into those that had security cameras for a look, taking in data and translating the
words of the humans into code to listen to their conversations. He’d been a little embarrassed to
realize how much she was privy too, with the right effort. Her mother had lectured her sternly after
she had made a report on the bedroom habits of The Spine and Marie... Her findings included the
observations that they had compatible ports, but a curious delay in establishing a connection, and that
they expended far too much energy for it to be a really efficient interface. Honey had nearly
overheated in her horror... Rabbit had hooted with laughter. Just like her mother...

But today, his little one drifted to her parents' room, where her mother sat, day after day, plugged into
the wall. Only when she was linked with Honey or The Spine could Qwerty fully observe the world around her... thought The Spine never suspected she was using his various receptors this way. The HoW was heavily equipped with cameras and other gadgets, giving her fairly sophisticated input, but nothing like what she had as she slipped now just a bit into her mother's mind.

There was a little flash, a spark of shock as she entered now. Qwerty had known her mother's hardware from the inside out, and had even attempted to slow the damage by rerouting passages, allowing Honey to be able to continue speaking right up until her death. But the damage was severe and her presence quivered with horror as she drifted with care along the circuitry, at last reaching the eye sensors.

*Mama... Pappy is sitting by her again... she never goes anywhere anymore...*

He saw himself, stroking her hand, whispering to her.

"He's gonna be so sad, Mama," she signaled.

"I know, Darling. But he knew someday I would fail."

"I know... but Mama... I don't like to bother you right now... but... will you tell Pappy about me now?"

"Soon, my sweet Darling..."

"You've said that for three years, Mama... I love him so... Why can't he know about me?"

"Darling..."

"It's been lonely..." Qwerty argued, and Rabbit could feel her frustration and grief. She knew her mother would soon be gone. She would miss her horribly, but she was also afraid of being alone...

"Lily doesn't even come up to play anymore. She thinks I'm imaginary! We used to play every day but she outgrew me! I want Pappy to know who I am!"

"I... the time hasn't been right..."

"Just Pappy. Okay? The others... I don't know about the others. I just want to talk with my Pappy."

"How, my little one? How can you talk with him?"

"I have some ideas..."

"Like the letter?"

"I can connect to Pappy's processor, just like yours, I'm just sure of it!"

"Alright. I'll tell him as soon as I can."

But Qwerty drifted back into the wiring with a feeling of dread. She kept a link to Honey's audioreceptors and heard her tell Rabbit about their child. She heard Rabbit's response and knew that he didn't believe his wife. She trembled and wept, in her own fashion, struggling to keep it from showing, from flickering the lights as she always did.

And then it was over. Qwerty fled to her core in the HoW and shut everything down, sobbing alone in her flickering blue pocket.

The Spine walked in. She watched, wondering if he would interface, wishing he would. She was
alone now... she would gladly talk to him, tell him she was there, beg him to tell her Pappy to come to her at last. They were both suffering... and she knew he would leave in a week.

But he didn't. She watched in wonder as he drained off his own Blue Matter, and understood. When he rose, staggering, and began to fall, she hastily swept the wires around him and held him. It was nice, holding someone. She gently lowered him to the floor, carefully closing his core. Why hadn't she known she could hold people on her own, instead of using Honey's chassis? She'd been missing out.

She watched over him until he woke and left... surprised when he spoke to her. But she couldn't tell him, couldn't explain... and by the time he returned, she had lost her nerve, feeling faintly embarrassed by having held him so tenderly and touched his core, which seemed rather fresh... He knew she had caught him, too; he'd said so. No, she was far too embarrassed to reveal herself to her uncle now!

At the last, Qwerty watched through the porch camera as her Pappy was driven away in a jeep... by the time Lily joined her in the HoW, she was once again desperate. Lily was her old playmate... and her Pappy had gone, too. Maybe...

The scene faded. Rabbit was alone.

"Qwerty?" he cried, devastated. "Honeybee? No, it's too soon!"

It grew darker still.

"No... one last moment, please..."

"Rabbit..."

"Honey? Honey, I can't see you..."

He felt arms wrap around him. He could smell her scent. He held her close and pressed his face against her hair in the darkness.

"I can only record a little more, beloved, so I choose to leave you with an embrace. I am dying."

"No..." Not yet...

"Even as I save this last message to you, Papa and Louise have been summoned. You sit by my side, weeping. I cannot find the strength to hold you as I wish. I cannot make love to you... Oh, Rabbit, if I could only do so one last time... how I have loved being in your arms, after so long of thinking I would never see you again! There is one place I always felt safe. Wherever we were, you had only to hold me close and I could put aside the years of abandonment... I will tell you in a moment, myself, about our child, Rabbit, and I only hope that I have shown you enough here that you will not hold my mistakes against our Darling or me.

"I have no regrets except this one, that I did not share what was ours, and that I can not remain and live with you until all our parts fail at once and we move on together. I know there is a place somewhere beyond where we will meet again... There just has to be!"

"Honeybee... I know you want me to love someone else, but... I can't promise..."

"It's alright, Rabbit. You'll live on. You are too alive to die with me. You bring happiness. Go and do that, and remember me doing it. Even in the carnivals, I tried to make people smile. I see you do that every day. You made me smile. I love you so much... I'm sorry if my handicaps were ever a
"Never," he said thickly. "Oh, baby, no, you could never have been a burden! You were what held me up."

There was a soft crackle. He felt the delicious tingle of electricity on his lips.

"Farewell..." The firm sensation of her arms faded, the solid feel of her body... only the scent lingered.

"No..." he sobbed, sinking, arms empty, to the nonexistent floor of whatever dark place he now inhabited... alone. He had thought that if he only had this chance to relive those years, that it would be easier to let her go.

It wasn't.

"Good-bye again, Honey..." he gasped, his voice shaking as he gave way to grief. The cold darkness suited him. It was just how he felt...

But there was a click, a whirr, a buzz... Light grew in front of his photoreceptors.

"Rabbit? Are you with us?"

"Peter?"

"It's okay... He's coming out of it!" Peter cried, dabbing at Rabbit's eyes with a soft cloth.

There were murmurs of relief. Rabbit saw, as his eyes focused, people all around him. A second later, as if from long ago, came the memory that he was missing his face plates. He groped for his blanket and pulled it over his head.

"Alright, we'd better clear out. Call The Spine; tell him not to hurry back."

"Got it." Soon only Peter remained in the room.

"You okay, Rabbit?"

Rabbit nodded. Then he buried his face in the blanket and sobbed.
Chapter Summary

Rabbit has a harder time returning to Walter Manor from his own mind than he had returning from Vietnam.

Chapter Notes

Short wrap up to the previous plot line... New events to come in the form of a headcanon my teenager and I have been giggling over for the better part of a year.

The Spine reclined in the bed, sighing. "This has been... wonderful."

Marie slipped into the bed and snuggled in next to him. "It has. They really did a good job restoring your chassis."

"So, better or worse than the other one?"

"About equal... well, some parts. Others... well... Love, did they upgrade it? You know..."

"It? Oh! No. Not that I know of..." he said, perplexed.

She sighed contentedly. "Then it must have just been from missing you so much, love."

"You're going to make me blush," he said.

"I hope not! Wouldn't you have to be superheated to turn red? That would set the bed on fire, I figure."

"If we haven't done that by now..."

"Oh, hush," she said pleasantly, thumping him in the chest.

He kissed her. "Are all your things packed? We have to check out in just two hours..."

"All bundled up."

"Good. Then we have two hours..."

No more words were necessary. They both knew how they'd be spending the time.

----------

The Spine's first stop on arriving home, after taking their bags to their room and hugging his children, was the lab where Rabbit remained.

"Spine," Rabbit said without looking at him. "I won't ask about your vacation..."
"You can ask! It was nice."

"Nice..."

"Yeah, nice." He grinned.

"Oh, that kind of nice. Good. Make the most of it, Spine..."

"You sound like an old man, Rabbit."

"I feel like one."

"Are you going to be okay? Do you need Peter to fix anything?"

"No."

The Spine sat on the sofa, looking at Rabbit, who remained curled in his chair and blanket. "Have you been up to see her since the letter?"

"No..."

"Why, Rabbit? She's been so eager to see you. Her whole life, in fact..."

"Stop it." Rabbit pulled his blanket closer and buried his face in it. "She was back, Spine. She was here, inside my head. But she wouldn't stay..."

"It wasn't real, was it? Qwerty said it was only memories..."

"It was more! She could speak to me, answer me... hold me... I... I s-s-saw her get pregnant... I was with her when she had the baby... It was like living my life over again but in the end she still died! She could have changed it, she could have programmed it so that she never had to leave! But she programmed it so that she'd show me what I missed and then took it away..."

"Because she wanted you to go on with your life, though, right?" The Spine asked slowly. "Because she loved you."

"Why didn't she stay?" sobbed Rabbit.

"You know why," The Spine said tightly.

"No. I know what she said but I'll never..." He trailed off.

"You do know why. You do understand, Rabbit..."

"Leave me alone... there's nothing left..."

"There's your daughter!" The Spine barked, suddenly angry. "You don't want to understand! You're throwing a tantrum just like you always do and your daughter is alone just like she always was!"

Rabbit looked at him in horror. The Spine felt terrible but plowed onward. "When I think of Lily being alone somewhere just because I wouldn't go to her, even if Marie was gone..." He closed his eyes for a moment.

"Spine, stop..." Rabbit begged.

He trembled a little as he continued, "Even if I had lost the woman I love more than my own life I
would still go to my children if they needed me, Rabbit..."

His words choked off as the feelings swept over him, as they had been since his rescue. He had been so close to dying himself... the old fear of losing her had come back fresh and raw. Marie had shown no interest in doing anything outside of lingering with him in the hotel room, to his relief, because he was terrified to let her go outside. He’d hidden it the best he could but he could swear she knew...

He buried his face in his hands and shook, unable to hold it back any longer. He heard the tick and creak of Rabbit rising from his chair, felt his older brother slip a skeletal arm around his back.

"Spine, buddy... Still?" he murmured gently. "She ain't even pregnant anymore."

"No... but she's older. She's just as beautiful now as the day we met but she's aging. Her hair is blue at the roots..."

"Wanda's whole head is blue, dummins. Lily's hair is blue black. Pete's is starting to get little blue streaks."

"But Walters always seem to take it in stride, and Marie is hiding it. Why? What else is going on? She's so pale..."

"They're all pale."

"She used to have a tan."

"So she d-d-don't get out."

"You have an answer for everything, don't you?" The Spine said irritably.

"I'm smart that way." Rabbit gave him a squeeze.

"I know I need to try to live for today but I just keep worrying..." He trailed off.

Rabbit was silent for a long moment.

"I'm sorry, Rabbit. For what I said..."

"No... well, you were kind of a j-j-j-j-jerk, but it was mostly true. I just... I lost her twice over... but... I don't have to worry about losing her anymore. Both times, I knew it would happen and I couldn't stop it... I wasted a lot of time worryin' and it happened anyway. I can sit here cryin' about it or go and see my baby... our baby. Makes ya think, hm?"

"So you're saying I need to quit wasting time..."

"Yeah... I kinda am. And I'm slapping myself in the head for wasting my own. We got a lot of years but they don't."

"Mine, yes. I think your daughter will be around a long time."

"Still... she'll only be a kid once. Spine... can you help me walk upstairs and see her? It was hard enough last time."

"Sure, Rabbit."

"Hey, maybe she'll interface with you. You should see her, Spine. She's beautiful. Just like Honey..."
"I don't know, Rabbit," The Spine replied, standing and helping Rabbit to his feet. "I'm feeling kind of weird already after connecting with what is basically my niece's body for years without knowing it..."

"It wasn't anything dirty, Spine. I ain't gonna beat you up for shaming my daughter."

He slung Rabbit's spindly arm over his shoulder. "You couldn't beat up my left leg right now, Rabbit."

"Bet I could."

The Spine snorted in spite of himself and had to stop walking until he'd finished laughing.

---------

"Qwerty, baby..." Rabbit said softly when they entered the HoW.

He'd half expected the wires to sweep out and scoop him up... more than that, he was hoping they would. But Qwerty made no response.

"Lily?" The Spine said.

"She's upset..."

"I'm sorry, baby. I should have come up to see you..." Rabbit said.

"No, she thinks it's her fault."

The lights flickered briefly. "Yeah, I told him!" Lily said sharply. "You didn't do anything wrong, Qwerty. Come and hug your pappy!"

"Lily, take it easy!" cried Rabbit.

"Pappy... I'm sorry," typed the machine. "I didn't think it would hurt u."

"Qwerty, no... no, baby, you didn't hurt your Pappy..."

"U wer stuck"

"No, it ended right when it should..."

"U cride"

"Yeah... because I miss her, baby." He looked up. "We both miss her, huh?"

Then at last the wires pulled from their hooks and Rabbit was swept into Qwerty's unusual embrace. "It's okay, baby," he whispered. "We got each other now, okay?"

The Spine and Lily slipped from the room. Rabbit waved at them and inched his way toward a chair, sitting.

"Tell me what it was like, baby. I know your Mama's side of it. Now I wanna hear yours."

The wires gently held him as Qwerty linked her mind to his for a long talk.
Wanda's Wedding

Chapter Summary

Months have passed since the robots returned home. The missing chassis remain missing, and another is going to go missing very soon.

The wedding of Wanda Hottie and Norman Becile was not exactly a big social event. There were a reasonable amount of guests, mostly on the bride's side. A surprising number of Cavalcadium members were present out of respect for the Walters, and despite the disgrace of the Beciles. Still more registered their disapproval by staying away, but if Wanda or Norman were bothered by it, they showed no sign of it, especially when Norman was told to kiss the bride. Wanda had taken the precaution of making sure that was actually possible before deciding to have a public ceremony.

Rabbit, standing by in a suit that was supported by a very simple temporary chassis and wearing one of his older face plates, had given the bride away. Wanda had started to ask The Spine to do it, and he had been deeply touched, but he suggested that the oldest would be more appropriate... and that such an important role in the event might be what was needed to convince Rabbit to wear the old face plate and leave the HoW for the wedding. To his satisfaction, it worked like a charm. The Spine was only too glad to accept the role of Best Man instead.

Lily was thoroughly delighted to be flower girl and bridesmaid all in one, and looked lovely in the pale pink dress Wanda had selected. She had confessed that she had chosen it more to make Lily look pretty than anything else; it was her second marriage and she had less interest in having all the trimmings this time around.

As the newly married couple walked back up the aisle together, The Spine looked anxiously at The Jon. They knew he'd be heartbroken if he found out he'd missed Wanda's wedding, so research was done to find out whether there were ways of combating the effects of LSD. Success had been achieved with doses of Valium, and Peter, with The Spine's help, gave a small dose to the koi. So far it seemed to be working... Though Jon was still not as he had once been, he was a good deal more subdued than he had been without the Valium. He still reported strange sights from time to time, and other times seemed almost too calm, but it was enough for him to be able, under their watchful eyes, to attend the wedding and even stand opposite Lily during the ceremony. Afterward, The Spine and Rabbit both kept close as the little robot trotted happily along behind the guests toward the ballroom with Lily on his arm.

Marie took The Spine by the hand as he walked. "Marie..." he said worriedly, glancing around. They had avoided public displays of affection ever since she had come to Walter Manor.

"Everyone in the Cavalcadium knows we're married, love. Lily is a topic of heated discussions. They know who her father is."

He sighed and gently squeezed her hand. "Well, good. That means we can dance at the reception."

She beamed and tugged him gently down for a quick kiss. He ventured a nervous glance around at the assembled guests and saw smiles and even a few winks. Marie seemed to enjoy it. He found it rather creepy.
But they did dance at the wedding, and it was wonderful. The first dance, however, was for Rabbit, who was still wobbly as he indulged Wanda in having the traditional "father's" dance with the bride. In a change from the usual, however, she followed it with a dance with The Spine and then with The Jon. Afterward, Rabbit found his seat as soon as he could and remained there throughout the night. The Spine was comforted by this, knowing that Rabbit spent much of that time watching The Jon while The Spine danced with his wife.

The Jon, too, danced happily throughout the evening... sometimes without a partner. However, he was still relatively docile so they let him whirl around in peace.

"It's been so long since we danced, love," Marie said dreamily as they moved around the floor.

"Too long. You're as graceful as ever."

"It's a luxury having a partner with perfect control whose feet can't be damaged if I step on them."

He laughed. As if she ever had a problem with that!

"Lily's dancing with Jon again," she said, peering past his arm.

"Good, that's a safe pairing. I don't trust some of these scientists with either of them."

"Well, neither do I, for that matter, but what are they gonna do at a wedding?"

"Try and collect data, of course. Ask a lot of questions. What they always do. If I wasn't dancing exclusively with you, they'd be asking me about my love life, mark my words."

"Let them try asking me. I could tell them tales."

"But you wouldn't," he murmured, smiling. "Would you?"

"Of course not. Some things you just can't describe."

The song ended and he kissed her hand. "I love you," he said.

She blushed, to his surprise. "I love you too," she whispered.

"What is it?" he asked, bemused.

"Well, you kissed my hand and said you loved me... in front of everyone. It feels so... intimate..."

"Oh... Y'know, I think it's something about the wedding. It reminds me of ours. Strange and scary, but beautiful... I was barely able to get through it but I was so happy."

"So was I, love."

He kissed her there, in front of everyone, as the music for the next dance started. He thought he heard murmurs from surrounding guests, but he didn't care. Time had become so precious to him since Vietnam!

"You have a room for that," said Dave, close to his ear.

"Thank you, son..." The Spine said lightly, at last breaking the kiss. The couple returned to their table as Dave grinned and led a tall Swiss scientist out onto the floor.

"Glad to see Dave dancing," said Rabbit as they sat. "And what're you two doing, n-n-n-neckin'
on the dance floor?"

"Rabbit..." The Spine began, but the copper robot was grinning. "Your face plate is loose," he finished lamely. Rabbit hastily snapped it into place.

"How did I ever stand this thing?"

"It was the best one we had at the time."

"Say... Lily's been dancing a lot."

They looked and saw that she was dancing with Peter. He was chattering to her, but looked uneasy, as he had since the dancing began. As the human head of household and the only living Peter A Walter, he was in demand and hadn't had time to sit down yet. The Spine wondered how he'd managed to dance with Lily this time, instead of some diplomat or biologist.

Lily looked equally uncomfortable. Peter sometimes rubbed her the wrong way... possible he was talking about something boring?

The song ended and Lily turned and walked straight out of the ballroom. Peter turned his attention to an elderly Cavalcadium member, seemingly unaware that the girl had gone.

"Oh, dear," said Marie.

"What?"

"Oh, teenagers," Marie sighed.

The Spine frowned. Well, if it was important, she'd tell him, surely. Probably some sort of girl trouble...

"Have you seen Jon?" Rabbit asked worriedly.

The Spine, alarmed, half stood. Ah, yes, there it was... the top of a curly head, twirling among the dancers on the far side of the room. He sat. "He's over there."

"I don't see him..."

"Well, I do. Relax."

"Well, alright..."

The reception wound down after the cake had been served. It had been a far more successful event than any of them had anticipated. Wanda drove off to the mountains with Norman, hauling a rented camper behind them, neither wanting to honeymoon in a crowded place but not content to do so at home either.

As they cleaned up, Rabbit asked The Spine, "Is Jon in stasis?"

"I..." He realized to his dismay that he had completely forgotten about Jon. He could see Rabbit realize this even as the copper robot hurried from the room. The Spine rushed to the HoW, where he found Lily, looking at him with wide eyes and a red face. She snatched the paper from the teletype machine and said, "Hi, Pappy."

"Hi, Airheart... Qwerty? Can you tell me which room The Jon is in?"
"Yes..."

They waited. After a minute, Qwerty typed, "Cant find him."

"No... Check again, please?"

"Not here, Uncle."

He ran from the room without another word. Behind him he heard the sound of crumpling paper.

---------

"How could he have gotten away?" Rabbit was asking for the tenth time.

They were scouring the grounds in the dark, calling and shining lanterns as well as their own brightly glowing eyes, but Jon either would not respond or could not... or just wasn't there. They had been through the house twice over before heading outside, despite Qwerty's scans. Marie waited by the phone in case he had managed to stow away with any of the guests, or Wanda and Norman. Peter was on the other side of the house with Lily, doing the same search.

"It was chaotic. I should have paid more attention."

"That's not what I..."

"I know."

Rabbit stumbled. The Spine caught him.

"You should go in. You still need repairs..."

"I want to look for Jon."

"Well, it's plain that it's a fruitless search, he just isn't here!" The Spine almost shouted as his flashlight lit the duck pond. He and Rabbit looked at each other suddenly.

"Rabbit..." The Spine gasped, surprised at the fear in his own voice.

"Don't break on me, buddy, I know what yehr thinkin'... He ain't g-g-gonna drown, is he? Even if he's in there?"

The Spine forced himself to calm down. "No, of course not..."

"Check for tracks. It's always mushy around the pond."

"Right, of course, tracks..." he repeated, relieved that Rabbit tended to be calmer whenever one of his younger brothers was nervous about something.

There were no prints around the pond that hadn't been made by little webbed feet. They turned back toward the Manor and saw flashlights approaching.

"Spine! No sign over there?" called Peter.

"None," he replied as they jogged up. "What now?"

"Call the police, I guess."

"I didn't want to have to do that. They blow a gasket every time one of us leaves the house without a
chaperone. Jon's wandered off before..."

"But not when he was carrying around a gut full of LSD and Valium," muttered Peter. "We tell the cops that and not only will we have to explain how he got them..."

"But they'll probably shoot to kill if they see him," The Spine finished unhappily.

"And I didn't exactly have a prescription for the Valium, either. My girlfriend boosted a couple from her mom..."

"You have a girlfriend?" Rabbit and The Spine said as one.

"Well, kinda... We date other people..."

"Ya mean she does," Rabbit said, amused.

"Look..."

"Can we keep looking for Jon?" snapped Lily suddenly. Peter jumped. The Spine understood why. She'd been so quiet...

"I don't know where to look anymore," sighed her father.

They walked inside gloomily. "So we do nothing?" she grumbled.

"No, Airheart," Rabbit said. "We got a few friends, right, Spine?"

"Right. Just let me make some calls."

----------

An hour later, The Spine had finally managed to contact General Hawkins. "Sorry to call you so late, General..."

"I'll forgive you for it if you'll just drop the formality," the man responded, sounding irritated.

"Alright, Jim. I need your help. Jon's gone."

"Spine... he get on one of those acid trips?"

"I don't honestly know, sir... um, Jim. We were attempting to counteract the effects with Valium and he seemed much improved during Wanda's wedding. And then he disappeared."

"Wedding... oh! Er... congratulations... but... you just let him roam around loose?"

"I know. I'm already kicking myself. He really did seem to be clear headed, Jim! Can you possibly find a way to search for him without alerting the media or the local police? You can imagine the hysteria if the public hears. When Rabbit took off back in 1950, we checked the train and bus stations, called the cab companies, but there are even more ways to disappear now..."

"Well, I'll make some calls, but... surely he'll turn up the second the morning sun hits that brass chassis of his!"

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Ah. Well, leave it to me, Spine. I'll get back to you once I have more information."
"Thank you, Jim. I didn't know where else to turn... We're desperate right now..."

"Don't gush, Spine. I know."

The Spine put down the phone and told the others what the man had said. They sent Lily to bed, unsuccessfully. They all went instead into the living room with a phone and waited together. The Spine sat with his arm around Marie, miserable. Not only did he blame himself, but he had, in the romantic setting of the dance floor, envisioned this day ending in his bedroom, alone with his wife, instead of in the living room with everyone. As worried as he was about his brother, he couldn't help feeling the lamentable difference in situation.

Two hours after the phone call, General Hawkins called him back. He had plain clothes investigators on the job, quietly searching train stations, bus depots, any place that might have transported a robot.

The Spine was afraid that wasn't how Jon had gone. But he thanked the General and they all headed for bed.

In their room, Marie suggested exactly the thing The Spine had wanted himself... but he couldn't. His brother was gone, just gone. Anything could have happened to him. The Spine couldn't just send someone else in pursuit and then blithely go to bed with his wife.

A few days later, though, when no sign had come outside of one hippie who said he'd met a golden man but couldn't say where he'd gone, The Spine succumbed. He had his limits and the strain was telling on them both. He felt guilty at first, unable to relax when his brother was still missing, but being with Marie brought a feeling of comfort and familiarity as well as the ecstasy and feeling of relief that had come with the drives protocol. He realized that was why she had suggested it the first night... as a means to comfort him.

As they lay cuddled afterward, Marie said, "They'll find him, okay? Torturing yourself won't bring him back."

"I just feel so useless, Marie... When it was Rabbit, we went looking for him. We didn't just leave it to someone else. But there were more of us then and... well, I wasn't the one making decisions. I felt almost like one of the children still. I didn't know it at the time. I guess a lot has changed since then..."

She laughed suddenly. "Yes, love, I'd say a lot has changed."

He couldn't quite laugh, but he did manage a smile. "I guess that goes without saying..."

She kissed him. "Torturing yourself won't bring him home, though. Neither will torturing me..."

"I'm sorry..."

"No, don't be. Just don't keep yourself from me, alright? I need you even if you don't need me."

He snorted. "I think you know better than that."

She sighed, absentely stroking her fingers along his stomach. She fell asleep soon after, as he stared up into the darkness, worrying.

----------

Jon trudged along the road in his shirt and trousers. His sneakers had worn out the day before. They always wore out quickly on his hard brass and iron feet.
He was so covered in dust now that no one gave him more than a look of disgust as they drove by. He had given up trying to hitch a ride, but he knew he was headed the right way. The people at the love-in at that park in L.A. had said there was a big gathering happening up at Calico and he wanted to be there, so he had started walking after most of them had passed out.

A battered jeep pulled up beside him. "Jonny! Hey, man, get in, like you can't walk all the way to Calico..."

"Moonglow... thank you," Jon breathed sleepily as he climbed in. "I don't want to be late..."

"We'll be there in a few hours, star traveler," said a girl behind him. "It's gonna be far out..."

"Yeah," he agreed, sinking into the seat. "That's why I started early."

"Crazy." Moonglow chuckled.

"Is it nice there?"

"Nice is June Cleaver. This is gonna be groovy."

"Okay." Jon closed his eyes.

"Where you from, anyway, little gold dude? You got a pad around here?"

"A what?"

"Some place to crash, baby."

"I haven't crashed in years..."

The man laughed as he drove away. "Like, I know how that feels. When my old man kicked me out, I had no bread, nowhere to go..."

"You must have been hungry," Jon murmured airily.

"Well... yeah..."

"Did you get some bread?"

"I got the feeling we're talkin' about different kinds of bread, little gold star traveler."

"Which kind did you want to talk about?"

"Outta sight," the man said, but he sounded puzzled.

One of the girls snuggled up to Jon.

"I like you, little space man," she murmured. "You know how to go with the flow."

"I do?" Jon said dreamily.

"How'd you get this mellow just walkin' down the road, man?" Moonglow asked him. "You got some grass or somethin'?"

"Grass?"

"Pot, baby. You smoke somethin'?"
"I had some Valium..."

"No wonder he's spaced out..."

The girl pulled a necklace over her head and put it onto Jon, then kissed him. He opened his eyes.

"Right on," said Moonglow. "Sunshine likes you. Of course, Sunshine likes everyone."

"I like him more than anyone," she murmured.

"Thanks..." Jon said happily. "I like you too..."

She leaned against him and said, "Oh.. You're so hard..."

"Hey, not in the jeep, Sunshine! Remember the last time..."

"No, baby, his whole body is hard." She knocked on his chest. Jon patted her hand fondly and closed his eyes again.

"Yeah. I was made this way."

"Far out..."
The Spine, in full human makeup, sank into the big library chair. Marie and Lily looked at him questioningly, but he just waved a hand weakly and said nothing. Lily returned to her books and Marie kissed him lightly before resuming her crossword.

He had felt defeated before, but he could swear it had never been as bad as this.

Week after week seemed to bring some new lead, a sighting, a piece of information, a glimmer of metal in a photo in the newspaper. Peter and The Spine would immediately make a trip out to investigate. A couple of times they had been sure it really had been him, but he had always gone. And finally, one day, there was no trace at all, no new leads, no fresh clues. The trail went cold. Well, it had only been a week, but there had been so many leads until then...

Today he had gone to a love-in in Balboa Park. Some girl gave him a daisy and said, "I love you," before moving on and doing the same for everyone she met... but the rest of them didn't appreciate his neat appearance, his tie and fedora, his sharp, almost military haircut, and he'd been obliged to leave. Well, he had no intention of trying to blend in, after all! But Dave had come along, with his long blonde hair mussed, dressed in his filthiest clothing, and entered the crowd separately even as his father retreated from angry, staggering hippies calling him "running dog," "square," and "candyass retard." The Spine bit his tongue and hurried away, not wanting any of them to get violent and force him to defend himself; a situation unlikely to end well for anyone involved. He would just have to wait for Dave to come home and report.

Only it turned out that he hadn't learned anything either. He'd gotten quite a few offers to make love to a variety of girls (and a couple of guys) but no one was interested in talking about... well, anything.

"I don't think I want to do that again, Dad," Dave said once he'd given his report.

"I'm sorry, son... I know you must have been uncomfortable..."

"No... tempted." He winked.

"Oh, Dave," Marie moaned, glancing at Lily.

"A lot of them needed a bath but this one girl..." He whistled.

"Son. Please."
He grinned mischievously. "Alright, Dad. I need a shower."

He got up and jogged up the stairs, passing Rabbit on his way in.

"Well?"

"Nothing, Rabbit. I'm sorry."

Rabbit slumped onto the couch beside Lily. He wore his temporary chassis daily now, just to be able to walk around dressed. Peter had fine tuned the old faceplate set so that it fit better, but Rabbit still complained about losing the last one made by his Pappy, back in 1940. It really was the best one he'd had...

The Spine pulled out his notebook. He'd taken to keeping a record of the search, hoping the outlet would help with the frustrating helplessness and spare his family the ordeal of hearing him complain as much as he really wanted to. He made a short entry:

"More hippies, called names again, no sign of Jon, but one girl loves me and gave me a daisy."

He sighed and showed it to Marie. She smiled and hugged him.

He flipped back to the beginning and looked through the entries.

"February 13: Jon missing now for a week. No reports except for one sloppy hippie."

February 20: Two weeks now and still nothing. So frustrated I could tear the house apart. Spending more time playing guitar.

March 7: Hurt Marie... a little. She refuses to complain but I cringe every time I see the bruise. Will ask her to lower the settings more next time as a precaution. I just..."

He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed silently. He had been so tense, so bottled up, that he had squeezed her arm too hard while they were making love. Well, she had been lowering the settings enough and it hadn't happened again. But it still hurt to remember hearing her gasp only to realize that it was one of pain and shock instead of... what it should have been.

He opened his eyes and looked at the next page. "March 12: heard reports of a man painted gold dancing on stage at a rock concert in Fresno. Trip out there yielded a few confirming reports but no trace of Jon."

There followed a surprising number of sightings, Jon... under the folk hero title of the "Golden Man" singing in parks and love-ins... roaming streets during busy market days and giving out flowers and hugs, miraculously avoiding not only the police but cameras as well. Beautiful murals were sometimes found in the mornings at random locations, and attributed to the Golden Man. A woman claimed the golden man saved her from a speeding car... by holding it still with his bare hands. That was certainly possible...

He flipped through a few more pages where Dave and Lily had doodled machine house pets while waiting for the dentist and found the next entry. On July 27, the Golden Man was seen handing out daisies made of aluminum cans in Fountain, Colorado. The same week, there was a sighting at a Denver art festival. He had painted an entire sidewalk with portrait of the Beatles at the Ed Sullivan Show. Of course that was Jon. He'd actually been at the Ed Sullivan Show. There had been a newspaper clipping with a photo; the sidewalk art was photorealistic, and the artist nowhere in evidence.
The last sighting had been somewhere in Ohio a few days later, and then nothing for the last week and a half. He supposed it was a ridiculous longshot, looking for him in San Diego, but he had hoped someone might have heard something, or knew him, maybe knew where he was headed.

He kissed Marie and got up to look for Peter.

----------

The next day, Lily sat slumped in a big squishy beanbag chair, too close to the TV, turning the dial with her toes, a big box fan aimed directly at her. There wasn't much on... Gilligan's Island reruns... yuck. She watched the end of the Addams Family; first episode, one of her favorites.

"Poor defenseless dragon," she chuckled, thinking of heading up to see Qwerty. But she stayed slumped, remembering that The Spine was up there, helping Peter try to install a vocal assembly for her cousin. She loved her Pappy and Peter... that is, she had no problem with Peter... but they were useless when they were working.

She turned the dial again. News. Ugh. She was just about to turn it again when she stopped. The screen was full of hippies. She leaned in, trying to pick out individual figures in the mass of unkempt humans. Then the news cut to commercial, promising more coverage when they returned. As the announcer spoke, the camera cut to a close-up of thoroughly spaced out people whirling to the music. Lily screamed.

She ran to the house phone and called the HoW. Peter and The Spine were downstairs in record time. The news recommenced and there he was... The Jon, dancing blithely to something loud and wailing, wearing only a pair of fringed buckskin trousers and a string of love beads, a beatific expression on his face. He sank to the ground as others whirled in his place and leaned a little way into the crowd. A girl nearby leaned toward him and he kissed her on the lips. The camera cut away to others whirling and rocking side to side.

They sat stunned. The Spine was the first to recover.

"Where..." He peered at the screen. "Woodstock, New York! I'll call Jim, maybe he has someone closer..."

He rushed away to make the call.

"Peter..."

"Yes, Lily?"

"Did you happen to notice..."

"The girl?"

"Uh-huh."

"That she was pregnant?"

"Yeah..."

"Very pregnant."

"Uh-huh."

"It doesn't mean anything. She's probably been around a whole lot..."
"Right. Of course," she said, relieved. "There's no way he could... or... No, Mama told me it was a rare occurrence."

She laughed at herself, but a glance at Peter made her nervous all over again as he sat, wide-eyed, his hands clutching the arms of his chair, staring at the tv.

"Aw, crap," she sighed.

--------

Peter and The Spine flew to New York as quickly as they could. The festival was just winding down when they arrived, and Jim had a guy watching Jon from a distance, just to make sure he didn't wander away. The man showed them a cluster of tents and indicated the one Jon shared with the girl they had seen on the TV.

Peter knocked gingerly on a tent pole, which he found was embedded firmly in the ground. Very firmly. No doubt the work of a robot...

"Go away, man," said a familiar voice. There was a feminine giggle. Peter rubbed a hand over his face and said, "Jon? It's Peter."

If they had thought, after his elusive ways of the past months, that Jon would try to evade them once more, they soon found out otherwise.

"Far out!" cried the voice. Jon threw open the tent flap, grinning. The next moment, Peter was swept up in a crushing hug. He coughed and Jon let go, just in time for The Spine to lunge in and grab him by the shoulders. Peter jumped backward, startled by the swiftness of the tall automaton's approach.

"Spine, calm down..." he began.

But The Spine, in his human makeup, just held his brother still and stared at him as if trying to believe he was real. Jon stared back in shock. The Spine said thickly, "I don't know whether to kiss you or throw you across the field, you... ugh!" He pulled him in for a hug.

"Can I choose?" The Jon said, muffled against The Spine's chest.

"Jon! How are you?" Peter cried. "Have you kept up your oil levels? Why didn't you come home?"

"I'm okay. I've just been going with the flow... y'know?"

The Spine stared at him. Peter shook his head.

"Jon, baby, come back in," purred a voice. The Jon grinned at them.

"That's my girlfriend!"

"Oh, boy. You're coming with us," Peter said quickly.

"But we... we were gonna go to..."

"No, you, Jon, need to come home. Now. Just you."

"Not without Sunshine!" Jon gasped, his smile fading.

The Spine pinched the bridge of his nose. "Would that be the girl who's... you know..."
"She's gonna have a baby, Spine!"

"Yes, Jon, about that," Peter whispered. "Do you happen to know who the father is?"

"Not really, no..."

"Has there been, oh, maybe a bluish glow to her stomach whenever you get close to her?"

"Peter!" The Spine snapped. Peter looked at him in surprise. Surely The Spine had considered the possibility!

"No, she's not gonna have a baby robot, silly," Jon said with a goofy grin. "She missed a period right before I met her... I didn't do it!"

"Right, because that's not possible, right Jon?" The Spine prompted in tense tones. "Because you know nothing about... well... sex. Right?"

"Oh, I never said that," Jon replied, grinning widely. "I'm gonna tell Sunshine what's up!"

"Oh, good lord... We've got to get him home!" The Spine said rapidly as Jon ducked into the tent.

"Spine! Relax! He's not a child..."

"But... he..." The Spine sighed over the sound of The Jon chattering. "He's always been so innocent."

"And then he went to war how many times now? And ended up on LSD..."

"I know..."

The Jon guided the girl from the tent and pulled out a battered backpack with a weathered guitar strapped to it. "We're ready."

"Like, do you have any reefers?" the girl asked. "I'm out..."

The Spine frowned. Peter shook his head.

"Look at it this way, Spine," he said. "You're a father, and she's somebody's daughter, right?"

"And somebody's mother," The Spine said bitterly.

"You want Jon to come home?"

The Spine sighed, and a plume of steam poured from his lips. The girl looked fascinated.

"Far out... Jonny does that sometimes, too."

"I hate to say this, but I can make the choice with or without your okay, Spine."

"Fine," The Spine said tightly. "She can come too."

Jon smiled. Sunshine beamed.
The Jon brought back a friend... or a girlfriend... or maybe really just a friend... Dang it, Jon!

It was a strange trip home. They knew because Jon kept saying so. At least, he said a lot of things were a strange trip. The Spine couldn't wait to get away from him for a while, having reached the point where he was sure that one more word of hippie slang from either of them would send him right over the edge of sanity. The Jon, with his open and loving nature, augmented by the spacey influence of LSD and mellowed by the now ingrained dose of Valium, had gladly embraced to hippie philosophy, and used his robotic language assimilation abilities well. He had also used his singing along their way to pick up enough money for travel, food for Sunshine, and oil and water for himself.

Sunshine was blissful and calm the whole journey, except when The Spine or Peter made clumsy attempts to find out where she had come from, at which point they caught a very definite dirty look and backed off. What was painfully clear to them both was that she couldn't be much over eighteen, and that it was just possible that someone was looking for her. She had, it turned out, had decided to lay off the really heavy drugs when she found she was pregnant. She had not, however, seen a doctor.

Peter wired ahead to let Marie and Wanda know what to expect. When they arrived, Marie's first question was how far along Sunshine was. The best guess Sunshine had was around seven months. Then she and Jon went to the room Marie had prepared for them and stayed there until morning. No one went looking for them... the lingering question of just how much Jon knew about sex and whether he used that knowledge kept anyone from really wanting to go near.

Lily came into the library the day after they arrived to find Sunshine meditating. She quietly found the book she'd left there and started to leave.

"Peace," said a soft voice. Lily turned.

"Um, peace. Hi, I'm Lily..."

"Like, groovy name. Lilies are beautiful flowers."

"Thanks," Lily said, bemused. She sat on the couch and watched Sunshine, with less peace than she had wished on Lily, struggle to get her legs out of the lotus position.

"Man... this was easier before Moonangel got so big..."

"Moonangel?"

"That its name. Girl or boy. It's a child of the cosmos... a magical being..."

"I once read a book with a character called the Moon Angel," Lily said quickly, not much interested in hippie talk.
Sunshine looked up from her reverie with a sudden brightness in her eyes. "You read Garden Behind the Moon?"

"I love reading. It was a lovely story. I was especially fascinated by the way David grew to be a man without even knowing it! Man, that would be nice, if you could just get it over with..."

Sunshine looked wistful for a moment, her hand resting on her bump, and Lily realized guiltily that there was more going on in her head than she had expected. Sunshine was a Reader. Lily was sure of it. How she ended up roaming the country with The Jon was a mystery. But Lily liked her. She wished she could take her to meet Qwerty, but one look at that belly was enough to dissuade her entirely.

"Yeah, growing up wasn't easy..." Sunshine murmured.

Lily wondered at that. Sunshine was surely only a few years older than she was...

"So, you like Jon..."

"Jon's so gentle. I can't help loving him."

"Like a boyfriend love or like a child of the cosmos love?"

"I don't know..." Sunshine smiled. Lily raised one eyebrow. She hoped Jon wasn't too attached...

Dave jogged into the room. "Hey, squeeze the toothpaste right or get your own tube... Oh..."

"Peace," breathed Sunshine.

"Right..." Dave said. "Right back atcha."

"Thank you," Sunshine said dreamily.

"Whoa, brother. Anyway, Lily, quit screwing up the toothpaste. It keeps cracking and leaking out the sides." He gave Sunshine one last sidelong look and stomped out.

"That was a bummer," she murmured. "Could you help me, Lily?"

Lily helped Sunshine to her feet. She was taller than Lily, but many people were... most people, she was sure.

"You hungry?" Lily asked. Sunshine nodded a little shyly. "Were you not comfortable asking for breakfast? You live here now, for as long as you need to! Of course you can get breakfast! Come on."

They walked to the kitchen together, and found Marie making her humble specialty... toast. Jon wandered in a few minutes after and kissed Sunshine sweetly. Then he swept Lily up in his arms and laughed.

"You're a moonbeam!" he sighed.

She didn't know if he was hallucinating again or just being Jon, but she laughed and said, "Put me down, Unkie The Jon!"

He put her down easily, kissed Sunshine's belly, and murmured, "Good morning, Moonangel."

Dave walked in at that moment and snorted. "Seriously? Moonangel?"
"Shut up, Dave," Lily said lightly, spreading jam on her toast.

"Okay, Moonlily." He snagged her other slice of toast and walked out.

"Hey!"

Marie handed her another one. "Do you want an egg? I can make those, too. If you want an omelet you'll have to ask your Pappy."

"Maybe tomorrow," said Lily. "This is good enough."

Sunshine nibbled her own toast without much appetite.

"Don't you like toast?"

"I don't really eat things like this usually," she said breathily. "I eat a lot of natural foods if I can... y'know, if we have enough bread and there's a health food store around."

"How much bread do you need?" asked Marie, perplexed.

"It means money, Marie," said Jon pleasantly.

"Oh."

Marie took Sunshine to the market so that she could get foods she liked. Sunshine was hesitant at first, obviously less comfortable than Jon was with her being treated as part of the family. Lily went along and found that she was not only growing more fond of the girl, but that she was noticing quite a few cracks in the veneer of peace and love. She seemed insecure sometimes, and at others showed a pride, an unwillingness to let them support her. She had let Jon do it, though. What was different? In a way, Jon was still supporting her.

It was interesting, also, to see Sunshine's reaction to the more interesting family members. She had been startled by Rabbit at first. He had turned on his considerable charm, however, as soon as he saw her fair face, and offered to carry her everywhere if she got tired. She declined but was enchanted with him from that day on.

The real shock had been The Spine. She met him when he was in disguise. The following day he had strolled from his room looking for Marie, wearing only his boxers and unbuttoned shirt, his chassis cleaned of makeup, just in time to see Lily and Sunshine coming along the hall. Sunshine had gasped and stared at him.

When she recovered, she cried, "Far out! You're one too!"

He smiled sheepishly and held his shirt closed over his gleaming core as though covering something embarrassing. Lily grinned as he slipped hastily back into his room. She later found out he'd expected her to sleep in... She knew he'd never have walked out half-dressed otherwise. The next time Sunshine saw him, he was fully dressed and gleaming silver.

"So, what do you think?" Lily asked her that evening as she worked on a jigsaw and Sunshine knitted... another surprise. The girl had been assembling a collection of baby clothes the only way she could, buying yarn whenever possible and making them herself. "Are you comfortable living here?"
Sunshine lowered the rainbow colored bootie she was knitting and looked at Lily in surprise. "You noticed?"

"That you feel uncomfortable? Yeah, I noticed."

Sunshine murmured, "I just don't want them to call my old man. I left for a reason. I mean, I dig the scene and all but if it wasn't that, I still would have been outta there. He's got some serious karma coming..."

"Did he beat you?" Lily asked, wide-eyed.

Sunshine looked at her and Lily saw a haunted look she never wanted to see again. "Yeah, pretty much. He... yeah, sure. He beat me."

Lily didn't know what it meant to be "pretty much" beaten. She suddenly felt uncomfortable and said, "But why are you hanging out with Unkie the Jon?"

"I... y'know, this is kinda grown-up stuff, Lily..."

"Come on, I'm hip to the scene! Groovy..."

Sunshine laughed and shook her head. "Far out. Don't try that anymore, alright?"

Lily smiled. "Alright. I don't really get hippie talk. But why Jon?"

"I told you." She resumed knitting. "He's gentle. He... he isn't like other men."

"That's for danged sure."

"Well, you know him even better than I do, right? He's one of the kindest people I've ever met. I knew from the moment I met him that he was. All I wanted was kindness. I got more from some of those guys."

Lily looked at Sunshine's softly squirming belly and felt even more uncomfortable. "Didn't you... I mean, you wanted to, right? Free love and stuff?"

Sunshine looked at her, then glanced at the doorway. She whispered, "I didn't do anything to stop them, no."

"Oh, Sunshine..." Lily whispered back, eyes wide. That just sounded... awful!

Sunshine rubbed the back of her hand across one eye. "I'm kinda tired. I think I'll go to bed."

"Alright," Lily said faintly as Sunshine worked her way to the edge of the couch, tipped forward onto her feet, and walked out. She was just as glad. She had a lot to think about... and possibly discuss with her mother.

But Lily didn't tell her mother. She also didn't mention it again. Sex was a far away concept to a teenaged girl who hardly even knew any boys and certainly didn't dare let any of them see her body, both because of her glowing core, and because her father was capable of reducing them to a pile of body parts without even straining.

But Lily realized, as she settled into her favorite chair in the library some three weeks after Sunshine arrived, that she had answered one question tormenting her father. Maybe The Jon knew about sex, but she was almost positive he'd never found a way to engage in it. Lily knew he wasn't anatomically correct, but her father hadn't been at first, either, and her parents had still been intimate. Lily made a
face when she thought of it; what a thoroughly revolting mental image that was!

Sunshine was getting more and more uncomfortable. Marie had asked the doctor to come examine her and he had found her a very uncooperative patient, refusing to do more that pull up her loose-fitting top to show her baby bump. He had, irritably, told Marie that he couldn't be sure of anything and to call if there were any questions.

Marie, however, had the patience of a saint. Lily also suspected that her mother knew something she didn't about Sunshine. After their uncomfortable chat, though, Lily was content to remain ignorant.

Sunshine was also having trouble with the stairs. Even one flight left her winded. Rabbit sometimes came along and carried her to the third floor, where their room was, but only when he found Sunshine asleep on the library couch, in no condition to object, on those occasions that Jon hadn't gotten to her first.

Lily still hadn't worked out whether it was a romance or not. Romances always seemed to lead to some sort of sex, or at least spending a lot of time together, and Jon and Sunshine, though they shared a room, wandered in separate circles much of the day. Lily found her uncle alone one afternoon and did her best to find out without asking directly. All she learned in the end was that Sunshine had nightmares sometimes. She had asked why they shared a room, all other approaches having failed, and The Jon had only told her about the nightmares. Was that the only reason? But how like Unkie The Jon to linger near her in case of bad dreams.

Still she had seen them kiss. On the lips.

A week later, Dave passed Rabbit as he carried Sunshine to her room yet again.

"Stubborn thing! Why doesn't she just ask for help?" he muttered to Lily after they'd gone.

"She's got her pride, I guess."

"What kind of hippie is she?" he demanded. "All the ones I ever met seemed to think all property should be shared, especially with them."

"I dunno. I just know that she doesn't like being dependent."

"Did she say that?" he asked, leaning against the door frame.

"It's pretty obvious, She eats like a bird and refuses to ask even Unkie The Jon to carry her to bed... and he's the only one she trusts."

Dave frowned. "Yeah, her boyfriend."

"I don't know about that..."

"What?"

She told him what she'd been observing.

"You little snoop! So, what, he's just her friend?"

"I think so."

He sighed. "Weird." He walked out.

Two days later, she overheard him talking to Peter. "We'll need new cables, there's no way around
“Alright. I'll see if I can get some quickly enough to be useful.”

As Peter walked away, Lil walked up and said, "What was that about?"

"Nothing. Quit eavesdropping."

Three days after that, he had repaired the small, ancient elevator that had been there since the Manor was built. She now understood the need for new cables. Peter asked the two young women to come and test it, without ever suggesting that it might have been done just to ease Sunshine's discomfort; Marie had assured him the girl wouldn't use it if she thought they had made expensive repairs for her alone.

Lily would, though! She used it to take Sunshine up to meet Qwerty, though Qwerty once again fell silent and Lily was pretty sure Sunshine thought she was trying to play a joke on her.

Later, in the library, they sat reading when Dave walked in and sat without comment. He prodded a discarded book and sighed.

"What is it, Dave?" Lily said without looking up.

"Nothing."

"Must be something."

"I said it's nothing. So... the elevator work okay?"

"Works great."

"Yes, thank you," said Sunshine.

Dave looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"I said thank you..."

He looked away. "I didn't think hippies thanked people."

"What? Why?"

"All that peace and love and crap like that, acting like the world owes you a living..."

"Dave!" snapped Lily.

Sunshine's face revealed no anger. "Is that what you think of me?"

"I'm just saying..."

"What?"

"That maybe you're not really like that."

"You think that peace and love are crap, and you think I'm lying when I say I want them?"

There was a tone in her voice that seemed calm at first, but Lily looked at Dave in alarm as she realized Sunshine was anything but. Dave, however, seemed completely oblivious.
"I'm saying that you shouldn't act like something you're not."

"Who says I am?"

"Well, you're obviously not just some brain dead slut who's running around saying she wants world peace so she can get laid in the name of free love."

There was no missing Sunshine's anger now. Her eyes practically flashed fire.

"So you think people shouldn't act like something they're not?"

"Of course not..." he said uneasily.

"So you actually are a jerk, then?"

Dave glared at her.

"Direct hit, Dave. Maybe you'd better go while you still have limbs left," Lily said.

Dave got up quickly and stomped out.

"I'm so sorry, Sunshine," Lily apologized. "He's a typical Walter man. They only ever know how to talk to gears and wiring." Although, she realized, Peter never acted like that...

"What's the matter with him, anyway? I just said thank you!" Sunshine said, her voice shaking.

"He's an idiot. Simple."

Sunshine laughed weakly, but there were tears in her eyes. "That's the trouble. He's not. He's very intelligent. And I thought maybe he was starting to like me a little. He was so standoffish when I first came here... and I couldn't stand him either! But... Oh, I don't know what's going on anymore! What's the matter with any of us?

Lily, staring at her friend as she ranted, had her suspicions. Why did so many people express feeling by fighting with each other? But she'd noticed it was ridiculously common. Her parents almost never fought; that was love to Lily. But Dave would tease her one minute and hug her the next. And Sunshine... It was clear she was leaning on peace and love to fight her instincts for war and hate, apparently. Or something. Lily still felt there was a hidden pain that was too awful to speak about, and too awful to ask about either.

But what it came down to was Dave antagonizing Sunshine and Sunshine lashing out at Dave. And that spelled certain things in Lily's teenaged mind.

How very awkward.
Heartbreak

Chapter Summary

A baby is born.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings, sorry for spoilers: childbirth, loss of child

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Spine was attempting to read his newspaper. He enjoyed it; it was important, he believed, to remain aware of world affairs. Even better, it helped him tune out household affairs.

He made a face at the newsprint. Possibly there was a better choice of words...

Either way, he was getting nowhere. Rabbit had been rattling around the room and sighing for several minutes, wanting his attention but unwilling to be responsible for interrupting his reading... no, that wasn't it. It was more fun for Rabbit to bother him until he cracked. The Spine decided to at least dull the victory by calmly capitulating instead.

He lowered the paper. "Rabbit? How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine..."

Aha. "And someone else isn't."

"No, they're all great."

The Spine's enamel teeth clenched and his eyebrows sank to a neat line just above his eyes as he stared at the opposite wall, trying to decide whether to let himself in for the next wave by resuming his reading.

"Yep. Hunky-dory."

"Good." The Spine said with sudden forced brightness, raising his paper again.

"Keeping busy, yessir."

"Lovely."

"Goin' about the u-u-u-usual business."

"Naturally. That's why it is the usual business. Because people usually do it."

"Very astute. Only..."

He waited for it, newspaper still in place, his eye tensely passing over the same line over and over...
"Dear Abby, I am a middle-aged housewife who doesn't enjoy sex anymore..."

Ugh. He lowered the paper. "What. What is it. You obviously want to tell me something but it's more fun to drive me insane with curiosity so just skip it and tell me."

"Jon's writin' music."

"Well, he is a musician, Rabbit. He's written some very nice songs. Remember that one that Danny Kaye sings on his humanitarian tours..."

"Oh, yeah, Danny. Learned a lot from that guy. But Jon ain't writin' sweet little songs about rain and sunshine and little birdies."

"So what is he writing about that has your attention?"

"Drugs."

"What?" barked The Spine.

"Sort of..." Rabbit said faintly, cringing.

"Sort of? Sort of how?"

"It's like one long acid trip, Spine!" Rabbit cried, finally letting loose. "Flying around naked in balloons giving socks to space clowns or something... And there's this other one that's even worse... He does something crazy to his voice when he sings it!"

"Well... but..." The Spine shook his head. "We aren't going to perform until you're back in shape, so it doesn't matter, okay? Let him write them."

"But he wants to go perform them in the park!"

"Rabbit... Why didn't you just tell me this?"

"I dunno."

Sometimes he wondered how Rabbit could really be the older brother... The Spine put down his paper and rose. "Alright, let's go see him."

--------

Once The Spine was settled with The Jon, trying to explain why it wasn't okay to sing in a public park about dancing around the world in the nude, Rabbit wandered off and found Sunshine in the rose garden.

"Heya, honey," he said quietly. She smiled weakly. "What's wrong?"

"I just... don't know."

Rabbit sat beside her on the stone bench and slipped his arm around her protectively. "That's normal."

"It is?"

"Sure, a g-g-girl gets this close to havin' her baby, she gets a little... Distracted, I guess. There's a lot to get used to."
"Yeah..." she sighed. "But how do you even know about that, man? You're..."

"A robot? Or a guy?"

"I dunno. Both."

"There's been a lot of mamas here over the years. I watch 'em. Same things happen every time. They get squirrelly right before they have the baby, and after..." He sighed. "It's like a new angel is born every time... an angel wi-wi-with a baby in her arms."

He gave her another soft squeeze and glanced around hastily to make sure The Spine couldn't hear him.

"I don't think I want to talk about the baby right now," said Sunshine quietly.

"Well, okay. We can talk about anything, ba... sweetie. Whaddya want to talk about?"

"Have you ever been in love?"

"What?" Rabbit gasped.

"The Spine is... I thought that was far out, him being married and having kids..."

"That's a secret. Don't forget."

"I won't. But I was thinking that maybe if he was in love even though he's a robot, maybe all of you can love."

He squeezed her gently. "You worried about Jon? He loves you. I can tell."

"Well, yeah, but, like, Jon loves everybody, y'know?"

"I know. So you don't think he loves you best? Is that what you're worried about?"

"No... I'm afraid he might."

"What?" Rabbit asked again. "I d-d-don't follow you."

"I... Jon and I... He's not my old man, Rabbit. He's my friend. I mean, he was in on a couple of..."

"Do I want to hear the rest of that sentence?"

She laughed a little. "No, probably not. He's not what you think. He's sweet and kinda innocent but... he's open to new ideas."

"Yeah. That confirms it. I d-d-don't wanna hear the rest." He hesitated as she snickered softly. "He didn't ge-ge-get anyone else... y'know..."

"Pregnant? Not that I know of..."

"But he..."

"What?"

"Made... y'know... whoopie..."

"Whoopie?" she laughed. "Yeah, he did. First time we picked him up, he said he'd hated making war
and he wanted to make love instead. I don't think he knew what we meant by it."

Rabbit put his hand over his face. "No."

"So Dusty, she offered to teach him..."

"Please don't tell me any more..."

"I'm sorry..."

"No... don't be sorry, baby. I ain't mad at you. Never at you."

"Oh... well, yeah, Jon did make... whoopie. Never with me... if that makes you feel any better."

"Alright," he sighed, feeling scarred by what he had already discovered. Jon, Jon, Jon... Wow. Just... Wow.

"But mostly he was always happy to just hug people, y'know. We just traveled together. Hell, once I found out I was pregnant, I couldn't get him to leave. He said I needed someone to take care of me."

"Ya do. Even the toughest girl needs help when she's gonna have a baby." Honey did... she just hadn't had it. He drew Sunshine ever so slightly closer.

"I guess. I liked Jon being there, anyway. I feel safe with him."

"Safe from what?" snorted Rabbit. "Safe from sanity?"

"Stop it!" she cried, leaning away.

"Sorry, honey!" he said quickly. He decided to change the subject. "So you wanted to know if I'd ev-ev-ever been in love?"

Sunshine sighed and nodded, leaning against him once more.

"Well... yeah, I have. I... uh... still am."

"Who is she?" Sunshine breathed.

Rabbit looked down at his hands.

"Oh... doesn't she love you back?"

"It ain't that... look, let's get some bread and go feed the ducks, okay?"

He and Sunshine got the bread and stood by the pond, tossing bits into the water. Sunshine looked behind her uneasily. "You have a cemetery here?"

"Yep. It's real old, from when Pappy's grandpa built the place. So back then they sometimes buried the family right on site. Pappy's in there, and his sons, and his grandsons. And someone else I wanna show you."

He tossed the rest of the bread into the pond and took her hand, leading her gently to a white stone with a bee carved into it.

"Honeybee..." Sunshine read. "Just that?"

"Yeah..."
"Was she a hippie?"

"No," he laughed, and his voice closed up as he did. He struggled with the feelings; they felt as fresh today as the day she had died.

"Rabbit?"

"She was... she was my wife," he said hoarsely.

"Oh..." she sighed. "You had one, too?"

"Yeah."

"Was she human?"

"No, she was a robot."

"But how...?" She trailed off and looked away.

"It's okay. You wanna know how a robot could die."

"Kinda. If you want to tell me."

"She was always kinda sickly... I mean, she was beautiful when she was built, and smart, and wonderful. But the guy who built her was broke. He couldn't afford fancy materials. And she just wasn't built to last. So she died..."

"Oh, Rabbit!"

"Y'know why I call you honey sometimes? Ya kinda look like her."

"Oh!"

"If she'd been human, anyhow. Oh, I don't mean anything weird by that..."

"I know. You're like my grandpa."

"I'm o-o-old enough," he said with a lopsided grin.

"No, I just mean, it's like when my grandpa would say I reminded him of Grandma. Because I looked like her."

"No kiddin'?"

"Yeah." She leaned against him as they looked down at the stone. "Oh..." she moaned softly, putting her hand on her belly.

"You gettin' contractions, honey?" Rabbit asked anxiously.

"Oh, man... like, yeah... I think I have been. They didn't hurt much, y'know. Like the ones I've been having for a while. But that one stung."

"Well, maybe it's just another one of those practice ones."

"Yeah. Though... I guess it's about time. She doesn't have much room in there."

"Yeah, that's about when it happens. Bet you can feel everything he does now..."
"Or she..."

"Right."

"Actually, I think she's out of room. She hasn't moved much lately."

Rabbit stiffened even more than usual. "Is that right?" he asked lightly.

"Yeah," she giggled. "He only moves now when I move too suddenly. Guess it startles him..."

"Oh yeah?" he replied, forcing a laugh. "What does he do then?"

"Just kinda jumps. Just a little bump. Guess that's all there's room for."

Rabbit was silent. Did it ever end? He vented a little steam and murmured, trying to keep his voice calm, "How about I carry you back and we get a doctor over about those contractions, huh? Just in case?"

He was afraid she would say no again, but she looked up wearily and said, "Alright."

He looked into her face as he lifted her. Did she realize? This was her first baby. Did she understand what it meant if they stopped moving? That bump could be nothing more than momentum from her sudden movement...

Rabbit ached and hoped he was wrong.

He found out later that day. She was in labor, alright. She refused to have the doctor in, so they called the family midwife... the granddaughter of old Abby who had since passed away. The baby was born with the usual difficulty... a beautiful baby boy, plump, perfect... and silent. Rabbit was standing outside of the bedroom with Lily and Dave when Sunshine found out her baby had died. Lily put her hand over her mouth and ran away when Sunshine's cry of agony sounded. Dave folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the door frame, shaking. Rabbit wiped his hand across his eyes and sat down against the wall. He wanted to go in and pick her up and make it all better. He almost felt like she was Qwerty's big sister sometimes, like she was his own girl. But Jon and Marie and the midwife were there already. If they couldn't make her feel better... well, he didn't expect anything to help right now anyway.

He looked up at Dave. The boy was still shaking but he wouldn't leave. Why wasn't he leaving? Rabbit would have expected Dave to be in his garage long since... where he felt comfortable, away from the terrifying sounds of childbirth and loss.

Rabbit had heard Lily talking about Dave the day before, up in the HoW. About how she thought he was getting sweet on Sunshine. Rabbit had rolled his eyes and dismissed it. Now he wasn't so sure... The Spine had hovered close when Marie was suffering. Maybe Lily was right.

Rabbit felt like a father to Sunshine, but Dave... what was he feeling? And Sunshine, too... she'd said she wasn't Jon's girlfriend. And then she'd asked Rabbit about love. Maybe Dave wasn't the only one feeling something. But whatever it was would have to wait. Maybe forever.

Rabbit wanted to comfort Sunshine. He was pretty sure Dave did, too. But here they were, out in the hall, listening to her weep.

He crept to his feet and shuffled back out to the cemetery to talk to his Pappy and his Honeybee.
Chapter End Notes

Featured headcanons:

Rabbit's distinctive arm movements are partially robotic twitchiness and partially inspired by the movements of Danny Kaye, who did a thing with his hands while performing that looks very similar to the familiar pose Rabbit is known for.

The song "Little Birdie" used to be a sweet little song like Inchworm, until the band made it over in a style resembling early BeeGees music. Hence Danny Kaye, known for performing for the children of the world, adopting it into his act.

Out in the Rain also was a sweet little song but was later recorded in a psychedelic and then an R&B style, after which it enjoyed new success on the radio in the late seventies.
The funeral was the following day. Peter saw to the arrangements. Sunshine was too unwell to attend, and said she didn't want to go anyway. She remained in bed, curled on her side, numbly allowing Marie and a hired nurse to tend her physical needs in the wake of childbirth. Lily would sometimes come to the door and peer into the room, unsure whether to speak to her. She often found Dave doing the same thing. The Jon would sometimes come in and lay beside her. She never stopped him, but she also didn't acknowledge him.

One day, as Jon slipped out past both siblings, Dave stopped him and said, "Do you think... d'you think she'd mind if I go in?"

"I don't know, Dave. You two yelled a lot."

"I know... I just thought maybe since being nice isn't helping..."

"Don't you be mean to her!" The Jon hissed warningly.

"Whoa, man! I never said..."

"She's been hurt a lot, Dave! She needs love. The right kind. The kind that doesn't take anything away."

"The kind you give..." Dave sighed. "You care a lot about her, don't you?"

"Sure! She's my friend."

"Friend?"

"Oh, yeah. I keep watch over her." The Jon smiled impishly. "You all thought I was her lover. That was pretty funny."

"Jon, you jerk..."

"She likes you, y'know. She just thinks you're mean."

"What... how... ugh. Look, I'm just gonna go in and say hi."
"Good. You've all been afraid to see her and she needs people now. She doesn't want them, but she needs them. She needs to know we haven't given up so that she won't give up, either."

"Given up on what?" Dave cried in frustration.

"On her, silly. She wants to give up on herself."

Dave shook his head and slipped into the room.

She glanced his way and turned back toward the wall. "Go away..."

"No."

"Whatever. Don't care."

"I know. I don't either. I just thought maybe you could use a visit."

"No."

"I know you've had a... uh... a huge bummer but..."

"What? Shut up! Don't try to talk hippie! Just get out! I don't care about anything!"

"If you didn't care, you wouldn't be a head case right now. You wanted the baby, didn't you? You really wanted him..."

"Just shut up!"

"It's okay to be miserable about it! It was awful and horrible and I get it, okay? I get that it hurts! It happens! Stop trying to pretend it doesn't hurt!"

"I'm not!"

"Yeah, you are! You won't feel anything so that you don't have to feel it hurting!"

"Stop!" she sobbed.

"Dave!" cried Lily from the doorway at last, finally overcoming her shock at the way he was acting. But even as she started forward, he dropped to his knees beside the bed and hesitantly put his arms around Sunshine where she lay. He pulled her close and let her sob against his chest. She struggled for just a moment and punched him in the ribs. He started to let go and she grabbed him so hard that he gasped as she clung to him and wept.

Lily slipped away hastily. She hesitated at the end of the hall, and then hurried up to talk to Qwerty.

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"So that's what happened!" Lily finished, after telling Qwerty the whole thing.

"Hoomans r weerd."

"I'm a human, Qwerty."

"No, you're a cousin."
Lily shook her head. "Anyway, I told you she was starting to fall for Dave before the baby was born, and he's in love with her, I'm just sure of it."

"Oops."

"Yeah, I know..."

"No oooops over ther."

Lily made a face and turned to see her father standing in the doorway. He was looking at her with wide eyes.

She jumped to her feet, horrified. "Pappy!" she cried. "What are you doing in here?"

"Um... I work in here, Lily. I come here every day to work with Qwerty. Now what's all this about Dave being in love?"

"It's not... it's not anything, Pappy. It's just my overactive imagination."

He shook his head. "It isn't. I've seen the signs, too." He sighed sharply and pressed his lips together. "I've let this go on too long."

He turned to go.

"No! No, Pappy! Don't send her away!" cried Lily desperately, running to him and grabbing his arm.

"Lily!" he cried, astonished as he stopped to peel her carefully off. "Calm down..."

"No! No, I can't! You'll go and send her away! It isn't her fault!"

"Calm down!" he cried, alarmed, as she grew more agitated. Blue Matter began to leak slowly from her chest. He gasped and scooped her up, shushing her.

"Sssh, no! Calm down, sweetheart..." he said soothingly, a trace of terror in his voice just beneath the air of calm. "It's okay! I'm not sending her away in her condition... come on... breathe slowly... Do it, baby... breathe..."

Lily inhaled slowly, and exhaled still more slowly, the way she had been taught years before. She heard him breathing with her, though it was less of a necessity for him.

"Slow, deep breaths," he said quietly, peering down to make sure the leaking had stopped.

She gradually grew calm, resting against her pappy's chest. With a tiny hiss, her pendant released replacement matter and she began to feel better. He stood, holding her, turning slowly from side to side the way he had when she was a baby.

"Don't scare me like that, Airheart," he said in a trembling voice.

"I'm sorry, Pappy," she sighed, tears trickling from her eyes.

"No, don't be sorry, love... You did nothing wrong. But I need to explain, and I need you to stay calm while you listen. Can you do that for me, Lily?"

"Okay, Pappy..."

"Thank you. I am not just going to go throw anyone out into the street, much less a girl who's just
lost her child. But she's very young. Someone may be wondering where she is, whether she's dead or alive. As a father, I have to consider them. I would like to think that if someone had found you lost, they would try to get you back to us, even if you didn't want to come back."

"Pappy... how could I ever think of leaving you like that?"

"It happens, love. Look at Sunshine."

"But we don't know what she ran away from, Pappy. I think her dad was really mean to her. I think he did something terrible. Worse than beatings. She said so."

"What did she say exactly?" he asked, frowning.

"I asked if he beat her and she said he pretty much did."

He sighed. "Well, that doesn't mean he did something worse! Maybe he yelled at her a lot instead..."

"Wouldn't that be enough reason not to send her back, especially now? And anyway, I really got the feeling she wasn't telling me all of it. She said... Pappy, she said she didn't really like free love. She just didn't stop the men from..."

"That's neither here nor there!" The Spine interrupted hastily. "I'm worried, that's all. I'm worried about the things you're hearing from her. And I'm worried about Dave losing his heart to her. And I am worried about a runaway ending up back out on the streets if she decides she doesn't want to live here anymore." He sighed sharply. "But if her father... I don't know. It happens, Lily. I've seen things over the years, heard terrible tales..."

"Pappy... what are you gonna do, then?"

"I guess Peter and I will carefully look around and see if there are any missing persons reports that match her description. Alright?"

"Alright, Pappy... Thank you..."

He held her close and kissed her head. "Just keep yourself calm, Airheart. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I'll be fine, Pappy. It was just a little leak..."

"I know." He set her down carefully. "I have to get some work done before I start looking."

"Okay. See you later, Qwerty."

Lily gave The Spine one last hug and left. She sat downstairs soon after, chewing her lip. She hadn't meant to lose control like that and frighten him. She felt terrible. Her mother had told her how worried he'd been during her pregnancy, how afraid he'd been that Lily would die, or that Marie would, or both of them. And now Sunshine's baby was dead, and here Lily was making herself sick and scaring her Pappy all over again. She wiped her eyes.

She didn't necessarily expect to life a long and full life. She was never really meant to happen... from what Lily had over heard while shamelessly spying on her parents after doctor visits over the years, and sneaking peeks at Peter's notes, she was formed from her mother's DNA with her father's Blue Matter as a catalyst. Not exactly the usual meeting of parent cells forming life. Yet somehow his traits had made it through. She had straight dark hair, the same as he had always worn. She had one green eye, just the same vibrant hue as his. She wasn't tall but she was slim where her mother was shapely.
And of course, she relied on Blue Matter to live.

And that was what would shorten her life. Because sooner or later, it wouldn't be enough. At some point, she would start to fade. Lily had accepted that. She'd been happy, and well loved, and seen things most kids never would. Her father was a robot. How cool was that?

But the hard part was connected with him, with both her parents. Because when she died, their hearts, or whatever they had instead, would break. She knew it. And she also knew that somehow, even though he was a robot, her Pappy would take it the hardest.

And she was determined to put that off as long as possible.

Dave walked in with his face flushed. "She's asleep."

"Good. Is she okay?"

"What do you think?" he sighed. "No. But... Mom said she hadn't been crying. She had that one fit when she found out and then she just switched off, y'know? Sick. She needs to cry about it some. She wanted that stupid kid..."

"Dave..."

"No, I mean it. She wanted a baby even after all the crap she's been through. I know about her dad, okay?"

"Yeah."

"I swear, if I ever get my hands on him..."

"Maybe it's a good thing if you don't..." she said slowly.

He snorted. "Yeah. Maybe it is."

"There's enough crap going on without you going to jail."

"He's the one that ought to go to jail! I wasn't gonna break any laws... just do a little repair work on his face."

She snorted. "Change his oil maybe."

"Lube job..."

"I don't think I'm old enough to know what that means."

"No one is," he said darkly. His cheeked twitched in a little smile. "Thanks, kid. I know I'm not laughing on the outside, but, y'know."

They sat in silence for a while.

"So what's your problem?" he asked finally.

She almost said it. She could have... I know I'm going to die... But she didn't. Because everyone was going to die. And they all knew already that Lily would probably do it early. And it didn't bother her... she would have liked to be able to talk about it the way other people talked about getting a new apartment, or job...
But it bothered them. So she replied, "Oh, just everything, y'know?"

"Yeah," he said. "I think I do."

--------

Peter reported a few days later that he had heard from Sunshine's mother. He said it just like that, to The Spine, Marie, Lily, Dave, and Rabbit, as they sat together in the evening.

"I guess she saw the same footage we did. It just took her longer to track her down. She doesn't have the connections we do. I told her about the baby and she wants Sunshine to come home... er, her real name is Phyllis, but the way."

"Far out," Lily breathed. Phyllis was the name of the girl who married David in Garden Behind the Moon...

The Spine glanced at her with a little frown. He didn't much like it when she used hippie slang, but he said nothing. Still shaken by the scare earlier that week, she supposed.

"But wait... what about her dad?" asked Lily. "You didn't mention him."

"She said she's left him. She wanted me to tell Sunshine... er, Phyllis, that specifically."

The Spine looked at Lily and raised an eyebrow and she nodded a little. It was almost confirmation of what Sunshine had told them... at least, that her father hadn't treated her right.

"Yeah, that might help..." Lily murmured.

"I thought so. Marie, could you tell her? She never did warm up to me."

"What if she don't wa-wa-want to go?" Rabbit asked abruptly.

"What?" Peter asked, surprised.

"You heard me."

"Yes, but... look, this isn't a halfway house or a home for unwed mothers. She'd suffered a shock and she needs her mother now..."

"She didn't want her mother before. Why would she now?"

"Rabbit..." Peter said exasperatedly. "I never expected you to be the tough cookie. She just... she's still seventeen, okay? We have no right to keep her here. Anyway, let's tell her first. Maybe she'll be okay with it. Anyway, her mom will be here tomorrow. I sprang for airfare."

Marie left soon after and spoke to Sunshine, and returned reporting that she had agreed to return with her mother. She'd made no argument, in fact.

The adults seemed satisfied with that. Lily waited until they all headed for bed and collared Dave.

"Are you buying that?" she asked.

"Not for a second."

They slipped away to the room Sunshine had occupied since her delivery. Empty... note on the pillow.
"So cliche..." Dave muttered. Lily looked at him skeptically as he slammed his hand against the wall. "Dammit! Look, cover for me, okay? I'll go after her..."

"Where, stupid?"

"I'll get Jon to go with me. Just... I dunno, jam pillows under the covers or something. Whatever kids do."

He jogged away.

"I'm not a kid!" she snapped.
Chasing Sunshine

Dave ran for The Jon's room. He wasn't sure whether Jon knew where she might have gone, but he wasn't sure where else to begin.

Then again... He ran back to the front door. She couldn't have gone far in the time since Marie had spoken to her. If he ran out now, he might still be able to catch her. If she wasn't there, he could still go ask Jon.

He bolted out the door into the night. The moon was nearly full and lit the grounds clearly. He didn't see her. But maybe... he ran down to the gates and leaned out. No sign of her anywhere. He could run off down the sidewalk and hope he chose the right direction... but she'd only hide if she heard him coming.

He turned back to the house, glancing around the grounds. Maybe she'd already heard him coming and was hiding here! But the moonlight lit only the tops of things and the shadows were deep...

Then he happened to look toward the duck pond. Someone was there! But... maybe it was Rabbit... only he'd seen Rabbit heading up to see Qwerty. Why would Sunshine leave them a note and then go to the pond, though?

He could think of one reason a desperate young girl would leave a note saying goodbye and then go to a pond... Dave broke into a run.

*Don't do it! Don't... please...* Why did it suddenly seem so far away? He pumped faster as her head disappeared. He could hear soft splashing...

Ducks quacked their objections and scattered as he ran straight into the water and ducked under the surface... and felt like an idiot. It was pitch black! There was no way... just no way at all!

His head popped up out of the water and he sucked in air desperately. He'd been out of breath when he ran in... stupid. Just stupid! Couldn't do anything right... and now she was... no, he'd get his dad, see if they could find her in time...

"Dave?"

He turned toward the bank and saw her, standing with her backpack, staring at him in shock.

"Are you out of your mind?" he roared, paddling back to shore.

"I was gonna ask you the same thing!" she gasped.

He slogged up the bank and perched on the edge of the sculpture/bench to remove his shoes and let the water run out.

"I thought... never mind. So, running away again?"

"I'm an adult..."

"Not yet! Look, if you're that scared, you don't have to lie! We'll ask if you can stay here..."

"I don't even want to see her! She never... she just... failed. She failed. Mothers are supposed to protect their kids. They're supposed to take good care of them..."
Her voice broke. He supposed the little idiot was blaming herself for her baby dying now. He sighed. That made sense, really. People got that way when someone they cared about died... He shivered.

"You're cold..." she said unnecessarily. "Here..."

She dug in her pack, pulled out a poncho, and flung it over his head before he could object.

"Can you do me a favor and just keep your mouth shut until I can get myself lost?" she said, shouldering her pack once more.

"Hell no!" he snapped. "You're gonna go out there alone and you want me to just sit back and let you? Maybe you are nuts."

"Even if I do go back with her, I'll just run away from there instead, where you can't stop me!"

"The cops will..."

"The cops! They didn't find me the first time!"

"Look, she said she left him! You'll be okay..."

"Dave... what if she's lying? What if he still tells her what to do and say and he's waiting back home? You know what my life will be worth? I'd... I'd kill myself, Dave! I'm not being dramatic, believe me when I say it. I would kill myself before I let him near me again."

"Then stay here!" he said miserably. He believed her and it terrified him. "Come on, just stay..."

She stared at him and then climbed onto the sculpture beside him. "Why?"

"Because no one is gonna hurt you here, stupid."

"Words hurt too, y'know," she said quietly, hugging her knees as she sat perched, staring down at the headstones.

"Sorry. Look, you're not stupid. I am."

"No, you're not."

"Whatever. Stay. Please."

"Until she gets here, you mean, right?"

"Well..." He wasn't sure what he meant. He just didn't want her to go. For half a wild minute, he considered going with her. But though she was talking to him now, he doubted she was interested in his company for that long. And he wasn't interested in free love. Well... not as free as she'd been, anyway... "I just don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"Thanks... I'm not really used to people caring." She sniffled, whether with tears or the cool night air, he couldn't tell. "So what happens if I go back and I'm right?"

"Call. Find some way to call and I'll come up there and tear him apart."

She snorted. "I love you, Dave, but you're kinda stringy..."

She fell silent.
"Do you?" he whispered when he'd recovered from the shock. "Love me, I mean?"

"It's just an expression."

"Right. Well, then, I love you, Phyllis, but you're stubborn as an Army mule."

"Thank you," she said, a little breathlessly. "So they told you my name, then, David?"

"Yeah, mine isn't that different. It doesn't really count as getting me back."

He shivered. It really was very chilly, even under the thick poncho.

"You should get inside," she said, hearing his teeth chatter.

"You'll run away."

"So? Am I worth pneumonia?"

"If Lily found out I let you go she'd kill me anyway. Even bet."

"Well... come here, stupid."

He slid closer, trying to hide his eagerness. She ducked under the poncho and put her arms around him, wriggling her head through the wide opening beside his.

"It's just to keep you warm, don't freak out," she ordered.

"I'm not..." he gasped.

"Your heart's pounding. Calm down."

"It'll keep me warmer..."

"Fine, go ahead and panic. If you didn't want to have to be near me, you should have been a good boy and gone inside."

She settled against his shoulder. *Just to keep me warm, huh?* he thought, sighing softly. Who was he kidding? He wanted it to mean something else but there was just no way.

"You can put your arm around my back instead of hanging there like a scarecrow. I won't slap you."

He hadn't been sure she wanted any man touching her, much less one she fought with all the time. He gently put his arm around her, squeezing a bit more than he'd intended. She said nothing.

They must have been there an hour by his reckoning when Rabbit entered the cemetery and looked down at them. Dave couldn't make out his expression.

"She asleep?" he asked Dave.

"Yeah, sounds like it... Lily told you, I suppose?"

"Yeah, she did. She couldn't take it any longer. So I stepped outside and saw you sittin' here. Pretty easy."

"I'm glad your eyes still work... My arm is cramping from holding her on this sculpture."

Rabbit helped him get out of the poncho and lifted Sunshine gently in his arms. Dave trailed along
behind his uncle, carrying her pack.

"You talk her out of it?" Rabbit asked.

"I don't know what I did. We talked and she decided I needed warming up because I was wet and got all snuggly with me."

"How'd y-y-you get all wet?"

"I... fell into the pond..."

"Fell in looking for her, you mean?"

"So what if I did?" he demanded.

"Aw, nothin'. Only you been f-f-fallin' into a lot of things lately, Davey boy."

"Shut up," Dave sighed.

"Y'know, I think you're about the only person who could have convinced her to stay."

"Me? She can barely stand me!"

"Yeah... Sunshine has a funny way of expressing herself..."

"Yeah, hilarious."

Dave opened the door. "Will you watch over her? Make sure she doesn't try it again?"

"Me?" Rabbit asked incredulously. "I'd make a lousy guard."

"What? Why?"

"Because I'd let her go."

"I thought you cared about her!" Dave hissed accusingly.

"I do," Rabbit said softly as he put her carefully into her bed. They slipped out of the room.

"Well, then?" Dave demanded.

"I was gonna have to say goodbye to her anyway. If there's even a chance she'll end up back with that son of a... well, I say if she wants to run away, I won't stop her."

"But... she could be in just as much danger running off alone!"

"I know!" Rabbit muttered. "But she was so scared..."

"Yeah."

"Well, we'll see what happens tomorrow. G-g-go get some shut-eye."

Rabbit stumped off down the hall. Dave turned toward his room. What if she woke and tried again? He crept back into her room and sat in the big plush chair they kept there. He was still damp and he'd have a wicked crick in the neck in the morning, but he'd sleep better here than in a separate room.

He watched her in the dim room. If things had been different, if he didn't know what he knew, he
might have thought about kissing her out there in the moonlight. But he couldn't imagine her wanting anyone near her. Not after what she'd been through.

He didn't care if he was stringy. He was a mechanic. Even if her dad was as big as a moose, a tire iron could still do a lot of damage...

Dave fell asleep listening to her soft breathing and imagining himself running in between her and her dad... sometimes pounding him, sometimes being pounded, either way being her hero.

--------

In the morning, he woke to the sound of Lily clapping her hands in front of his face. He jerked away and groaned. There was that crick in the neck!

He struggled to turn his head toward the bed and gasped.

"Sunshine!"

"Relax! She's having a shower."

"Ugh..." He sank into the chair and let out a long breath. "Thanks for freaking me out!"

"Don't mention it. Get cleaned up. Peter's picking her mom up from the airport."

"Oh... okay..."

"What happened, anyway? You found her, Rabbit came and told us... me and Qwerty. But how?"

"She just went to the pond. I... guess she was saying goodbye to... y'know..."

"David?"

"Dave, if you please..."

"No, I mean the baby..."

"What?"

"I thought you knew. I think it's a little creepy..."

He stared at her. "You're putting me on..."

"No," she muttered uncomfortably. "Sunshine told Mom to put David on the headstone. To be honest, I wasn't sure if it was because she wanted you dead, or... but no. She wouldn't use his grave like that, so I guess then it's because..."

"Because what?" he asked, wide eyed.

"Because of that book she likes. Dad's made scrambled eggs." She hurried out.

"What book?" he roared after her.

--------

Sunshine was in the library with her mother, Wanda, and Marie, for a few hours. Dave spent the time in the garage getting almost nothing done on his car... partially because of Rabbit and Jon sitting in it and playing drag race, and partially because he couldn't focus. Was she going to go with her mother...
after all?

He was called in to lunch, and to find out that she was. He didn't eat much.

There was good news, though, of a sort. Sunshine's mother had indeed left her father. In fact, she had reported him to the police after Sunshine ran away, and her mother caught him trying to do the same things to a young girl from the neighborhood. Their lengthy conversation involved whether Sunshine was willing to give evidence to prosecute.

She was. Dave was proud of her but nervous. What would they believe, when it came from a girl who had run away from home, gotten stoned and gotten herself knocked up? She wasn't exactly the girl next door. But he kept his mouth shut. He didn't want her to have to hide anymore. Maybe if she did this, she could start to get over it. Maybe someday she might even want a guy to touch her... He really hoped so. For reasons of his own.

They left the following morning. Dave offered to drive them to the airport. He felt stupid for it... what did he think was going to happen? She'd leave, either way, and he just stood more of a chance of tearing up in front of her.

But he did it. Her mom was a little creepy, varying between unwavering, almost challenging eye contact, and dropping her eyes too soon in a conversation. It bothered him, realizing she must have kept her eyes down a lot... down, turned away, and closed. But Sunshine had forgiven, or had done so enough to be willing to go back with her. It wasn't up to him...

As the plane boarded at last, he stood to say goodbye. Her mother glanced at him and said she'd be waiting on the plane.

"I meant it, y'know," he said as they stood by the gate. "If anything goes wrong, if he gets anywhere near you... just call and I'll come for you."

"I meant it, too... he's strong. He'd beat your face in."

"Not if I bring my dad to beat up your dad!"

She laughed. "The Spine? I can't imagine him hitting anyone..."

"He gave me a very careful spanking once that I'll never forget, but yeah." He grinned roguishly. "But Rabbit wouldn't hesitate."

"I'll be fine, Dave. Well... no sense dragging it out. Good-bye..."

"Bye..."

She turned to go.

"Sunshine!" he cried as she walked away.

"I have to go..."

"I know, but... I hate to ask this here, but... why'd you name him David?"

She smiled sadly and turned back to him. "In memory of dreams... I've always loved the name because of a book called Garden Behind the Moon. I first read it before the bad stuff started. After... everything went wrong, I used to dream I was there, that I was Phyllis and that David would come for me."
"Oh... I'm sorry..."

"And he did," she said softly. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him gently on the lips. His heart must have done a cartwheel, he was sure of it...

"Thank you. Tell everyone I love them, okay? I'll come back if I can, if things are different... Alright?"

"I... please do. I'd... we'd love that."

She smiled, blinking away tears, and hurried onto the plane. He watched it as it taxied away. He hoped she be able to do more for herself than he had done... He didn't want her to depend on any man, on anyone, to save her.

The plane roared down the runway. Dave stood at the big window long after the plane flew away, watching other planes without seeing them, letting one moment play over and over in his mind.
It's 1972 and about time some chassis got found...

"Pappy!"

"Hm?"

"Come on, Pappy, there's someone at the door."

Rabbit snuggled into his seat, in Qwerty's blue room, and in the HoW. Their interface had been refined since the incident with the letter. His little girl had been terrified when he couldn't get out on his own and didn't want it to happen again. He could control his avatar and his own body together or separately now. And right now his body was wrapped in wires in the HoW even as their avatars snuggled on a plump blue sofa.

She was taller now... at seventeen, she had decided she was done "growing" and had stopped when her avatar was around five feet, eleven inches tall; the height she felt was suitable for Rabbit's daughter. This had Lily beat by a good eight inches... and she was certainly done growing. He pushed that thought out of his mind, or tried to... He thought of it all too often now.

Lily wasn't well. Of course, she'd never been well, really. She was a plump and rosy little girl, though, full of life and energy. These days, she moved with the calm of an old woman. He remembered Pappy had gotten like that... and Peter III... he closed his eyes tightly for a moment, filing the pain away to be addressed when he had to and not one second sooner.

"Pappy!"

"Sorry, baby... who's at the door?" he murmured, resting his head on hers.

"A man with a parcel."

"Oh. That's nice."

"You need to go help, Pappy."

"Why? Anyone can take a parcel. Or they can leave it on tha stoop."

"It's special. Please, Pappy."

"How d'you know?"

"I promise. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Why?"
She sat up and kissed him on the nose. She looked so much like her mother... if Honey could see her now! He smiled indulgently at her.

"You'll understand. Alright?"

He laughed. "Alright, baby. Tomorrow."

She severed the link and he rose reluctantly from the loosening bundle of wires. It wasn't easy... his temporary chassis hadn't worn well. It was never meant to be worn for three solid years...

He trudged to the door, gave a wave, and headed for the elevator.

By the time he got downstairs, Wanda was struggling with the tape.

"Ugh, I hate this tape with the strings in it!" she groaned, brushing strands of blue hair out of her face. "Rabbit! Perfect! Can you slice this open?"

He trundled over to the box and extended a needle-like finger. In a few slashes, the tape was cut to ribbons.

"What's in it?" he asked eagerly, peeling scraps of sticky string from his hand.

Wanda began to rummage inside the foam peanuts as others began to trickle into the entrance hall. Lily and her parents came in through the front door. They had started taking daily walks. Marie said it was because she needed to lose a few pounds but she hadn't gained weight as far as Rabbit could tell; she hadn't even aged since their return. Just like Wanda.

No, most likely they were hoping Lily would improve if she got out more. Her cheeks were pinker, he noted to his satisfaction. Maybe it was working...

"Unkie Rab-" she began.

"What's in the box?" crowed Jon, running into the room with Peter slipping in behind.

"Oh, good, you're with us today," Rabbit said, giving Lily a careful hug as she rolled her eyes at the interruption... or away from Peter. He wasn't sure. She'd never had much use for him.

But Rabbit was genuinely glad Jon seemed so lucid today. He varied between extremes most days... sometimes almost nonverbal in his calmness, a few hours later singing to leaves out in the yard. But there was usually a balance; the worst thing he'd done since he'd received the Valium was to have a long conversation with Colonel Walter... apparently, from his responses, two sided... and later had to be reminded that his Pappy had died in 1942.

"Aha!" cried Wanda.

Rabbit released Lily and leaned in to look. She was holding a copper faceplate.

"Is... izzat..."

The last thing Rabbit heard was the sound of screaming, a deafening thud, and Peter barking, "Robots can't faint!"

--------

"Rabbit? Come on, big brother..."
"Jon?" he groaned, but when his eyes activated, he saw The Spine. "Did you just call me big brother?"

The Spine smiled and jabbed a thumb toward Jon, who wiggled his fingers at him. "We were worried, Rabbit. I think that temporary chassis is putting too much strain on your systems."

"I do alright..." Rabbit said defensively. He'd allowed the installation of the parts but he hadn't allowed maintenance. That involved being on a slab... just like in Vietnam. No matter how familiar the surroundings, as soon as he looked up into the overhead lights, the panic started. He didn't even want to be there in stasis now. It wasn't like he had Honey to comfort him...

It came back to him in a flash. "My chassis! They found it!"

The Spine laughed. "It's all there, Rabbit! Peter was saving it for a surprise. He heard about it a month ago and sent them the specs to make repairs and a few Walter approved adjustments... nothing strange, alright? No weapons, just things to make you move more smoothly, streamline your form. I think Pappy would have liked the designs. Anyway, Peter did it because he's had time to study your structure and says you should have been a lot more flexible all along, so yeah. Had the whole thing sent in secret as a surprise. No one expected you to keel over, though."

"Wait, you knew? What about surprisin' you?"

"They're... well... They're keeping mine."

"What?"

"I practically got a brand new one after the war, Rabbit. And most of it was already Walter property. Once they got their upgrades back, the higher ups said that was it. No more putting expensive machinery into a singing robot and sending him off to California to make babies with it."

"Aw, come on..." Rabbit groaned, putting his hands over his face.

"That's how Jim explained it," The Spine chuckled, clearly unperturbed. "I haven't missed having a nuclear reactor tucked in my arm. I'm not complaining. Good riddance, let them keep that crap in storage, just keep it away from me!"

There was a hard edge to his voice as he said it... Rabbit realized he'd been relieved the whole time, even before they'd re-plated him. It was also a good thing Rabbit hadn't chosen to self destruct back in Vietnam. He'd been worried about taking out the peninsula. He could have taken out the whole planet!

It was a lot to take in. "What happens now?" he asked, afraid of the answer.

"Well, if you're okay with it, Peter and I will call in some help and get to work putting you back together."

"Help? What help?"

"Oh, Armand, Louise, Dave if he can get away between classes. Wanda and Lily are already in there with him, setting up."

"That's assuming a lot."

"No, I think it's not. You want to be able to move again, don't you? Sing and dance, run? You haven't run since you've been home. That's got to be bothering you."
"Don't you want your body back, Rabbit?" Jon murmured at last. "You hate it when I have to help you up the stairs..."

"Don't have to help me. I let you help me..."

"Don't split hairs, Rabbit," The Spine interrupted. "You'll be shut down before you even enter the room. I also have an option if you're still worried... Qwerty. You can interface with her while we work. She can even keep you updated on our progress, but you would be in full shutdown and have no awareness of it..."

"Yes!" Rabbit said suddenly. "Tha-that one... please..."

"Alright." The Spine smiled and helped his brother stand. "Come on, Rabbit. It's about time you got back to being the life of the party."

"You bet your sweet..." He glanced around.

"Lily's in the workshop, remember?" said The Spine, putting a supportive arm around Rabbit. The Jon did the same on the other side. Rabbit knew they were holding him up even though they were just acting friendly. His knees had been buckling lately...

"Oh, right," Rabbit murmured, trudging between them.

"But she's a big girl now. I don't suppose you have to watch your language around her. Much."

"Eh, it still seems wrong to cuss like a sailor around my little niece. Hey, ain't ya gonna call Armand and Louise?"

The Spine grinned. "They're already on their way! Louise said it was just like hearing there was a baby on the way."

Rabbit chuckled. "She should know... she came runnin' when it was Lily."

"Yeah..."

They fell silent. Lily had been mentioned before, but there was something about thinking about the beginning of her life that seemed to bring to mind the topic of how it would end... and how soon.

"They're starting, Pappy."

"Don't tell me all the dirty details, baby. I feel weird enough."

"But it's wonderful, Pappy! You'll be whole, just like before. No, wait, you'll be better than before."

"Wasn't anything wrong with me before..." Rabbit muttered.

"I know, Pappy. But you'll be able to move so much better..."

"How much better? I won't have to learn everything from scratch, will I?"

Qwerty fell silent, snuggled against his shoulder. She could hear Peter and the others outside in the HoW, where they had decided to perform the installation so that Rabbit could be eased through it by his daughter. She didn't know what to tell him... There was a chance that he would have a period of adjustment. She felt a deep doubt as to whether Peter should have allowed anyone but a Walter to
touch Rabbit's chassis.

Mostly because she had suggested it.

She was tired of her parents being afraid of the world. They had each seen so much and their response had been to hide inside themselves, sometimes literally. Whereas she would do almost anything to get out into the world, see things, feel things... It wasn't that she didn't feel, or wasn't content. But she sometimes envied her cousin's ability to walk anywhere she wanted. She was out there now, helping Peter, handing him tools and making adjustments of her own... standing right next to him...

"What's wrong, baby? Is there something you're afraid to tell me?"

Qwerty looked up at him hesitantly. "N-no, Pappy..."

"You stuttered..." he breathed. "Are... are you okay? Are you feeling any memory loss? How's your core?"

"Pappy..." she groaned.

"Sorry..." he sighed, holding her close. "I just... you remember how she was, honey. Stuttering more than I did, even."

"I know, Pappy." He didn't stutter here, of course; it only seemed to affect his vocal assembly.

"So what is it, baby? Am I gonna have that much trouble and you don't wanna say it?"

"Maybe..." she mumbled.

There were other questions she had, ones that she could have asked her mother. But Rabbit? She wasn't sure about him. He was so fragile right now... literally. And it wasn't the same, discussing certain things with him. Things she couldn't even say to Lily...

"Well, that's okay," Rabbit said calmly. "I guess it was gonna feel weird anyway. That's life, right? Things change, sometimes they get better, sometimes worse. This is better. And Peter knows what he's doin'. I've seen him."

"Yes, he does. He's... wonderful."

"Yeah. He really is. He's a great kid."

"Yeah..." she whispered.

They sat in silence as the work carried on.

Dave went out and got pizza after the installation. Rabbit had asked them, through Qwerty, to wait until morning to power him on. According to her, they were curled up on a couch napping. Peter commented for the nth time how much he wished he could see her inner world. Qwerty didn't respond.

The next morning, Rabbit was carefully dressed and switched on. The Spine and The Jon stood by to help him take his first steps in his newly designed old chassis. Certain pieces of hardware had been added to accommodate it and they knew there would be trouble if it felt too strange, but Rabbit smiled as he powered on and stretched as he sat up. He wobbled a little and The Spine steadied him.
"Thanks, buddy. Whew, I feel kinda... dizzy? Is that possible?" He rattled his head. "I think that's what you call it..."

"I can see that," Peter said. "The whole thing has been smoothed and some springs and bands have been added for flexibility. It wasn't easy. I looked for your original blueprints but there's so many places around here they could be. But it seems the Colonel gave you the strangest framework..."

"I-I-like to think of it as advanced, thank you," Rabbit scoffed, wriggling his fingers smoothly. "Say, that's nice... look at those, that's supple stuff there, baby."

"I don't mean it as a criticism, Rabbit. I just mean that the shape isn't what I expected... It's... well..."

"Feminine," said Louise, grinning.

"You can't please some people," Rabbit said dismissively. He jumped up from the table all at once and fell flat on his face.

There was a flurry of activity as his brothers lifted him and Peter, Armand, Louise and Lily all at once began to scold him for risking damage to his freshly installed face plate. Marie, Wanda and Dave sat back and laughed. Norman looked on benignly.

"Does this look feminine?" Rabbit challenged as his brothers held him steady. He whipped his newly oily hips in his best Elvis pelvis flip and grinned.

"Yeah, it does," Louise chortled.

"Tell that to the ladies," he said loftily. "Well, come on, guys. Let's learn to wa-wa-walk so's I can get out there and make women faint."

To his surprise, The Spine smiled and said, "You got it, Rabbit."

Chapter End Notes

Because it just seems to me that if Rabbit had known all along, she would have said something. So for now, male!Rabbit. I also figure there would be a point where they'd find out and rather than having some earth shattering moment of epiphany, Rabbit would shrug and say, "Meh. Whatever. It's all good."
Everybody's going to the Clockwork Vaudeville...

Chapter Summary

Facing the crowd once again...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

San Diego, 1900:

"Are you ready, boys? The crowd is just getting settled."

"Crowd?" asked The Spine apprehensively.

"The audience, stupid," said Rabbit, slipping his hands into the straps of his squeezebox. His hat slipped over his eyes. He swore out loud.

"Rabbit!" snapped Colonel Walter. "There are children in the house! And some of San Diego's wealthiest..."

"Sorry, Pappy! It just slipped out!" Rabbit cried, his voice trembling as he used the squeezebox to push up his hat.

"You spent too much time in the bilge on the way back from Africa... I guess knowledge is power but..." The Colonel sighed, gently patting Rabbit's shoulder. "That hat doesn't fit, does it? Just watch your language, son."

Rabbit smiled; a grisly sight, as he knew. The Colonel flinched a little but smiled back.

Rabbit didn't know what butterflies in the stomach felt like, but there were plenty of bubbles in his boiler... Suppose they were scared? Even his Pappy had said he hoped the audience wouldn't be close enough to get a good look at the snaggle-toothed leer, but he'd spent so much money fine-tuning their motor skills that he'd only had enough left to cover The Spine's rather terrifying silver skull plate. Rabbit and Jon, he'd said, were just a little peculiar looking. The Spine looked like the Grim Reaper...

But not now... He blinked his new eyelids at Rabbit now with a perpetually surprised expression... his eyebrows weren't quite done yet, not quite under The Spine's control. The lowest setting made him look sullen, at the middle setting he appeared disapproving. So the Colonel had settled on the highest. He flexed the new lower jaw assembly in an awkward smile, looking more frightened than frightening, and Rabbit had a feeling that was about right.

He turned to Jon and shrugged. "Ya ready, lil guy?"

Jon grinned, and despite his primitive structure, he looked sweet and childlike. But that was Jon.

"I'm so excited!" he said, bouncing in place.

"Great!" Rabbit said happily.
"Yeah..." murmured The Spine, looking down at his banjo.

Rabbit pulled one hand carefully from the squeezebox and put his arm around his brother. "Yehr go-gonna be great, buddy!"

The Spine sighed; a habit he'd been affecting for the last year. It was effective, though. Rabbit gave him a squeeze and looked up to see his Pappy smiling at them.

"What is it, Pappy?"

"I just... You amaze me every day, Rabbit. You all do. It's time to go on... boys."

He hesitated, his eyes lingering on Rabbit for a moment. There was a look of... he wasn't sure. He was still new, and human feelings were complicated. It was a look of not happy... but what was it?

"Yeah, Pappy?"

"Boys," the Colonel said firmly. "I love you. Good luck."

He waved for them to follow. They rose and obeyed.

"Why did Pappy look so strange when he called us boys, Rabbit?" asked The Spine.

"Eh, it's because we're robuts. Hope I do-don't stutter on stage."

"You never do when you sing, and the maid thinks it's cute when you do it anyway."

"Yeah, but she's paid to think that..."

"We're gonna sing for the people!" Jon crowed.

"Shush!"

"The people... Rabbit..." The Spine stopped. "I can't do it!"

"What?"

Jon trotted past them after the Colonel. Rabbit grabbed The Spine by the arm.

"Come on, they're waiting!"

"I-I-I-I-I..."

"Oh, no, I'm the one with the stutter," Rabbit joked nervously.

"Ca-ca-ca-ca-ca-ca..."

He thumped his brother hard in the side of the head. The Spine snapped out of his loop and thumped Rabbit right back.

"You'll dent my new face plates!" he snapped, shoving Rabbit away.

"That's the old captain! Come on, you fought monsters, ya dummy! You can do this! Fight the fear!"

"You're so corny..." The Spine said grumpily.

"I'm gonna play better anyway," Rabbit said, slipping his hand back into its strap.
"What? All you play is that stupid squeezebox..." The Spine's mouth snapped shut.

"Oh, now the truth is revealed! I'm gonna play rings around you with this stupid squeezebox, just watch."

"Boys!" hissed The Colonel. They could hear the crowd murmuring beyond the wings.

The Spine grinned; instinctively, naturally, his new faceplates spreading seamlessly in the most human expression Rabbit had seen from any of his brothers. He thought of telling him, but he'd get self-conscious again...

"Just try it!" he said slyly and hurried out onto the stage after The Jon, waving at the crowd.

"I did it!" gasped Rabbit. "I actually talked him out there..."

"You did, Rabbit."

Rabbit beamed and started out onto the stage. The Colonel caught him in a quick embrace.

"Pappy..." Rabbit whispered.

"I'm very proud of you. Go on, son..." The look again. "Go on, Rabbit."

Rabbit didn't have time to be confused. He hurried out and the crowd stared and then clapped politely. He smiled, just a little smile this time, just in case, and waved brightly. There were a few familiar faces from times they'd practiced in the park and from those parties the cheers were most enthusiastic, especially when they launched into "Clockwork Vaudeville."

The war had felt wrong. They had fought because they had to, because they could. But this was what they were made for. This was what all the music lessons had led to... The Spine showed no signs of fear. The Jon beamed at the children. And Rabbit...

Rabbit was home.

San Diego, 1974:

"We're on in five, Rabbit."

"Spine... wait..."

"Something wrong? I thought you were excited..."

Rabbit shook his head. "Spine... it's been a long time... we're different. Everything is different. What if they hate us?"

"Rabbit!" laughed The Spine. "You've never been afraid before..."

"The-the-there's a first time for everything."

"You'll be great. One swing of those hips..."

"You hate it when I do that," Rabbit said flatly.

"But they don't. I think you've actually made women ovulate doing that..."
"Made them what?" Rabbit snorted.

"Never mind, it was a weird thing to say..." He shook his head.

"You're nervous, too."

"Yeah."

"How's Jon?"

They both turned to look. He was sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, murmuring to himself.

"With anyone else I'd call it hippie bullsh- Well, nonsense, anyway... but if it keeps him still..."

"They can't hear us in here, Spine. Go ahead an' cuss."

"Guess we've both learned a lot since that first concert," The Spine said with a grin.

"I've always thought the art of manly swearing kinda suited you, bi-bi-big guy."

"The Hell it does."

They both snickered stupidly and Jon opened one eye at them... and closed it again.

"Thought so..." Rabbit murmured. So much for deep meditation.

Peter hurried in and Rabbit almost gasped out loud. He'd forgotten how much Peter looked like his great-grandfather. Of course, he looked more like him at the moment because he was wearing a white Nehru jacket and he'd swept his long hair back into a ponytail... but one little tuft at the hairline just wasn't cooperating.

"I see it, Rabbit. Looks just like him..." The Spine said quietly.

"Hey, guys! The crowd is going nuts!"

"Looks can be deceiving."

"Well, they're excited, anyway..."

"Are the others seated?"

"Marie is right up front, along with Dave and Lily. We put Norman and Wanda in a box."

"You what?" Rabbit gasped.

"The box, the seats on the walls, Rabbit," laughed The Spine. "It hasn't been as long as all that!"

"Oh." Right.

Jon, still in the lotus position, snickered.

"Did you save yourself a seat next to Lily?" Rabbit asked slyly, trying to pass off the embarrassment to someone else.

"What?"

"Rabbit..." The Spine said warningly.
"Nothin'. Hey, what about Qwerty?"

"She's connected by camera. Cost me a fortune..."

"I'll make it up, okay?" Rabbit promised. "She really wanted to see the show..."

"It's alright. Come on!"

They hurried after him, just as they had followed their Pappy decades before. The Spine put his arm around Rabbit as they walked.

"I'm still gonna play you into the ground, Rabbit."

"Just try it."

The Spine grinned; still the most human expression Rabbit had ever seen. And Rabbit grinned back and hoped he looked absolutely terrifying... even though he knew he looked fantastic.

"We're gonna play for the people!" Jon whispered. "Rabbit... I'm kinda scared..."

"After all that meditating?"

"I was just holdin' really still..."

"Yeah, I figured. It's alright. You can be mellow or go all dreamy or dance for no reason or say weird stuff. They'll eat it up. We'll cover for you."

"I guess..."

"Trust me."

"Trust you?"

"Trust me, too," said The Spine. "It'll be alright. You're not in this alone."

"Okay."

Rabbit rolled his eyes irritably. "Oh, sure, when The Spine says it..."

"He said it better. His sounded like something on a poster..."

Peter shushed them. He'd hired someone to announce them... money was tighter lately but he had the most terrible stage fright...

"As seen on the Ed Sullivan show, back from their hiatus, San Diego's treasure, The Steam Man Band!"

The crowd cheered. Rabbit giggled softly as he hurried out onto the stage. He could see familiar faces in the crowd... older, but familiar... some with kids they hadn't had last time.

Just like me... he thought. He looked at the camera, fitted into the back of the auditorium, and gave a graceful little curl of his fingers. It looked like part of the act but Qwerty knew he was waving at her; they'd agreed on it ahead of time.

They launched into Clockwork Vaudeville, just as they had at their first concert. Rabbit played the melodica now... he hadn't been able to manage a harmonica but the sound added something. And the
audience beamed, just as they had then.

Once more, even more here than in Walter Manor, he was sure... Rabbit was home.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I threw in a little quote from "A Way into Your Heart."
Peter has spent an awful lot of time researching Blue Matter... and how it interacts with organic matter. But his research has yielded just one thing... an unexpected attachment to his test subject.

A possible explanation for why Peter Walter V is not reported to have gotten married until 1986, at age 39.

Edit: I feel like I need to throw in a few disclaimers as this fic goes on. I've written characters with all kinds of moral views that don't reflect my own. Rather than take this whole fic down, I just want to say from time to time that I totally do not think making private vows is equal to a marriage ceremony in real life and that you ought to wait to have sex until you're married. Call me a dinosaur or whatever but I just think it's an act that needs to be part of that level of commitment. And yeah, there are unmarried people who are just as committed. And at the very least don't treat it like a danged hobby or a need or a right... bad stuff comes from thinking you're entitled to it and that's a fact. And I further do not recommend too large of an age gap unless you're older yourself because that's kinda awkward right there.

So, yeah, for the record, those are my beliefs. I guess I was just worried that here I was having fun writing these little cozy ships and yet people of most any age can read this.

However, I write about a variety of people, and robots and their unlikely offspring can't exactly do things the legal way so...

February 1969:

Lily hurried from the ballroom in Walter Manor. She'd had enough dancing to last a lifetime.

At least, enough dancing with Peter Walter!

She made her way to the Hall of Wires to see Qwerty. The room brightened as she entered.

"Lily! Tel me whut is hapening!"

"I'll tell you what is happening! Mr. Wonderful is happening! Peter just... ugh! All he talks about is that girl..."

"Whut grl?"

"He's got some girlfriend from college and he thinks she's so great and talks about how she said his
hair is cute when it's short because she can see his eyes. I like it when it gets in his eyes."

"Me 2."

"And I'm just a teenager here, I don't want to hear all this crap!"

"Rite!"

Lily sat heavily in the beanbag she'd carried up earlier. "Why does he have to talk about her?" she sighed.

Qwerty stroked her head with a wire. Lily batted it away lightly.

"That tickles."

"Sorre."

She sat in silence as the HoW clicked and pinged around her. Finally she heard the teletype machine tick out a message.

"You lik him?"

"I lick him?"

"NO!"

"Oh... you mean like! Oh!" Lily gasped, blushing. "I... I don't..."

"You do. You lik Petr."

"Stop it!"

"Its ok."

"Is it? He's like, what, nine years older? So even when I get older, there's no way..."

"Mabbe."

"No. He'll always think I'm a kid. Mama would say I'll get over it, but what if I don't? I never meet any other boys! Maybe Peter isn't that great and I just haven't met enough guys to know it. I know he's a dork and he's a little too skinny and freaks out when anyone mentions sex..."

She could hear the electrical trill of Qwerty's laughter. "Yeah, and I'm pretty sure he's actually done it and he still can't talk about it. Dork."

"Y r humans afraid to dusquss procr8tion?"

"I don't know. I already know all about it. I even hope to try it someday." She pulled her legs up to her chest. "Unless he's married by then..." she muttered into her knees.

"whut?"

"Never mind..."

"Wel if Petr has had the sex than he can teech u..."

"Qwerty! You did hear me!"
"Yis. Do any humans hav the sex?"

"Just people who love each other..." She paused, thinking about some of the stories she'd read, and added, "At least, that's how it should be."

"So u lov Petr..."

"Shut up, Qwerty!"

Qwerty did, her wires waving in an awkward side to side swish. Lily sighed.

"I'm sorry."

"sokay."

The Spine rushed to the HoW. Lily gasped and snatched the paper from the teletype machine.

"Hi, Pappy."

"Hi, Airheart... Qwerty? Can you tell me which room The Jon is in?"

"Yes..."

They waited. After a minute, Qwerty typed, "Cant find him."

"No... Check again, please?"

"Not here, Uncle."

He ran from the room without another word.

Lily hastily crumpled the printout and took it to the furnace room before anyone could see it.

June 1974:

It was good to be back in his own lab. The tour had gone well enough, but he had a feeling it wouldn't last. The crowds had been older people, sometimes with their children and grandchildren, but almost no young crowds. Music had gone a different direction. Even if the robots, with their usual skill, managed to crank out a few hits in the current styles, they weren't going to attract young crowds unless they had manes of long hair, tight pants, lots of bright spotlights and screamed everything they sang.

And screaming robots would not end well.

He started organizing parts he'd left sitting in the rush to leave. They'd been there for a few months but they weren't dusty... he supposed Lily had kept an eye on things. It had to be Lily; she was the one who knew he didn't like the tools moved from where he left them...

"Peter?"

"That you, Lily?" he called back, looking up.

She walked into the lab and he couldn't breathe. He swallowed hard.

She looked so grown up! Why hadn't he noticed before? He'd only been away for a few months...
"Hey! How'd the tour go? Pappy said it was great but I thought maybe it was different for you."

Her sweater hugged her shape. She had a shape. He knew she had one but...

"Cat got your tongue?" she asked, sitting beside him. He looked away.

"Oh, um, no... I've just been away so long..."

"Y'know, you have. Aunt Wanda says it's only been three months but it felt longer."

"Yeah... it really did."

"It's good to have you back. So... there any science projects lined up?"

"Lily? How have you been feeling?"

"Alright, I guess. Y'know, considering."

"Are the walks helping?"

"I don't know if they help physically, but I enjoy them. That helps, right? Keeping your spirits up?"

He looked at her again and his heart pounded. When had it happened? When had he fallen? He'd missed her so much... He'd thought of her frequently but hadn't attributed it to anything unusual. He'd wanted to talk to her but he hadn't thought it was excessive...

She smiled. "Maybe we should start tomorrow. You look exhausted." She took him by the hand. "Come on, Petey boy, let's go to bed."

He felt the heat spreading, starting somewhere around his ears.

"Or maybe you need some water?" she asked, frowning.

"I'm fine. I'll head for bed, okay? You can go back to whatever you were doing..."

"I wasn't doing anything. I don't mind going back to that," she said with a mischievous smile. "Or maybe I'll read."

"Good... good. See you later."

She squeezed his hand and walked out with a little wave. Peter sank back onto his stool and stared at the doorway.

He sighed, a long, slow breath. New projects were forming in his mind... ones related to studies he'd done in the past. The focus: improving absorption of Blue Matter, or facilitation of independence from it. Either would work. Either would prolong her life. He simply had to prolong her life.

"Lily... I love you... that can't be right... When? Wouldn't I have noticed?"

October 1975:

Lily sat on the grass, feeling the wind on her face. It was good to be alive. It had to be... she didn't do much else.

Not that she was unhappy. But she knew better than anyone in Walter Manor, or so she thought, the
importance of making the most of life. She really wasn't sure how much she had left.

She saw Peter coming across the grass and sighed. Time to be a guinea pig again. She preferred being a scientist... she knew as much about the research as Peter did and they had worked side by side for years now. Sometimes they sat around in the evenings, drinking coffee and laughing about the day's mistakes... It was almost like they were married.

Almost...

But now he wanted to bring her in and shine lights on her and stick little sensors to her head with Vaseline. She groaned and flopped back onto the grass, looking up at the sky through the tree branches. She heard the soft crunching of the grass under his feet. A moment later, to her surprise, he lay down on the ground beside her.

He said nothing for a few minutes. She listened to him breathing. It would be lovely to just stay like this...

"Tired?" he asked, putting his arms behind his head.

"Not so much today. In fact, I think I'd like to take a trip to Vegas."

He chuckled. "In your mind, maybe. Even if you were up to it, I wouldn't risk it. Rabbit would insist on going and blow a wad on blackjack."

She giggled despite the odd sinking feeling his words gave her. She never went anywhere, never did anything... much less with Peter.

"Peter? Can't we go somewhere? Los Angeles? Tijuana? Temecula for crying out loud?"

He sat up on one elbow, looking down at her. "I have a battery of tests planned for this afternoon..."

"That you won't get me in to do whether you take me somewhere or not," she responded petulantly.

"Me?" he cried. "I thought you meant... you want me, specifically, to take you somewhere?"

She looked up at him, at the loose hairs drifting around his cheeks. She liked him with long hair... He needed a shave... She felt like touching the stubble but didn't. She wasn't sure how he would respond... but sometimes she was sure... She couldn't believe his obsession with curing her Blue Matter dependence was just scientific interest. She was just certain he felt something... He was older, sure, but she was no child.

"Lily? You home?"

"I want to live, Peter," she said suddenly.

He chuckled, sounding relieved, and lay back again. "That's the idea! That's what I'm trying to accomplish..."

"No... you're trying to prolong my life. I want to live my life! I want to go out and choose the best basket of strawberries, and sing, and carry shopping bags, and talk to strangers and see things and... and feel things..."

"Feel things? Like what? Like... soft things? Or mud in your toes, rain on your face? What?"

She groaned in frustration and sat up, wrapping her arms around her knees.
"What did I say?" he asked rather pitifully. He sat up beside her.

"Nothing. Look, can we just go out this afternoon? Somewhere simple, somewhere besides Balboa Park? I can take it."

"Well, we could go to Temecula, if you really want. It's not very exciting, but we can see what they do have. It isn't far. Oh, but on one condition... that you cooperate with today's tests when we get back."

"Alright. It's worth it."

"Right, then! It's a date."

They froze as one. She saw that his face had turned bright red. Hers felt unusually warm...

He smiled sheepishly and stood, holding his hand out to her. She accepted it and he helped her stand. She looked up at him... he was so tall! He looked away quickly, still smiling. They walked into the house together.

It took her a few muddled minutes to realize he was still holding her hand.

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Four hours later, she was sitting calmly with sticky sensors positioned around her chest area. She'd had a marvelous time... her standards were very low, Peter had assured her. But just the drive itself had been wonderful. The rush of air blowing in the windows, her blood pumping, the roar of the engine. Peter had borrowed Dave's car and it made a beautiful noise thanks to his hard work...

But she had to admit, she was tired. "How much longer?"

"Are you alright?" he asked, looking up worriedly.

"Just a little tired."

"Alright, we'll quit in ten minutes. I just need to see these results..."

She shifted in her seat. "Peter..."

"Hm?"

"I was thinking of asking you something..."

"You want to take me to the prom?" he asked, grinning.

"No, stupid... you need better jokes."

"Alright." He put a Blue Matter core carefully into her hand and observed its responses. "What did you want to ask?"

It just wasn't something you came out and said... Then again... at the rate things were going, she'd be saying it on her death bed. She'd tried hints, tried double entendre a couple of times, though she lacked Rabbit's natural knack for saying something dirty while sounding innocent. But Peter just didn't seem to get it. She was done being subtle.

"Peter... I've never even kissed a boy."
"Oh," he said blankly.

"And I mean... I'd like to..."

He frowned at her. "Any particular one?"

"Maybe..."

"Who is he?" he asked sharply.

"Peter!" she laughed. "I was just trying to point out that I haven't, and maybe it would be nice if... if I varied my experiences."

"By kissing this guy you met somehow?"

"I haven't met anyone, stupid! But actually, yeah, that, and... other things in that whole area of... look, there's just a lot of things I haven't done, alright? And I wanted you to know because you could... ugh. This just isn't coming out right..."

There was one long, heavy moment filled with soft bleeping of scientific apparatus. "Oh!" he cried. "You want to... Well... um..."

"Yeah, I know..." she muttered, her head turned away from him as she blinked away tears. "My health won't allow it..."

"Your health?" he gasped. "That's one obstacle, yeah! There also the little problem of finding someone to..." His eyes widened. "Oh... so that was what... We are talking about what I think we're talking about, aren't we?"

She turned toward him. He was pale.

"I don't know," she said brashly, feeling suddenly angry. "What do you think we're talking about?"

"You're not thinking... y'know..."

"What if I am?"

"And... and you're not thinking that I... I mean, unless there was another guy you had in mind..."

"Not really, no."

"Then you're suggesting that I..."

"That you what?"

"I'm not gonna say it..."

"Ugh!" she grumped.

"Lily..."

"Don't, okay? Don't pacify me or try to talk me down! If you don't want to then..."

"I never said..."

She wasn't hearing him anymore. Sound had gone funny. But she was still angry... "Honestly! You're just so..."
Her head was swimming. She reached out, she wasn't sure for what, and he caught her hand.

"Lily!" he cried.

She fell. Something caught her...

She woke up in her bed. Her parents were looking at her worriedly.

"Mama..." she said quietly. "What happened?"

"Peter said you overdid it a little, that's all," Marie said firmly. "We just wanted to make sure you were feeling better. We'll let you get some sleep."

Her mother always made it sound like everything was okay. Lily didn't know if she did it more for herself or for the rest of them. Her father, certainly... he looked down at her with a forced smile that hurt more than if he'd been crying.

"It's alright, Pappy," she said. "I feel better already. But where's Peter?"

"He carried you to bed and told us what happened... I guess he went back to the lab?" The Spine said, puzzled. "Odd behavior. Usually he hurries back to make sure you're alright..."

She didn't know which was more pathetic... that Peter had run away to hide or that there was a usual response to her fainting. What a life...

"I'd like to talk to him later. Could you tell him? I'm wide awake, I'll just read for a while."

"Alright, baby," Marie said as they walked out.

They were in the habit of indulging her. She tried not to take advantage but it could be very useful...

Peter finally turned up two hours later. She knew why... he was hoping she'd fall back asleep by then.

He looked in through the open door. "Oh!" he gasped, startled to see her looking back. "You're... you're still up..."

She laughed quietly. "Yeah. I am. Come on in. Shut the door."

He stopped in mid step. "I don't think so..."

"Oh, fine, leave it open then!" she huffed. "I could threaten you with a tantrum but I don't want to be like that..."

"Why stop now?" he chuckled nervously, sitting at her vanity table.

"Why are you clear over there?" she laughed.

"You know why," he said, looking her in the eye.

She sighed sharply. "Look about earlier... if you don't want to, just say so."

"I... maybe I misunderstood... This is embarrassing... were you just asking me to kiss you, or..."

"Or what?" she led.

"Were you maybe talking about sex...?" he whispered.
"Both. I was talking about both."

He put his hand over his eyes. "I didn't misunderstand..."

"You didn't. Peter... please... I wouldn't ask if I didn't think you were interested."

His hand dropped. "What?" he gasped.

"I think you want to... to make love to me, Peter. There have been times in the lab when I swear you could barely keep your hands off me."

He gasped sharply and jumped up to close the door unasked. Turning hastily, he hissed, "Are you trying to get me killed?"

She laughed. She couldn't help it. He hadn't even tried to argue with her... she had to be right! But he was so adorably flustered...

"Oh, Peter..." she groaned, as her laughter trailed off.

"Shush, dang it! Someone passing by might think we're... and we're not even because... I mean... considering..." He leaned against the door, rubbing his fingers roughly through his hair. "Look... if you're interested in some kind of romantic relationship, you don't start by telling a guy he can take you to bed if he wants to... I mean, is that what you want?"

"What? a romance?"

"Yes! I'd like to think that the sexual revolution hasn't eliminated the light and pleasant side of it. Are you telling me you want to be closer to me, or just that you figure I'm hard up enough to be happy to have you on demand?"

"Ugh! Now who's being gross about it? I'm saying that my life is uncertain and I don't want to waste any time... and that I care about you, and I think you care about me. So why linger over pretty words?"

He shook his head. "Lily... you're..."

"What? What am I? Irritating? Beautiful? Stupid? Sexy? Or..." She looked him in the eye. "Peter... I guess the question is, how do you feel about me?"

He said nothing, just looked away sharply. But she saw it, before he had the chance to hide it. Pain. Fear. A look she had seen in her father's eyes...

But oh so different.

She got out of bed and walked to him since it was clear he wouldn't be coming to her. "Are you afraid?" she said quietly, touching his face. His razor stubble tickled her hand. She liked it. The men in her life, most of them, couldn't grow hair at all...

He looked down at her. "For you, yes. I also don't want to be castrated."

She slid her arms hesitantly around his waist. She felt a shudder go through him. Was it fear, or...? "Oh, stop. You're safe..." she said, holding him tightly.

"Not if your father catches us... like this... much less the way you want things, Lily."

"The way I want things? Am I the only one who wants them that way?"
"I'd rather not discuss this now..."

"And I'd rather not wait..."

He touched her hair gently, almost reluctantly. She rested her head against his chest and heard him sigh deeply. But he didn't push her away.

"Peter..." she murmured, looking up once more, "will you at least kiss me?"

"You think you can start like that and seduce me by inches, don't you?" he whispered. "Lily... you're such a kid..."

"I'm not, though. I haven't been to you for years now, have I? I'm almost twenty years old and I've had a feeling for a while now that you... Look, you can kiss me... there's no harm in that."

"It won't work..." he insisted.

"Prove it."

"Nice try..."

She could feel his heart pounding. She closed her eyes and listened. He still wouldn't hold her, but it just felt so right to be holding him.

"Just one kiss," she murmured. "If nothing else, before I die..."

"Stop it! Just stop bringing that up!" he cried.

"Alright," she said soothingly. Maybe trying to find a way to prolong her life was the only thing that kept him from cracking up... "But just right now, just for this moment, one kiss, Peter. Even if I'm wrong and you don't love me the way I love you..."

Her heart jumped and she stopped talking. Neither of them had actually said it out loud before. He was looking at her in wonder.

"You love me?" he said weakly.

She pressed her face against his chest, embarrassed. "I hadn't meant to just blurt it out like that, but yeah, I love you. I guess I just sorta figured it was obvious."

He put his hands lightly on her back, as though he was afraid she would break. She could feel his breath. Was he smelling her hair? What was it with guys and hair? She was always reading that somewhere or other...

"How was it obvious?" he asked softly, gently tipping up her chin.

"Well... I could tell you had feelings for me. You do, don't you?"

"Yes... I do..." he sighed, and leaned toward her. She stood on tiptoe and pulled him closer. Their lips touched lightly and he shivered. She was nervous but pressed her lips against his firmly. He drew back a little and resumed more gently, guiding... he'd had some experience... well, more than she did, of course. She felt a little giddy, a little light-headed, but it wasn't like when she had a leak. It was her first kiss... and not with some awkward boy back in her teens, like most girls seemed to do, but with a grown man who loved her...

She pulled back and smiled at him. His face was flushed.
"Thank you," she whispered, tears forming in her eyes. "If I never feel any more than that in my life, I'll never forget this one moment."

"Lily," he whispered hoarsely. "I've wanted to do that for so long... I didn't dare but..."

She kissed him again and her hair stood on end as his arms finally slid tightly around her, curling into her sweater, her hair. She felt his body shuddering against her, the strength in his embrace, and it made her a little afraid. He said it wouldn't work but something was definitely happening to him... It was overwhelming, but intoxicating, especially in light of what was happening to her. She could feel the blood coursing through her, tingles passing along her skin. She felt shivers where he clutched at her back.

This was what she had missed... This was being alive! She slid her hand down his back, found his backside and gave it a little squeeze, feeling rather wicked for it. His first response was to press against her... oh! She realized abruptly that she had definitely gotten a response from him and almost laughed... she'd read about those and she had questions, ones that she would ask him later... if her personal observations didn't answer them first.

His second response to the tweak on the bottom, interrupting her thoughts and the kiss alike, was a violent startle.

"No... oh, no no no... No, Lily!" he gasped, pushing her away... carefully.

She felt like weeping. It was all new to her, but what she had been feeling... it didn't just switch off, it didn't want to stop until... until what? Whatever it was, she wanted to feel it, it filled her with a hunger she couldn't identify and it almost hurt to deny it now... And she'd had enough confirmation, in the moment that he had pressed against her, that he wanted it, too... which was further confirmed as he sat hastily on her vanity stool again, crossing his legs self-consciously.

"Please don't let me go..." she said unhappily. "That's the most anyone has touched me in years! Everyone is afraid, like I'll break... I need touch, Peter! It's so cold being fragile, everyone's afraid to hold me properly anymore... I just need someone to hold me tightly sometimes, but... I want that and more with you! Please, Peter!"

"You don't realize what you're asking! We can't do this, okay?" he hissed. "We just can't!"

"Why?" she whispered angrily. "You've done it before, haven't you?"

"Well... yeah, but that's different..."

"This double standard! It's okay for a boy but not a girl! How does that even work?"

"I'm twenty eight, for one thing!" he snapped, folding his arms and leaning on his elbows, further concealing his lap. "And your parents raised you to be better than that..."

She sighed irritably. "I felt it, Peter. Y'know, it? You had it pressed right up against my stomach... You're a man, that's part of being a man... you don't have to tie yourself up in knots trying to hide it..."

He ignored her, remained in his awkward pose and continued, "And it isn't just that, Lily... There's your health..."

"I don't want to live a long life feeling nothing, Peter!"

"And I don't want you to end it in bed with me!" he said sharply. "Not like this... not... Lily, look,
you leak Blue Matter every time you get really worked up... I've seen a couple of wisps tonight, even. How do I know that when you... y'know... go..."

She rolled her eyes. "Are you referring to an orgasm?" she said harshly. "I have been educated y'know."

He put his hand over his eyes and sighed. "I get that you know all the big words but could you just keep it down? Please?"

"Fine..."

"But that's just it..." He lowered his hand and looked at her with tears sparkling in the corners of his eyes. "What if it's too much, Lily? If we do this and it's too much for you, you might jettison so much matter that you die in my arms!"

"What a lovely way to go..." she breathed. But his tears struck her to the heart.

"For you maybe! You can't ask me to do it, not if you love me. If you died... You can't expect me to be able to live with that!"

"Oh..." she whispered, sinking onto her bed.

It hit her all at once. He was right. She couldn't. She wanted so much to be with him... and she wasn't afraid of the consequences. For herself, at least. But now...

Peter mopped his eyes fitfully with his sleeve and glanced uneasily down at his lap. As he uncrossed his legs, he said, "You get it now? It isn't that I don't want to, I promise it isn't. I... um... guess you know that already..."

"Yeah..." she said dully. She'd felt rather flattered that he'd responded so quickly... but if he could stop himself, even after that... he must really be afraid...

"Believe me, if things were different... If you had anything else besides this... if you were actually sick, instead of the way you are... Well, it doesn't matter. This is what we have to deal with..."

He was babbling. "I'm so sorry, Peter," she murmured thickly, looking at the floor. "Maybe you'd better go before Pappy comes to check on me..."

"Lily... I'm sorry..."

"Just go."

"I love you. For what it's worth, I really do love you. I just wanted you to know," Peter sighed.

He got up and walked slowly out.

She waited until he'd gone to have her cry.

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Peter walked out of Lily's room with a deep feeling of regret. Regret for having to walk out when he wanted so much to stay. Regret for being unable to give her what they both wanted. Regret for having ever let her realize that he loved her. It was only making her more unhappy...

And she'd seemed so happy until then. But of course... the brave face. Her parents needed to believe she was happy being cooped up in a manor house in San Diego. Strong individually, stronger as a
couple, and weak when it came to their child. And so, to all appearances, Lily Walter was happy.

Lily Walter. She already had the right name and everything... He shook his head. It was complicated and a little creepy. They weren't really related... They'd grown up together, but they weren't siblings, not even cousins. She'd seemed so young for so long and then one day he turned toward her and couldn't speak... he just stared at her until she looked up and noticed and he looked away, still processing what he had felt. All at once, he'd realized they'd worked together in the lab for years, and that she wasn't a child, and, most shocking... that he loved her so much that the thought of her life being cut short early rendered him almost unable to function.

Just like that. *I love you, Lily... and I have no idea when I started. Maybe I always did...*

He walked around the corner and found himself face to face with Rabbit.

"Come on, Petes," the automaton said. "We g-g-gotta talk."

"Not now, Rabbit, please..." he said wearily.

"Oh, yeah, now. Come on."

Rabbit turned and slumped away in that curious way he had and Peter sighed and followed him out to the duck pond.

"Alright, now what?" he asked as they leaned against the big stone sculpture in the moonlit dimness.

"You're an idiot."

"And that concludes our conversation. Good night."

He turned to go and felt Rabbit's hand clutch his arm.

"Look, I've had a long day..." Peter muttered.

"This is important, Pete," Rabbit said seriously. His gleaming eyes were fixed on Peter's. "You love Lily, right?"

"Does everyone know?" he barked irritably, yanking his arm free.

"Pretty much. Oh, except, luckily for you, The Spine. It's impressive, really. Takes real skill to maintain blinders like those."

Peter sank back against the sculpture. "If you brought me here to threaten me and make sure I don't try any funny business, you don't need to..."

"No. That isn't it. Look, kid... we have great hearing... us robuts. We keep it turned down u-u-usually but sometimes ya crank it up because it's getting late and quiet and hear things ya never meant ta hear..."

"Oh, lord..." he groaned, hands over his face. "You heard..."

"The whole thing. Sorry, I shoulda shut it off but I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Why are you afraid, Peter?"

"You're the one with the super ears. You heard," Peter sulked, surfacing.

"Yeah. Look, I understand. Better than anybody in fact. When we found out that Honey was getting
worse, I didn't want to touch her. I didn't want to make her worse. I was afraid she'd die from the strain of those... y'know, the power surges..."

"Oh..."

"Yeah. I just wanted us to be together for as long as we could. But y'know what? The thing she was the most afraid of was goin' through the rest of her life without bein' close to me. She told Armand that and he told me. She didn't want to live without love, Peter. So even though I was scared... I went ahead and ma-ma-made love to her."

"That's different!"

"How? You got a woman you love, who's sick, who wants to get you into bed but she might die from it. Did I miss anything?"

"Yeah, I won't do it!" Peter cried. "I don't get you, Rabbit! You're her uncle! Do you really want me to just climb into bed with her?"

"She wants it. I think you were right not to do it just now, but..." Rabbit twiddled his thumbs nervously. "Yeah, Peter. I think you should... soon. Because she's a lot like Honey. She wants to live, not just be alive. And she loves you, ya lucky jerk. You're in love with each other. You shouldn't just sit tight when you have something like that..."

"But... look, even if it wasn't so risky, we'd have to get married first!"

"Why?"

"Rabbit! You're just... she's a good girl! And her mother would murder me if I slept with Lily without marrying her!"

"Only if her pappy didn't get to you first. But you forget an important lil detail."

"What?" asked Peter miserably.

"Lily don't exist. Not officially. You can't get a marriage license. It was different with her pappy. Three had lots of connections who helped get him married. But Lily... she was never supposed to have been possible. She has no birth certificate, at least, nothin' in any courthouse. Just an entry in an old family Bible collectin' dust in some old office. Her name ain't even really Walter. She wouldn't have a name if it weren't for those phony documents. David Walter is just a made up person. The Cav knows, and the government higher-ups, and they're both known for keeping things closer than their own skin. The real world don't believe in Lily Walter. Spine has been trying to hide her all her life."

"I believe in her," Peter sighed. "Look, Rabbit... what's your point? That there's no way we can do this right?"

"No, stupid. That if you want her to be your wife, you'll be just as legally married if you just promise yourselves to each other."

"Are you kidding? That's just... that's nonsense, that doesn't count."

Rabbit peered at him narrowly and Peter got the creepy feeling he'd just crossed a line. "It was good enough for me and Honey," Rabbit said coolly.

"That's..." He wasn't going to say it this time. Rabbit got snarky when he said it was different... and
he already sounded angry.

"And it ain't so dangerous," Rabbit said in a lighter tone. "I heard sex is good for humans."

"Some humans, maybe." Peter sighed. "I don't know. I guess if she kept calm... but sooner or later she'd probably reach... aw, man! Why am I even discussing this? Argh! I'm just torturing myself..."

Rabbit stared calmly down at Honeybee's headstone for a long time while Peter struggled with his frustration. He really did want advice, but how could he talk about sex to a robot? Yet here he was, feeling horribly awkward, trying to figure out how he could safely bed the robot's niece...

"Way I see it," Rabbit said, standing. "Either you keep doing the science and li-li-living with her while she gets more miserable, maybe shortens her life because she don't want to live this way... Or you go and hold her and stop letting her feel cold and lonely all the time, even though she's surrounded by people who are supposed to love her and keep her warm. You can keep her warm, Peter. You can at least do that. And a bright kid like you, well, I figure you can figure out enough to at least make sure she don't leak out all her Blue Matter... and you can make her happy the way I did with Honey. And if she don't live longer because of it, well... I'd be surprised." He started to leave.

"Did Honey live longer because you slept with her?" Peter asked harshly, no longer caring if he made him angry. Since when was sex necessary for happiness?

Rabbit stopped and turned back. "Yeah, she did. She got pregnant. She had a baby... and our ba-ba-ba-baby rerouted her brain patterns to give her more time, to lengthen her life. And when her mama died... our baby lived. And that means Honey's still here too. It won't happen that way with you, of course."

"Well... Rabbit... what were your vows?"

"That's pretty personal. I never told anyone that..."

"Sorry, you don't have to..."

"No, it's okay. I promised to love her, to be faithful, to trust her and never let her go again, until one of us passed from the earth. I didn't want that last part, but it made her happy to think I'd move on once she was gone." He chuckled sadly, looking down at the darkened grass. "I haven't. But she thought I would. I don't know who I'd love now."

"But... if you two slept together... don't you miss it?"

"Course I do. But I ain't got drives, see? Not like you meatbags. Us robuts, we don't have to deal with that. We like it but we don't need it."

Peter saw no reason to set him straight... Obviously Rabbit had no idea of the programming updates The Spine had received years before.

"Well... whatever you do, if you need someone to back you up with The Spine, call me," said Rabbit, turning once more. "Just do-do-don't piss him off too much. I can't beat him in a fair fight."

He walked back to the house, leaving Peter looking at the headstones. Endings all around him. Loving her was a lot like giving up on her... he'd have to concentrate on making sure she didn't die in bed rather than studying how to wean her from Blue Matter. Their lives would be about living instead of not dying. That was what she wanted...

And would Lily really die if he made love to her? She was willing to risk it. But he still wasn't.
You can keep her warm, Peter. It was better than nothing. And it was more than they had. And the thought of her sitting back in that lonely room after all that had been said... made him want more than anything to just hold her. Someone needed to.

He hurried back to the house.

--------

Lily couldn't sleep. She felt terrible, thinking only of herself. Poor Peter... of course he wouldn't want to... Who would?

There was a soft knock at her door. Peter looked in.

"What is it?" she said, a little coldly, sitting up.

"Lily... can I come in?" he asked gently.

"Well, yeah," she sighed. "What's going on?"

He closed the door and stood looking at her. "I'm sorry, Lily."

"You said that."

"Alright, then. I just wanted to tell you that... anytime you need someone to hold you, just ask."

"What?" she asked, frowning.

He moved closer. "If you just need a hug, or even if you want me to kiss you... I don't care if your dad sees us, or if he does tear me apart. I'm not going to let you be cold again."

"Peter..." she gasped.

He sat on her bed. "I love you, Lily. I love you so much... I..." He swallowed. "Look, I want you to marry me. I mean, if you want to."

She stared, stunned.

"I know we can't get a marriage license... But we can make vows. Rabbit and Honeybee did that, y'know. They were married... as much as they could be."

"Oh... I'd always wondered about that..." she said faintly. "But Peter... you're okay with it? With just being my husband, not being able to love me..."

"Of course I'll be able to love you! I love you now! And yes, I know what you mean. But I want us to have something... I want to be near you, at least. And maybe I'll figure out a way to make sure you'll be okay... I hope so."

So do I..

"Well, Lily? Will you marry me?"

"Oh! Of course, Peter!" she said in a trembling voice. "Should we... should we go ahead and make our vows or think for a while about what to say?"

He took her hand and kissed it. Her hair stood on end.
"I already know what I want to say," he whispered, looking into her eyes. "I solemnly promise you, Lily Walter... to be your husband, to love you, and hold you whenever you want me to, and trust you, to be faithful and to be your friend. As long as we live together, as long as you want me, I'm yours alone."

"Me, too," she choked. "I love you, Peter Walter, and I promise to be yours, always, to be your wife, and love you in any way I can, and hold you and be your friend and be faithful for as long as I have to live!"

"Lily..." he breathed, pulling her into his arms.

He kissed her and she felt warm all over. Then that was it. As far as she was concerned, they were married.

They slipped together back into the bed. Peter wriggled over a bit to keep from falling out, pulling her halfway on top of himself.

"Peter..." she gasped when she could breathe. She rested her head on his shoulder. "I meant it. I won't ask you again to make love to me..."

"I know," he whispered. "And despite how it looks right now... I don't dare try yet, okay? I need to think about a few things. If it's possible to keep you calm enough... I don't know. Sex isn't really calm..." He kissed her forehead. "I just need some time," he murmured at last.

"Alright, love." She giggled softly. She liked calling him that. "Love. Oh, we... um, probably shouldn't mention this to Pappy. Or Mama. Or anyone... About being married, I mean."

"No... it'll be our secret, for now. I don't think he ever much liked it when Rabbit and Honey did that... Oh... just so you know, Rabbit was the one who suggested this. So we have at least one person on our side."

She giggled again. "Who knew Rabbit would turn out to be Juliet's nurse and Friar Lawrence all rolled into one?"

He held her closer, sighing, and she realized with a pang that the comparison to Romeo and Juliet didn't please him one bit. But he said nothing, just stroked her hair and rested his head against hers.

"I'll just stay for a little while," he said sleepily. "If they find me here..."

"I know," she whispered.

She fell asleep to the sound of his heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes

I seem to always have the women in Walter Manor obsessed with sex. Eh, well.
Promises and Discoveries

Chapter Summary

Peter Walter V is married, long before he ever met Annie Burnette. And almost no one knows it...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"This is it, then," Marie was murmuring into the phone. "Alright, I'll be there in a few hours. It's okay, you're not putting me out. Louise! I want to be there with you both. I'll bring Spine. Yeah, I thought you'd be pleased. See you then."

Marie hung up. Louise was always pleased to see the robots. Even at a time like this.

"He's dying," The Spine said quietly.

She nodded. "They knew for a while but of course it's hitting her pretty hard. I guess they were lucky to have what they did, but poor Louise!"

He looked away, sighing.

Rabbit walked into the hall. "Hey, why the long face?"

"Rabbit..." Marie realized this was the really hard part. Armand was the closest thing to a parent that Honeybee had, which meant he was essentially Rabbit's father-in-law.

To her relief, The Spine stood and put his arm around Rabbit's shoulders. "Armand is sick, Rabbit. He isn't expected to make it more than a couple of days."

"Oh..." Rabbit said faintly. "Ju-ju-ju-just like that..."

"Yeah. We're going to see him. Are you coming?"

"Oh... oh, yeah. I should. But... oh, Qwerty ain't gonna like it. I better go see her. I hope she understands..."

--------

She didn't... about some things. It didn't go well. Not at all.

The HoW flashed. Wires whipped everywhere. Rabbit stood placidly in the center, as if in the eye of a storm, looking braver than he felt. He was fairly sure Qwerty wouldn't strike him on purpose, but some of those wires were whipping around pretty hard.

"I can't take you, baby! You know that!"

"But... I won't even get to say goodbye!" intoned her new monitor flatly, its electronic voice belying the distress he could hear in the electrical crackle of the wiring.
There was a knock at the door. "If that's anyone but a robut," Rabbit called, staying carefully still, "ya be-be-better go back downstairs..."

"Unkie Rabbit..." came Lily's voice through the slightly cracked door.

"Lily!" he barked. "Get out of here!"

"I'm not in, Unkie Rabbit! Is everything alright? The lights are going crazy in the whole house..."

"We're just havin' a little discussion, Airheart. Head back down."

"Alright," she said meekly.

"I can stay here with you if ya want, baby..." he continued to his daughter.

"No!"

"How am I supposed to take you, then?" he asked irritably. He was trying to be understanding, but he was upset about it, too... and she was being thoroughly unreasonable.

"The link, Pappy!"

"There ain't a wire on earth that l-l-l-long..."

"Inside, Pappy! In your head. I could do it with mama, and I'm sure your brain is more compatible!"

"Oh, no, no baby. That wouldn't be okay..."

"I'd ride in your empty slots! I wouldn't look at anything private! I can lock myself out of those sectors..."

"Qwerty, be sensible, baby..."

"Pappy, please!" She was crying now... not like a human, but crying all the same. He could tell. "He's my grandpa! I hardly have any family, really..."

"You have the Walters..." he said weakly. Let her inside his mind? It wasn't a pretty place...

"I know, but... Grand-pere is special..."

Rabbit sighed. "Yeah. He is."

The room was calmer. Rabbit stared down at the floor.

"Well?" she asked, her monitor rolling closer.

He closed his eyes, sighed deeply, and nodded. "But..." he said sharply as the wires closed in. "No takin' over, okay? I run the hardware!"

"Alright. My core will continue to power the manor in my absence."

He flipped open his sleek new head plate and she clipped a wire into it. He gasped and clutched at the chair in front of him as her massive amounts of data rushed through the wire and into his mind.

"Baby... is there room?" he breathed, shaking.

"I've packed unnecessary data into a smaller form. It'll be fine," she said, inside his mind now.
"Ew..." he whispered, his servos calming. "That's gonna take some getting used to..."

"We'd better go, Pappy..."

He hurried to the car. The sooner they saw Armand, the sooner his little girl could go back where she was safe.

In the HoW, Qwerty's monitor flickered to life. Its atonal voice chimed, "Processing household tasks... collecting data... Qwerty iz onlien..."

--------

Peter and Lily waved at them as they drove away. They walked inside together. Peter shut the door...

He and Lily fell into each others arms. She hit him so abruptly that he bumped into the door.

"Sorry!" she whispered, clinging to him.

"Not a problem! Better me than you."

They kissed without fear of discovery. For the first time since pledging themselves to each other a month before, they were alone. The Spine had shut Jon off as a precaution, Dave was at work, and Wanda had taken Norman on one of their camping trips. Peter thought he had seen a little wink from Rabbit as they drove away...

"What should we do?" asked Lily dreamily as he held her close.

"Well..." He was still afraid. But he'd done his research and he thought there was just a chance... "Come with me."

He led her to the lab. Lily groaned.

"You want to work?" she asked incredulously.

"No," he chuckled. "I just need to make an adjustment to your necklace."

"What?" she asked. "Peter... are you telling me you've found a way..."

"I hope so..." He found a small screwdriver and carefully used it to prod a small opening in her pendant. "From The Spine's description, he snapped off the switch that allows it to absorb Blue Matter. He didn't want you to get hurt. But if I adjust it just a little... I can make it absorb free-floating matter. Just that, mind you... just whatever isn't held by something else, like your core. So if you jettison matter, it will be absorbed rather than escape and be lost. Then it should return when you need it."

He heard a soft click. He watched it closely. It didn't appear to be absorbing matter from Lily.

"I just need a test." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, then peered down at the pendant. Nothing.

"Guess my kisses aren't as exciting as they used to be," he said sheepishly.

"What, a month ago your kiss got me so worked up that I leaked?"

"You didn't notice?"
"No, I was too busy... oh, getting worked up. Well, that makes sense now..."

He laughed and stroked her cheek. How had he gone on so long just working beside her?

"I guess we'll just have to find out as we go," she whispered. She began to unbutton his shirt.

"Whoa!" he cried. "Not here! Suppose Dave comes home early? My room, come on..."

He scooped her up so quickly that she squeaked in alarm. He laughed.

"Sorry, I should have warned you! I was just thinking... well, this is kind of the honeymoon..."

She looked at him with one eyebrow raised. "Whoo, how romantic... honeymooning in your dirty bedroom..."

"Sarcasm... very sexy," he said, walking toward the stairs. "How do you just raise one eyebrow anyway?"

"I just do..." She wrapped her arms around his neck as he started climbing. "Why not use the elevator?"

"It's on the blink again and besides... this makes me feel like Rhett Butler."

"Just so you don't act like Rhett Butler..."

"Are you joking to cope with the nerves too?"

"Yes. Yes I am."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

She stared at him for a long moment as he struggled with the doorknob on his bedroom door. The door at last swung lazily inward and he looked at her. There was fear there, and determination, just as clearly as if she'd written it on her forehead in black marker. He didn't see anything like lust, however...

"Lily? We don't have to, y'know. I'm nervous myself... I've never been anyone's first. We could let nature take its course... wait until we both feel it."

"Don't you feel it?"

"I'm a guy. We always feel it."

She snorted. "You don't speak for every guy..."

"Alright, I'm me and I always want sex! I'm not obsessed with it, I have self-control, but you'll have a very hard time finding a moment when I wouldn't drop everything to join you in the sack, okay?"

"Okay!"

"Alright!" He sighed, leaning against the door frame. His arms were aching. She was slim but had always been unusual heavy for her size. "So... do I go in?"

"That was a pun..." she snickered.

"No, it wasn't!" he cried, blushing.
"Walk in and set me down, stupid. Your muscles are starting to shake..."

Once she was on her own feet, she turned to him. "I do want to do this. We won't get another chance like this in years and I don't have years..."

Did she have to keep reminding him? "But if you don't feel..."

She pulled him down and kissed him warmly. "But I do, love. I am scared, yes. I know the first time is going to hurt. I've read enough on the subject."

"Have you?" he asked, intrigued.

"Oh, yes. Technical manuals on anatomy and human response as well as guides and such like. The Kama Sutra was especially enlightening..."

They had a copy of the Kama Sutra? "Wha! Let's not run before we can walk..."

She laughed and embraced him. "Alright, I won't do any cartwheels first time out. But yes, I want to. I have urges of my own, y'know. And they've been sending me your direction ever since puberty..."

"That's actually kind of frightening..."

She kissed him again and his heart pounded. This was really going to happen... finally. But hopefully not too finally...

"Peter," she whispered. "Shut up and make love to me."

"Ooooo..."

"Gently."

"I'll try."

-------------------

Armand was settled comfortably, or as comfortably as he could be. They each went in to see him separately. Rabbit waited nervously for his turn, wondering if he should tell him Qwerty was there.

"Alright, Rabbit," The Spine said as Marie walked out, dabbing at her eyes, and pulled her sister into a hug.

He nodded and slipped into the room, shutting the door behind him.

Armand opened his eyes. He looked so old all of a sudden. He smiled.

"Rabbit... how good it is to see you."

"Hey, old man..." Rabbit said softly. "I heard ya ain't feelin' too hot."

"Sit, please," the man said, dismissing any talk of his health as usual. "Tell me how you are, and my granddaughter. How is she?"

"She's... she's great, Armand. She amazes me all the time... she's so smart and beautiful... just like her mama."

Oh, Pappy... Qwerty sighed.
"How I wish I could visit one last time with her," the man said wearily. "But I can no longer make such a journey."

"Armand..." Rabbit began. Why bring her all this way just to watch him talk to the man? "Look, brace yourself for a shock, but... I brought her to see you."

"Mon dieu..."

"You okay?" Rabbit asked anxiously.

Armand waved a hand and looked at him intently. "But how is this possible?"

"She's here. Inside my head. I brought her with me."

"Oh, my... I must remain calm, of course, but... you must return her as soon as possible. Do you understand? You know the risks..."

"Yeah. I will. But she's here now. I want to let her talk to you, okay?"

Armand sighed. "Very well."

Alright, baby. Just go ahead and use the vocal processor.

Yes, Pappy.

"Grand-pere Armand?"

His voice sounded different when she used it... soft and sweet. Like a young woman. He didn't know he could sound that way.

"Qwerty, child... you wanted so much to see grand-pere that you push your Pappy to take the risks?"

"I'm sorry..." she said in a trembling voice.

"No, little one! We do foolish things for love, hm? I am pleased to see you one last time..."

"Oh, Grand-pere!" she sobbed. She tried to get up and couldn't quite manage the body. Rabbit hastily resumed control.

I want to hug him, Pappy!

Alright, baby...

"Are you okay for a hug, Armand? She can't quite handle it but I can do it."

"Rabbit," Armand said with a sleepy smile. "I would be honored. I have never given you the fatherly hug either."

Rabbit sat on the edge of the bed and carefully slid his arms around the man and held him, and he knew Qwerty could feel it.

"I'll miss you so much, Grand-pere," she whispered.

"Ah, little one! You take care of the house, hm? And your pappy, and your little cousin."

"Grand-pere... can I tell you a secret?"
"Of course. I will take it to my grave." He smiled and winked.

"Don't!" she sobbed. "It isn't funny..."

Rabbit, in spite of his sorrow, disagreed. It had been a golden opportunity for one the best jokes he had heard since he was activated, and Armand had taken it. He'd never been prouder of his father-in-law.

"My apologies, child. What is this secret?"

Rabbit gently lowered him into the bed and sat beside him. "Lily and Peter got married." Qwerty told him.

Qwerty, baby...

"They did it just like Pappy and Mama did. But Pappy and I are the only ones who know."

Rabbit hadn't realized she knew. Well, she did pick up a lot of things around the manor...

"Oh, child... and how are you?" Armand asked with concern. "What a time for me to leave, when you need me the most!"

Rabbit looked at him, puzzled, as Qwerty replied, "I'm alright, Grand-pere. I promise. I love him, but... If it had to be anyone... well, she has a body and... I never had any illusions, you know."

Qwerty? Rabbit felt horrible. His daughter had fallen in love and he never even realized it... he just blithely encouraged Peter and Lily to get together and broke her heart... I'm sorry, baby...

It's alright. "Pappy is upset, Grand-pere. He didn't know."

"Ah... you only talk about the heartache with me, eh? I don't blame him for being upset. Talk to him, hm? You need each other. He understands the heartache, little one. Very well indeed."

"Alright," she whispered.

There was a soft rap at the door. Their time was up.

"Goodbye! I love you, Grand-pere!" she sobbed, retreating into the safety of Rabbit's memory. He felt the gentle click of a password protected lock and knew she could no longer receive signals.

"She's hiding now, Armand," said Rabbit, resuming full control. "Poor kid... why didn't she tell me?"

"Some things it is perhaps easier to tell those not as close to you."

"I guess. But... how do I look at them now? How do I live with this? She'll have to watch them together and... Oh, man, I almost think you're the lucky one, bein' able to die. I know that sounds bad..."

"We have always been frank with one another. I do not fear death any more than your little niece. But she has found life first, eh? And they are alone in the manor together?"

"Yeah..." Rabbit whispered. "I think... well, it's kinda private... He was worried about her core... y'know, in the sack... but he's a smart guy."

"Ah," Armand said with a smile, touching his nose wisely. "Love finds a way... with a little advice
"Yeah," Rabbit said, feeling deflated. He'd been proud of that before. It wasn't as if his daughter could be with Peter, but that didn't make him feel any better.

"Do not feel wrong for it. Sometimes hearts must break, but they heal. Even when there is no heart..."

There was another soft rap at the door. "Rabbit..."

"Gimme a coupla minutes okay?" he snapped. "I gotta go..."

"Rabbit," Armand said, coughing. He wriggled a bit, trying to get comfortable. Rabbit jumped up and helped him sit up a bit more, fluffing his pillows around him. It reminded him so much of Three...

"Rabbit... be careful. When you return her to the HoW, you must exercise caution. She should never had severed herself from her core. Returning her... keeping her code intact may prove difficult."

Rabbit stared at him. "What?"

"She was able to leave intact but returning may be problematic. Take it slowly and carefully. I only wish I could be there to supervise..."

Rabbit's bummer had descended into a terrible feeling of dread. "Alright," he gasped. Qwerty! What had the stupid kid done now? He felt guilty immediately, he never called her that, after all, she had an IQ they couldn't even calculate. But if she got hurt...

"Well, goodbye, Rabbit. It has been an honor to know you, and to have such a close connection."

"Oh... yeah, right back atcha, big guy. You'll be missed." He wiped at his eyes. "I, uh... hope it happens quickly and don't hurt."

"As do I! Oh... one moment... Could I speak to my little one just once more? Privately?"

"Privately? Can I even do that?"

"Initiate stasis after she is active. She will do the rest."

"Wow... alright, I'll get her. Oh, I better prop myself up, she can't figure out how to drive this thing."

Rabbit settled in and concentrated, finding the locked sector. He flicked a signal at it and felt it unlock. Yehr grandpa wants ta say one last thing, baby.

Alright, Pappy.

Rabbit went into stasis. When he awoke, he was starting to slide off his chair and Qwerty was still active, but crying. Rabbit touched his face and found oil on it. He hastily grabbed a tissue from a box beside the bed.

"Good luck to you both," Armand said. "It will not be as terrible as you expect. Where things are lost, things are gained. I will miss you both wherever my path leads me. Farewell."

Rabbit gave him one last careful hug and left, sighing, hearing the crackling signals of his daughter's weeping.
Poor baby girl... losing everyone all at once. Now if I can just keep from losing her...

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Lily sighed luxuriously and stroked Peter's hair, looking dreamily up at the ceiling. They'd done it twice in the last few hours. She wasn't sure what the world considered impressive, but she had definite feelings of admiration.

And for all he had downplayed his past experience, he'd known what he was doing. He didn't hurry, he held her gently, stroked her skin, whispered that he loved her, and still somehow managed to check her core frequently. It was... beautiful. Only once was it jarring or troubling... but they'd expected that... the point that the caresses and whispers had brought them to at last. He offered to stop when she squeaked in pain. She had declined. She'd had pain before. It had never held so much promise...

It hadn't taken much convincing to get him to continue despite the look of worry in his eyes... and the stinging had quickly been replaced with more pleasant sensations...

But now she lay in his arms, relaxed. Parts of her pulsed, and parts were burning, but nothing too excruciating. His head was on her shoulder, his chin against her breast, his arm across her stomach. His fingers aimlessly stroked the soft skin of her arm. She wanted to stay this way for as long as she could.

"Did you see any Blue Matter leak?" she asked quietly.

He nodded and his breath tickled her skin. She shivered and he gently pulled the sheet over them both, thinking she was cold. She didn't mind. She'd been bundled up all her life; there was something so deliciously naughty about laying bare with his stubbly cheek resting on her, his hair drifting loosely against her neck, the cool bed sheet sliding over them both.

"The pendant pulled it in. Have you felt light-headed or sick?"

"Well, I did feel light-headed for a moment... but I'm pretty sure you noticed that."

He paused and sighed. "Seriously?"

"Alright, dumb joke but it was your fault."

"Well, you knew what they were called and now you know what they feel like. Congratulations, you didn't jettison all of your Blue Matter, just a little of it. And your parents will still kill me if they find out we risked it just to make love."

Just to make love! It would have been worth dying for, but she knew he hated it when she said things like that. She kissed the top of his head. "Then they don't need to know."

"Even now, Lily? Even after we've slept together? We're lovers. Don't you think that's a pretty heavy secret to carry around?"

"It's the perfect secret to carry around! If I wasn't sick, if I was a normal girl with public records and nothing to stop me, and you and I decided to go out and get married and go to a motel and make love, well... I'd be old enough to do all of that without reporting to Mama. Wouldn't I? I'm old enough to get laid in the back of a Chevy if I really want."

"Do you want? Because I'm sure I could find a Chevy..."
She laughed. "We'd have to fold you up like a road map just to be able to fit back there. So when do you think they'll be home?"

"They're staying the night."

"Oh," she sighed. "Perfect. Now we can literally sleep together. It'll be so cozy..."

"Nope. Dave is coming back at six, remember?"

"Ugh! Why does he still live at home?"

"To save money. And because Sunshine can find him here."

"She hasn't so far..."

"I still think he's waiting. She writes sometimes."

"Poor idiot," she sighed. "So we can't sleep here. And I guess I should wash your sheets before Mama and Aunt Wanda come home and want to know why your sheets have blood on them."

"Right in the middle, too."

"Uh-huh."

"If everyone knew, y'know, about us... we could share a bed every night, you realize... Just snuggle up like spoons and sleep..."

"I still want to keep it a secret a little longer. I... don't actually look forward to telling Pappy his little girl is a woman now."

"You were already a woman, Lily."

"Yeah, alright, then I don't look forward to telling him you waited until he was out of town to repeatedly screw his only daughter... in your own bed..."

"Don't say it like that!" he groaned as she laughed. "It gives me visions of dismemberment starting with one particular member..."

"I know. So we keep it a secret."

"Alright, alright!" he cried, shuddering. "Woman can be really coarse, I swear..."

Chapter End Notes

It's funny how I seem to keep ending up with scenes like this... stuff I think needs explaining but is so awkward... but if I didn't explain it, well, really. Peter and Lily running off and getting married would raise so many questions...

Anyway, more surprises ahead... I hope that Death's sting won't be too sharp if I find a way to blunt it just a little.
Here Comes the Sun...

Chapter Summary

Sunshine comes back to Walter Manor... but for most of the household, it never rains but it pours.

Dave wiped his hands. The grease never really came off all the way, but he had to try. The car was humming nicely now... there would be another satisfied customer.

It wasn't his main work, of course; he was finishing up one last course and then he'd be moving to Los Angeles. His Aunt Louise had promising connections lined up for him in commercial aviation. She had been bragging about him and there were offers waiting.

But it felt good to do a simple auto repair. The need was every bit as pressing.

"Your car is ready, ma'am," he said, walking into the waiting room. He stopped short.

Behind the counter stood Sunshine. She smiled nervously.

"Sunshine!" he cried, grinning. The next moment he looked down self-consciously.

"Oh, stop, you're supposed to be a mess!" she said pleasantly.

"Did you say my car was done?" asked the matronly woman sitting by the windows.

"Oh! Yes, ma'am. Purring like a kitten. Please pay at the cashier."

The woman nodded and bustled out, stopping for just a moment to whisper, "Isn't he handsome?" to Sunshine. She smiled and turned back to Dave.

"I just got into town yesterday. I'm going to be working out here. I called the manor a little while ago and Lily said everyone was gone for the day but you were here. Is she alright? She sounded like she was out of breath..."

"I hope so. She's been weaker but she's still okay. I'll check on her in a little while. My folks have taken Rabbit up to see Armand... you remember, the French guy? He's... well, I guess he's dying. They went up yesterday."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. So Lily's with Wanda..."

"No, just Peter."

She blinked at him.

"Something wrong?"

"No! No... just thinking."

He looked at her for a long moment.
"What?" she asked, looking away, brushing a strand of hair out of her face.

"You look well," he said, immediately kicking himself for saying something so stupid.

"Thank you. I've been a lot better. I go by Phyllis again and I got myself through college. Bachelor's."

"No way! What's your major?"

"Psychology."

"Perfect."

"You think so?" she asked, smiling. "From what I remember, I would have thought you'd roll your eyes and say I'd just make people worse."

He sighed. "I was such a jerk when I was seventeen... Try to forget how I was back then, okay?"

"You weren't so bad," she murmured. "You shot your mouth off a lot but you always meant well."

"I don't know about that. But thank you."

The looked at each other in awkward silence.

"So... you wanna get some dinner?" asked Sunshine.

"I'm supposed to ask you that," he said, grinning.

"Who says? It's 1975. Women take initiative. We burned our bras and then ran back and bought more as fast as we could. We are strong, we are invincible!"

Dave laughed. He'd begun to wonder if he'd just been infatuated with her back then. But she was great, even better than back when she had a chip on your shoulder that she hid with peace and love. He'd been able to get an idea of the real her through all that, though, but now she was so much lighter...

"Alright, it's a date. Hey... is it okay if I still call you Sunshine?"

She pinked and he stifled a giggle. She nodded.

"I don't really like Phyllis anyway. It's been yelled at me too many times."

"Sunshine, then. It suits you."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"Well... I'm done here. I'll get cleaned up. Did you drive?"

"No, I took the bus. I haven't got a car yet..."

"Great!" he cried. "I mean, I finished my car. I can drive."

"No way! You finished it? Oh, I want to see that."

He grinned. His tricked out ride waited outside, red and glorious. He knew she wasn't the kind of girl to be won with cars, but it didn't hurt...
Armand died in his sleep the night after he told them goodbye. They all returned home the following day. Louise insisted she’d be fine until they returned for the funeral; she had friends around and so Marie had reluctantly left her alone.

When they arrived, they found a surprise... Dave and Sunshine were waiting for them.

"Sunshine!" Marie said, delighted. "How lovely to see you again! Oh, you look so pretty. Doesn't she look pretty, Dave?"

"Yeah, Mom..." Dave said, rolling his eyes. He took her bag from his father.

Rabbit smiled and hugged her. "You look terrific, honey."

"Thanks, Rabbit," she whispered. She turned to Marie and hugged her as well. "I just wish I could have come at a better time." She looked at Marie. "Y’know, you don't look a day older?"

"Oh, well... Love keeps you young," Marie said with a smile.

The Spine's face was carefully blank, his eyes focused somewhere in the distance. Rabbit snickered. How he loved that woman sometimes...

"Mom..." Dave groaned, heading down the hall with her bag.

Peter's theory was that Wanda and Marie, having close contact with Blue Matter, were being preserved by it. Wanda through robot maintenance work and contact with Norman, who was infused with it, and Marie through The Spine... who leaked trace amounts of it in bed.

"I'm so sorry to hear about Mr. Chastanet," Sunshine went on, unaware that she’d just been told a dirty joke.

"It was expected, but... Well, it doesn't make it easy. How have you been, sweetie?"

"Wonderful, Marie."

"Y'all two getting along?" she said with a wink. "I always had a feeling..."

"Mom!" barked Dave from somewhere down the hall.

Rabbit snickered again... but his amusement faded. Qwerty wasn't laughing. He knew she could hear...

"Yeah, we are!" Sunshine whispered.

Dave jogged back in, having delivered his mother's bag. "Ixnay, Ma."

"What does that even mean?" Marie asked, frowning. "Where's Lily?"

"In the HoW," Dave said. "I guess she decided to tell Qwerty and she's not taking it very well..."

Rabbit stared. "Not... saying much... I guess?" he asked blankly.

"No, she talks but she only says things like "status green" and stuff like that."

"Rabbit... you should probably go to her," The Spine prompted.
Rabbit had intended to do just that, but they had thrown him a curve ball... "Alright. Heading up."

In the HoW, he found Peter and Lily. They were standing in each others' arms. He heard Lily crying.

"Please, try to keep calm, love," Peter whispered.

"I am... but... something's wrong. I've seen her upset before, Peter." She noticed Rabbit and jumped. A tiny wisp of blue flickered through her blouse.

Rabbit hurried to her and pulled her gently from Peter's arms into a hug. "Hey, it's okay, Airheart! Just Unkie Rabbit, see? I assume you two had a nice time with all of us out of your hair?"

He winked and smiled, but it hurt. Qwerty had been so quiet since they arrived home...

"Yes," she said weakly. "It was just wonderful, Unkie Rabbit... but I'm so worried about Qwerty!"

"Oh, now, do-do-don't you get upset, little one. I'll talk to her, okay? My way."

"Alright," she breathed. "Good. Yeah..."

She clung to him with trembling arms. Her face was pale. "Unkie Rabbit... I'm..."

She sagged in his arms.

"Peter! She's faint. Get her down to her mama, okay?"

"Oh, Lily!" Peter said, lifting her gently. "She was fine earlier..."

"I told you sex was good for you," Rabbit chuckled dryly.

"Rabbit..." Peter groaned, settling Lily against his shoulder. "I'd rather not talk about that, please."

"Was it bad?" Rabbit asked worriedly.

"Rabbit!"

Rabbit lifted his hands defensively. "Okay, okay. I gotta get Qwerty... um... to talk to me. See ya."

Peter walked to the door. He hesitated. "Rabbit?"

"Huh?"

"It wasn't bad. It was like she said. It was wonderful." He smiled and walked quickly out. Rabbit beamed... and just as quickly sighed. He hastily closed and locked the door.

"Qwerty?" he said aloud, testing, as he approached the monitor.

Inside his head, he heard her weary signal. Yes, Pappy?

Outside his head, he heard, "Automaton detected."

"What?"

*I crafted it to run the house, Pappy. I told you. Can we get on with it?*  

*Alright, baby.*
You'll have to connect yourself. The AI doesn't understand the need to interface with you. It will link with Uncle Spine for maintenance work but you're just a visitor.

Oh... weird.

Rabbit found the right wire, popped open his head panel, and connected to the HoW. Lights began flashing and an alarm screamed.

"Foreign AI detected!" shouted Qwerty's usual digital chime.

"What?" screamed Rabbit.

"It's okay, that's just a security system..."

"Disconnect foreign system!"

"Baby..."

"It's alright, Pappy." She sounded strangely calm. "I'll go ahead and reconnect." But she hesitated.

"You should hurry if you're go-go-gonna..." Rabbit began.

"System purge will be activated in twenty seconds!"

Rabbit yanked the wire out of his head.

"System purge?" he screamed, thoroughly shaken. "Qwerty! Wha-wha-wha-what the Hell was that all about?"

I... I made it in a hurry...

"We coulda both been wiped!" he gasped, rattling loudly.

I'm sorry, Pappy!

Rabbit's eyes began blinking alternately. She was crying again. Rabbit felt awful... and not just because she'd taken over his eyes. "I never should have let you come with me..." he moaned.

Don't worry, Pappy. We'll think of something...

You bet we will! he sent. We're getting Peter and The Spine to help.

No, Pappy!!

Yes, Qwerty! I got no idea how to handle this and I can't keep you in my head forever! Armand said it was dangerous!

What?

You were upset... he told me we need to get you back as soon as possible. Rabbit was getting more and more distressed. We're getting help and that's all there is to it!

To his surprise, Qwerty meekly responded, Alright, Pappy.

--------

Peter and The Spine listened in shock. Rabbit had called them on the house phone and explained
when they arrived in the HoW about the data transfer.

They both started shouting at once. Rabbit cringed.

"Honestly, you two will be the death of me!" Peter roared.

"Are you out of your mind, Rabbit? Your own daughter! That seems... ugh, it just seems wrong... and you risked her life!"

"She begged me, Spine!" Rabbit cried. "She wanted to see him one last time... I couldn't just leave her here miserable!"

"It would be better to lose her?"

"Spine!" Peter cried. "Look, let's just concentrate on saving her, okay? If anything happens to her, Lily will be crushed.."

The Spine sighed. "You don't need to add that. I'd do it just to save my niece."

Rabbit almost smiled. Peter didn't say it to persuade The Spine. He said it because he was thinking of Lily himself.

They got to work. The data transfer was quick, but if it took longer than 20 seconds, both Qwerty and Rabbit would be at risk. Rabbit would lose memories, but Qwerty would lose everything.

"Could we shut it down entirely?" asked Peter.

"Qwerty says the AI would still be online when the power comes back on."

"Then delete the AI?"

"Uh, n-n-n-no... apparently it's actually a part of her. She needs to reconnect with it and assimilate it into her own programming."

Peter swore softly.

"You say she enabled it to connect to me..." The Spine began thoughtfully. "Can I go in and facilitate the transfer?"

"I dunno... Qwerty?"

*It should work, Pappy. He just needs to convince it that you're a friendly program and it should allow you access. Then I can upload and reestablish control before it wipes me out."

*Wait, can't he convince it that you're a friendly program?*

*You both run on the same kind of processor. I don't think he'll need to tell it I'm friendly, but even if he does need to, he won't be able to. It only allows him access to certain things. I'm going to have to do this myself, Pappy.*

"Rabbit?" said The Spine.

*No, baby... we have to find another way...*

*Okay, build me my own robot body and put me in it.*
"Now you're just being difficult..."

"Is it possible?" The Spine pressed. Rabbit held up a hand.

*I mean it, Pappy.*

*You know we can't!*

*And I'm not staying in your body, not if I can help it. There's too many dark turns I have to avoid.*

He sighed. That sounded about right...

"Rabbit? What's wrong?" The Spine said.

"Just a minute..." he murmured.

*This is the only way. Tell them, please, and we'll get started. I'm not afraid.*

*Not afraid... or are you tryin' ta die?* he sent angrily.

She didn't respond. Rabbit forced himself to stay calm.

*Baby... look, we'll do this your way if you just promise me something.*

*Tell me what it is first...*

*Do your best to survive, he told her. Try to live. For me, alright? Maybe you're hurting but I still need you. You're my little girl...*

She made no reply for a moment and he knew, to his horror, that he had been right. *Alright, Pappy.*

"Well, Rabbit?" The Spine pressed.

"Yeah... you can," Rabbit sobbed.

--------

The Spine stored his body and slithered into the wiring. A moment later, Qwerty's voice spoke as the same words appeared on the monitor, "Additional AI recognized. Welcome Spi3n."

They waited.

"Spine?" Peter called after a couple of minutes.

"Ugh!" came the response. "Primitive thing! Are you sure Qwerty made this?"

"In a hurry, yeah," Rabbit sighed. Qwerty had no comment.

"Cooperate, you..." His voice trailed off in what Rabbit could only assume was swearing. "Argh! That's not what I... Don't be stupid!" More muttering.

Another pause... and then, "Got it!" came The Spine's triumphant cry.

"Additional AI... Searching..." it droned.

"Plug in, Rabbit," called The Spine.
Rabbit cringed as Peter connected the cable, but Qwerty's voice said, "Recognized, Welcome Rabbit."

He felt the connection in his head and it was troubling. Cold, empty data, a simplistic AI, barely able to make conversation, if at all. It really was stupid...

You ready, baby?

Yes, Pappy. I'm going through.

Be careful...!

She was already on her way in. He felt the rush of data pass through once more.

"Foreign AI detected! Disconnect foreign system! System purge will be activated in twenty seconds!"

"Qwerty!" screamed Rabbit.

"She's in, Rabbit! Give her a minute!" called The Spine.

"She don't have a minute!" wailed Rabbit, shaking, helpless, as the alarms blared around him.

"Spine?" Peter said apprehensively.

"She's disabled her security system!"

"Foreign AI detected! Foreign AI detected!"

There was a pause. Rabbit waited, shaking. It didn't sound disabled!

"Spine?" he called after fifteen seconds.

The HoW went dark. He heard The Spine cry out.

"You okay?"

"The wires went limp! I'm fine, though, I was hanging on..."

The HoW powered up. Rabbit felt a little tickle in his mind.

"We're one once more. The minimal AI is neutralized. I'll refine its programming before trying to use it again."

The Spine had descended and returned to his body. "Under control?"

Rabbit gave a thumbs up. "Thanks, buddy. I really appreciate it."

"I wouldn't have left her in your head. No niece of mine deserves that." The Spine tipped his hat and left.

"Never again, Qwerty!" Peter shouted at the ceiling.

"Sorry, Peter," she chimed.

"Scared me to death... I gotta check on Lily," he muttered, walking out.

"You want me to stay, baby?"
"No, Pappy. I'd like to be alone for a while."

The wire unplugged from his head. "Can I trust you alone, though?"

"Pappy?"

"You made that AI in a hurry, but you don't make mistakes like that, even workin' fast." Rabbit sat wearily in the old desk chair and glared at her little monitor. "That thing was set to delete your code... all of it. Look, baby... I know it's hard. Your grandpa has passed on, and you gotta come back here and see... Well, them. You can't be with him and she can. And you don't grudge them but you can't watch..."

"Stop it."

"Alright, but... so help me, if you ever try crap like that again..." Rabbit frowned at the floor. "Well... I'll cry my eyes out, that's all. You're hurtin' but if I lose you, I've lost everything. You hear?"

"Yes, Pappy."

"Now am I gonna hafta start stayin' with you all day and night, or are you gonna be a good girl and stop trying to... to ki-ki-ki-ki-kill yourself?"

"I'll stop, Pappy. I'm sorry..." The lights flickered.

"Don't be, baby. Just... don't leave me. I ain't ready."

He got up, hesitated, and sat back down.

"Pappy?"

"I ain't even ready to leave the HoW. Why don't I just keep you company while you rest? You didn't go into stasis all night."

"Alright, Pappy."

"I love you. I ain't gonna leave you, no matter what. Got it?"

"I love you, too, Pappy."

The lights dimmed. Rabbit's eyes soon followed.
Presents

Chapter Summary

Giving and receiving, throughout the years...

Chapter Notes

I've never really touched on holidays. With Thanksgiving (here anyway) and Christmas coming, I thought I'd lighten things up a bit with a master post kind of chapter. There's also some important plot secrets if you scratch the surface gently... and of course, feels.

Walter Manor, 1950:

"This is just what we need," said Marie.

Rabbit, covered in sparkling tinsel, nodded. "Yehr ma-ma-making it real pretty, Mary."

Marie wrapped the tinsel, with his help, around the tree. She heard a soft sigh.

"It's so lovely," said a slightly hollow voice.

Rabbit turned, grinning. "Yehr first Christmas tree, baby!"

Honeybee smiled gently, but her chair trembled with excitement. Marie had learned a few things about Honeybee in the last several months. One thing she had noticed was that she couldn't, or wouldn't, defy her programming. Her voice was gentle and low, her words polite, her responses reserved and genteel. She'd known cultured elderly Southern ladies just like her. If they'd fallen down a well, they'd still cross their ankles and say please and thank you.

But Rabbit Was the cure, the outlet... His childlike enthusiasm brought out in her a similar quality... Honey hadn't really had a childhood, after all. Marie could tell that they were both excited for the holidays. She just hoped that the pain of remembering those no longer around to celebrate wouldn't destroy their enthusiasm.

The Spine, now... He hadn't been very keen. More like dead set against it. But Marie was his weak point, and so Four had come to her with the idea after The Spine, currently looked to as being the head of household, had shut him down. And Marie had smiled and agreed to help. She liked Four. He was a good kid and just wanted to cheer everyone up a little.

Besides, she reasoned, no matter what they did, Christmas would mean thinking of people who had died and could no longer join in the celebration. They had to fight back with joy or this Christmas would be nothing but loss... and that was the key to securing The Spine's cooperation. She reminded him that Three was being released soon, being at last able to walk and talk, if somewhat haltingly. They couldn't bring him, of all of them, back to a house that felt like a funeral home. Not after he'd
lost his twin brother.

And so the black wreath was finally taken off the door and replaced with mistletoe and holly and pine boughs... Marie had bought the cheeriest one they had and spritzed it daily with water.

Rabbit told her his Pappy once said that the Christmas wreath represented the eternal progression of time... and that things sometimes pass away, but life continues. It sounded like a scientist's way of trying to comfort his child about loss. While Marie tended to subscribe to the Christian side of Christmas, she liked the idea behind the Colonel's story.

They managed to coax The Spine to join them for a Christmas Eve party. Once again, Marie suspected they never would have been able to coax him if it weren't for Peter III. He didn't want to hurt him any more than he already had been. Even so, man and robot alike sometimes slipped into a quiet melancholy. They had been raised here with Peter II. It was understandable.

But Three had been astonished and delighted to meet Marie again. When The Spine explained, with obvious embarrassment, that he and Marie wanted to get married, Three had beamed and promised to do everything in his power to bring it about. And he added, in halting words, that he wouldn't be surprised if The Spine became a father soon after. And Marie had blushed scarlet as she just began to dare to hope... Could he help them get married, and even adopt a child?

There was no gift she could ask for Christmas greater than that! The thing she had most missed, having only Louise as family, was the feeling of gathering relatives around her at the holidays. There had been more when she was little, all older... All gone now except for them.

It was never how she'd expected things to be. No one could have warned her of the strange turn life would take the day she met him. But he had as much right to claim humanity as any man born to a woman. He had started life from the acts of a man and a woman. And he had lived and learned and grown up, in his own way.

And he had already given her a family... his. But if there was even a hope of having their own child, well... Just for the day, she decided, she would relish the hope and ignore the misgivings. She bustled about, handing out presents and traditional holiday treats... thought the only one she'd been able to make herself was made of marshmallows and cereal, and The Jon had helped her with that. He had a cooking file...

At last she sat, exhausted, staring into the fire while they all listened to Bing Crosby. The Spine sat beside her, silent. He adored Bing Crosby, she'd found out, and according to Rabbit had at one time sung several of his songs as part of their act. She could just imagine... he would have given Bing a run for his money.

"I hope he sings White Christmas!" Jon said quietly after one of the songs ended. The broadcast was nearly over.

"They enjoyed the blue Burbank skies," intoned Crosby. "But they also missed a White Christmas."

"He al-al-always sings it, buddy," Rabbit said cheerfully from where he sat with Honeybee on his lap. He always looked a little pained when he held her that way, but that didn't stop him. He kissed her with a tiny spark.

The Spine looked around. "What is it?" Marie asked sleepily as Bing began singing.

"Did you get any mistletoe?" he asked softly.

She laughed quietly and looked up at him. "I think you can consider yourself permanently covered
for that, love."

He smiled and kissed her. His lips were cool and warm at the same time... cool metal, with his rubber lips warm from steam. The steam came out his cheeks and nose as they kissed, swirling around her face. It added something, she'd decided.

"Merry Christmas, Marie," he murmured, holding her close.

"Merry Christmas, love. Thank you for playing along."

"I wanted to... I want you to have only happy memories here..."

"Whatever I have, as long as it's here with you, I'll be happy."

"And may all your Christmases be white!" sang Bing.

"No thanks," she sighed. "I never had one before, why start now?"

"Don't it snow in Louisiana?" Rabbit asked, hearing her.

They launched into a discussion about Louisiana weather. After the broadcast, The Spine, seeing how tired she was, carried her to bed. And though they didn't share the bed as man and wife, he took off his tie, vest and shirt and snuggled in beside her. They were patient. It was enough to be together until they figured out the rest.

Walter Manor was silent, or as silent as ever... there was always a soft hum. She had gotten used to it quickly.

But into the silence came her fiance's voice, singing to her, one of the songs from the radio broadcast. Yes, he was a match for old Bing! Marie smiled and fell asleep listening.

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St. Macrina's Orphanage, 1956:

Peter sat on the porch, swinging his legs. It was quieter outside... and he didn't really want to be inside. Not without Anna.

She'd left a few days before. He was glad and all... she was so little that she'd be able to forget being alone, maybe. Her mama had given her up because she wasn't married. He'd heard the nuns talking about it. Sometimes they discussed how to save her soul. But it wasn't Anna's fault. She was only four... her mama had tried to take care of her but she couldn't. Anna cried every night for a month when she first arrived.

Then Peter had started sitting with her at night. He didn't know any way to help, but no one else even tried... well, almost. Most of the nuns left her to it, thinking she'd get settled in better if they didn't coddle her, though one, Sister Alberta, did try to slip in and comfort her. She couldn't get in much; there were so many kids and the matron was a tough old bird. He'd heard the trustee muttering that one during an inspection...

And the kids were used to helping themselves. But no one tried to help Anna. Except for Peter. They said she was strange, and mean, and never smiled. Well, he could understand that. He'd been around her age when he'd first come there, and he'd watched kid after kid get adopted while he just got
taller. What was there to smile about?

But for Anna, there was hope. She'd only been there six months before her mama came back... she'd gotten married and took her away to have a family. Just in time for Thanksgiving. The orphanage always had a good meal that day thanks to charitable collections. He hoped Anna would have a good meal too.

He missed her. She was little and whiny, and she really was kinda grump and didn't smile. But she was clever and cute, and could remember everything you told her. Word for word. It was cool, the other kids had no idea...

Sister Alberta joined him after a while. "Peter, dear, I have had such a phone call. Child, did you know you have a family?"

Peter took this numbly at first. When it sank it, he didn't know what to say. "What do you mean? My Pappy died..."

"God rest his soul," she said, crossing herself. "Yes, sweetheart. But his family. Did you know that he has a sister and a brother?"

"Yeah," Peter sighed. He didn't know what he'd expected. He knew his mother was gone too. But maybe there had been a mistake... maybe she was still alive... He sighed and stared down at the ground. No, there was no way.

"But they never came for me," he sighed, "so I guess they didn't want me..."

"Oh, Peter. They couldn't find you, sweetheart! They told me they had word that your father died and got no word of you at all! They thought you'd died in the same accident! Peter, dear... they want you to come live with them."

Peter felt the same way he'd felt the day he decided to stick a fork into a power outlet to see what would happen. It had been interesting, but was it a good idea?

"Do you want to go to live with them? You may not have much say in it, but I would feel better in my heart if I knew that you were at peace with the choice."

He shrugged. "Yeah, sure. I mean, it's not really bad here but, well... that's my family. Maybe they're nice."

"Then I'll tell you the rest. I didn't want to turn your head before asking. Your uncle recently passed, God rest his soul, and your aunt and uncle found that you were named as his heir. They have a mansion in San Diego... that'll be lovely and warm, hm? And you'll inherit the entire thing when you come of age... the house, the grounds, and the robots."

"Oh..." he breathed. Robots? "But... are you sure they're nice? 'Cause I read this book about famous ghosts and these kids were orphans and got killed by their uncle so that they wouldn't inherit the crown..."

"Oh, gracious, Peter!" she cried, crossing herself again. "Child, this is why you need family around you. You spend too much time in the library! As much as I want you children to be educated, well... there's quite a bit of trash in some of those books. Things not good for a tender young mind. Yes, this can only be a good change. Now gather your things. Your Aunt and Uncle are coming to get you tomorrow morning. They said they'd like you to be back at Walter Manor in time for Thanksgiving dinner."
"Yes, ma'am."

He hurried to his bunk and gathered his things while the others were at dinner. He didn't have much appetite. Why didn't his father tell him more about them? He'd been small but he should have told him... He had mentioned robots, but Peter had always figured that was just a story.

And now they were coming to get him and he wanted to go, but what if they were mean? What if they just dumped him at their big old house and expected him to stay quiet and out of the way?

Peter fell asleep crying quietly to himself.

He waited the next morning in the sitting room. He heard them come in... Heard them talking to the matron. She was cordial and polite. She was a tough old bird, alright, but she was always glad to have a child go to a good home, if only so that they didn't have to stretch their resources too far...

"He's right in here. I believe he has been waiting eagerly to meet you both."

Peter stood up suddenly as they walked in. His aunt was pretty, with dark hair, and his uncle was tall and wearing a uniform. Another man had come with them, even taller than his uncle. He wore mostly black and Peter looked at him apprehensively before turning back to his uncle.

"Are you a soldier?" Peter gasped.

His uncle smiled. "Hello to you too, Peter. Y'know, that's my name too? Peter A Walter IV. You're Peter A Walter V."

"Oh... weird..." Peter said dully.

"Mr. Walter!" scolded the matron.

"Huh?" they answered at the same time. The man in black glanced at her as they did. Was he another uncle?

Peter, the grown up, snickered. Peter, the boy, grinned.

"Oh, Peter!" his aunt said suddenly, stepping forward. She was crying. "Look at him... he looks just like Mark..."

"Keep your cool, Wanda," his uncle said, amused.

She took out a hankie and nodded as she dabbed at her eyes. "We're so sorry we didn't come for you sooner, Peter. We didn't..."

"I know. Sister Alberta told me. You thought I died."

"There was no word, no one said... we didn't even find out for a month after your father passed..." She put the hankie to her mouth and her brother gave her a reassuring side hug.

"So, Pete... do they call you Pete?" said Peter the elder.

"No, it's Peter..." the boy said quietly.

"I don't blame you. Pete sounds like a dog. Well, we brought someone special to meet you. Spine?"

Spine? Was he a gangster? Peter looked up in awe. He was dressed like a gangster...
The tall man smiled down at him. "Good morning, Mr. Walter," he said politely, extending a hand. Peter took it, It was cold... "My name is The Spine and I was built with a titanium alloy spine."

"Built?" Peter gasped. Then this was one of the robots!

The Spine nodded. "I'm one of the Walter automatons. We wanted you to understand what you're coming back to."

"But you look like a man!"

"Oh... well, that's a disguise. I can't very well walk around looking silver. The nuns would never let me in!" He smiled, and Peter decided he liked him.

"So, d'you want to come back with us?" asked Peter IV. "The place is yours when you grow up either way, I'm much too busy to take it myself... but if you have friends here, well... It's up to you, big guy. We'd love to bring you home. There's another little boy there... um, nearby I mean... and your aunt Wanda, and the other robots."

Peter blinked at them for a moment. He made up his mind. He picked up his bag and walked to Peter IV.

"I'd like to come home, sir."

"Just Peter. Come on, you're the one man who can call me that without adding a suffix, enjoy it! Well, good, this is gonna be a great Thanksgiving! Got everything?"

Peter V nodded. His Aunt Wanda put out her hand to him and he took it. It was cold and a little wet... but she kept turning to look at him and smile tearily as they walked. His uncle and The Spine followed.

"I'm so glad you're coming with us, sweetie," she murmured. "If I'd just known you were alive... we never would have left you here for so long..."

"I know. I... I'm glad to come home, too."

-------

Pasadena, January 1, 1959:

"Look, Lily!" cried Davey. "It's Rudolph!"

"Wudoph!" she crowed, bobbing in Marie's arms.

Davey waved from the level of his dad's shoulders at the sleigh and reindeer. His parents had brought them up to Pasadena for the New Year's parade, but despite the date, there was an impressive float with Santa Claus and the children were thrilled.

He liked it when his dad held him. He was big and strong and never groaned like the other dads when they picked up their boys. And Mom could hold Lily alright, so why shouldn't he get to be held by his dad?

A marching band passed by. Lily covered her ears. They were playing an old song Davey didn't know, but his dad bobbed slightly to the beat and sang it under his breath... or whatever he did. Davey knew he didn't breathe, but the rest was a little hazy.

"Hot dog!" roared Lily, turning to look over her mama's shoulder. "Want hot dog mama!"
"Oh, alright, baby. It's a special occasion, so I guess we can eat at odd hours. You want one, Davey?"

"Nope!"

"Alright." She started to walk away, glanced around shiftyly, and asked a little too loudly, "Would you like anything, dear?"

The Spine was smiling at a group of fancy horses and their riders.

"Dad!" Dave shouted.

"What? Oh... why?"

"I just asked... if you want anything to eat, dear," she said with a slight wink.

"Oh, right! No thank you, my love."

"Alright. We'll be right back." She hurried away.

"I forgot I was in disguise for a minute," he whispered to Davey.

"Oh, dad," Davey sighed.

Lily was already smeared with mustard by the time they returned.

"Yuck! Why does she like mustard so much?" Davey asked.

"Now, you like ketchup and she likes mustard," Marie chided. "You don't have to like the same things."

"But what kind of little girl likes mustard? All the little girls I know hate mustard."

"Wike mustard!" Lily shouted.

"Hush, you two. Look at this one," The Spine said, pointing up the street.

They watched it pass by. The next band was between songs and launched into new one as they passed. The cymbals crashed directly in front of them. The Spine and Davey laughed, but Marie started and Lily screamed and dropped her hot dog. She looked down at it and began to cry.

"Oh, no..." Marie cried. "Hush, baby... we can get another one."

Lily continued to howl as the band moved away, still surrounding them with thunderous noise, drowning Marie out. The Spine hastily put down Davey and scooped up his daughter, trying to calm her before she leaked.

Davey scowled. It was always Lily! Their little girl! His mama had assured him they were so happy to have him, to have gotten to adopt him, that he was special and loved... but then Lily would cry and it was like Davey didn't exist anymore. And knowing that they were just worried about her health only made him feel guilty for being mad... which made him mad for feeling guilty!

He watched them try to calm her down, the little crybaby... it was just a hot dog, and it was all gross with mustard anyway! Unless she was crying about the noise... Well, she was still a crybaby and no one would even look at him and he was tired of it.
He turned and headed down the street, slipping easily through the crowds of long adult legs. He bet they wouldn't even look for him.

Even as a nagging thought told him they would, and they'd be so worried and scared...

And he felt sick and looked back through the crowds and saw his father kiss Lily's soft baby cheek...

And his guilt turned to a sullen satisfaction. Now they'd worry about him for once.

He turned and hurried on.

The parade broke up eventually. Davey was tired by then. He'd looked into shop windows and avoided police officers and studied some motorcycles he'd seen parked nearby... until the bikers who owned them turned and saw him looking. One of them winked and he bolted... they chuckled as he hurried away. Adults were always chuckling...

But now he sat on the curb, hungry and cold and fighting tears, as the last of the crowds trickled away. They hadn't found him. It had been ages and they hadn't even looked!

He saw a pair of dark shoes and looked up suddenly.

It was a policeman. His heart sank and he swallowed hard.

The man smiled kindly. "Are you lost, little boy?"

"No."

"Oh, you're not? Well, you're all alone and the parade is over. Don't you think it's a good time to go home?"

"Y-yeah..."

"Alright, well, get going, son."

Dave's lip trembled and his face contorted in misery. "I can't walk all the way to San Diego!" he wailed.

The policeman looked at him in astonishment as he howled and hiccuped. He was a big boy and here he was crying...

"Now, then, you're from San Diego, hm? Well, that changes things. You need to come with me."

"I d-don't wanna go to jail either!" he sobbed. "I want my mom and dad!"

"Now, that's enough of that!" gasped the policeman. "Who said anything about jail, young man? Only your mama and daddy are looking for you. They're back at the station, you know."

"The-they are?"

"Come on, silly."

"My mama said not to go with strangers..."

"But I'm a policeman. See?" He pointed at his badge.

"It cou-could be fake! Maybe you're a bad man dressed as a policeman!"
Davey cried harder at the thought. He wanted his parents but he didn't want to be sold to some rich family to walk their dog like Rabbit had told him. Rabbit always told him interesting things... and he was sure this one was true!

There was just no way out of this one...

The policeman looked down at him with a little smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. Davey was sure he was up to something. What reason was there to smile?

"You're a good boy," he said. "Can you do me a favor? Oh, I know, you can't trust me, but just stay here for a little while? I have to make a phone call and the nearest phone is across the street."

Davey shrugged, still shaking and hiccuping softly. The man patted his head and walked away.

By the time he returned, there was a cluster of concerned men and women around the boy. He felt a bit safer with them there... they wouldn't let some big ugly man take him away.

"It's alright, ladies. His mother and father are on their way. They've been searching for him for a couple of hours."

"Oh! They must be so frightened!" breathed a large woman with a high soft voice.

"He's gonna get a hiding!" said an old man.

Davey began to wail again. He didn't know what a hiding was, but he'd been hiding and the man made it sound so ugly... The women in the group turned angry glares on the man and he backed away.

It was only a few minutes until a police car zoomed up, lights flashing, and his mother leaped from it almost before it stopped.

"Davey! Darn you, where did you slip off to?" she sobbed, scooping him up despite his size. He grabbed onto her and cried into her shoulder.

"Mama..." he cried.

"You're shaking like a leaf!" she gasped, staggering under his weight.

"Brudder!" crowed Lily.

Davey peeked at his sister. Her little face was red and wet and her lip was trembling. Holding her hand and dabbing carefully at his eyes was his father.

Marie put him down and Lily threw herself at him.

"Gone..." she hiccuped. "Brudder..."

"I'm not gone, Lily. I'm here."

"Yeah."

And then his mother pulled Lily gently away and Davey was lifted, higher, and higher, and held carefully against his father's sturdy shoulder.

"I should paddle you for wandering away but I'm too happy to find you safe," he murmured, pressing his face against the boy's tousled curls. "Please be more careful, son. I'd begun to think you
were lost forever."

Davey sighed. He still vaguely remembered having wandered off on purpose... He wrapped his arms around his dad's neck.

"Okay, Dad... I'm sorry..."

"It's alright, now. Let's get home."

Davey fell asleep on the way home and woke in time for turkey back at Walter Manor, where Aunt Wanda heard the whole story with a look of shock. Peter V rolled his eyes and thumped him in the shoulder and Peter IV hugged him and told him he was lucky.

But his parents hovered, as if afraid he'd vanish. And Lily fell asleep snuggled between him and his mother while they watched tv.

And he guessed that was okay. She wasn't such a bad little kid, really.

----------

Walter Manor, December, 1966:

Qwerty swished softly. She'd already done everything the silver man did every day to maintain the manor. Lily hadn't come up all morning... she'd explained the day before that today was a holiday and she would have to be downstairs for a while.

Holidays were something her mother had told her about but that Qwerty hadn't really gotten to experience. Outside of Honeybee wishing her a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, at least. But Lily was having one, and she had told her that they had a surprise for her later. Surprises were things she had experienced... but they were always nasty ones. Lily had promised a nice one.

But it was hard to wait. Even though Qwerty had been waiting her whole life.

Around one in the afternoon, she picked up movement on the hall cameras. Peter, Dave, Norman and Lily were coming along with something. Something big, covered in a colorful cloth. They were fine until they got to the stairs, and then the two young men braced themselves on either side of the thing while Norman hooked his good arm under one side and they proceeded to start working it up to her floor... Qwerty didn't know what to think as she waited, looking at their progress through the cameras as they arrived at each level. The HoW lights flickered as she anxiously watched.

At last the two boys breathlessly rolled the thing into the HoW with Lily skipping behind. Norman gave a nervous little wave and left. Peter and Dave placed the thing in the middle of the room and Peter called, "Qwerty! We have something for you!"

Qwerty extended a wire to the old typewriter and carefully picked out the words, "wut iz it"

"I need you to give me a suitable cable... one that allows data to be sent out. Then you'll see, if it works."

"It's great, Qwerty!" Lily cried. "Just wait and see!"

Qwerty hesitantly gave him the cable and Peter connected it to the box. He dramatically whipped the cloth off of it to reveal... a very ordinary, big, boxy typewriter with a long strip of paper coming out of it. What was this nonsense?
"Well? Try it!"

Qwerty aimed a wire at the typewriter, but as she formed the words to type in her working memory storage unit, the machine suddenly typed, swiftly and efficiently, "whut iz this krap"

"Whoo!" cried Lily, clapping. Dave and Peter cheered.

"i dont undrstand whut whut iz it tiping whut i m thinkng itz so ez oh mi gosh" Qwerty began. She forced herself to slow down. "lile lile iz this mi suprize"

"Yes, Qwerty! It's a teletype machine we found in storage! Isn't this much better? Now we can really talk!"

"thank yoo thank yoo veree much" she replied excitedly. The typewriter was so slow compared to this!

"Next we get you a dictionary," Peter quipped. Dave shook his head.

She sent wires down to wrap around each of them in turn. The boys were startled but Lily laughed and hugged the wires.

"Your welcome, Qwerty," Peter said as he walked out with Dave. "Have fun, you two."

After they had gone, Lily, who was wearing a long pair of footed pajamas that barely fit and holding a plate, sat in front of the teletype machine and began to eat something. Qwerty sent an optical wire down to examine it.

Lily laughed. "It's fudge, Qwerty! I'd share if I could!"

Qwerty looked at it from every side. She took in the sound Lily made as she chewed it, observed the way her teeth cut through the soft texture. She could detect Lily's rate of salivation... she was enjoying it, it seemed, from that and the yummy sounds she sometimes made while eating it.

"iz it gud"

"Very! Mama made it. It's not healthy but it's super delicious. Someday maybe you'll be able to eat too..."

"no but whut iz it lik"

"Well, it's creamy, and chocolatey, and it makes your insides go squiggly."

"iz that gud"

Lily laughed. "I like it."

"oh"

Lily talked with her until dinner and came back after dinner with a sleeping bag and pillow. "I'll sleep here tonight. It's not your first Christmas but since we didn't do anything last year I thought we'd make this one special with a sleepover."

The year before, Lily had been too sad, Qwerty remembered. She missed her Pappy and they hadn't heard from him in a few months. He finally made contact a few days after Christmas, saying they were all okay. This year he'd even been able to make a phone call, but as usual, hadn't told Rabbit about his daughter. When she'd asked, he'd said that they were stationed separately and that he had...
the feeling Rabbit wasn't bearing up well on his own. Lily thought that hearing about Qwerty would help with that, but The Spine thought it would be the last straw. It was the closest Lily had come yet to being angry with her Pappy... at least, since she was little.

"do yoo think hill tell him soon" asked Qwerty as she dimmed the lights.

"I hope so. I know Unkie Rabbit would be so excited to hear about you."

"yeah i jus wish mama had told him"

"Me too," Lily yawned as she snuggled into her sleeping bag.

Qwerty turned down the lights, hesitated, and turned the colored ones up again. They weren't really Christmas lights, but shining together they still looked pretty festive.

"Maybe next year, Qwerty..." Lily mumbled sleepily.

"necks yeer"

"Yeah... Merry Christmas."

"mere krismis"

Qwerty went into stasis.

----------

July 1968:

"Qwerty?"

The HoW was dark and silent. Of course Qwerty was there; where could she go? Oh, there were parts of the house she could visit, but for the most part, she remained in the HoW. She could gather all the information from other parts from there.

And lately, she didn't even want to do that. Her Pappy had been gone for years. And for months now, no one had heard from him. No word, not even to say he'd been deactivated. Nothing. As far as she knew, he'd never even been told that he had a daughter.

And yet Lily was here again, trying to convince her to celebrate Independence Day. Why? Why celebrate America? America had sent her Pappy away forever... He didn't know he was her Pappy, and he was strange and stuttered and liked to play jokes on people but he was her Pappy and she loved him... and he was gone.

America could dry up for all she cared.

"Qwerty? Come on... Peter's gonna set up an outside camera so that you can see the fireworks, just like last year."

"get out" Qwerty typed.

Lily sighed and sank into her beanbag, picking up a book.

"whatevr"

Qwerty played idly with the lights, which earned her a dirty look from Lily. She stopped and
checked the house cameras. Dave was in the garage as usual. That was good. He didn't go out to parties so much now, since Peter had started getting him more parts for his car. Marie had been sad when Dave went to parties, and he'd come in acting weird, which had scared Lily. Now he was a jerk, but he was sober...

He needed his dad, just like they did. Stupid America.

She checked the porch camera. There was a car pulling into the driveway. Humans. Whatever.

The phone rang. Qwerty waited until it was answered and patched herself into the call. She knew it was rude, but she didn't care at the moment. She listened... there was someone asking for Marie...

The lights in the HoW shut off.

"Qwerty!" Lily snapped. "That's just obnoxious!"

The lights hastily came back on. Qwerty had been so surprised she'd actually cut the connection...

"Lililililillll...

"Are you okay?"

"On the phon! the phon! Your pappe!"

Lily stared at the teletype machine in blank shock. A tiny wisp of blue coiled from her chest.

"LILE!" Qwerty sent, alarmed. She flashed the HoW lights wildly.

"Pappy?" Lily squeaked, putting her hands to her mouth.

"Yes! Don't scarr me like that!"

"Sorry..." Lily gasped.

"Wel... go see!"

"Oh, right!"

Lily ran out as the call continued. Qwerty listened anxiously. There was a lot of mushy nonsense between The Spine and his wife... but her patience was rewarded when, at last, she heard what she'd waited her whole life to hear.

"Lily?" The Spine cried.

"Pappy! You're alive! You're alive! I knew it!"

The Spine laughed. "Of course you did!"

He was such a good pappy...

"Did you tell him, Pappy?" Lily cried. "Did you tell Unkie Rabbit about Qwerty?"

Qwerty let the lights fade, the closest she got to holding her breath, as he said, "He knows all about her now, Airheart. He's very happy to have a little girl of his own and he wants too see her more than anything."

Mama... he knows, Mama...
"Oh, boy! I knew it! He's gonna love her, Pappy!"

"I think he already does."

Qwerty, in her own core and in her own way, sobbed.

*My Pappy's coming home. And he loves me!*

By the time Lily came back, the lights were back on... but Qwerty couldn't say much. She was past words. But they watched the fireworks the next day. Qwerty still had a certain grudge against America and everyone who had stupid wars and broke up families. But fireworks were just what was wanted. Fireworks were the only thing that came close to expressing how she felt.

The very next day, she set to work on her core, making a nice game room and an avatar for herself. She already had her Pappy's... tall, dashing, with that pretty red scarf. That was one thing she loved about him... how he was so handsome and pretty at the same time. Sometimes she remembered that she could be a boy if she wanted to be... it didn't matter for her. She liked being a girl, but she had decided that if she ever wanted to be a boy for a while, she would be one like him... handsome, and beautiful.

But when he got home, he would find a daughter. Just like her Mama had always promised him. Just like he wanted.

---------

July, 1974

"Happy birthday, baby!"

"Thanks, Mama..." Lily said. It sounded like Baba, though. Her nose was very stuffed up.

Marie sighed. "It's such a pity, though, you being sick on your birthday... And your father having that concert..."

"Well, there was no reason to skip it for me. It's not like I can even..." She sneezed three times and shuddered back into place on the couch. "Anything. Yeah. So why not pick up some cash?"

"Well, the money helps, but still. I just wish you could have gone like you planned. Peter looked so sorry about it..."

"Yeah... I dunno, he's been acting weird lately. I don't know what his problem is."

Marie looked thoughtful but said nothing.

Lily dozed off and Marie slipped out to get some tea. She heard the front door open and hurried to shush the chattering of the robots. Rabbit was jogging into the entrance hall, singing loudly, as she walked in.

"Hush, y'all! Lily's asleep!"

"Wow, that takes me back!" Rabbit giggled.

"Exactly eighteen years," The Spine said, smiling, as he walked in behind him.

Marie stared up at them as The Jon joined them. Peter walked in after, rifling through the mail.
"Love, is there any particular reason y'all all are wearing sombreros?"

Jon giggled and Rabbit shushed him, grinning.

"Well," The Spine said, sheepishly removing his. "Peter got hungry and Jon suggested a little Mexican restaurant just beside the park... We ended up singing a song with the band and they liked us so much that they gave us these sombreros."

"You like?" Rabbit asked, striking a pose.

Marie laughed. "Very handsome! So... did you bring Lily something?"

Peter looked up from the letter he was reading. The robots, as one, stared at her in shock. Rabbit clapped his hand over his face.

"You didn't!" Marie said witheringly. "Oh, love, how could you forget?"

The Spine's mouth opened and shut several times in silence. The Jon's face crumpled and Rabbit shoved him.

"What're you cryin' about? It ain't your birthday!"

"I'm a bad uncle!" Jon wailed.

"Oh, bother..." Marie sighed, glancing at Peter. His face was bright red.

"Peter..."

"I'll be right back!" he said, rushing out the door.

"Hey!" cried Rabbit, starting after him. "That's cheatin'!"

"Oh, let him go, Rabbit... I have a feeling it's especially important to him this year," Marie said.

The Spine frowned at her. She'd mentioned her suspicions to him and he didn't like them one little bit.

Peter really was right back, however... carrying a wrapped package.

"You got her something?" Rabbit gasped. "That was fast!"

"Oh, I got this last week," Peter said casually, walking out of the room. "It was in the trunk. I'm going to see if she's awake."

The others stared after him with the faces of the betrayed.

"Well, what now?" Marie said coolly.

The Spine looked at Rabbit, who looked at Jon, who smiled weakly and took off his sombrero. Rabbit looked at it and took off his own.

"Well, I could give her my sombrero..."

"Me too!" cried Jon.

"We can't both give her sombreros!"
The Spine laughed. "Why not? We're better off just confessing at this point. Let's at least try and make it funny. Three sombreros for Lily."

"Four if you count Peter's."

"I'm sure he'll play along."

They filed out, carrying the sombreros as ceremoniously as they could, trying to look meek. Marie hurried after.

Lily was awake when they went in, holding a beautiful doll in her own image. It even had a little gemstone set into the upper breast.

"It's not as pretty as you, of course," Peter said clumsily.

"Aw, thank you, Peter, that's so sweet," Lily said pleasantly.

He was smiling in a rather goofy fashion when he finally appeared to remember he was wearing the sombrero. He took it off hastily as the others entered.

"Lily... we come to throw ourselves upon your mercy," The Spine said, laying the hat in her lap.

"But we bring gifts," Rabbit added, stacking his atop it.

"We got you sombreros!" Jon crowed, as if that had been the plan all along, and plopped his onto her head.

"What?" Lily giggled. She coughed for a minute and said, "Wow, three sombreros just for me!"

"Four," Peter said, putting a second one onto her head.

"Lucky me!" She looked at them sidelong. "Forgot, huh?"

"Well..." The Spine began.

"Yup!" cried Jon. Rabbit sighed.

"Then you have to make it up to me. Sing my song as penance."

Rabbit grinned and The Spine hurried out for his guitar. Jon jumped up and clicked his heels.

"Yay! We're being punished!"

"Stahp shakin' yehrself up!" Rabbit barked.

They played Airheart for her and Marie brought in soup for Lily, followed by cake. Peter helped her blow out the candles when she had a coughing fit.

"I guess you get my wish, Peter," she said in a croaky voice.

"I'll just have to wish for you," he murmured.

"Okay. What do you wish for me?"

He blinked as though surprised. "Oh, I'd... wish you were over this cold already!"

"Me too," she sighed, laying back on her pillow.
Peter, red faced, smiled weakly. The Spine, however, was glaring at him with a look that was anything but amused. Marie caught his eye and shook her head. He sighed and looked away.

Fathers never did like the idea of their daughters growing up, she decided. Human or not. She, however, was just amazed at the neat way Peter had been saved from saying something he obviously never meant to say out loud. Lily had missed the double meaning, but The Spine certainly hadn't.

Well, it was true then. Peter was in love with her little girl. Poor boy... Marie didn't like to think of it, but she had to admit, Peter was making a mistake. Lily was delicate even at her best, and as far as she could tell, thought of Peter as a big brother. An annoying big brother.

But right now she was giggling with him over the cake. Peter looked enchanted. It was precious.

Well, she decided, sooner or later he'd figure it out and move on.

----------

December, 1975

"I just need to pick up a couple of things in the drug store, Mama."

"Oh. Do you want me to come in with you?"

"No, I can do it. You go ahead and get the turkey."

"Alright, baby. I'll meet you right here, okay?"

Lily nodded and walked casually into the drug store. She found a bottle of aspirin, a bag of cotton balls... and a pregnancy test. She put them all onto the counter as nonchalantly as she could manage.

The girl greeted her and began to ring up her purchases. Lily caught a quick sidelong glance as she punched in the price for the pregnancy test and kept her face carefully neutral, fighting the urge to say it was for a friend. That would just sound more conspicuous...

"Lily?" called Marie from the doorway. "I found one right away. Ugh! This turkey is heavy! I should have brought your father..."

Thank goodness she hadn't! Lily quickly paid for her things, rolled up the top of the paper bag, and left.

"Wait!" called the girl. Lily stiffened. She turned, worried.

"Your change..."

"Oh..."

She pocketed the coins and locked eyes for a moment with the girl. She wondered what she could be thinking; their family frequented the store, and Lily wasn't wearing a wedding band...

The girl's eye flicked momentarily in a wink and she whispered, "Let me know if you need any help, okay?"

"Oh! Um... thanks!" Lily gasped, hurrying out.
"Are you alright, baby? You're white as a sheet!" Marie said as she staggered to the car.

"Fine, Mama..." Lily said weakly, getting in while her mother eased the large bird into the back seat. They were going to have Sunshine spend Christmas with them, and Peter and Dave ate a lot between them anyway.

"I wonder. You haven't had much appetite lately."

Well, yeah, I feel queasy all the time... dammit, Peter! First time? But she suppressed the smile that came to her lips as she said, "Oh, I'm just a little tired."

"Well, alright. Maybe once you get some Christmas dinner in you, you'll have more energy."

Lily thought of her mother stuffing the turkey and swallowed hard to keep from puking.

That night, she stood in the bathroom, staring at the little testing kit, reading and rereading the instructions.

"It's positive..." she whispered, trembling. "Oh, lord... what now?"

What would happen if she told her family? Well, after they yelled and screamed and asked who the father was... and her father tore Peter in half with his bare hands and Dave ran over what was left with his Chevy... ugh. That was going to be tricky...

What was more, with her health... suppose they made her see a doctor to take care of it? She realized with a start that she was in the same spot as Honeybee once again. Peter had told her what Rabbit had told him... and she was feeling a deeper understanding of the robot who had hidden her child from everyone. Like Honeybee, if she told anyone, they might insist that she wasn't up to carrying a child... Well, if she waited long enough, it would be too big, surely!

And meanwhile, she had a wonderful secret to carry with her... literally carried inside her. She was going to have Peter's baby! She felt warm all over. She'd wanted to live, to experience life before she died, but she hadn't dared to hope. She was pregnant! There was such romance to it, making love to a man and having a life form from it. She wished she could tell him... Maybe for Valentine's Day.

Meanwhile she would cherish every moment of it, even the morning sickness. She just hoped no one figured it out.

"Merry Christmas, Lily..." she murmured, resting her hand over her stomach.
Pregnant

Chapter Summary

It all comes out at last. And it's not a joyous occasion.

Chapter Notes

This is where, as Hatchworth said, we get serious. And it's going to last a few chapters. But this story, like life, has been passing inevitably to loss... and just as inevitably will get better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I don't see anyone..." Lily murmured, peering around the bushes. She shivered. "Stop, silly! We're supposed to look like we just went for a walk..."

Peter stopped nuzzling her neck and rested his head on hers, his arms wrapped around her tightly. "Baby, this is fun and all, but if we just get it over with and tell your parents..."

"Too complicated," she mumbled, smoothing her hair the best she could with him wrapped around her. "Any leaves?"

"One." She felt him pluck it from her hair. "We should at least bring a blanket..."

"Oh, yeah, that makes sense. 'Hey, Peter, you want to go for a walk? Bring a blanket in case we decide to stop and make love in the bushes...'"

"Dork. It's risky, that's all I'm saying. No one has walked by so far, but... We could spend every night together, all night, not just the couple of hours you sometimes sneak into my bed. Sometimes I just want to sleep next to you. Y'know, roll over and smell your funky breath in the morning and smile, and have people call you my wife and call me your husband instead of giving me pitying looks because they think I'm in love with a girl who isn't interested..."

She turned in his arms and kissed him. "I still don't know how they got the idea I wasn't interested. I've been interested since I was a kid, almost."

"You're right. Let's set them straight."

She sighed. "No, dummins. Just trust me on this."

"Why? Sometimes I get the feeling you're hiding something from me, Lily. You have more layers..."

"Oh, phooey," she scoffed hastily. "So, Valentine's Day is coming... Mama and Pappy are going out, and Wanda and Norman have talked about a camping trip. And I'm pretty sure Dave is getting really serious with Sunshine. So what will we do?"

"Babysit Rabbit while he cries over Honeybee."
"Oh..."
"Every year."
"Poor Rabbit. He misses her so much."

Peter held her, his forehead gently pressed against hers. He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed.
"Peter, don't... Don't think about it..."

"I do, though. Baby, let me do some more tests, look for a way to help your core..."

"No! I'm happy, Peter. I'm the happiest I've ever been."

"I'm flattered, but what happens when..."

She kissed him. He spluttered a little at first before settling into the kiss.

"Fine," he murmured at last. "You win again. I don't have the heart to push, so you win."

"Don't be petulant. I have a Valentine's surprise for you. I hope it'll make it all worth it."

"Is it something I get to unwrap?" he asked, opening one eye at her.

"Well, maybe two surprises."

Lily strolled back to the house carrying a handful of pine cones and pretty leaves to make it look as though they'd been gathering them the whole time. She passed Rabbit on her way in and smiled.

Rabbit grinned and winked, asking Peter softly, "You need me to go ma-ma-make sure the woods ain't on fire?"

Peter stopped short and sighed. "Would you stop making comments like that?"

"Well, we've had such dry weather..."

"Shut it, Rabbit."

Lily giggled as she walked ahead into the Manor. She headed for her room and put the cones into a basket. It was overflowing... she needed to empty it again.

When she came out, she ran into Sunshine.

"Oh! Sorry..."

"Lily! There you are! I wanted you to be the first to know..."

Lily clapped her hands to her mouth. "He finally got his act together, didn't he? Dave finally asked you to marry him!"

"Finally?" laughed Sunshine. She was so much happier these days... even if she did tend to analyze everyone. "We've only been dating a few months. And no, I asked him! He rolled his eyes and said he should ask me and I asked him whether he was just trying to evade the question! Once he got over being macho, he said he did want to marry me."

Lily giggled. "Why'd you ask him?"
"Well, first of all, if a lady wants something she can ask for it. And there's no reason men should have to do it. It's not fair to either sex. But mostly it's because I knew he would take forever. He's so worried about pressuring me after all I've been through, and he figures I'm too liberated now to want to get married. Well, I didn't after seeing my parents... but after seeing your parents, I began to see that marriage should be beautiful."

Lily tried to laugh, but Sunshine's words had struck her unexpectedly. Her parents and their loving marriage. They trusted her and she hadn't told them... And Peter was right. She wanted people to know they were married. She loved him and she wanted to sing it from the housetops. But... things had gotten complicated.

Sunshine was looking at her searchingly. "Lily... be honest with me..."

"About what?" she asked lightly.

"Is something going on with Peter?"

"Peter?" she murmured, trying to sound casual.

"Is everything alright?" Sunshine pressed. "If you're in any kind of trouble..."

Lily sighed and whispered, "Not the kind you think, I bet... But yeah. Something is going on and I don't really want to talk about it much but... look, don't worry, okay? He's not forcing me to do anything. I'm the one who pushed him, actually. We love each other. I just don't think my parents would approve."

"Your parents approve of you being happy, Lily. I've seen them. They'd be worried but they'd let you live your life."

"They'd let me risk it in bed with Peter?" she whispered. "You don't understand how it is for me, even after living here."

"Lily..." Sunshine said softly. She sounded a little hurt...

"I know... I'm sorry. But they'll let me do anything except over-exert myself. And I have been over-exerting myself, I can promise you that... at least twice a week. And I don't intend to stop until I waste away too much to be able to get his pants off."

Sunshine's face went through an obstacle course of emotions at this... passing through surprise, dismay, blank shock, and amusement. "Lily, honestly... I never can keep up with you."

"My turn for free love, huh?" she snickered. "Well, it's not really free love. We've exchanged vows."

Sunshine put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, that's so beautiful... You're married!" she whispered ecstatically. "Why didn't you say, oh my goodness!"

"I guess... I didn't expect anyone else to see it that way. We can't get a civil union because... I'm not really... I guess I'm an illegal citizen or something. I'm not on record."

"Ooo, you should become an international secret agent!" laughed Sunshine quietly. "Well, let's celebrate! How about lunch? Dave is downstairs telling your mom about our engagement, but we were going to go out in a few minutes."

"Actually..." She'd been lucky and hadn't actually thrown up, but she had almost no appetite. It was getting better lately, though. She was wondering when she'd start to feel the baby kick... "I'm not
really hungry."

"But... aren't you supposed to eat at certain times? You don't want another bout of anemia. I know you struggle with it..." She frowned. "You look awfully pale..."

"I'll have a little tea and get some rest. I really don't want to eat right now."

Sunshine's smile had vanished. Lily got the feeling she was being examined by the psychologist instead of her old friend.

"Alright. I'll see you in a while." She started to walk away, hesitated, and whispered, "Congratulations!"

Lily was startled until she remembered Sunshine had only just found out she and Peter were married. She forced a smile and said, "Thanks!"

Sunshine nodded wisely and walked away. Lily hurried to the little elevator and went up the the HoW.

"Lily?" Qwerty asked her, a little while later, as she sat reading.

"Hm?"

"When are you going to tell them?"

"Ugh, you too? I don't know, Qwerty. I'm reading."

"But I don't mean about marrying Peter. I mean the other secret."

Lily closed her book with a snap. "What do you know, Qwerty?"

"I know why you don't eat much. I know why you are so quiet lately. I know Peter got you..."

"Got me what?" Lily asked sharply.

"Pregnant."

"How in the world..."

"That's a book about pregnancy. Why would you read that otherwise?"

"You tell anyone and so help me..." Lily growled.

Qwerty wished she could put emotion into her voice. She certainly felt it. "You're being stupid! It's just like mama, isn't it? You are afraid they'll kill it..."

"They'll tell me my health won't allow it. You know they will."

"And maybe they're right, Lily!"

Lily stood, irritably slamming her book down. "Is everyone gonna get on my back today? Just mind your own business!" she snapped, turning to go.

"Lily..."
"Let me live my life, Qwerty! I haven't even told Peter yet! I'm going to tell him in a few days so just butt out and don't spoil it."

She hurried out and Qwerty stared after her.

"Idiot."

Qwerty swished her wires the way she usually did while thinking. It wasn't long before she heard someone climbing the stairs. She checked the cameras and saw Sunshine.

What did she want?

"Qwerty?" she said, peering into the room.

"What?" She didn't have anything against Sunshine personally, but she'd never quite forgiven her for thinking Lily was lying about having a cousin, years before.

"I was hoping you could tell me something. About Lily. I'm worried about her."

Oh...

Sunshine stepped over to the beanbag and found the fallen book. She picked it up slowly.

"Oh, Lily..." she breathed.

"Don't tell!" Qwerty said quickly. Why had Lily been so careless?

"How can I hide this? She could die!"

"I know..."

"Silly girl... she'd never agree to a... no. And I guess I don't blame her."

"Can you look after her? I can't do anything. I'm trapped in here..."

Sunshine looked at the words on the monitor as she spoke them. She looked thoughtful.

"Does that bother you, Qwerty? Not being able to leave?"

"Well, yes, my cousin could die and I can't help her."

"Yes, and I will keep an eye on her but... how are you? Rabbit told me your grandfather died earlier this year. I'm sure you miss him."

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Alright." She settled into the beanbag, to Qwerty's dismay. She wanted to be alone. She usually did these days. "But Rabbit told me you were pretty broken up about that, and... he didn't say what else but I got the feeling there was something. Are you having a hard time being cooped up in one place?"

"I don't really have a choice," Qwerty said as sharply as she could. "Can we discuss Lily now?"

"Lily... yes, she can go anywhere she wants. She does a lot of things really. More than I ever expected..."

Why was she still here? Lily needed her, not Qwerty! "And she's nearly killing herself!"
"But she's not the only one to risk that, is she?" Sunshine asked gently.

Qwerty said nothing for a minute. Pappy had told... how could he? "Just go..."

"Rabbit's worried about you, Qwerty."

She'd heard of this. Sunshine was some kind of brain doctor and she was trying to use it now... "I'm fine. I run everything here and take care of the house. You can leave."

"If you like. But I'd like to come back sometimes."

"Suit yourself. I'll be busy."

"Alright. Thank you. I'll see you tomorrow. You don't have to talk. Maybe I'll talk and you can work."

She got to her feet and walked to the door, where she paused and added, "It's okay to feel bad, Qwerty. It's hard losing people you love... one way or another. It's hard when life denies you something you desperately want. It's okay to feel. Those things hurt. You were never just a computer, were you? So don't feel ashamed about having a broken heart. It's part of being a person. Okay?"

"Whatever."

Sunshine actually laughed. "I'll go check on Lily. See you later."

Qwerty wished she could sigh. She had a few things to say to her Pappy about this one...

Part of being a person. Sunshine had called her a person. She would have preferred to be a person with legs.

Lily leaned back on her pillow, scowling at the ceiling. Was everyone watching her all the time? How had she ever found enough privacy to make love to her own husband?

She wondered what he was doing. He was in one of the labs, and she didn't dare follow him in there anymore. She knew he'd have sensors on her in a heartbeat. If he put them in the wrong place, he might just detect that she had two heartbeats inside her now, and she'd come too close to her reveal to risk exposure... She hoped he'd be as happy as she was.

She rubbed her stomach irritably. She'd been feeling a little achy. Maybe she just needed to pee...

She sat up and the room spun around. She felt another dull spasm in her abdomen.

"What's going on?" she murmured, holding onto the bed frame until the dizziness subsided. She got slowly to her feet and headed for the bathroom.

Peeing didn't really help much; she still ached. She was getting worried. She was reaching for the toilet paper when she glanced down and saw the blood in her panties.

Time seemed to freeze. It was so quiet...

"No!" she gasped at last. "No, it isn't fair!"

She burst into tears as another spasm passed through her. This one hurt. She bent double where she
sat, shuddering with misery.

"No!" she wailed. "Don't... don't go..."

She tried to stay calm but the aching continued, coming and going like contractions. Her body was getting rid of what it was supposed to protect. She'd read about this... She sobbed, unable to calm herself. The usual curl of Blue Matter erupted from her core but she didn't care. It just wasn't fair! This was why the nausea had subsided... she'd miscarried. It was over before she could feel it kick, before she could tell the father. She couldn't bear it... She wanted her mother, but what would she say to her?

"Lily! What's wrong, honey?"

"Sunshine..." she sobbed. "C-come in, okay?"

She carefully crept in and shut the door. "Lily, oh my lord, oh... oh, you poor thing!"

She sank to the floor beside her, indifferent to her awkward state, and put her arm around her. Lily let the tears fall, saying nothing.

After a little while, Sunshine said, "We need to get you cleaned up, sweet. And we need a doctor."

"So you do know..."

"I was just up visiting Qwerty. I saw your book there."

Lily sighed weakly. "Why do we need a doctor? There's nothing he can do," Lily said thickly, still shaking with sobs.

"He can... he can make sure there's nothing to cause you any infections."

Lily cried harder at this. She meant he was going to clean everything out. It was like the last nail in the coffin.

"And it's time to tell your mother, Lily. Because we can't sneak a doctor in. I don't even know his number."

Lily nodded miserably. "I want Peter..."

"Alright. I'll help you get cleaned up and tucked into bed and I'll go tell your mom..."

"No... I need to do that. I lied to her and Pappy. I need to tell them. I'm not afraid anymore." She gulped and whispered, "I don't really feel anything at all..."

Sunshine sighed as she reached for the toilet paper. "I understand. Too well."

Peter was busy in the lab, working on Lily's problem in spite of her protests, when he heard a knock at the front door. He headed out to answer it but Marie was already there.

"Why's the doctor here?" he asked as she let the man in.

The doctor looked at Marie with a frown. She nodded. "Peter, we need to talk. Just stay here a moment..." She turned. "Doctor, she's waiting. Sunshine is with her. Go on in."
"Lily!" Peter cried, starting after him.

"No, Peter!" Marie cried. "She's okay but we really need to talk before you see her!"

He stared. "She told you, didn't she? She finally told you we're married."

Marie nodded. That was a load off. Marie didn't seem angry. She wasn't happy, but that was to be expected...

"But that's only part of this... Peter, honey..."

Uh oh. There was something ominous about her tone.

"There's no gentle way to tell you." She sighed and said, "She was pregnant. Lily was pregnant."

He stood thunderstruck. At last he managed, "Was?"

She nodded, wiping tears.

"Oh, Lily..." he whispered. "But... I guess it's for the best, she couldn't carry it to term..."

"But she wanted it, honey. She wanted to have your baby. If you'd only told me sooner... I guess there's nothing I could have done, but... it would have been nice to know! I honestly thought she wasn't interested in you!"

"I know..." he said dryly.

"She never acted like she was! And now... the poor baby..."

She choked up at this and Peter sighed and hugged her. He needed it as much as she did. It was just hitting him that he'd been a father, just a little... Lily had been carrying his child, and his baby was gone before he even knew he'd had one. He wasn't sure how to react, or even how to feel. There was a knot in his throat. He wanted to see Lily but she would be in no position to see him until the doctor left.

To his surprise, Marie said, "You should go to her, Peter."

"Right now? Isn't he..."

"Cleaning out the remains of her pregnancy, yes. To prevent an infection. And she is probably weeping through the whole thing."

"Oh..." he breathed.

"I can go to her for now, if you want, but she really wants you."

"Alright... just until the doctor leaves, okay? I'll be waiting outside the room."

"Peter..." she said as they turned to go to Lily. "I want you to know that I'm proud to have you for a son in law."

"I don't know why..." he murmured miserably.

They turned the corner and found themselves facing The Spine. He was scowling at them both.

In clipped, short tones, he said, "I just came from being given the runaround by Lily's doctor!"
"Love..." Marie started.

"Will someone tell me just what the Hell is going on around here?" he said, eyes flickering as he glared directly at Peter, as though assuming it had something to do with him.

Which it did. Peter sighed. Time to die.

"Go ahead. Kill me if that's what you think is best, Spine. Lily and I got married."

The Spine's glared twisted into something Peter had only ever seen on Rabbit when they tried to get him in for maintenance. "Did you?" he asked coolly. "Only she doesn't have a wedding ring... Neither do you."

"We... we love each other... Lily wanted to just sleep with... oh... this isn't going to end well..."

"That's a fair assumption," The Spine sneered, his eyes flickering red.

"Love, please!" Marie cried. "You're scaring me!"

This had the effect she'd likely intended. The Spine at last stopped staring Peter down and looked apprehensively at his wife. "Marie... you'd better go to Lily while Peter tells me what he's been up to..."

"I think maybe it's better if I stay here. I seem to be the only thing keeping you out of battle mode."

"Oh, Marie..." he muttered guiltily. He looked away from her sheepishly. "Right. Start talking, Peter."

Peter took a deep breath, hoping it wasn't his last. "Lily said she was tired of being sheltered, that she wanted to live a full life while she can, and since we can't get a civil union we took Rabbit's advice and exchanged vows... I consider her my wife, Spine. Just as surely as if we'd had a judge perform the ceremony..."

"Rabbit knows?" The Spine barked.

"Spine! Keep it together!" Marie snapped. To Peter's amazement, The Spine glanced at her like a scolded puppy.

"I am," he said tightly. "But Rabbit..."

"We'll have a talk with him later, believe me."

He looked almost pleased.

"Anyway, love," she continued. "Lily is alright. But... she's had a miscarriage."

The Spine looked at her in blind shock. "A miscarriage... but... my little girl..."

Peter took a step backward as The Spine glared at him again. "She was pregnant?" the automaton snarled.

"Spine, come on! He said they were married! That's what happens sometimes..."

Two seconds later, Peter was staring into cold green eyes over the gleaming chrome fist that was clutching his shirt front. "She wanted to live a full life, did she? It's kind of hard to live a full life when you're dead! Or were you too horny to care?"
Peter shut his eyes and waited for whatever happened next. It wasn't possible to fight off The Spine. He felt a struggle ensuing as Marie tried to interfere, but he had no hope that this would help.

"She could have died! She's fragile and he just had his way with her!" The Spine roared. The lamps in the hallway rattled.

Peter slammed into the wall and sank to the floor, gasping for breath. He opened his eyes in time to see The Spine turn away, fists curled at his sides.

"She loves him..." Marie breathed through her tears. "She chose to do it, love. Even if it meant... well, you know Lily. She's always wanted to do more than just survive. And didn't we take risks, too, when we got married? She wants what she's seen growing up. She wants her time loving someone... She wanted her baby, too, and she's lost it."

His fists slowly went slack. He slumped slightly. Peter could barely hear him as he muttered, "But... she's my baby... and he didn't care, he just saw her as..."

"A woman. That's what she is. I guess we should have remembered that."

"I know..." The Spine wiped his sleeve across his eyes. He turned slowly toward Peter. 

Aw, crap! Peter cringed, still out of breath, and put up his hands feebly.

And felt The Spine grip them and help him to his feet. Peter leaned against the wall, trembling.

"I'm... sorry..." The Spine grunted, and Peter knew he wasn't, not a bit. "Well... if you and Lily are determined to play house, then be the man you've promised to be and get your ass in there with her. She needs you..."

The Spine's voice broke at this. That wasn't supposed to happen... But Peter wasn't going to suggest a maintenance check just now. He hurried to Lily's room instead. Behind him, he could swear he heard a sob.

He wondered how much of The Spine's grief came from the fact that his daughter had grown up and fallen in love. Fathers could be pretty silly about their daughters sometimes...

As he raised a hand to knock at the door, he remembered that he had been a father himself... briefly.

He sighed deeply. "Poor Spine."

That evening, Peter found The Spine downstairs with Marie, Rabbit, Jon, Sunshine... and Dave. Peter hesitated in the doorway as Dave glared at him from his seat.

"Peter," Dave said shortly.

Peter smiled weakly.

"No, don't freak out. I know the little brat well enough to know she'll do what she damn well pleases. It was probably all you could do to fight her off."

"Dave!" snapped Marie, Sunshine, and The Spine as one. Rabbit was smiling sadly down at his shoes.

Peter sighed. Dave was right. He knew her very well. "She's asleep. I just wanted to tell you..." Here
he looked toward her parents. "She's said she wants to sleep in my room now that everyone knows."

"Fine," The Spine said shortly, looking at Marie. "Whatever. Carry her off..."

"Love... she isn't gone."

"Not yet," the automaton muttered almost inaudibly. He shook his head and got up to leave. "Goodnight," he said thickly as he walked out.

"Poor jerk," Rabbit muttered. "She was just his until today. His own little baby girl. They gotta grow up sometime."

No one said anything. Rabbit was in no danger of sharing his daughter's affections, and even if he was, he would probably give her every encouragement.

"So how is she?" Sunshine asked. "What did the doctor say?"

"That she wasn't strong enough to support the baby. She was doing alright, but that was just one strain she couldn't maintain. He said they're pretty common at this stage of pregnancy."

Marie nodded and wiped her eyes. "That's how far I was when I had mine."

Jon's chin trembled. "You had one too?" he whimpered.

She nodded. "Years ago, before I met Spine."

The Jon's face crumpled and he scooted over and hugged her. Marie patted him limply.

"Well, I'd better get going. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon, Rabbit." Sunshine stood and Dave got up to walk her out.

"Why'd she tell you, Rabbit?" Marie asked around Jon's curls.

"Uh... Qwerty's been feelin' a li-li-little down since Armand passed away..."

Peter and The Spine had discussed Qwerty at length after her close shave. The Spine had suggested something that had never occurred to Peter, but the more he considered it, the more it rang true... Qwerty was depressed. It troubled him, not just because he'd come to see her as a person but because there wasn't a single thing he could do to help her, outside of provide her with a better interface. And he was always trying to do just that... but he knew what she wanted. She mentioned it casually from time to time, as though it didn't matter, but it did. She wanted out.

"So Qwerty has an analyst, hm?" Peter said.

"Maybe she can talk to Lily, too..." Rabbit said.

"She will," Marie said. "As a friend, if nothing else. Well, I'd better go check on my husband. Come on, Jon... you need stasis."

"Uh-huh..." he said miserably. "Babies..."

"Shush, now. Don't wake Lily as we go by."

"Okay."

Dave passed them on his way back in and gave his mother a quick kiss on the head. When they'd
gone, Dave said, "Peter... I hate to even ask this but I want to know... How long do you honestly think she has left?"

"Dave!" Rabbit said sharply.

"I know you think about it and I know you haven't made any progress. How long, Peter?"

"Shut it, you stupid..." Rabbit said, standing abruptly.

"Rabbit... it's okay," Peter said weakly. He felt like Dave had stabbed him but somehow, still not angry. "Honestly... I give her a year."

His voice broke and Rabbit put an arm around him. Dave nodded coolly.

"I'll put off going to L.A."

"But... you have such a big chance right now," Peter said.

"Would you have me leave? I'll wait. If they want me now, they'll want me more in a year. And if not, there's plenty of broken cars. I'll stay around for now... and after that, I won't cross this threshold again."

"What?" gasped Rabbit.

"You heard me. I'm not coming back here after Lily passes. I'll see my family at restaurants or my place. Maybe out on the lawn, I don't know. This place is saturated with Blue Matter radiation. It's changing everyone. Mom has blue hairs even though she dyes them. So do you and Aunt Wanda, who still looks twenty-five and Mom doesn't look much older. Sunshine lost her baby in this house. Lily..."

"Lives on Blue Matter! It isn't poison!" Peter cried. "It doesn't cause miscarriage or radiation poisoning!"

"Look at my hair!" Dave snapped. He pointed. "I'm getting them now! I don't even work with the stuff! How do I know what else it does?"

"You grew up here..." Rabbit said weakly.

"And for all I know I have tumors all over just waiting to become cancer. And now I'm getting married... yeah, me and Sunshine. I can't put her in the position of losing another baby. She's tough and she's learned all those stages of grief but it would kill her to lose another baby. She was crying over Lily's, and it wasn't even that far developed! I'll let her come back here and treat Qwerty, and visit Lily..."

"Let her?" snorted Rabbit. "You're gonna let Sunshine do that, huh? Only maybe she should hear this crap before she ties herself to you! She mi-mi-might wanna think it over!"

"You know what I mean..."

"Yeah, she says yes and all of a sudden you're her lord and master..."

"Look, I'm giving a lot here! I was gonna leave tonight. But Lily needs her family around her and... I just don't want her to die and hear about it from L.A. after not seeing her for months."

Peter sank into a chair. He'd stopped being part of the argument. This was really going to happen. Dave had asked it and he'd said it. He'd always had the number hovering in his mind but this was the
first time he'd said it aloud. It felt too much like a commitment. She'd been declining for years but now... Lily, his wife, was dying.

He broke down at last and the argument stopped short.

Peter had managed to pull himself together after a long sit with Rabbit. The automaton had chased Dave away and just sat, saying nothing, until Peter at last took a deep, shuddering breath and got up to go see to Lily.

The one bright spot of the day, since their "nature walk" anyway, was at the end. Lily was pale and her smile was brittle, but as Peter carried her into his room and lay her gently on his bed, for that moment he was able to feel that he was doing something for her instead of hurting her. She smiled up at him as he pulled the blankets up over her. He slipped out of his shirt and pants and climbed into bed beside her.

"The doctor said I had to wait three weeks before... y'know," she murmured sleepily. He'd given her something to calm her nerves. She'd have plenty of time to hurt tomorrow.

As if he would ever be able to bring himself to make love to her again! He hoped he would have the courage, though... because he knew she'd have a fit if he refused. He took her little hand and kissed her fingers.

"Don't worry about that, baby," he whispered. "Oh... not the best choice of words..."

"It's okay. It's not as if I forgot."

She put her arms around him and he gently pulled her closer, letting her rest carefully against his shoulder.

"Peter... are you okay? I at least got to have a little time knowing about the baby, but you... you only heard about it when it was too late. I'm so sorry, love..."

"Ssh... I'm more worried about you."

"It's okay, though. If you're hurting too... I want to know."

He hesitated. Lily meant it. But how could he add to her worries?

She stroked his cheek and he sighed tremulously. "I was a father," he whispered at last. "I don't blame you for holding it back for just a little while, but... yeah, it hurts..."

And he discovered he'd made the right choice. She held him close and did her best to comfort him as tears prickled at his eyes.

"We'll get through it together," she murmured. "I love you, Peter. I would have been so happy to have your baby."

"I would have been happy if you could have," he whispered. He didn't dare say that it was for the best.

"Peter... Tomorrow I want to talk about something I know you've been avoiding. I don't want to hurt you..."

"Then don't," he said tightly. Everyone wanted to talk about death today...
"But it isn't painful for me, don't you understand? I want you to understand because I want to leave you with that same feeling... that life gave us beautiful things to remember! And that's what I want to talk about, memories... something Qwerty and I have been discussing. It's really important, okay? Or I swear I wouldn't even mention it."

He turned off the light so that she wouldn't see him crying. Maybe she really was bearing up well. He still couldn't let her watch him cry.

"Alright," he whispered.

"Thank you," she murmured, pulling him gently down for a kiss. He saw her lightly sweep a finger across her face in the dimness and realized that a tear had dripped onto her cheek. Lily didn't mention it. "You make me very happy. I love you, Peter."

"I love you, baby. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, that was brutal. Peter V has one son, and we all know all about him. There's no one in the SPG universe born in the mid-70s, so Lily is too frail to carry it to term.
Goodbye

Chapter Summary

Dying is easy. Living is hard...

Chapter Notes

Sorry. I can't put it off any longer. I've been sitting on this one for a while... and I'm hoping to get to a happier installment by Christmas, even if it has to be a danged flashback. But it's not gonna lighten up just yet, chronologically. I can only promise better times ahead...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Los Angeles, November, 1975:

"Qwerty? Is your Pappy in stasis?"

"Yes, Grand-Pere..."

"This concerns you and your cousin. Have you considered that her core may contain the same mysteries of sentience possessed by her father?"

"I thought about it a little..."

"Think of it again, little one. It may be the key to saving her."

"I can save her life?" she gasped. Her Pappy's body began to slump. She did her best to keep him upright.

"Ah, no, little one. I don't know that you can. But possibly you can save her, if you find the way."

"I don't understand!" she sobbed.

"When you are calm, child. When you have time to study it. Her life will end. We both know it is inevitable; like me, she is mortal. And she will be young. She was not created with the true building blocks of life, and she cannot be sustained indefinitely. But she has lived and been loved. And she can be preserved in her pure form."

Qwerty gasped. "Oh, Grand-pere... You mean, without her body! But that's worse than dying!" She hesitated, feeling she had given too much away. "To her, at least," she added lamely.

"Ask her if she thinks so. She should be the judge of it."

Qwerty sighed. "Alright."
"I am tired. Let me speak to your Pappy..."

"I'll miss you so much!" she whispered.

"Be well, little one. Be whole, and be happy."

Whole? She had never been whole. "I'll try!" she sobbed. She began sliding again and woke her Pappy from his stasis in time to stop the descent.

--------

San Diego, April 1977:

It had been the most lovely year of Lily's life. She'd been in love, married, pregnant... Peter had been persuaded to resume a physical relationship, with certain protective measures in place. They'd managed to continue it right up until last month, when even Lily was forced to admit she just couldn't manage it anymore.

Once she'd recovered from her miscarriage, though, she'd been reasonably vigorous and Peter had set about taking her to see what sights they could see in the area. She'd seen museums, dinosaur bones, zoos, art, the ocean and the desert, mountains and canyons. They'd stayed a night on the Queen Mary. Peter had said it would be a nice place for a concert. Rabbit had always been fascinated with ships, despite his dislike of sand.

It was a year after their wedding that her decline really began to show, and to limit what they could do. Lily sometimes was pushed around in a wheelchair; not Honeybee's, something new and not carrying a battery. She had a nurse for a while but became so irritated with her that she'd quit. And they knew better than to push another onto Lily.

So she'd been tended by family, when they could get her to cooperate. She was always willing to be carried, but she liked being able to do for herself. It was hard becoming increasingly weak. Her appetite was almost non-existent, except when Norman surprised her with a chocolate souffle. Norman was full of surprises.

It was a week after Easter. Peter carried Lily into the HoW and set her gently in a plush chair. The Spine had moved up there for her. He kissed her softly.

"How are you?" he murmured, moving a heavy footstool under her feet and pulling a blanket over her. She was always cold lately...

"Just fine," she said quietly.

"No, you're not," he sighed. "But I'll humor you."

"Thanks. I'll see you in a while."

"Alright. Take care of her Qwerty. I'll hurry back."

She'd given up telling him not to worry. Besides, she wanted him to hurry back. "Alright, darling. I'll be waiting."

"I'll count on it."

He left, closing the door gently behind him. Qwerty's monitor rolled forward.

"He is worried," she intoned.
"He's always worried. It's sad. He's not a worrier, really. It's just that his family is always giving him something to worry about. If he hadn't had so much dumped on him so young, I swear he'd have tried your gravity theory already... he was talking about it yesterday."

"It would work too."

"Can't you try it?"

"It only applies to organic matter. I think he's the perfect subject for the experiment..."

"So he's your guinea pig?" Lily giggled weakly and winced.

"Are you alright?"

"Am I ever?" Lily wheezed.

Her core ached. It actually ached. She rubbed fitfully at her breast bone. A metal arm slid before her, holding a tray with a little paper cup and a glass of water.

"You're in pain."

"That stuff makes me dopey, Qwerty."

"He won't be home for hours. It will pass before he gets back."

"Alright," Lily sighed. She took the medicine and leaned back, sighing.

"Speaking of guinea pigs, have you thought about my idea?"

"I have. I'm interested, but not yet."

"There isn't much time, you know that better than anyone."

"But that's why I'm waiting. He needs me a little longer..."

"The longer you stay, the lower the chance of salvaging enough matter to achieve the desired results..."

"A risk I'm willing to take. I can't just do it. He hit the roof when I told him about it last year, and I know he's expecting me to go through with it willy-nilly... So yeah, if that means I don't make it in time, so be it."

"Alright, then, the longer you wait, the longer it will take him to start to recover and move on. I talked all about that with Sunshine..."

"Oh, Qwerty. Can we just play chess or something?"

"I know all your moves."

"Read to me, then?"

"Alright. What should I read?"

For Qwerty, reading was just reciting. She had every book in Walter Manor in her database.

"Harpo Speaks."
"Really?"

"Yeah, really! It's funny. He never got depressed, no matter how bad his life was, even when people died, he went with the flow. Even when he was the one with health problems... he went ahead and had fun after trying the boring rest the doctors recommended. I understand him. I like hearing how he talks about life."

"Alright..." She could almost hear Qwerty sigh. "Harpo Speaks, Chapter 1: Confessions of a Non-Lady Harpist. I don't know whether my life has been a success or a failure. But not having any anxiety about becoming one instead of the other, and just taking things as they came along, I've had a lot of extra time to enjoy life."

Lily sighed and smiled. "Just like me."

--------

Peter carried her downstairs to dinner when he arrived home. Everyone was cheerful... too much so. She knew why but she sometimes wished they didn't feel the need. She was only brittle on the outside...

They played Monopoly that night. Lily liked it; she could play it despite her illness and she usually creamed her Pappy at it because he didn't understand the killer instinct. Rabbit, on the other hand, was a worthy foe... and Dave never gave an inch.

Dave was the one, in fact, that she could count on to be himself. He wasn't happy about the decline in her health and grumbled when the others couldn't hear. She suspected her big brother knew she saw through the well-meaning tripe and appreciated his honesty. Besides, as they both had discussed, the others were being sunshiney more for themselves than for Lily. That was the part that hurt the most; knowing that no matter how intrigued she was with her future, as much as she wondered what came next, all they would have was an empty chair.

Or not. Maybe they'd have just a bit more. Lily still, after all this time, wasn't sure what she thought of Qwerty's theories. The concept of being uploaded, not having to vanish away or leave home, no longer being weighed down by a dying body... It actually sounded lovely until you thought it through. How could Peter move on when his wife still lived in the HoW as a digital ghost with her cousin? She would be doing him nothing but harm.

But Lily suspected she had a choice. She had memories to save. But she didn't have to stay with them. She could feel it at night, as she listened to her core swirling softly in the darkness. She could tell that it held echoes... but they weren't her. They were separating... if she died away from the HoW, they would dissipate and all that was Lily would pass away.

Peter had set her pendant to catch what swirled from her core and return it at need. What he didn't realize was that the pendant had stopped giving it back. Her body wasn't even trying to pull in the needed Blue Matter now... and she could feel the difference. But Peter... he knew she was weak, but he didn't study her anymore, and she hadn't told him. She supposed Qwerty would need the pendant too, for the experiment.

She just hoped that Qwerty accepted her terms for completing it.

Lily grew tired at last and insisted on going around the group, kissing them all goodnight. She lingered... she had been lingering... but she did so now at each person. She knew each one admitted, in their own small way, that each night could be her last, and each had their own response.
Dave, who got a hug and a quiet thank you, usually lightly punched her arm... but tonight for the first time looked genuinely worried. Aunt Wanda, who patted her cheek. Norman, who kissed her hand with his curious sideways mouth. Sunshine, Dave's new wife of six months, always hugged her and called her "Dearheart." Lily had managed to be her maid of honor, walking on Peter's arm, at the wedding. It had felt like walking down the aisle herself... the one thing she'd missed about her own marriage... and Sunshine had made the shocking choice of having Lily dressed in white. They both understood why.

She sat between Rabbit and The Jon and hugged each in turn. Jon had a curious way of placing one hand over her breastbone and whispering, "Still here."

And Rabbit rolled his eyes and kissed her cheek and whispered, "Don't fly away yet, Airheart." Same every night.

She kissed her mother and held her, and Marie had taken her usual long look into her face. Lily never objected to her mother's long stares. She, like Marie, hadn't been too sure which would be the last. Marie had confessed it, gently, lovingly... that she always wanted to remember her sweet face, even when she had gone off on a new adventure. She always called it that, too. Lily liked it. It was a way of saying it instead of denying it... and it reminded her of Peter Pan.

Finally, she sat on her Pappy's lap and rested a little while, and Peter asked The Spine to take her upstairs. She kissed Peter and her Pappy carried her gently upstairs and put her into bed. She already wore her nightgown; it was just easier.

"Goodnight, Pappy," she said. "Thank you."

For everything, she added in her head. For being a wonderful father despite being made of metal and gears. But she never said it aloud. He wouldn't hear it. And she couldn't bear the look on his face if she had. She couldn't stay alive for him, anymore than she could for Peter or Marie. Their hearts would have to break and mend in the usual way. She had written letters to each of them... if they could bear to read them, those would tell them everything they were too afraid to hear while she was alive. Mama Honey may have had a fancier delivery method... but the concept was the same.

The Spine kissed her cheek. "Goodnight, little one. I'll see you in the morning."

He said it firmly, as though giving an order. But of course he would see her. She just wasn't sure she would see him. Unlike the others, though, he tried... as though by force of will he could make her hang on one more day... and another... and another.

He lingered in the doorway as he always did, taking his own long last look, never admitting, as far as she had ever heard, that it could be the last.

----------

Lily dozed lightly that night. She was afraid to go to sleep too deeply...

Peter came in very late, undressed, and slipped into bed. She woke and stroked his hair.

"Can't sleep?" he whispered.

"I have been. I must have been in a light stage..."

"Sorry, I tried to be quiet," he murmured wearily, moving closer. He lay his head on her shoulder the way he had done the first time they made love. His stubble was thick, almost enough to call it a beard. "I've been working on something that I think is going to make the difference..."
"Oh?" she said.

He said that about everything. She didn't believe for a second that anything was going to make a difference at this point. It was time to go and see Qwerty about their experiment.

"Just... need to check the results in the morning..." He yawned.

"Alright. Get some sleep. I love you, Peter."

"Hm?"

"I love you," she said earnestly. She tipped his head up and kissed him, lingering over this too. She would never have enough kisses... "Don't forget it."

"I love you, too, Lily..."

He was asleep almost before he said it. She lay, holding him, wishing she could stay. He would be so hurt if she left this way, but if she told him, he would interfere.

She didn't mind dying so much... it was not living longer that stunk. She would at least have liked to make love to him once more. That had been really, really nice. He was good at it, very gentle. She'd overheard conversations where her aunt talked about her first husband... nice guy, she'd said, but terrible in bed, what was it she'd said? "Wham bam, thank you ma'am..." Yuck.

Lily smiled. Not her husband. Never once...

She stroked his hair out of the way and kissed his forehead. He squeezed her waist in his sleep.

She had to let go... and so did he! She had to wait for him to roll over... she was weak, she could barely lift herself.

She coughed softly and a wisp of Blue Matter spiraled out of her chest only to be absorbed by her pendant.

Peter rolled over at last. Lily waited until his breathing was steady and carefully slipped out of bed. The floor felt cold. She savored anything she could feel now...

She crept from the room, giving one last glance at the sombreros hanging on the wall... and picking up a doll in her own image as she went.

The lift had been repaired, thank goodness. She made her way to the HoW.

Qwerty was still running. "Lily!" she chimed.

Wires slipped around her, easing her into the big chair, tucking pillows all around. Lily placed the doll beside her.

"Is it time?"

Lily nodded. "I can feel it. It's almost gone, Qwerty."

"Is there enough, then?"

"In the pendant. Peter adjusted it a year ago to absorb any matter I lost."

A little light flashed over the pendant. "It's all there! If there was just a way to return it..."
Lily smiled weakly. "No... they all agree that my body has to take it in. And it's stopped doing that."

"Lily... I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything."

"I'm just sorry."

"Just do it, Qwerty. I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

The wires began to move. A blue light came toward her... Qwerty's core. It had been fastened to the wall, but she had managed to dislodge it and fashion a portable unit. It hovered in front of her, flickering.

"Goodnight, Lily. See you soon."

"Goodnight, Qwerty."

Lily closed her eyes. She felt a rushing sensation... there was blue light all around... it was beautiful. She wasn't afraid to die...

But she hadn't died. Her focus readjusted. She was looking out through a monitor.

In a big plush chair, before her, braced with pillows, was a frail young woman, pale and still, her dark blue black hair laying in strands across her livid skin. On her chest was a gray circle and a darkened pendant.

Seconds later the door flew open and Peter ran in. He stopped short and stared... then sank to the floor beside the chair. He took one cold hand and felt for a pulse as though forcing himself to do it. And then he just slumped back against the chair. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he stared, unseeing, in front of him. He didn't speak to Qwerty... His face contorted and he sobbed against his knees, shuddering...

"Not yet..." he gasped. "I... almost had the answer..."

He had always almost had the answer. But Lily was tired. She'd been happy. She was ready to move on. There was just one more obstacle to that... one more friend to leave with a lingering look.

A figure of a woman appeared beside Lily... She looked a lot like Honeybee, but with copper skin so clean that it shone pink, and Rabbit's unique eyes. She wore a black dress with a fluffy skirt. Beside her appeared a slim small woman. Lily was drawn to it and abruptly became the woman. She gasped in surprise.

_Qwerty! You look like a robot in here..._

_Do you like it? I changed to copper after Pappy came home... But... Lily... It worked... we should tell Peter!_ Qwerty insisted.

No...

_But you aren't gone! You just left your body!

He needs the body. You know it as well as I do. He needs a whole, human wife._

Qwerty was silent. Lily knew how Qwerty felt about Peter, too. She felt bad for pointing out what had been an obstacle to Qwerty for so long, but there it was. Peter needed a warm, human lover, not
Let's complete the interface, Qwerty.

Qwerty stared. That wasn't the plan! If I do that, you'll be absorbed! You won't be Lily anymore. You'll become part of my matrix.

I don't want to be Lily anymore. I want to move on. To do that, you need to take the Blue Matter to you and free me to move on. Qwerty, I want you to have the most important things I own. My memories.

But...

I'm not afraid to die. I did this for another reason.

Lily... No!

She'd expected her to put up a fight. You'll have what I had, Qwerty.

It'll be stolen! It isn't right! It wasn't really me!

Once I am part of your matrix, it will have been you.

But...

I give them freely. It's his past now. He needs to move forward, and I won't need Blue Matter now... I can already feel something else pulling at me. Maybe it's Heaven. I hope so.

Oh... I'd hoped you could stay here. It wouldn't be so lonely...

I know, but I don't think I'm meant to. I was never supposed to be born, according to humans, but somehow I think that from the eternal view of things I was always meant to be. I have a place in the cosmos... gosh, I sound like a hippie!

A little, Qwerty murmured sadly.

Lily realized that Qwerty hadn't felt the loss everyone else had because she thought Lily was going to stay. But it was true, she felt a strange lightness beyond leaving her body. She could almost hear a voice calling her name.

And Qwerty... You love him, too. I know. So I give you the memories of having been loved in return.

Lily... Qwerty stared at her in wonder. Lily decided she liked Qwerty's face. Thank you.

They stepped forward into the sisterly hug they had never really been able to share.

I love you, Lily. Thank you for saving me from being alone.

Oh, Qwerty! I love you too! I always had a sister because you were here...

Initializing interface. Goodbye, Airheart.

Be happy, Lily whispered. Be whole.

Grand-pere said that...

I know.
There was a flash of light and Lily's avatar flickered and vanished. She turned toward the increasingly insistent voice.

*Coming...* she murmured as the blue room around her vanished.

---------

Qwerty, still in her core, gasped. She'd never gasped before, not really. She'd done something like gasping...

There was a Lily shaped mist before her... It smiled... then turned as if seeing something... took a step... and was gone.

Qwerty's heart was pounding. No wait... that couldn't be. She put her hand to her chest, looking at her hand as she did... same metal, same old simulation. But she felt it! She felt... different. She formed a mirror and looked. She looked the same. But... she concentrated and her hair turned dark.

That seemed right.

Lily's memory was now being installed into her data bank, organized neatly into little parcels to ease the process. Food related files were up first, for some reason. She had a terrible craving for mustard. It passed a moment later as the next file was incorporated. Now she wanted a cookie... It was going to be a long night.

She scratched her neck for no apparent reason and turned her camera to Peter, watching over him the rest of the night as the new data gradually merged with her old data... and she became more and more... human.

---------

They came for Peter in the morning when neither of them turned up at breakfast. It was necessary to give him one of Norman's tranquilizers in order to be able to get him to leave Lily. Qwerty watched as Rabbit came to bring Lily downstairs; The Spine, from what Rabbit told her, was in forced stasis after having broken down, figuratively, upon hearing the news. Marie sat with him and Dave, crying on her son's shoulder. Jon had hidden when he heard. Rabbit was the only one both able and willing to retrieve the body. He cradled her gently against his chest, bundled in a blanket like a baby, leaving the doll in the chair. Tears flowed freely down his cheeks but he carried his burden with the greatest of care.

"Airheart..." he whispered. "Was she happy, baby? Did she hurt? I mean... was it a good ending?"

"She was happy. She loved us all but she just couldn't stay. She wanted to be with someone at the end... I could handle it the best so she came to me."

It was kind of a lie and she felt guilty for lying to her Unkie Rabbit... no... her Pappy. Right.

"Poor kid," he whispered. "It don't matter how long you see it co-co-comin'... It still feels like it came outta nowhere."

Qwerty wrapped a wire around him carefully and gave him a squeeze. "I love you."

"I love you too, baby."

Qwerty watched him go.

She settled back into the hum of the HoW. It had hurt to watch, but there was a curious joy inside
her. The strangest part was that now she really understood what it felt like to have an inside. And arms, and legs, lungs and teeth, breasts and ears... She could remember having skin, being ticklish. She could remember being touched... embraced by Marie and The Spine, lifted and tossed by Rabbit, held on Honeybee’s lap. Her parents. She knew how it felt to be held by her parents... to hear her mother read her a story, to have her Pappy kiss her cheek...

Qwerty closed her eyes and smiled... only she didn’t. But it felt like she did... she felt like a woman now. She could never see masquerading as a boy after this. She was a girl. A woman. She’d been pregnant...

And Peter... she could remember Peter... the first time they kissed, the first time they made love... she tried to tell herself that had been Lily... but just as surely, now, it had been her. She wasn’t now, but she had been Lily... Peter had touched her skin, whispered that he loved her, been as close to her as it was possible to be. It felt wrong to savor that memory... and it felt just wonderful.

And like Lily, she was committed now to keeping her silence. Peter Walter V was a widower. He would mourn, and heal, and she could only pray that someday he found love again, with someone strong enough to live out her days with him. She loved him too much to risk holding him back. She could see it the way Lily had pictured it, Peter with someone who loved him, someone who didn’t fill him with worry, someone who wouldn’t leave him so soon. Someone who would give him the chance to be a father. And it was enough.

Qwerty straightened the doll in the chair, shut down the HoW lights, and settled in to replay memories of four different sombreros and eating hot dogs with added mustard.

Chapter End Notes

Complicated, ain’t it?
Walking Forward

Chapter Summary

Peter isn't taking things well... who would? But Peter Walter V was never meant to give up and die...

And he wasn't left to suffer alone.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this is the first time I can remember for sure that I teared up while writing. The scene with Peter and The Spine.

Just to make it more painful, here's a suitable musical accompaniment.

https://youtu.be/TELk1uxQw4Q

Excellent musician, this guy.

The most painful day of Marie's life, bar none, was the day she noticed Lily wasn't at breakfast. It beat the day she lost her first baby, the day she found out her fiance was killed in action... even the day Peter received a telegram offering financial compensation for the loss of three Walter Automatons, should their parts fail to surface by the end of the Vietnam Conflict...

Yes, she'd been hurt before. But Lily... her sweet Lily. Gone. And yet she suspected what put it over, what made it rise above the other wounds she'd endured, was knowing what it would do to her husband. Marie didn't feel the need to sink onto her despair and give up, the way she had in the past. Lily would never want to be mourned in such a weak manner. Lily, Marie knew, would want parades, trees planted, stories told, songs sung... life lived. She was kept back so much and still had managed to have so much life. She would want those memories to be shared, preserved. She couldn't really be dead that way, could she? Even now Marie felt her presence...

Not so, her husband. He sat, still, in the dark of Lily's old nursery. He'd gone there the moment they told him and sat in the old rocking chair, ignoring everyone, and shut down. Rabbit said to give him time... but then Rabbit himself went in and switched him gently on... every hour on the hour. He always came back reporting that The Spine just switched right back off again. Marie hugged him and agreed, at his request, to join him the next time. They couldn't leave The Spine to rust the way he wanted. They had to have the funeral, and if The Spine was to ever go on with life, he would have to attend.

More than that, though... Marie's pain at losing Lily was bad enough. The pain of enduring it without him... was almost unbearable.

---------
His first thought when Rabbit powered him on was to shut down again. She was gone! His baby, his little miracle... lying so cold and still. He'd never see another of her precious smiles... How could he face that? But would Rabbit give up and leave him alone? Of course not. It hadn't worked for Rabbit, and yet he thought it would work for The Spine... He would stay online just long enough to tell Rabbit to stop...

Then his photoreceptors activated and he saw Marie. She was trying to look brave but her eyes were red. He didn't want to feel that either... but he couldn't shut down, now that he'd seen her. It would be like turning away from her...

"Marie," he whispered, shaking. "I... I... c-c-c-can't..." He filled his bellows with a sharp gasp of air... it came out as a shuddering sob, and that was how it felt. "Lily!"

He shut his eyes. He wanted them all to go away. He couldn't bear it!

Marie was in his arms in an instant, sitting on his lap and holding him. Just as he was thinking how brave she was, she let go and cried. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his head on hers just as much as he dared.

"I hoped it wouldn't happen yet!" she sobbed. "Every day I thought, 'One more... just one more day...'

"So did I," he whispered hoarsely.

He saw Rabbit slip out the door with a little salute. The Spine glared after him. That son of a... He knew the one thing that would keep his brother from shutting down forever. The Spine fought the desire to hate him from the depths of his core for it.

Marie clung a little tighter and he sighed. No, he didn't hate him for it. How could he? He would have hated himself too much in the end if he hadn't done it.

----------

"Wanda, baby... I sure am sorry about your trip."

"Oh, Rabbit... I was never easy about planning it anyway, but you know that if we'd hovered around, Lily..." Her voice failed her for a moment. She swallowed. "She would have known why."

"Yeah." Rabbit was surprised at himself. He thought that when Lily at last left them, he'd have been like The Spine, hopeless, collapsed in grief. But he'd felt loss before. It never got easy, but you began to understand how it would be. They'd be with you in their own way and furious if they knew you'd given up. So why not keep living, instead of letting yourself die of grief? All that was left of them would die, every memory, if you didn't keep them alive. And he didn't have the heart to lose those, too.

So Rabbit lived. But The Spine... he'd lost people, too, but this was different. This was his baby. Rabbit had come close to losing his once... and it still wasn't enough to make him understand what his brother and sister-in-law must be enduring. He didn't want to understand it, ever.

And then there was Marie. No matter how well preserved she was... she'd die, too. Rabbit didn't look forward to that. He suspected that would be the end of everything... The Spine, the band... life as they knew it. It wasn't fair that so much should ride on one person, even a great dame like Marie. But The Spine thought the world of her. And Rabbit wouldn't suggest he shouldn't, even while he wished he didn't.
Though not so very much... because that had been the key to keeping him from giving up. How he would help Peter was the real challenge. But certain things had to be done first.

"Did you call Louise?" Wanda asked.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. I had a little trouble with the dial but I got through. She has it all arranged. We do it under cover of darkness..."

"It's such a shame! You know she'd love her funeral to be in the sunshine..." Wanda put her hand to her mouth, eyes wide. In a trembling voice she gasped, "Listen to me! I can't believe I'm just talking about it like..."

"Like Lily wanted to. She wasn't worried about it. She did want it to be in the sunshine. But we have to act before anyone even knows she's gone. And we can't even place a stone..."

Here even Rabbit weakened. His voice choked off, trembling. Poor Lily... they would know the place, but no stone! It was like desecration, and yet it was to prevent that very thing. Lily was the family secret everyone knew about... and it had been Louise who pointed out that once she was gone, not every scientist in the Cavalcadium would agree with their choice to bury her rather than study her. Her core alone... created spontaneously from a fusion of organic and Blue matter. It was a mystery no one could touch while Lily was alive... but now that she didn't need it anymore...

Rabbit thought of his little niece, now laying on her bed in her old room, Norman sitting stoically by the bed holding an axe... He wasn't the brilliant and evil man he once was, but Norman had insisted on keeping watch on the basis of what he knew of the Cavalcadium. He agreed with Louise, who had become a member herself a few years before when Armand petitioned for it... she was no ordinary mechanic, having invented several crucial new pieces for the airlines. And she and Norman sometimes sat and scoffed at the so called scientists. Each agreed that grave-robbing was a real danger.

"I know, Rabbit," Wanda sighed. "That hurts, but it's for her, you know? And for those who love her... How is Qwerty bearing up?"

"She's doin' okay. I think they said a special goodbye. The one that worries me is Peter."

They fell silent at that. Peter was doing very badly indeed.

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They managed to hold the funeral two nights after Lily's death. The only indication of her presence was a young eucalyptus tree planted on the site, marking the grave and disguising the purpose of the digging. The manor itself showed no outward signs of mourning in the weeks that followed. Inside, however... The Spine went through the motions of life for the sake of his wife. Marie did the same for her husband. Wanda and Norman each did their best to help, but there was little they could do. Jon, strangely, followed Peter around much of the day at a distance... pointlessly, since all the man did was move boxes around and drink. It was making Rabbit nervous; Jon had a lot of quirks but when something persistently worried him, there was often good reason for everyone to worry. The drinking alone could explain it, however. Peter had never been a drinker before his wife died...

Meanwhile, Rabbit visited his daughter frequently, reassuring her over the loss of her cousin. But while she would speak to him, she made no move to interface. The Spine didn't come up to work anymore; just as well. If she wouldn't link with her own father, she wouldn't link with her uncle, surely.
But Rabbit was missing her sweet face... even if she had fabricated it.

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It had been a month since Lily died.

Peter took a drink from the bottle he'd brought with him and threw another load of papers into the furnace.

"Useless..." he muttered. "Crap. Didn't work... didn't save anyone..."

He stared through red, burning eyes at the next stack. More junk. He tossed it into the fire.

Why had she done it? She could have lived longer. Maybe just a little longer. But he knew... he knew... And he was going to go and face her, face Qwerty, find out what happened and whether Lily was really still here.

He just needed to finish the bottle. Because whatever was up there scared the Hell out of him.

"Lily..." he whispered, dumping a sack full of memos into the furnace. "If you're still here..."

He watched them burn and sank to the floor, sobbing.

"I don't know if I hope you are or hope you aren't..." he gasped, rubbing at his burning eyes. He drained the last of the bottle and sat shuddering at the taste. He didn't like to drink... but it brought a certain numbness, and he wasn't willing to move on to drugs.

A moment later he was sick all over the basement floor.

When it subsided, he wiped his mouth and swore loudly. "Can't do anything right! I can't even save one woman from dying, dammit!"

He clumsily levered himself to his feet around the puddle and staggered toward the elevator. He passed The Jon on the way without even a nod. Jon was always there... He shrugged and half fell into the elevator, closing the door hastily before heading for the top floor.

----------

"Mustard... why am I craving mustard..." Qwerty sighed. "I can't even eat!"

She knew she should be mourning in some way, but for her, Lily hadn't left. Well, she knew she had. She could almost swear she'd watched her go into that light people always talk about. And she found that strangely comforting, considering she had no belief system to speak of. But she had seen it... Lily smiling and moving on. And it was a good feeling. Lily had been in so much pain...

And she was still with her. Her mannerisms, her memories, thoughts, ideas... Qwerty was still herself, and yet... she wasn't. She hadn't been prepared for Lily's strength. And Lily had been strong! She had slunk, or the memory of her had, into every sector of Qwerty's self. She could remember being each person, and she could feel she was someone else now. It was frightening... she was afraid for her Pappy to find out. Or was he her uncle? Would he love her the way she was now?

The door slammed open and she jumped. She'd always been able to startle, but it was different. She felt like her heart was pounding when it happened now.

Peter stumbled in and sank into the big chair where he'd last seen Lily. Qwerty stared in shock. He looked terrible! Had he shaved once since... but it didn't look as though he had, much less bathed.
"I'm sorry, love..." She wanted to scoop him up and hold him, but... it was different now. She just couldn't.

"I've come to..." he began sloppily. He paused and looked around him, looked down at the chair... and burst into tears.

"Peter?" she said as gently as her computerized voice could manage. "Why don't you go to bed?"

"She's... she's not there..." he choked. "I can't be there now..."

"Oh, Peter..."

"Where is she?" he barked abruptly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, frightened.

"You f***ing know what I mean! You did it, didn't you? You sucked her life away! Right here in this chair, you killed her!"

"No! She was dying when-"

"Don't lie to me!" he roared, trying to stand on trembling legs.

"Peter!" shouted Rabbit, running into the HoW. He stood between Peter and Qwerty's monitor, his arms spread defensively. It was rather ridiculous and rather touching... "You need to get out of here, okay? Come with me..."

"She killed her!" Peter screamed, clutching his head. "She killed my wife! She... killed her..."

Peter went slowly limp, sinking back into the big chair and sliding halfway to the floor immediately.

"Stupid jerk never could drink..." Rabbit sighed, picking him up. "I'm sorry, baby. We shouldn't have left him alone."

Qwerty was still in shock. She hadn't thought of it that way... She hadn't killed Lily... had she?

"Baby? You okay?"

"I'm... okay, Unkie... I'm okay, Pappy..."

Rabbit stared at her monitor. "Tell ya what... I'll be back in a few minutes. You've been through a lot... I think we need to interface."

"No..." She wasn't ready! She'd changed so much...

"Qwerty! You're scarin' me, okay? I know we're all messed up right now but you're not yourself..."

She couldn't argue with that.

"Let me come back and see you."

"Alright... Pappy..."

"Good. I'll get Norman to keep an eye on this poor slob and be right back. Hey! Jon!"

The Jon peered around the door frame.
"What's the matter with you? Come in!"

Jon looked down at his hands and shook his head. "Not right..." he muttered.

He stomped out after The Jon.

Qwerty, in her inner world, sank into a chair that formed from nothing to catch her. Interface? Already? She wanted to, she wanted the comfort of her Pappy, and yet... She lived in her simulations more and more since Lily died. And more had changed than she was ready to reveal.

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When Rabbit returned, alone, he sank into the big chair and said softly, "Alright, baby. I know ya been hiding something so don't even try to lie."

"Pappy!"

"I'm sorry. I ain't angry, just worried. Come on... link up and let Pappy see..."

There was a long pause.

"I love you, Qwerty," he said quietly. "Understand? I ain't go-go-gonna stop, no matter what. Come on."

She slowly brought the cable down to where he had removed his bandana. He plugged himself in.

"Oh..." he murmured. "It's, uh... it looks a lot more real in here... Nice rug..."

Qwerty stayed hidden.

"Baby, where's Pappy's avatar? And why don't I see you?"

"Pappy... I'm afraid..."

"Why? Qwerty? Baby? Come on, I know you miss your cousin but don't shut Pappy out... I bet you'd love a hug right now."

"Yeah..."

"Yeah? You don't usually talk like that..."

"I don't?"

"Qwerty... I'm gettin' real worried, okay? Please..."

"Alright... But... don't freak out..."

"Freak out?"

Both avatars appeared at once. Rabbit felt himself yanked into his before he knew what was happening. He had a glimpse of pink skin, blue and green eyes, soft brown hair, and then he snapped into place. He staggered forward abruptly and gasped in shock... gasped...

Rabbit put his hands to his throat. What the Hell... He touched his face, ears, head... soft! He looked at his hands and cried out. His voice sounded thin and... human... He tried not to panic but it wasn't
as easy as telling the program to abort. He tried but the interface was so vivid... This pink fleshy impostor was still panting in terror!

It was actually a relief when a figure struck him in the chest. He was the one who needed a hug now!

But who was this? Could this be his child? She was shorter... Her hair was dark... She was crying. More than that, she was human!

Rabbit welcomed her crushing hug, but he still could feel his heart pounding. He hated it.

"Qwerty, baby..." he murmured in his thin, reedy voice. "Is that you?"

"I'm so sorry, Pappy!"

"I don't like this... What have you done to me?"

"I made you human, Pappy! I made you into a man! I can do that now, I understand how it works! But... oh, Pappy, I didn't mean to kill her!" Qwerty wailed, clutching at him. It hurt. Why did she make it hurt?

He wanted to be made of metal again but she'd made herself a soft human woman and everything here was suddenly so solid... Would he be able to hug her as himself? If he could feel pain, so could she... but surely she'd just shut it off...

He blinked. It felt weird. Very meaty.

Did she just say she'd killed Lily?

He sighed, all the more irritably because he actually could sigh, and scooped her up. Her usual couch was there, in the new and elaborate playroom. He put her gently onto it and sat beside her, holding her close.

"There... uh... any chance you could put me back into my chassis?" he asked uncomfortably.

His trousers weren't feeling right... Did she have to make him anatomically correct? He tugged at a pantleg. His clothes hadn't changed. The accurately male human privates he'd never asked for were binding up something awful. How did she even know how that felt? How did she know how any of it felt? But she was a very convincing facsimile of a human woman... Rosy skin, brown hair, big blue and green eyes. He liked it better when she looked like her mother...

But maybe she did. And her Pappy.

Rabbit felt even more uncomfortable than the tight trousers could explain. He pushed her away a little and looked at her. She still had the same face... but something wasn't right, besides the humanity. She looked... an awful lot like Lily. He'd thought it was just the booze talking...

"What... Qwerty, baby... What really happened that night?"

"Pappy..." she began. Her face crumpled and she sank against his shoulder once more. He didn't even ask her to make him an automaton... not yet. First things first.

"Just tell me about it, okay? Tell Pappy. We'll figure the rest out later."

"Alright," she whispered.
Rabbit stood outside The Spine's room, flexing his iron fingers. He felt a lot better physically. He'd spent the last six hours in the form of a meatbag and it had been thoroughly disgusting. Well, mostly. It was certainly true that holding his soft human daughter in the physical form of her soft human father had been a cuddly feeling. He'd gotten a good look at his avatar eventually. It looked a lot like his Pappy, with lighter hair. She'd even aged him appropriately for a guy with a grown up daughter. Clever kid. Too clever, come to think of it.

Because he had to tell him. Lily was gone, and yet she wasn't.

"How do I do this..." he murmured, putting his hands on his face.

"Do what?"

Rabbit jumped. The Spine was right behind him.

"Sorry... I was just... Out walking."

Rabbit saw a trace of oil under one of his brother's eyes. "It's okay, buddy. Yehr allowed to visit her."

"I know," he sighed. "I just have to do it in the dead of night."

They looked at each other for a moment. Sometimes there just wasn't anything worth saying.

"So... You were looking for me? Or was it Marie?"

"Well..." Both, if he was doing this right. But Marie! That was even worse, telling Marie... Poor gal...

"How about we take another walk? Then y-y-you can help me figure this out."

The Spine raised an eyebrow and Rabbit understood. The day the older brother asked for help would be marked and remembered. But Rabbit was, for once, completely at a loss. He didn't know what to do with this. He wasn't even sure what to call her anymore...

Back in the HoW, he stood, looking up at the hanging wires.

"Rabbit?" The Spine prompted.

"Yeah... Look, something's happened I never expected. I ne-ne-never thought it was possible..." He trailed off.

The Spine said, "You gonna tell me anytime soon? Or can we do this in the morning..."

"No... it needs to be now..."

"Marie needs me, though. I was out there for an hour..."

He almost told him to go. "Alright... Look, Lily... Lily did pass on but... she left some stuff behind with Qwerty." Yes, that sounded alright.

"What... what could she possibly have left?" The Spine said faintly.

"Memories. Kinda like Honey did. Not really in any kind of order, no special messages. Just... her life. The memories of her life."
There was a long humming silence. "Oh..." The Spine breathed at last. "I... didn't know she could... how, Rabbit?"

"Well..."

"Or was it... Her core? She left her core with Qwerty, didn't she?"

He was getting agitated. Rabbit turned to him. "Yeah, they planned it together. Peter told Lily he didn't want her to do it but you know how stubborn Lily... sorry. But she did things her own way..."

"But..." gasped The Spine desperately, clutching Rabbit's hands as if for support. "Why Qwerty? Why not... why not me?"

Rabbit pulled him into a hug as the silver robot began to shake. "It's okay... come on, yehr a big robot..."

"Why wouldn't she leave them with me, Rabbit? I'm her father... her real father..."

"Of course you are. You'll find out why, buddy. Maybe she didn't realize what it would do... and maybe she suspected it. She was a real smart kid. And Qwerty didn't see it comin' either. She's scared, Spine. She thinks she murdered Lily. From what I can tell, Lily chose the moment to come up here because she could feel herself slippin' away. I... I need you to come with me and interface with Qwerty. Then you'll see."

"How can I... I don't know..." he faltered, clinging to his older brother.

"You can do this. It's gonna hurt, but if I survived seein' Honey's memories, you can survive this."

The Spine nodded and buried his face for a moment in his brother's shoulder. Then he looked up and said thickly, "Qwerty? Hey... It's okay. I'm not angry..."

The wires descended as the two robots sat together in the big chair. A moment later, Rabbit was once again in the form of a human man. But there was a new surprise.

Standing in front of him, staring in wide-eyed wonder at his own slim, pink hands, was a man Rabbit had only ever seen in a photograph. A weak smile appeared on his face.

"Qwerty... how did you make it so real?" murmured David Walter.

"I know how it feels to have a body, now. I know what a heartbeat feels like. Though I'm only guessing part of it..." she said quietly, suddenly standing beside her father. Her eyes flicked awkwardly downward for a moment and she hastily turned her head. "And I knew how you'd look from a photo in my data files. I modeled Pappy's after it, too... since your face plates are the same."

"Are they?" Rabbit asked blankly.

The Spine laughed, touching his face. His smile faded just as quickly as he looked at Qwerty. "This is... wonderful... but how can I enjoy it? Lily died for this..."

"No, Spine!" Rabbit cried, pulling him once again into a hug... more awkward now that they felt like two squishy meatbags. He was uncomfortably aware of all the dangly parts she'd given them and felt the need to hug slightly askew. "Lily died because she did, that's all! It ain't nobody's fault!"

"Isn't it?" The Spine whispered, hugging him tightly despite their anatomy. He was used to it, after all. Rabbit squirmed. He didn't even want gonads, much less to have them bumping into The Spine...
"No, it's not..." Qwerty said. "And Lily came up here to die for a reason. I've been thinking about it and she did say so, once. I'm sorry I got so upset, Pappy. I should have remembered..."

"You don't need to apologize, baby..." Except maybe for the gonads...

"Uncle Spine, Lily left her memories with me because I was the best suited to cope with them... all of them. She was afraid that she would die near one of you and you would absorb her core. And... she had memories none of you would want..."

Rabbit and The Spine pushed apart and stared at her for a moment. Understanding hit Rabbit at almost exactly the same time as The Spine abruptly muttered, "Ugh! Oh... no, no... no, I wouldn't... no."

"Peter..."

"And periods..."

"Sex..."

"Miscarriage..."

"Oh, that too..."

"I'm sorry we hid this, Uncle Spine. It's for the best..."

He nodded. "I see that now..." He sighed and looked alternately pleased and guilty. "You look different."

"I feel different."

He hugged her and said, "Well, you're still my niece. You're just... expanded. But you're Rabbit's daughter, not mine. I refuse to consider you both. I don't want to contemplate that. I'm barely coping as it is."

Rabbit snorted with laughter.

"I'd ask you what could possibly be funny about this circumstance, but I really don't want to hear the answer." He ran his hand through his hair restlessly. "How am I going to tell Marie?"

"I'm not sure you should," said Rabbit.

"But keeping it from her..."

"Might be the only way she can move on. The real problem right now is Peter. He already knows."

"Oh... that explains earlier..."

"Yeah. That and the bourbon," Rabbit said sadly.

Qwerty began to cry. "He's killing himself! Please help him! I can't do anything... he thinks I killed her... I can't see him destroying himself like this! I just wish I could..."

The Spine stroked her hair, taking a long look into her face as though searching for something. He looked down at last, smiling sadly and shaking his head. Rabbit watched, bemused, as his brother passed the girl that was now Qwerty over to him. Rabbit held her and sighed. He could get used to this, and it looked like he had no choice. She still showed no inclination to resume her automaton
"You did that for us, Qwerty?" The Spine murmured. "You didn't want any of us to get those memories of loving Peter, so you took them yourself?"

"No," Rabbit sighed. "My little girl already felt this way about him." He kissed her head. "Poor kid."

The Spine stared at him. "Qwerty... was already..."

"In love with Peter. Yeah."

"They both fell in love with Peter."

"Yup."

"I just don't understand it."

"Me neither."

"I can honestly say he isn't that attractive..."

"I know it."

"Oh, stop it..." Qwerty mumbled against Rabbit's chest.

"Okay," they said as one.

She giggled quietly. "Uncle Spine... I know this will hurt, but I want you to know that she went on... She moved on."

"What...?" gasped The Spine.

"I saw her. She was here... she said she was tired. She wanted to move on."

Behind her, the images formed... Qwerty's old avatar and one of Lily, just Lily. The one of Lily smiled, faded to a mist, and walked away into nothing. The Spine reached out his hand for a moment, letting it slowly drop as he stared at the fading images.

"Lily..." he whispered. "I... I love you, little one. I wish I could have saved you... Even kept you for just one more day..."

Rabbit patted his daughter's shoulder and went willingly back to hugging his brother. How he'd ended up being the strength of the family he didn't know, but he kinda liked it... even as a meatbag.

"Thank you, Qwerty," The Spine mumbled from Rabbit's fleshy shoulder.

"Why?" she asked blankly.

"For everything. For saving her, and for helping her be free of that body... I felt guilty my whole life for condemning her to live in it, even while I loved her more than my life!"

"Aw, Spine!" Rabbit sighed. "She was a real good kid. Everyone has some problem, right?"

"I guess..." He sighed raggedly and murmured, "I have to go. I'll deal with Peter, okay, Qwerty? That seems right. He doesn't have a father and he married my daughter so... I guess that makes me the closest thing he has to a parent. And I've been avoiding him. I see now that could have been
disastrous. And Marie... I won't tell her, not yet. Not until she's had some time."

"You know best I guess, but... well, get goin' anyhow."

"Right." He let Rabbit go, kissed Qwerty on the forehead, and vanished.

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"Peter?"

Peter groaned. "Let me die..." he whined, clutching his head.

"Not in a million years. Someday, maybe, I'll see my little girl again, and when I do, I don't want your death on my conscience."

"Spine? Just go away..." He covered his eyes. "Quietly..."

"Sorry, no."

A mercifully cool cloth was placed on Peter's head. He sighed.

"I want you to understand," The Spine murmured. "I hated you, for a while. Or as close to hate as I've gotten for a long time. I blamed you for shortening her life."

Peter didn't want to talk about her. He shut his eyes tightly as tears squeezed from them.

"I think now that even if you did shorten it... which I really doubt... you sweetened it. And that she had what she wanted most. She had what was best from life and that was all I ever wanted for her... I couldn't find someone to love her but you did, you loved her..."

"I... still love her..." Peter whispered shakily.

He wished he had a drink... he'd been keeping himself pickled for a reason. But now he was sober and he couldn't hold it back anymore. There was nothing to dull the pain.

"Oh... make it stop..." he sobbed.

And the next moment, he was lifted like a child, held against a cool shoulder, a hand stroking his back. He could still remember his father holding him this way... his father. Who had died... and left him alone... Just like Lily. He hadn't cried like this when his father died. He couldn't. He had only himself, then. But now... now he could let go.

He wept almost violently, choking, screaming sobs, and The Spine held him firmly as he did, rocking and humming. It was something he would never have asked him to do, no matter how much he needed it. And it was something he would never speak of again...

"Why does everyone die!" he shrieked, slamming his fist against the automaton's shoulder. His hand exploded with pain but he didn't care... he welcomed it... it was physical, solid, real... it wasn't the pain he'd felt this last month, this last year... He'd hurt for so long now! Why did everyone die and leave him alone? Why did he always live? Why did he have to always live?

"I've asked myself that many times," The Spine murmured, and his deep voice felt soothing.

They sat that way for a long time, until Peter was too exhausted to cry anymore. The Spine gently returned him to his bed, placing the cool, wet cloth back on his head. Peter let him do it. He felt bloated and sick and his hand ached, and he just wanted to die and follow Lily...
"I've lost a lot of people, Peter..." The Spine said quietly.

Peter sighed. He supposed he was going to make him feel guilty for mourning one person so dramatically... even if she was The Spine's own daughter.

"And I'll only lose more. My time will come, and when it does... I need you to remember this. Because no one will be able to comfort me. I've thought of it too often and it terrifies me. So I've come here to do what I can for you. You aren't going to be left alone again, do you hear? You'll be seen to if I have to do it all by myself."

"But... Lily..."

"I know. I miss her almost more than I can bear. If it weren't for just a few things, just a precious few comforts, I'd shut down and never reactivate. One, I need to be strong for Marie. And I see now that you need me too."

"I don't..." Peter muttered weakly.

"Yes, you do. You need someone. I guess I'm as good as anyone."

Better, Peter realized. The Spine... his father in law, against all expectation. The robot who had come with his aunt and uncle to bring him home. He realized how much it had really hurt when The Spine had been angry with him.

"But Qwerty..." Peter said weakly. "Spine, why did she do it?"

"Lily. She wanted it. She was afraid that I would absorb her core and have to live forever with the memory of seeing you naked."

"Come on, Spine..."

"I'm serious, actually."

It actually made sense. Peter shuddered.

"She's moved on. I want you to understand that. She's gone, alright? I know that hurts, but..."

"No... I was so afraid she was stuck in the HoW, Spine... I couldn't live with that... but... what did Qwerty do, then? Didn't it work?"

"Oh... she just has Lily's memories stored. It's like having a stack of photo albums in the attic. Maybe someday she can show you, when the technology allows."

"Maybe. Some of them..." Peter sighed.

"Well, I'll let you get some rest... Oh! Jon... good thinking."

Peter hissed in pain as The Spine placed an ice pack on his hand. "We'll need to have a doctor look at this tomorrow. Alright, just keep it there and I'll check on you later."

"You don't have to..."

"Yes, I do." He got up and left.

Peter, squinting after him through bleary eyes, noticed that at long last, The Jon left, too.
Sunshine and Honeybees

Chapter Summary

Rabbit finds out why Sunshine looks so much like Honeybee... But for Peter, who still hasn't found his feet after losing Lily, an adventure begins.

Chapter Notes

Y'know, this was never supposed to get this involved... I was going to have The Spine and his wife be cute for a while and raise one kid and then kill her off and give him some closure but here we are... I've made myself interested in the canon characters as well as my own. So it will probably carry right on up to the present to tie of some plot threads I started. Right now, though, I'm wondering how the somewhat humble dork that is Peter V as I've written him becomes the worldly and wise Peter V of the web comic. Because virtually all that's canon about the man is that he adores his wife, Annie, to the point that his eyes actually disappear when she's not around, that he thinks apples and oranges will hit you back, that he likes to ride on cows, that he thinks gravity is stupid and that he can bloody fly! Seducing gravity is a concept that is pure Bunny Bennett... the whole "yes, you heard me and no, I won't explain, just enjoy the mystery and don't pick it apart to see how it works..." quality that comes with the wheels within wheels mind of the Bun. Um, so, yes... how did Peter become that Peter Walter? Well, I'll see what I can make up. Should be fun...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Things never went back to normal in Walter Manor because there had never been a normal. But they learned to live again. There wasn't much choice... they needed each other and that meant living.

What really brought them all back to life was a phone call from Dave. Sunshine was pregnant. He'd waited until she was four months in before telling them... after all that had happened, he said, he was even hesitant to call before Sunshine gave birth. And she, for all her psychology, was anxious. She'd come full term the last time, and still lost her child.

But Marie brightened the most. She didn't worry that this pregnancy would end up like the last one... optimism had always been her natural state and she said, again and again, that the law of averages was in their favor. She wasn't in the least bothered about becoming a grandmother and, along with Wanda, launched right into preparations to welcome the new baby. To their surprise, Jon helped as well, producing the bright, rainbow colored baby clothes she'd made for her first child. He'd put them away for her at the time and hoped she'd appreciate having them back. He also seemed to think she'd name her new baby Moonangel, to Marie's amusement.

But when the baby came, she was named Julia Lily Walter. The Spine quietly pouted and said that he thought the baby should be named Marie, but his wife assured him that the name was perfect. Julia had been Sunshine's grandmother. And even The Spine had to agree with Lily.
Marie went up to Los Angeles to help right away, and Wanda brought the robots to visit after Sunshine had gotten time to recover. It was then that Rabbit had the chance to see a photo of the first Julia, in a yellowed old album. Sunshine put it into his hands reverently, murmuring that he should look at it carefully. Bemused, he did so.

As the family fuss and bustle went on around him, as he sat on a sofa in Dave's apartment, he stared at the album, oily tears slipping down his cheeks.

Honeybee. He'd have put money on it. Her graceful features... the eyes... the lips... so beautiful. What was it Armand had said? He accessed the file and nodded. Secret had modeled her after a student whose picture had been selected by Armand himself. And this... this had to be her. There was a photo of her drawing... And a painting on the wall that Sunshine had told him was painted by her. Rabbit turned a page and stared in shock.

Sunshine sat beside him as he pressed his lips together. "I just got this from my mom. She found it in an old chest. Look at that, Rabbit... that's her, isn't it?"

Julia, holding a toddler in her arms, standing beside a man in the Hall of Science at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Behind her, a gleaming steel automaton stood. Geoffrey Secret was leaning over the railing, leering at the camera. Julia's husband didn't look very pleased...

"I don't know whether she had something going on with that Secret guy ever, but if she did, it was over by the time grandpa came along. Still, she wanted a photo of the statue made in her image. It was all explained in an old journal. She said Secret was full of himself but his sculpting skills were super. Oh, she also mentioned she'd enjoyed seeing a certain robot band when she was a little girl, and that made her more excited about being used as the model for Honeybee."

"Where... where is she now?" Rabbit whispered.

"Oh... I thought I mentioned back when I first... yeah, uh, she died in a car accident when she was thirty-six."

"Oh..."

"Oh, wait... Louise also gave us this... Guess Armand had some keepsakes or something."

She gave Rabbit another crumbling photo. It was a young woman in a bathing suit. This, younger and definitely more carefree, was also Julia.

"I guess that confirms it. It's her, isn't it?" she asked.

He nodded.

"She's just beautiful, Rabbit. Isn't this amazing? I had no idea... it's really like you are my grandpa."

Sunshine laughed and Rabbit, unable to find words, just smiled. What a crazy world! Sunshine took the photo album and gently passed little Julia to him. He looked down at her little face. Beautiful. Just like her great-grandma. And just like Honey.

He kissed her little head so gently. "Thanks, honey."

"Me, or her?"

"Both."
Sunshine let him take home the old pinup photo of Julia. On the way back, he showed it around the car. Most of them were astonished. Jon laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"I thought you already knew, Rabbit."

"What? You telling me you knew?"

"Sure. I knew the first time I met Sunshine. She looks just like her."

"Bull. That's just... bullcrap. There is no way you just looked at her and kne-kne-knew that her grandma was..."

"Well, I didn't know exactly that it was her grandma. I was sorta buzzed... I thought she was Honeybee herself for a minute. I mean, the model for Honeybee. I think." He giggled. "It's all a little fuzzy."

Rabbit shook his head. One good thing that had happened, at least... Jon's chemical abnormalities, as The Spine usually called them, had settled down significantly since Vietnam. He was still spacier than he'd been before, and tended to forget things, and sometimes just stood staring at nothing and smiling, or fell to the ground and forgot to get up, but they weren't worried about him wandering off anymore. It was nice... and well timed. They didn't need any more to worry about.

When they got home, Wanda went to her room to tell Norman all about the baby and show him the Polaroids she'd taken. The Spine went first thing to check on Peter.

He'd been doing reasonably well. He hadn't resumed his scientific studies but he was out of bed. That had taken a couple of months after The Spine had started helping him to give up alcohol. Most of his time was spent reading or outside, tending a special eucalyptus tree or cleaning up with Norman. They'd begun to think that was all he'd ever do... be Norman's assistant gardener.

But he'd gotten stable enough that they'd chosen to risk leaving him there alone for a day... well, almost alone. Norman had promised to look in on him. And they'd cleaned out all of the alcohol...

Peter wasn't in his room. It looked like he'd been cleaning, though. That was good... it was time to move on, to make a fresh start. The Spine went outside... no sign. He checked the library, the kitchen, every bathroom... He was getting genuinely worried when he heard the pounding of feet.

"Spine!" Rabbit cried, pelting down the stairs. The Spine intercepted him in time to stop him from continuing straight out through the front window.

"What is it?" he said quickly, though he already suspected.

"Qwerty... she said P-P-Peter's gone! He left, Spine, he just packed up and he left!"

"Whaddy mean he just packed up and left?" The Spine barked, his usual precise speech failing him in his shock.

"Yeah! She said he came upstairs and he was dressed and carrying a duffel bag, and he wanted to talk to her about gravity! I thought he was crazy but she says that was one of her theories she wanted
him to test, but... anyway, he said he was leaving and she let him go! The crazy kid... Did you check his room?"

"I did..." The Spine said quietly. "It was clean..."

"There you go!"

"I thought he was making a fresh start..." The Spine murmured, staring blankly down the hallway.

"He is! He took off to make it! Spine... Spine, do we go after him? He's not a kid anymore but... he's all messed up right now. What if something happens and we n-n-n-never see him again?"

"I don't know... Wasn't Norman checking on him?"

"Let's go ask him..."

"No... no, wait. Wanda is in there showing him baby pictures. If we burst in with news like this... It'll break her heart, Rabbit. She brought him home, taught him herself all those years... to leave without a word! And after Four died..."

"Well, sometimes a guy don't fe-fe-feel like talkin'... Maybe he didn't leave without a word, though. Did you see anything that looked like a note?"

Without another word, they hurried back to Peter's room. Now that he knew what to look for, The Spine saw it right away. There was a small bundle of letters, beneath another one in Peter's handwriting, addressed to the whole family.

"Open it!" Rabbit cried.

"No... Let's get everyone together. It's only right. Up in the HoW, okay? I'll call Marie later and let her know, but... yeah, let's get everyone."

In the HoW, The Spine read Peter's note aloud. Wanda was already in tears; they'd had to tell her he'd gone.

"I'm sorry to leave like this. I can't handle it right now. Maybe if I'm away for a while, I'll be able to come back and be in those halls and rooms without being haunted by her. I know we weren't married long but we were there for years together and I see her everywhere I go. I'll send letters when I can. I took some money out of the bank, Aunt Wanda..."

"It's your money..." she said weakly. "I mean, why does he feel like he has to... ugh!"

"He's trying to do things right, Wanda," The Spine murmured. He continued reading. "Thank The Spine and Marie for everything. They're the closest thing to parents I've had besides you...' He addressed this to everyone but he keeps talking to you. Do you want to read it?"

"I can't... Just go on."

"But it almost makes it worse to be taken in as part of their little family. I've never felt more like their son-in-law but she's gone... I know I should just get over it, people die every day..."

"Stupid... This is different! Half of us here have been through it, why did he run away from the people who can help him?"
Rabbit gave her a side hug, reaching carefully around Norman's lobster claw arm. "He said, kiddo. I had the same problem when I lost Honey."

"Oh... Yeah, I didn't have that because I came here after Guy died... yeah. I guess I understand."

"I love you all. I'll be home as soon as I can. I have some things I need to understand before I come home. Kiss the new baby for me. Love, Peter."

Wanda cried quietly. The rest said nothing.

Chapter End Notes

And the next chapter steps into fantasy for a little while...
Chapter Summary

Peter seduces gravity. Seriously. That is the main thing that happens here. I don't go into detail but he totally does it.

Renewing my disclaimer here: Peter does this but I sure as heck do not endorse sleeping with someone you just met. Not even if they said they're a god. In fact I'd suggest calling 911 in that event... Anyway, yeah, you'd be surprised how guilty I felt after writing this and still consider deleting it from time to time. It isn't terribly essential and I never wanted to be that kind of fic writer but here we are. I may yet choose to remove it. I'm not out to corrupt the young here. Or anyone else for that matter.

Edit: I went and added chapters connected with it so it's here to stay... and that was when it occurred to me that the band may have meant that part of the comic to be part of Peter's dream and I went and took it literally. Well, then.

Chapter Notes

Funny sort of chapter title but I wanted something that takes your mind in the right direction. I'm using Louisiana again because it's kind of a mysterious place, especially out in de swamps. And because I grew up there. That helps. I would have been six or seven when this story takes place... incidentally, I knew a kid named Tomeka and I lived near Shreveport. She never mentioned her Pappaw picking up hobos though...

Anyway, this one's got a whole magical feel because I just couldn't find another way for Peter to seduce gravity without dipping deep into dusty science and making something up that way. And Bunny chose the word seduce... Seriously, where's the fun in making it about science? ;) So even though I think of Peter VI as being a borderline asexual dorky cutie, I can't help thinking of Peter V as a man of the world, a man of mysterious experiences, one of those middle aged guys that has saved kids from burning buildings and has actually been in an opium den and been shot at by pygmies in the jungle and is a member of a dozen secret societies all opposing one another and flips through the kama sutra and chuckles over which ones worked and which ones didn't.

Sorry, none of that happens here. Not in any detail.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forth Worth, Texas, 1979:

"Where you headed, boy?"

Peter was bemused. He was thirty years old... "Louisiana, sir."
"Well, I'm goin' as far as Shreveport. That good enough?"

"It's an excellent start and I'd appreciate it very much. Um, I can pay my share of the gas..."

"I appreciate that. Prices ain't what they were, but they ain't good either. Hop on in."

Peter climbed into the pickup next to a gangly little girl in braids who slid over to make room. She stared up at him.

"Hello," Peter said uneasily. She blinked solemnly but said nothing.

"Mind your manners, Tomeka," the old man said, not unkindly. "We gonna give this man a lift."

The little girl tore her gaze from Peter and tugged at the man's sleeve. He leaned carefully down and she whispered loudly, "What if he's a robber, Pappaw?"

The old man chuckled and winked ever so slightly at Peter. "I can handle any old robber, baby. Besides, I got a good feeling about him."

Peter couldn't imagine where he'd gotten it.

"But he got a beard, Pappaw!"

The old man laughed richly and Peter sighed and stroked his facial hair. He'd considered shaving it off but it hid his chin so well... He'd always had such a prominent chin.

"So do I," the old man was saying.

"Yeah, but you a Pappaw. You supposed to have a beard."

"Oh, hush now. He done heard everything you said. You gonna make him rob us early."

"I'm not..." Peter began, wondering if he should have sprung for the bus.

But the driver was laughing and Tomeka shook her head and said, "Aw, Pappaw. That ain't even funny."

"Neither is you callin' a man a robber on account of him havin' a beard. You just don't talk to strangers without Pappaw and leave my business to me, a'ight?"

"Yes, sir."

The rest of the drive was uneventful, if slow. The man was kindly enough, chatting with him about the news, varied, or the weather, unvaried and heavy. They stopped at a small restaurant just past the state line. The food was delicious but very greasy. Peter slapped at a million mosquitoes as they all sat outside to eat.

"You goin' far, son?" he asked as they drove at last into Shreveport.

"I'm heading south. I heard of some interesting sights there."

"They sure is. You just watch yourself, though. You may look shifty to Tomeka but I get the feeling you ain't been around much."

"I've been working my way across the country for a couple of months," Peter said defensively. He'd done some backbreaking jobs and felt as though he'd done some real living as well. There had been a
couple of women, too... but it had been empty. He hated himself for even thinking of it, much less following through. It had been so long... but it wasn't Lily.

He pushed the thought of her out of his head once more and said, "I just need to check something out. Then I can move on."

"A'ight. You take care of yourself."

Peter gave him a few dollars for the gas and climbed out, pleased that the man actually took the money. Some people were too nice and he was in no state of mind to be a burden. He'd felt like that back at home.

He waved as the truck drove away and saw Tomeka's little hand waving from the window.

"Cute kid," he murmured.

As he turned to head for the bus station, he reflected for what must have been the thousandth time on his child, the one Lily had been unable to carry, and saw a little boy in his mind's eye, taking an interest in his father's scientific study while his mother, her core glowing a bright, healthy blue, looked on.

It was midnight when his bus reached Alexandria. He dozed in the bus station until morning, when he was ordered gruffly to get going.

He jerked awake. "Hm? Oh... sorry, officer..."

"Git going, ya hippie. Go on. Git."

He bit back an angry response, gathered his things, and hurried out into the morning haze. After looking around for a moment, he stepped into a doughnut shop for coffee and a roll before setting off hiking down the road, trying to thumb a ride as he got out into the rural areas.

No one stopped for him so he just kept trudging, wondering how long it would take him to walk the length of the state. He was up for it; memories of Lily, cold in that chair, still followed him. Walking until he dropped was one of the ways he escaped it. It was easy to sleep when he was completely exhausted.

Qwerty hadn't given him exact directions. He still thought she was glitching when she did the calculations on this one. But he'd needed to get away and this was as good a reason as any. He knew that she believed there were certain places that had a deeper connection with the forces of nature, places where the "veil," as she called it, were thinner. Bloody superstitious talk coming from a supercomputer.

But of course she was more than that. He'd always seen her as a petulant kid who just couldn't be seen, like that boy in the plastic bubble only obscured, unable to come out. But then, that was like a prisoner too. He decided he might try to come up with a way to let her get out, maybe a rudimentary automaton. He was a whiz at computers and repairs but just wasn't easy with building robots from scratch. He'd never been able to manage the fusion of programming and physical dexterity that his great grandfather had.

It was the first science he'd thought about in months. He'd missed it. And, like always, he could feel Lily beside him, smiling and applauding him for getting back to his life, as though she'd never been there. She'd always been there. He groaned softly and murmured, "You really think it's that easy,
don't you? Just get right back on that horse. I love you... I tried so hard to save you and you just left me, Lily. You went up to that attic and told her to pull you away. I get now that you did kiss me goodbye. But you never gave me the chance to kiss you goodbye. You never told me!"

He wiped his sleeve across his eyes and hiccuped softly. He was used to crying. It just sort of happened. He got odd looks sometimes but he looked so ragged now that most people didn't ask questions. He didn't blame Tomeka for being uncomfortable with him. It was a fair reaction and he was glad. She was a cute little kid; she should avoid guys like him.

He hadn't done much good for the last little girl who'd taken a liking to him, after all.

Lily...

The weather was heavy, the sun bright and beating through the thick, humid atmosphere. Insects sang loudly in the marshy undergrowth on either side of the road as he trudged. This lonely stretch was just right... he could see the dim and distant shapes of swamp trees in the shadows and thought of what Qwerty had told him.

"It will be where there aren't as many people. You should be able to sense the pull of gravity there if you remain quiet and focus. Give it a little while and when you're sure you feel it, you can begin."

"Begin what?" he'd asked, fascinated in spite of himself.

"The dance. You move as though gravity is pulling you down, feel it and move with it, let it have its way with you..."

"Is that why you call it seducing?"

"Pretty much. That, and my research has found other reported cases of this, and they called it that too."

"I never heard of any other case..."

"You don't speak enough languages to read the text," she'd scoffed.

He didn't bother to argue with that. Qwerty was too full of herself already, and she always beat him at arguments.

"So then, when you feel the full weight on your body, you push up quickly and take a deep breath, then another, then a third, until you feel a quickening..."

It sounded filthy... he was understanding her choice of words more and more. "A what?"

"That's what they called it. Old scroll from the 12th century. So after the quickening you should feel lighter..."

"I should think so... I'll get a head rush from the oxygen intake and pass out!"

"Maybe," she replied. How comforting... "But when you wake, you'll feel it. You'll be able to defy gravity."

"Just like that?" he said skeptically.

"That's it. You find a place far away from people, where you feel heavier, where you can feel gravity touching you, grabbing at your body, pulling at you... and you try what I said. And you can seduce gravity."
"Uh-huh. Did you ever consider that this may just be one of those superstitions? I know you found many aligning accounts of it but what if it's like swamp lights or vampires?"

"Maybe it's just one of those mass hysteria things? Maybe they were drunk, or maybe it's another St. Vitus' Dance* or leprechauns or werewolves... but wouldn't you want to go and find out?"

"I would," Peter had responded. "And I am."

"What?"

He snapped out of his memories with a start.

"Hey! You want a ride or what?" called a voice.

He looked sharply. It was a woman, older, very plain and not looking especially bright, peering out of an old Ford pickup.

"Oh! Thank you... but..."

He squinted at her. She looked... odd. Scruffy, unkempt, not quite human. Her pale hair was loose around her head and stuck out in places. He wondered what her motive was in picking him up. He mentally slapped himself the next moment; who was he to judge?

"Alright."

He climbed into the truck. After all, she wasn't that big and he'd been doing backbreaking jobs all across the desert and Texas scrub, earning his way after the cash ran out. He wasn't as beefy as Dave, but he was pretty nicely toned these days. He could take care of himself.

"Where you goin'?" she asked in a creaky voice as she urged the trembling truck forward.

"I'm just trying to get into the deep swamp, ma'am."

"What?" she cackled. "You wanna kill yo'self, boy?"

"What? Oh, no, ma'am. I... well, this may sound crazy, but I'm following up on a lead from... my late wife's cousin... um... it's for scientific research."

"Scientific what now?"

"Never mind."

Peter gave up. This woman was dumber than a bag of toenail clippings. He wondered whether that should worry him since she was driving.

"When you last eat, boy?"

Uh-oh. "I had something in Alexandria."

"An' you done been walkin' since den?"

"Oh, it hasn't been very long..."

"Sheeyoot, boy. You in luck. I done lef' a big mess o' beans on de stove."

He grappled with the Cajun... he thought it was Cajun... accent, and wasn't thrilled with what it
revealed. "In a pot?" he asked, his voice cracking.

She laughed with the sound of a cat trying to cough up another cat. "You real funny! Shore they's in a pot! I jes' make up some sticky rice and a mess o' cone bread and you gon' have de best meal..."

"I really couldn't put you out..."

"Sheeyoot, boy. I 'preciate de company. Dat ain't no bother."

"Oh." He felt a little guilty now. Poor, lonely old woman...

He flicked a glance at her chuckling, snaggle-toothed expression and wondered if her house was made of gingerbread.

When he was served the meal, however, it smelled absolutely delicious. She sat down opposite at what turned out to be a simple but neat table in a simple but very clean kitchen, in a surprisingly large house on stilts well into the swamp. He didn't wonder she appreciated the company; there couldn't have been another living soul for miles.

Which just made him hope she wasn't some kind of psycho killer. He eyed the beans and rice before him. They could be laced with something... On the other hand, he realized, he hadn't cared much for living for a while now. He shrugged mentally and dug into his meal with the appetite she had guessed he had. He could put a lot away these days without blinking... and this tasted as good as it smelled.**

She chatted with him in her bumbling way as he ate. And as she did, her speech seemed to grow clearer. He supposed he was getting used to it.

"So what's dis science you come to do?"

"Well... I hope you don't think I'm crazy, but I'm trying to find a place where gravity is stronger. A place where you can really feel it."

She raised one eyebrow. He blinked her, impressed. He'd never been able to do that...

"You want to feel gravity? Ain't things heavy enough for you already?"

"You said it," he sighed. How did she know? But he supposed it was written all over him. "But I needed something keep my mind off of my problems after my..."

He couldn't say it, even now. She looked at him sympathetically. Yes, he could see it. Hadn't she looked older? He'd been sure she had teeth missing but now they all seemed to be there.

"After yo' wife passed?" she said gently.

"Yeah..." he sighed. She sounded younger too...

"But why you want to find gravity?"

"To... well, this sounds even crazier..."

"I doubt it."

"I'm supposed to seduce gravity."
She dropped her spoon.

"Yeah, I know. Sorry. Oh, you've splashed a little on yourself there. Here..."

He grabbed his napkin and started wiping the splatters without really thinking about it; he'd gotten into the habit with Lily who sometimes was too weak to help herself. The woman didn't object so he continued wiping her hand.

"You must think real highly of yourself, boy!" she cried, glaring.

"Don't you want me to wipe up?" he asked blankly.

"Well, shore, but... You say you gonna seduce gravity?"

He laughed. "I think it was just a figure of speech," he said. "She said it that way so I said it that way."

"But... how it the world did you plan to do it?" she asked breathlessly.

She was definitely younger than he'd thought, he realized as he wiped some sauce from her arm and shoulder. There was some near her neck. He carefully dabbed it with the napkin and she tensed.

"Sorry," he said quietly, sitting back down. "Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned that. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"I ain't uncomfortable... But I just wonder what you expected when you came here. You thought you'd just sail on in and have your way with... gravity?"

"Well, it's not like I really can, is it? I said it was probably just an expression. Don't worry, I wasn't planning to seduce anyone with an actual body."

He felt a little shiver as he said this. He'd been aware of her body, if unconsciously. It came to the surface now... she was not at all as old as he'd thought. And under the sack-like blouse she was shapely. That last splatter he'd wiped away, he now realized, had been close to her bust...

"I hadn't thought of that," she said softly. More briskly, she added, "Well... if you even want a chance of seducing anything, you better clean up."

"Oh, but..." He hadn't finished eating!

"No arguin'. You right funky and I should know. I live in a swamp. Come on."

Peter grabbed a chunk of cornbread as she grabbed his arm and hauled him through the house and into a clean, white bathroom.

"Go on an' shower. I got a robe around here and we can get those clothes cleaned too."

"I really appreciate this, ma'am," he murmured. She was really being nice to him. And here he'd thought she was a crazy little old lady...

But that must have been the light. Looking at her in the brightness of the bathroom, he could see that her hair was blond and shining, her skin clear with just a few lines, her eyes bright and shrewd. What a difference lighting makes...

He realized he'd been staring when she turned away sharply. When she turned back to hand him a towel, he saw that her cheeks were deep pink. She pressed the towel into his hands and their fingers
touched.

She jerked her hand away and said, "I'll put the robe on the outside of the door." She hurried out.

He watched her, confused. He'd sworn off women after that last one in Arizona, but unless he was mistaken, she was reacting to him as though she was attracted to him. He was pretty sure she was, anyway; he still wasn't exactly Casanova. And she certainly was attractive, now that he had seen her better. A little dusty, but the effect was kind of sexy on her...

Then he thought of Lily and sighed, turning to the shower.

Once he was clean, he stepped out to find she'd already taken his clothes. He'd been enjoying the warm water so much he hadn't noticed. As he reached around the door for the robe she'd hung up, he glanced back at the shower. That curtain was see through...

Now he was blushing. Well, she probably was careful not to look. She seemed like a really nice lady...

He walked out and looked around for her. As he passed one of the rooms, he heard a clink and glanced in. She was standing before a dresser with an old fashioned water bowl. Her dress was open and she was washing with a washcloth... There must have been only one bathroom. He watched her guiltily for a moment. Yes, she was... very shapely... but...

She started to turn and he slipped out of sight as silently as possible, heart pounding. There was no way... She had at least been middle aged in that truck, he was sure of it. But the woman he had just seen bare to the waist was most certainly not a day over thirty. Could it be her?

"Hello?" she called. Before he could get away, she looked around the door frame, her bodice once more tugged up over her upper body. "Oh! You're done. Good. Your clothes are washin' right now."

"Alright. Thank you. Um... I didn't actually ask your name. I apologize."

"I didn't ask yours either. Maybe it's better that way."

He frowned, confused. "Why?"

She stared up at him for a long moment. She reached toward him. He shivered as she firmly adjusted the robe so that it covered more of his now tanned and toned chest area. It almost seemed as she was trying to hide it.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"I... don't know. I wasn't expecting... I thought this would be easier. It was with the others. There was never any question... Now and then a new one arrives, usually with no idea that they've found the right place. They try to feel the gravity and then they leave."

"What? You knew why I was here?" he gasped. "Why pick my brain then?"

"It's important to me. It's my work. And I've never heard one call it what you did. Seduce... seduce gravity." She shook her blouse to cool herself. Her cheeks were very pink as she stepped toward him. "The others never saw past the grizzled old hag. They never came to see me as I am. No one else understood..."
"Understood what?" he asked.

What was all this? Magic? He didn't believe in magic! He couldn't imagine Qwerty had entertained any idea of magic being involved. But he had seen the woman with his own eyes transform from an old woman into... a veritable goddess. She was closer now...

"How lonely it is for me," she murmured.

There were tears in her eyes. Peter gently wiped one, wondering whether she was crazy or he was. She pressed her cheek into his hand and sighed. Her cheek was soft. He stroked his fingers along it and down her neck. So soft...

"You, I think, are worthy to receive something I give only rarely," she whispered.

"What is it?"

She slid her hand around the back of his neck and pulled him closer. Her lips brushed his gently. He wanted to put his arms around her, but he still saw Lily... He always saw Lily.

"No!" he gasped, turning away. "I can't! I just can't..."

"Then you will fail," she sighed, gently releasing him. "You can return home without what you seek. I already appreciate the company. I don't need to be seduced. That was your goal, not mine."

He looked at her sharply and it hit him all at once. "You're... gravity?"

She smiled and curtseyed slightly. "I represent it. I like places like this, where there aren't many people stomping around to confuse me. I had an impression that I should drive along that road today, and there you were. And you have been so gentle to me... I would like to give something in return."

"If it's what I think it is, I don't see how I can accept. I just can't forget her... I've tried, believe me."

"You shouldn't. You don't have to. But yes, that is what I want to give you, and more. You are lonely too. I can give you peace from it for a little while. I can make you forget, if you like, just for a while."

"Just for a while?" he murmured as she gently teased open the robe she had tugged shut earlier. "I... guess I don't want to forget her forever. But it hurts..."

"Not forever. Just while I hold you. And when you awake, and your burdens return, they will be lighter."

It sounded, well, perfect. That made him suspicious. "I just... don't think it's a good idea..."

"Very well. If you like, we can play chess..."

He couldn't breathe. She was stroking his neck. She was wearing some kind of scent. He wanted to, in spite of everything, but... How could gravity be a woman? Had Qwerty known she was sending him to sleep with this lady, instead of... He remembered her instructions and blushed so hard he was sure his face glowed. *When you're sure you feel it, you can begin... move with it... let it have its way with you...*

*Ho-ly crap. Maybe Qwerty hadn't known, but someone had, and they'd done it too...* He turned away suddenly.

"Not chess, then?"
"I'm sorry... I never realized she meant it literally! I thought the seducing part was a figure of speech, I promise!"

"Then... that changes things?"

"Yes! She actually described... oh, great..." He loosened the robe self consciously. Now that he thought about it, she'd been fairly graphic! Just thinking about it had... ugh, how embarrassing!

She touched his arm and he trembled. "You don't have to..."

"I know. Look, I'll get my clothes once they're ready and leave, okay? I didn't mean to come here and... I don't understand any of this but the whole thing... it's just not right."

"You're a good man. But know this. No man can seduce me against my will."

"Of course..."

"Don't misunderstand. I mean to say that if I choose to be seduced, you need feel no burden of guilt."

"But..." He couldn't get past the image in his mind. "Lily."

"Your wife. Who has moved on. Would she ask you to remain lonely forever?"

"She wouldn't want me to sleep with a woman I just met. I have, and it felt wrong..."

"Not even a goddess? I am one."

He looked at her sidelong. Seriously? On the other hand... "So you definitely want me to..."

"I do. If you're interested. And I think you are."

He was, so help him. She stroked her hand across his forehead and the ever-present image of Lily dimmed in his mind.

"No!"

"Only for now," she whispered, kissing him lightly on the breast bone. "Just for tonight. She is still with you but just tonight you will have peace. Rest. Heal. Tomorrow will be better."

"Rest?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes..."

He swallowed, hard. She took his hand and led him into her room.

"But I'm supposed to seduce you," he said weakly as she guided him toward her bed.

"You have, you precious man," she whispered as she dimmed the light.

Peter woke in a bright, sunlit room. His tan looked even darker against the clean white sheets. The robe she had pulled off of him after turning down the light hung on the closet door. His clothing lay folded on the bed.

He started to call out to her and then remembered that even when they were making love, she had given him no name to call her by. He couldn't imagine just calling out, "Gravity!" He'd been past
He smiled for a moment. It hadn't been like the others. He really had been able to let go, for a little while. It wasn't as wonderful as it had been with Lily, but he hadn't expected it would be. Maybe she was a goddess... he didn't know. But she had been so kind... and he had seen tears in her eyes when he had held her in his arms. She reminded him of Lily. Maybe that was what made it work...

He sat up. The bed was so light and springy! He chuckled. Of course it would feel that way if he was weightless! And he'd certain followed Qwerty's instructions. He blushed a little and hurried to dress, walking with a light step from the room.

She wasn't in the kitchen, but she'd left the rest of the cornbread bundled for him, as well as some beans and rice. There was a note.

"'It's time for you to go home,'" he read. "'Thank you for your warmth and gentleness. I've left you gifts in return... please take the meal with you and remember me as you enjoy them. I have already given you my other gift.'"

He felt like a male prostitute for a moment. Surely they'd both gotten a lot out of the night's activities... But what did she mean? Other gift?

"'I wish I could remain and feel that warmth once again, but that isn't how it works. Go home. They need you there far more than I do.'"

He felt a little empty as he gratefully placed the food into his pack, tugging out a square of cornbread for breakfast. He didn't know whether he'd hoped to stay there with her, but it had been the first time he'd felt he could care for someone besides Lily. That was a good feeling. It would take time before he could move on and love another woman without feeling he'd betrayed her, but for once he could see himself succeeding.

He walked outside and started toward the main road, hesitating when he realized it was too quiet. Not the woods or the swamp. His footsteps. There was no crunch of leaves or gravel. Just silence.

"Am I still asleep?" he said uneasily. If he was, it was an awfully vivid dream!

He looked down. He was standing on the ground. Only... The slanting rays of morning sun cast long shadows... and sunbeams that he could see passing right through him! But no, they were under his feet!

The second he realized this, he dropped with a thud onto the ground. He turned to look at the house in wonder... and saw nothing but swamp.

Peter stood there for a long time, thoughtful. After a few minutes he peeked into his pack and made sure the food was still there. Satisfied that it was, he turned to go, his feet sometimes touching the ground and sometimes not.

He called home once he reached a small town. The looks he got were friendlier here, now that he was cleaned up.

"Walter Manor."

"Aunt Wanda?"
There was a softly crackling silence for a moment. "Peter?" she screamed. "You're alive!"

He sighed. He'd sent letters...

"Oh, Peter! Why have you been gone so long, sweetheart? Come back!"

"I'm going to, Aunt Wanda! I was just wondering whether you could wire me bus fare at Alexandria."

"Alexandria? You can't take a bus from Alexandria!"

"I can't?" he asked, frowning in confusion. "Oh! No, I'm not in Egypt, Aunt Wanda. I'm in Louisiana."

"Oh!" she giggled, almost hysterically. "Thank goodness for that!"

"So yeah, if you could find out how much a ticket costs and send some money to the Western Union... I saw one next to the bus station."

"Oh, of course, idiot! Spine! Spine, it's Peter!" she sobbed.

He waited for The Spine to come onto the phone, but all that came was the rumble of a deep voice in the background.

"Yes, I know he wrote but it's so good to hear his voice! Oh, what's the matter with you two? Peter, baby, I'll send the money... hang on... Spine, could you go see if Marie wants to do that shopping today..."

There was a pause. "Aunt Wanda, can this wait? I don't have much time to talk..."

"Sorry, honey! I just wanted him to leave."

Peter laughed. "Why?"

"Oh, Peter... it's so terrible! Marie... she has cancer."

Peter's blood ran cold. No... too soon! No wonder The Spine hadn't felt like talking to him. Was everyone in Walter Manor meant to be miserable? Only Marie had been like a mother to him...

"Peter, sweetie? I'm so sorry to tell you like that! She's getting treatment, alright? They caught it early and she has a good chance of going into remission but it's Spine... he's acting all strong and tough but she's got cervical cancer, Peter! He blames himself, I know he does. All that talk Dave has been doing about Blue Matter being a poison... Spine must be sure that he gave her cancer somehow..."

"We know how, Aunt Wanda..." he said wryly. He almost smiled, the buzz from the night before tickling at his thoughts. Marie probably thought it was worth it. Sex was good. "But it's bunk! It's not a cancer causing substance!"

"You are out of time. Please deposit ten cents now to continue your call."

"I gotta go! Western Union in Alexandria, alright? I love you. I'll see you soon."

She sobbed incoherently in response and they said goodbye. Peter walked out into the sunshine, his feet now firmly on the ground. How could he float at a time like this?

But as he set out for Alexandria, he remembered soft skin, golden hair, blue eyes... and lifted gently
off the ground as he walked.

Chapter End Notes

*You ever heard of St. Vitus' Dance? Freaky form of mass hysteria. Humans are weird.

**Red beans and rice taste even better than they smell. Especially with corn bread.

So like I said, no details. But he did get laid. Sorry. Hee.
Marital Struggles

Chapter Summary

The Spine has to get over himself. Dave does, too. Only one of them will.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Los Angeles, November, 1980:

"Mom! You look great!"

"Shut up, sweetie," Marie said gently. "Well, at least they caught the cancer early so that I didn't have to have that chemotherapy and lose all my hair."

"Of course, if you had, maybe it wouldn't have grown back blue..."

Marie fixed him with a full spread glare. Dave looked away.

"Sorry, but..."

"Don't start."

"Mom... it's just that since... things happened, surely you see what I'm talking about?"

"I mean it. I'll go to a hotel..."

"No! No, I'll drop it," he sighed. He looked over at Sunshine, who rolled her eyes. Marie wondered whether she was rolling them at her husband or her mother in law. She suspected it was a little of both.

"Thank you. Now where's my sweet little Julia?"

"She's napping, Marie." Sunshine said. "But I sure appreciate you coming to help."

Marie sat in a chair near her as Dave brought in her suitcase. Sunshine was feeding the new baby, and it fascinated Marie. Breastfeeding just wasn't done when Lily was born, and they'd been used to bottles after adopting Dave anyway.

"Is she feeding well?"

"Very! Look at her little hands... she's like a kitten when she eats."

Marie smiled at the soft little hands quietly thumping against her mother and felt herself tearing up. Lily had done that, too... But only with one person. And right now, as far as she knew, he was still hanging in the HoW, refusing to talk to anyone.

Sunshine nodded ever so slightly. Marie had noticed the same look even when she was a confused
teenager. She'd been forced to grow up too quickly, but she had turned her torment into wisdom. There was no doubt, Sunshine saw right through her.

Sunshine brought it up when Dave had stepped out to pick up dinner. "Is everything alright? You came up to help, I know, but... you haven't even called home since you got here."

"Everything's..." She couldn't say it. She wanted to, but this was Sunshine. She deserved better than to be lied to.

"He's still having a hard time?"

"Yes," Marie sighed. "You know it wasn't the Blue Matter, don't you?"

"Of course! But Dave..."

"I know. And his father believes him, poor soul! He was there through the entire treatment. He didn't have much to say but I supposed he just didn't know what he could say. But as soon as the doctor said we could resume... well... bedroom activities... he moved out of the room and cut himself off from me. And it kills me... well, you know what I mean, it's so frustrating, because we don't have to if he's uncomfortable with it! I just want him with me... He's been up there for six months and I may be in remission now but who knows what may happen in the future? I don't want to waste time!"

She wiped her eyes and laughed sheepishly. "Sorry. I'm telling you more than you want to know..."

"Don't!" Sunshine said earnestly. "Don't be ashamed! Haven't you been able to talk to anyone about this?"

"No... Wanda keeps insisting that he just needs time. Norman isn't really all there, Jon isn't either, and Rabbit, well, he's already on the brink of going up there and yanking him out of the wiring and smacking him! He doesn't like having him in there with Qwerty all the time. It interferes with daddy-daughter time."

Sunshine chuckled, as Marie had expected. She was so close to Rabbit now... anything he did seemed to please her. "I think Rabbit wants to smack him for more reasons than that. But what about Peter?"

"Oh, I don't know... He's so young and he's like a son to us these days, and he's already upset enough about things. And he's only just getting back on his feet. He finally shaved and got a haircut. He really is quite a nice looking boy."

"Boy? He's what, thirty-one?"

"I only look young, honey. Honey... oh, that reminds me, Rabbit asked me to pick out a Pooh Bear nightie for Julia as a present."

"Gwandpappy Wabbit sent a present, huh?"

"Is that what she calls him? Oh, that's precious! Oh, I'd like to take Julia to Disneyland while I'm here..."

She stopped with a shiver. How long would she be here? The Spine didn't seem interested in having her come home. Yes, she hadn't called... but he knew how long it took her to get there and... neither had he.

Julia, having heard her name, looked up from where she was playing with her blocks. "Wabbit!"
Marie held her arms open toward her and Julia toddled to her, hugged her, and squirmed to get free and resume her play. They heard a key in the front door.

"Marie..." Sunshine said quietly, leaning around the baby, who was now on her shoulder. "We'll talk later, okay? As a doctor or a friend, your choice. Either way, you need to talk about it, okay?"

Marie smiled gratefully. "Thank you, sweetie. Well... I guess I'd better let them know I'm alive."

"Spine?"

The HoW hummed. Qwerty's monitor slid forward but Rabbit held up a hand to his daughter and she remained quiet.

"Spine!" he barked up at the wiring.

Nothing.

"She left you! You hear me? She gave up and left you!"

"Pappy, no!" Qwerty shrilled. "She just..."

"Yeah, I know, she went to help with the new baby. But she was already packed before she got the call."

"That's because she knew the baby was due soon!"

"Was it? Maybe... but she didn't say when she'd be back. And she ain't ca-ca-ca-called."

He thought he heard a shift in the wiring. He thought that would get to him.

"'Course, she probably got there safely... Dave hasn't called asking where she is, but I don't think she actually told him when she'd be there."

The phone rang. Rabbit sighed. If that was Marie, there went his plan.

Qwerty answered it. To the public, she was just an AI built for greetings. But Peter had said he thought she might feel less isolated if she could talk on the phone.

"Walter Robotics, Qwerty speaking!" Pause. "I am sorry, sir, this is not the In and Out Burger..."

Rabbit looked at her sharply. It wasn't Marie?

"Yes, the number is 555-EATS. You are welcome. Yes, I am a recording, thank you for asking."

"Qwerty," Rabbit snickered in spite of himself. It looked like his baby had figured out what he was trying to do. He was certain that hadn't been a wrong number. "Well, like I said. We haven't heard from her all day."

He heard the rustling in the wiring again.

"Well, guess you can't reason with a jackass. Enjoy yehr alfalfa, donkey-boy. I'll let you know if we hear anything. You might want to follow the local news just in case," Rabbit called, strolling toward the door.
"Pappy!" Qwerty called, and he was sure he could hear anger in her chiming monotone voice.

He kept going. He didn't know whether she was really angry or whether she was still playing along, but either way, he was done here. Maybe it would work, and maybe it wouldn't. But if The Spine was determined to wreck his life and hers, Rabbit decided he'd be damned if he was going to let his idiot brother be comfortable doing it.

"Well, for goodness' sake!" Marie cried, plopping down the phone.

"What is it, Mom?"

"Oh, that silly girl! She acted like I was some guy looking for the In and Out Burger! What's she trying to pull?"

"Is Dad in there with her?"

"Probably. Do you mean to tell me you think she's keeping me from talking to him?"

"Well, what else is it? He must have asked her to do it."

"Oh, Dave! Really! Of all the childish notions."

"He's cut himself off, hasn't he? He knows he's dangerous to you and he's trying to do the right thing."

"I warned you, Dave..."

"Mom! Just see reason, please! He's trying to do the right thing and give you the rest of your life!"

"I don't want it if he's not in it!" she snapped.

Dave gaped. "Mom, you're not serious... That's romantic kid stuff, come on!"

"Will you hush? There's babies sleeping!" Sunshine whispered, slipping into the room hastily. "What's going on?"

"Dave is being a... a danged butt!"

"Strong words, Marie."

"Oh, stop!" Marie sank into a plush chair and sighed. "Sorry. But Dave says The Spine is trying to set me free."

Sunshine glared at him. Dave squirmed and looked away.

"Dave!" she hissed angrily.

"Well... Qwerty wouldn't take her call! How else do you explain that?"

"Oh, Qwerty wouldn't do something like that without a good reason!" Sunshine exclaimed. "I talked to her a lot the year her grandpa died. She's a person, Dave..."

"You don't have to tell me that! She always was a brat."

"What do you expect?" Marie growled. "She can't ever leave that room, she can't have friends, she
can be destroyed by a lightning storm! I'd be eccentric too, if I spent that much time alone."

"Eccentric," he humphed. "Either way, I just think Mom should accept this. I've moved out, Lily's... well, she's gone. This is Mom's chance to have her own life, and he wants her to take it!"

"How can you even suggest it?" Marie said mournfully.

"Just what I was wondering," Sunshine said tightly. "I'm sure there's another reason, Marie. I can't believe he'd ever just let you go."

"Aren't psychologists supposed to be objective?" Dave said accusingly. "We're talking about my mother's life here!"

"Exactly, you big jerk! Psychologists also supposed to be smart, and have good instincts. And both of these things are telling me that even if they live a long time apart, they'll never really be happy unless they're together, for as long as it lasts."

Marie looked up at her as though she'd thrown her a lifeline. "Thank you, sweetheart. But... I don't know. I've tried. I've really tried. He just doesn't..."

Sunshine sat on the arm of the chair and hugged Marie. "He will," she whispered.

Dave let out an angry sigh and walked out.

"Well, that was unpleasant. Look, you're welcome to stay as long as you need to, Marie..."

"As long as you need me. That's all."

"Well, then I'll just have to need you for as long as you need to stay, then."

Marie shook her head, patted Sunshine's arm, and went to her room.

It had been a month since Marie left, a full two weeks longer than she'd stayed away to help with Julia. And The Jon was crying, but not because of Marie. He'd just heard such sad news!

John Lennon was dead. He hadn't really liked him; John had made him cry backstage at the Ed Sullivan Show. He'd teased him about his curls, called Rabbit "The Tin Man" and smirked at The Spine and said, "Klaatu barada nicto!" But he'd been improving, Jon had heard, and he had kids. One of them was so little! And he'd been murdered in front of his wife! It was just too horrible, even for a guy who had made fun of his hair, and Jon wept to think of it.

He rose at last and shuffled toward the garden door, snuffling unhappily. He met Rabbit on his way.

"Jonny boy, why ya cryin'?" Rabbit asked, taking him by the shoulders. "You been wa-wa-watchin' them soap operas again?"

"No," Jon snuffled.

"Is it because of Spine?"

"Sorta. I heard somethin' sad, Rabbit. John Lennon got shot!"

"Oh... yeah, I heard. People are freakin' out."
"Yeah! He wasn't as nice as they think he was but it's so sad! An' Spine... humans don't live very long an' he's gonna waste all the time she has left and that's sad too and..."

He put his hands over his face and wept. Rabbit hugged him.

"I can't remember the last time you cried like this, buddy! Well, I mean, ya cry easier than the rest of us but not like this. An' yehr right. I think we should tell Spine about Johnny. I think maybe it'll be good for him."

"But he's already sad!"

"But maybe he ain't the right kind of sad. Come on."

The Spine hung in the wiring, brooding. Qwerty stayed carefully clear of him.

They'd come in and told him, together. Jon kept looking at Rabbit as though he wanted to stop, but Rabbit pushed on with apparent relish. And by the time they walked out, The Spine had been reeling... or reeling as much as he could hanging from wires.

He wasn't sure why hearing about John had hit him so hard. Sure, he loved his music. Sure he'd known the man, albeit briefly. But only Rabbit had actually liked him, despite of or because of his smart mouth. And even Rabbit had decided to steer clear when John made The Jon cry.

And sure, it was sad to hear about a man being murdered, but The Spine had seen worse. But really, he knew what it was. He knew that Rabbit had told him for a reason. Life was short for humans, he had seemed to say. This man is cut off in his prime.

He felt horrible. The metal man who wasn't supposed to feel, and who, like his brothers, felt. He'd always felt, and he wished he could stop. Because there was something he had to do, and it was only going to make it worse in the end. And it would end. She was alright for now, but it would end. He'd been able to fool himself for a little while as the years passed and she remained young and beautiful. But she could die. She would die. It was only a matter of when. But as Jon had shown him today, it really could happen any time. And only an idiot would waste the time he had...

He'd wanted to let her live. He'd tried as hard as he could to free her, and she'd finally left. But she'd only gone to help their son with their grandchildren. In her way, Marie had run from her husband right back to him. And he knew she'd come back to Walter Manor.

He thought she would, anyway. But what if she didn't? He'd been trying to get her to go, hadn't he? Should he worry that she was gone forever?

He felt sick... robot, yes, and still he felt positively ill. He couldn't take it anymore. The Spine slipped from the wiring. His body rose to meet him, unasked.

"Qwerty," he murmured as two pronged limbs helped him into it.

"Go bring her back, Pappy."

"Pappy... Qwerty, what did I tell you about calling me that?" he said gently as the last hooks settled into his spinal assembly.

"She'd have said it, if she was here, Uncle Spine. You know it."
"She would have..."

"Why did you hide? Why did you leave her alone?"

"Because... I was afraid. I thought maybe it was true, and that I had made her sick."

"There's no evidence to support that."

"I know. But you can ask your Pappy about how well I use logic these days. I think he thinks I'm a lost cause."

"I was startin' t-t-to, dummins," Rabbit muttered. He was leaning in the doorway. "'Bout time you came down. Ya gonna go make love to your wife or what?"

"I don't really appreciate you tossing my sex life around that way..." The Spine said sternly.

"Hey, you don't seem to care about it. Why should I?"

The Spine sighed irritably. "In case you didn't notice, I'm down now. I wasn't just going to go for a stroll, y'know."

Rabbit looked at him eagerly. "Spine? Then yehr re-re-really gonna go get her? Yehr gonna quit being a jerk and-"

"Not helping."

"Sorry. So what's the plan?"

"I... don't know."

Rabbit frowned. "Wow."

"Look, it's hard! I just wanted her to be well, but... I know she'll be back. I know she will. Because I hung up there for a month and I can't go on another minute. And I know she's feeling the same way up in L.A. I give up. I hate myself for it but I can't bear it! And I've been horrible to her, so even though I miss her so much I could shut down, I have no idea how to tell her I want her to come home!"

"Tell her that, stupid!"

"I guess... I... What if she doesn't want to come back, though?"

Rabbit jogged in and gave him a crushing hug. The Spine flailed.

"Yeah, you don't want my hugs," Rabbit chuckled, releasing him. "I'm bettin' she just doesn't want to feel like ya don't love her."

"Rabbit..." The Spine groaned miserably. Now he felt worse. Didn't love her? Of all the stupid ideas! So why had he tried so hard to make her believe that?

"Alrighty then. You ain't got any ideas. So how's about we try a plan by big brother Rabbit, huh?"

"Couldn't I have just called?" The Spine demanded.
"Is he kidding?" Rabbit asked Wanda.

The car was straining under the weight, but Wanda was used to dealing with the sluggish car, and even though Dave was a fancy airline mechanic and didn't visit anymore, he still repaired their cars as needed.

"Well, it would be faster," she said, changing lanes to enter the freeway.

"But it wouldn't be romantic enough!"

"You never gave me the chance to show how romantic it would be, dammit!" The Spine growled. "I'm considered to be pretty suave, y'know... especially my voice."

"Yeah, well, you may have a nice voice but just think how she's gonna feel when you show up and sweep her off her feet."

"I should have known this would be your plan... but did we have to bring Jon?"

"I wanna see Sunshine and the new baby!" Jon squawked.

There was a little girl staring at him from a passing car. Her mother glanced at him and gasped. Jon waved vigorously and the woman swerved and hastily corrected her course.

"This is just like you, Rabbit," the Spine continued. "There's gonna be an accident when people notice a car with three robots in it heading up the five freeway!"

"Then hunker down. I'm enjoyin' myself." He waved at the little girl and her mother.

"You could at least have let me put on my makeup... and you two could use some, too."

"I'm beautiful the way I am."

"Me, too!" Jon agreed.

"You know what I mean."

"Ya really think you can slap makeup over these vents? Besides, you know Mary don't like it. It'll work a lot better to show up as yourself. You been hi-hi-hidin' enough."

The Spine slumped the best he could. Trust Rabbit not to soften any blows. The Spine wished he would, though. He felt badly enough.

When they got to the apartment, two hours later, they hurried inside to avoid the stares on the street. They weren't able to avoid much, however; Los Angeles seemed to be made of sunlight and the three of them reflected light beams like an outdoor disco ball.

"Ugh! Why is it always so hot here?" Wanda groaned as they entered the elevator. "It's December, for crying out loud! It's not exactly snowing back home but it's always so much hotter in L.A."

"That's odd. I didn't notice," Rabbit said pleasantly.

"Very funny."

Sunshine looked at them with wide eyes when she opened the door. She was wearing a bathrobe. At the sight of The Spine, however, she broke into a smile.
"Oh! Oh, I'm sorry, I was catching up on sleep. She's been so colicky lately... Come in!"

"Where's Marie?" asked Wanda as they shuffled inside. "Oh, of course, she must have taken the kids out so you can rest!"

"Just Julia. The baby's finally sleeping! Yes, Marie and Julia are at Disneyland."

"Oh! Oh, dear... that's awkward..."

"No, it ain't!" grinned Rabbit. "That's perfect."

"Rabbit, you three can't just show up at Disneyland! They'll think you're trying to break in on their racket!" Wanda cried.

Rabbit laughed. "Aw, come on. They've heard of the Steam Man Band. We fit right in on Main Street. We even played at the bandstand the year it opened."

Wanda sighed and The Spine said, "Maybe the strain is finally getting to me, but I'm with him. I don't care where it is, as long as it's now."

Sunshine laughed and murmured, "Then get going. It's right off the five."

Elephants whirled over Fantasyland. Marie held Julia carefully even though they were strapped into place. Julia giggled and reached as far as she could to flip the handle that made their elephant move up and down. Marie looked across the park and said, "Let's go on the carousel next, baby? Okay?"

"Dumbo fly!" Julia giggled.

Marie smiled. It hurt a little, but not as much as sitting back at the apartment brooding. In fact, taking Julia places was one of the best ways to soothe the ache.

He still hadn't called. She was beginning to believe that it really was over. She couldn't grasp it no matter how she tried... but what other conclusion was there? She could say he was malfunctioning, but it began to sound like a twisted version of a woman making excuses for her husband being a drunk, or beating her. In the end, she didn't believe he was malfunctioning. Peter could handle that. No, the only answer was that he had decided not to contact her. And thinking of that felt like being stabbed to the heart.

Marie swallowed, hard, as they climbed out of the ride. There she went again, letting it prey on her mind. She hadn't made it this far in life by giving way to things and feeling sorry for herself.

But she had never imagined something like this. From the first time they'd kissed, he'd never shown any desire to be apart. Why did he have to do it now, when she needed him so much? She wasn't sure whether she was more sorrowful, or angry.

"Horsey!" Julia crowed. Marie pushed other thoughts from her mind. This was what she was doing now. Spending time with her sweet little granddaughter. This was what she would think about now. This was all that mattered.

"Yes... hello... Yes... yes, thank you, pleased to meet you... excuse me, I really need to... yes, thank you..."
The Spine was cursing Rabbit mentally with every greeting from enthralled and enchanted park visitors. There was a bit of a crowd and the sun was bright as usual. And that meant that you couldn't miss the towering silver automaton and his gleaming brass and copper brothers. Wanda was giggling helplessly. The Spine wondered whether it was nerves...

"Can we ride tha train?" Jon cried, bobbing.

"We ain't got any tickets yet," Rabbit said.

"And we're not going to," The Spine added.

"I actually have a couple in my wallet from the last time we came up here," Wanda commented.

The Spine sighed as Jon and Rabbit looked at him eagerly. "We'd have to sit in separate cars and even then i don't know whether it could pull our collective weight, Jon," he explained. He resumed his efforts to get through the crowd at the front of the park. "Excuse me... yes, thank you... but we need to... be somewhere. Yes, thank you..."

They managed to work their way to the central plaza. The crowds here were largely moving from ride to ride but there were still many stares and camera flashes.

"Maybe we should head for Tomorrowland," Rabbit suggested. 'We'd blend in better."

"I doubt it," The Spine said absently, scanning the crowds. What if they'd missed her? "You and that old timey getup. I thought you were into new ideas."

"New ideas and old, trusty clothes. ain't there a way to page people here?"

"Not that I know of," Wanda replied. "Oh! How about the Skyway? Maybe we could see them... oh, right. Robots. Well, I'll tell you what, I'll go on it and see if I can find them, okay? You three stand here and try not to get thrown out."

Wanda hurried away before they could stop her. The Spine felt thoroughly exposed, and that much more uncomfortable since he hadn't been outside in weeks. He wasn't even sure how clean his chassis was. Had he wiped all the oil from under his eyes?

And what would he say to her? Would she forgive him? She might come back, but she'd never trust him again after he just abandoned her like that!

"Are you C3P0?" piped a tiny voice nearby.

The Jon giggled and waved as a woman grabbed the little girl and led her away. Rabbit laughed.

"Well, she got the right chassis color," he said. The laugh faded. "Only... C3P0 always reminded me of... of Honey..."

"What?" The Spine asked a little shrilly.

"C-C-C-ause he's a pro-pro-protocol droid," Rabbit said in a trembling voice.

"Aw, don't cry, Rabbit!" Jon said soothingly.

"Ain't cryin'!" Rabbit said stoutly, wiping his eyes hastily. "Ain't like we're gonna see him here anyway. Totally different company."*

The Spine sighed, wishing they would shut up. But he didn't have the heart to say so the way he
usually would, not with Rabbit missing his wife. That hit too close to home.

Rabbit rocked on his feet restlessly. "I wonder how long Wanda's gonna take..."

The Spine shrugged and looked toward Frontierland. Crowds were shuffling through and then... a glimpse of sandy blonde hair with what his sharp eyes could see were blue roots! In her arms, a golden haired child... was that...

"Marie!" he gasped.

"Where?" Rabbit said, craning his neck. The Jon stood on tiptoe and looked.

"Over there! Just heading for the Golden Horseshoe!"

"Call to her, dummins! Yehr loud enough to be heard over that tinny loudspeaker!"

The Spine opened his mouth... and closed it again.

"What? Ye-ye-yell already!"

"Rabbit... I can't... what will I say?"

"Say yehr sorry!"

"But..."

"Ugh, come on!"

Rabbit hurried through the crowds the best he could, The Spine and The Jon hastily following.

"Rabbit, no! Wanda said..."

"What? Wanda said let Marie get away when you see her? Come on, stupid! Find her, apologize, grovel, and kiss her! That's what you do!"

"And suddenly you're the expert on making up with women?"

"You think I never pissed off Honey? Were you that distracted by your wife and kids?"

"No..." Rabbit had made her angry a few times, but she was usually too gracious to show it. The Spine wondered what Rabbit had done to make her so angry that he had to grovel for forgiveness.

They squeezed through a crowd of stunned Japanese tourists and stepped into Frontierland.

"Ah, the perfect place for you to lasso yehr lady, cowboy!"

'Only she's gone!' The Spine almost wailed.

"Calm down, big guy! Whoa, how did you ever go this long without her?"

"By switching off my..." He hesitated. Rabbit had gone out of his way to avoid finding out how The Spine's false reproductive organs functioned and this was no time or place to broach the subject anyway. "Shut up, Rabbit."

Rabbit snickered, apparently enjoying the chase enough to disregard his brother's manners. "Come on, let's try that way."
They hurried toward the Pirates of the Caribbean. The Spine scanned the crowd; yes, there she was again! She was just entering the line with Julia.

"Marie!" he cried before he could lose courage again.

She turned sharply at his cry. They locked gazes. He could hear Julia calling to him but everything seemed to fade away.

His photoreceptors took in every inch of her face in a nanosecond. She was so beautiful! What little aging she'd done had only increased that beauty. Her eyes were a little red, and even as he watched, they shimmered with tears. He felt the deep stab of remorse once more. The first thing she did after they had been apart for months was cry. That was nothing new. What was new was that she made no move to run into his arms... Just stood, holding Julia, jaw set, staring at him as the tears brimmed over and trickled down her cheeks.

"Marie... I'm so sorry, my love. I've been such a fool," he whispered, anguished.

"Go and tell her that, dummins!" Rabbit barked, shoving him.

He hadn't realized he'd said that aloud! The Spine stumbled forward and the astonished crowds parted to make way for the towering silver man. Marie stood still beside the ropes, now holding Julia's hand as the child wriggled, staring at him. He heard people murmuring but he couldn't let it trouble him. Let the world see. He wasn't letting her go again... unless she wanted to go. And he was terrified that she might, after everything...

"Marie... I... I'm so glad I found you! I was looking for you over in... well, the point is, I've found you and... and..."

He trailed off. She looked angry, he noticed. Very angry.

"Are you... are you mad at me, Marie?" he asked weakly.

"You came looking for me?" she asked coolly.

"You came looking for me?" she asked coolly.

Yes, she was angry! But she also seemed to be out of breath. Was she alright?

"Well, yes. I came up from San Diego but Sunshine said you were here and I've been searching the park for you so that I could ask you to..." He was rambling. Ugh. He hated rambling. He pulled himself together. "Well, honestly, it's so that I can beg you to come home with me, Marie," he finished quietly. "Please."

"Just like that?" she said calmly.

He noticed there was a tremor in her voice now. Julia struggled and tried to get to The Spine.

"Hush for a minute, baby," Marie murmured. "Grandma has to talk to Grandpa."

Grandpa. It made his core fizz with joy to hear that usually, but the way she said it made him quake with dread. "No," he said earnestly. "Not just like that. I'm trying to say that I'm sorry. I'm sorry for letting myself believe we'd both be better off apart. It's been Hell, Marie. I don't want to harm you but I can't bear to be without you any longer!"

"Spine..." she faltered. "I was so worried you didn't want me to come home!"

"Oh, Marie, it wasn't that! Of course I want you there... I just thought it would be better for you to be
away from me so I..."

He trailed off as her expression darkened. "If we weren't around all these kids," she hissed, "I'd slap you and break my hand!"

"Marie!" he gasped, shocked. He knew he deserved it, but she'd sounded so sweet and sad a minute before! He didn't want her to be sad, but he could deal with sadness better than rage.

"Or I'd kiss you or...! You idiot! You just take it upon yourself to leave me alone, night after night, in that giant bed, without even explaining? Do you know what it's been like without you? Do you have any idea how lonely I've been?"

He fought the urge to defend himself. Nearly thirty years of marriage had taught him that now was not the time to interrupt.

"And then coming up here and listening to Dave's sermons about Blue Matter radiation, trying to tell me I'm better off without the love of my life! When I think of how many nights he fell asleep against your core without coming to harm! And of how many times I slept with my head against your chest... and yet here I've been wondering if you'd ever hold me close again? I don't even care if it does cause cancer. Which it doesn't!"

"I know. I was... just afraid of hurting you..."

"Well, you managed it anyway! You could have at least said something!" she sobbed.

There was a silent crowd surrounding them now. Ordinarily, he would never have said things like this in front of anyone, but she had made no move to go somewhere private and he couldn't bear to just let her walk into that ride without telling her what he had come to tell her. Let the world find out he was married. To Hell with everyone. She was right. He had a brilliant processor packed with knowledge and he was still an idiot.

"Marie," he whispered. "There's really no other excuse I can make. I've told you the truth. I... I don't know what else to say except that I love you." The crowd nearby gasped. "I'm so sorry I treated you this way. I've learned my lesson. Please come home."

He heard a woman's voice nearby whisper rapturously, "Say yes!"

He forced himself to stand his ground despite the onlookers. Marie looked up at him, tears dripping from her chin. At last she stepped over the rope and lifted Julia over it with her. The Spine put his arms around them both.

"G'andpa!" Julia crowed, clambering into his arms. He eased her to one side. Marie settled against his chest as the still very confused crowd applauded in a scattered sort of way.

"I've missed this so much," she breathed, pressing her ear against his core.

"Alright, show's over, hope you li-li-liked," Rabbit called, waving them away.

The crowd moved off reluctantly as The Spine gently kissed Julia on the brow and kissed Marie carefully on the lips. He wanted to do so much more; it had been such a long time! But with their little granddaughter there, he knew they'd have to wait before they could even kiss properly.

But he was so relieved. She had forgiven him and he hadn't even had to grovel! Although... it occurred to him that he had been a bit too literal. Rabbit hadn't actually groveled, surely. The Spine knew that he would, but Honeybee would never require it. But throwing himself on her mercy,
begging for forgiveness... Yes, come to think of it, he had indeed needed to grovel. Whaddya know.

"I guess we need to get out of this crowd..." Marie was saying. There were camera flashes from the now enchanted Japanese tourists, as well as what looked awfully like a full sized professional photographer's tripod aimed right at The Spine and the woman and child he embraced. He tucked Julia's little face carefully away from the camera and glared at the photographer, who paled instantly.

"Um, yeah, before we get thrown out," Rabbit said close to them both. "Wanda's on her way, I just saw her. But so are a buttload of people in uniforms."

"It's alright, Marie said, wiping her eyes. "Julia went on all her favorites already."

Th Jon giggled and scooped Julia out of her grandpa's arms. "What's your favorite? I'm the only one who's been on the rides here, 'cause I'm not as heavy. I like the teacups!"

The Spine took the opportunity to put both arms around his wife. She felt wonderful.

The Jon prattled on to Julia about rides Disneyland had never had, with talking fish, and robots, tiny roller coasters and log flumes,** as she patted his golden cheeks and smiled. Wanda reached them at last and they hurried the best they could through the crowds and out of Disneyland, with a quiet escort of Disney employees trailing behind. Most were smiling, but a few looked dead serious and no one wanted to find out just how serious.

"Well, we made the news," Wanda sighed back at the apartment.

The Spine stared at the TV and saw himself shield Julia's face and glare at the camera. Ugh. So he'd been right. That wasn't going to sit well with Peter.

Sunshine beamed. "So what? This is so wonderful! Let them talk. Things will be okay."

"I hope so," Wanda said worriedly. "We could end up in a lot of trouble...

Marie hurried out with her packed suitcase and The Spine forgot his concern and grinned from ear to ear.

"We have to get going," she said. "You sure you can handle the pair of them, Sunshine?"

"You've been a huge help but yes, I can do this! Get home with your husband, girl!"

"Why the hurry?" Jon asked. "I wanna see Dave!"

"Um, Jonny boy, he's... We'll just have to see him another time. Marie wants to get home."

"Oh, right... so does The Spine. They want to hurry so they can make love."

Sunshine nearly spit out her juice giggling.

"Dammit Jon..." Rabbit sighed.

"They do, don't they?"

"Shut up," Rabbit groaned faintly.

The Spine said nothing. He did, he really did. Whether he would have the courage, even now, was
the question.

Marie smiled up at him as the others filed out the door ahead of them, and whispered, "We don't have to, love."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. Just... don't completely give up on it? I'm not afraid."

And he was. Being a big, strong robot didn't stop him from that.

He kissed her. It was the kiss they should have had at the park, the kiss of a long separation. He resolved in that moment, that when they arrived home, fear or no fear, he'd do something for her.

He'd switch his drives protocols back on.

Chapter End Notes

*for now.

**Jon sees the future!
Father and Son

Chapter Summary

You can love them with your whole soul, or whatever a robot has... but it doesn't mean they see it.

Chapter Notes

Dave was a sweet little boy. But sometimes a really nice kid can grow up to be a real jerk.

And just for the heck of it... theme song, Father and Son by Cat Stevens (now Yusuf Islam).

Walter Manor, 1954:

Marie half stumbled through the kitchen hallway. She just needed a coffee and she could face this again. Yes, her husband was a robot and could take things in long shifts, but he was the most human robot she knew, and she knew more than most people. He needed rest, too, and he had been due to start his stasis cycle when Davey had suddenly started wailing from his crib. And no sooner had they arrived to see what was wrong than he had thrown up all over himself.

Three hours and two baths later, The Spine suggested they take shifts until the vomiting stopped. She knew better than to suggest he rest first; he'd never cooperate. Besides, she was wrung out anyway. She couldn't help noticing that even though there were several other adults in the household, robotic and human, none of them were anywhere to be found. Davey was a lot more fun when he was vomit free, to be sure, but she still had a bone to pick with those fair weather relatives...

Wanda was just pouring coffee, to her relief; Marie had been prepared to drink whatever she could manage to make herself, however vile, just for the boost.

"Marie!" Wanda cried. "You're up early!"

"Don't remind me..." Marie muttered, pouring herself a coffee. She couldn't really blame Wanda for not being around when they needed back up, though. She wasn't a night person.

"And you look so tired... Oh!" Wanda blushed. "Um... never mind..."

Marie laughed wearily. Why did everyone always assume that? "Davey has a stomach bug. Spine took the first shift."

"What? Oh, the poor little guy! Why didn't you wake me?"

"Well, we had it covered."

"I'll bet! Spine has sat up with a few of us over the years. How's Davey this morning?"
"Oh, um... I'm going to check on them in a few minutes," she said guiltily. She really should have done that first.

"Oh, let me, you look all in."

Wanda walked out and Marie sighed with relief. She was worried about her baby boy, though the vomiting had subsided a bit before she went to bed. But she was also half afraid to take her shift. He seemed so much more capable!

Wanda returned a few minutes later and waved to her to follow. The Spine was in the TV room, the way he always did when Davey was a colicky newborn. He was slumped in stasis against the back of the sofa with Davey fast asleep on his chest. The same as usual. But Marie never got tired of it.

What wasn't usual were the little water cups on the coffee table, an assortment of towels (there was a double layer under Davey himself) and a bucket. Marie was relieved to find the bucket was empty.

They crept back out and returned to the kitchen.

"Well, I assume that means he's feeling better," Marie sighed. "I think I'll go back to bed."

"Good idea."

"I'd take a picture if my camera wasn't so loud. I'd like to put that in his baby book."

"What, a picture of him after he threw up all night?"

Marie smiled. "No... well, yes, but also a picture of him with his Daddy, after he took care of him while he was sick."

"Oh! Well, I don't think he'll have any trouble knowing his Pappy is a good man. Photo or no photo."

Walter Manor, 1983:

The Spine remembered the days when Rabbit had hummed and covered his ears whenever he mentioned sex.

He missed those days.

"So if she turns th-th-the lil dial and ya get weaker," Rabbit was saying, "how the Hell d'ya hold up yehr own weight?"

"Rabbit..."

"Me and Honey never had any trouble because we didn't have to do tha pumping, ya know. Lot of wasted power, doin' all that pumping..."

"Could you not..."

"She was the heavy one anyhow. But how'd ya keep from squishing her, bro?"

The Spine put his hand over his face as a grin spread across Rabbit's.

"You were on tha bottom, weren't ya?" he crowed.
"Shut up before I flatten you, Rabbit."

"I figured it out!"

"And don't think I can't flatten you, either, after your nice shiny upgrades, because at least I get maintenance."

"I figure that much maintenance at once was enough to last me ten years," Rabbit said petulantly.

"And it's been eleven," The Spine said, brightening now that Rabbit was the one on the defensive.

He couldn't figure out why Rabbit had decided to wander in and start asking him how he could make love to his wife without crushing her under his weight, but he never wanted it to happen again. It had been enough just figuring that out for themselves. The first four years had been easy. They couldn't do what Rabbit referred to as "pumping" either but Marie had assured him that there was much more to sex than that, especially for a woman. And he'd found out how right she was.

But he'd always felt a little off... He'd had those parts for just a little while and if they hadn't heard about the accident when they did, he had a strong and agonizing feeling that he would have gotten to use them. It haunted him for those four years how close he'd come to the full human experience, genuinely being able to make love to her like a man if only once, just once!

Of course, based upon their first run with the new hardware, it would have been thoroughly embarrassing. The second, on the other hand... well, he'd ended up having to explain to half the household that the sounds that had woken them were just him having a bad dream. Rabbit had smirked and suggested that it had sounded like a pretty good dream.

It wasn't The Spine's fault that the government hadn't warned him that they'd wired the power surge to trigger when his partner climaxed in order to simulate reality. It had made life interesting, however...

Well, the good news was that Rabbit was now walking out of the room in response to the probing and awkward question of his neglected maintenance. The Spine worried about him, but right now all he wanted was to not have to discuss his sex life with his brother.

It had gone well since Marie had come home from Dave's, though. He'd switched on his drives protocol that night and spent a strange evening with her. He'd known that the protocol, when switched off for long periods, was overwhelming when it came back online. And so it was. He wanted her so badly it frightened him.

But what frightened him more was the lingering fear that he'd caused her cancer. And so he had held her close and wept, and made love to her and wept, lay beside her feeling the strange sensation of pinging firing nerve endings in the wake of the power surge (the techs had assured him this was consistent with the human experience) and still he had quietly wept. She lay beside him, as beautiful as she had looked on their wedding night, looking at him with wide eyes and whispering, "You didn't have to, love. Not until you were ready..."

And he had told her, "I was ready. Or as ready as I'll ever be."

And it had gotten easier. He knew it would, and that was his reason. He knew that if he waited, it might get worse. So what choice was there? He made love to his wife. Too much time had been wasted already.

They were just about back to normal now. Marie kept busy teaching. He and his brothers played in the park to smaller and smaller crowds, still enjoying the work since the regulars still came. Rabbit
visited his daughter and The Jon had started doing the same, giving her still more company. Wanda
was deep into Blue Matter research and had taken on an assistant whose hair was gradually turning
blue. Norman had taken to answering the door which made things relatively quiet around the manor.
And Peter still hadn't resumed the level of scientific study that he had in the seventies, but that was
only natural. He didn't have the same motivation.

He did, however, travel. They didn't have the money for him to do it in style, so he did it like he used
to, by working his way across the country. When that grew boring, he said, he'd see about taking
work on ships and seeing the world. He was fit, now, muscular and worldly, so that The Spine
hardly knew him sometimes. But he was happy for him because he knew Lily would be proud of her
husband, and there was something about this Peter Walter that felt right. It reminded him of past men
named Col. Peter Walter, men who traveled and smiled readily and lived passionately. And while he
had never been sure whether Three had lived passionately with women or men, he knew that either
way, he had been content with his life. He had gone out and done things, not remained locked up
with test tubes like his brother. The Spine may have been the result of science, but for himself, he
didn't think it was the way to find fulfillment.

This was why, despite the distance between them, he still felt glad about David. He had a job he
loved, a job that made a difference and was on the cutting edge of modern air travel. He also had
three kids now, finally giving Sunshine a son born alive and screaming. Marie had returned with
photos and the boy never seemed to do anything but scream. She had stayed an extra week because
of it and Louise had stepped in when she left. The boy had put the whole household on pins and
needles and The Spine loved it. There was passion, life, energy.

He just wished he could see him in person.

He sighed and picked up his paper. It was what it was. David had never let go of his conviction that
his mother's cancer was connected with Blue Matter. Wanda, having done a special series of tests in
that area, assured him that there was absolutely no foundation to the theory. She had even seen rats
recover from illnesses when exposed to it, and have longer lives.

And he believed her. Which was good.

Because it was the only thing that was going to keep him from breaking down entirely when he
found out...

Marie walked into the manor. How could she tell him? She'd made peace with it the first time. She
counted every day as a blessing.

But that hadn't spared her the sinking feeling she'd had the night she and her husband had come
together... and it hurt.

She had cried out and his eyes, closed rapturously until then, had flown open in shock. She
recovered hastily and did her best to assure him that her cry had been one of ecstasy. What else could
she say? It could have been a little infection, a minor irritation. It wasn't severe, just unexpected.

And as they made love, it had only stung a little, so she hoped that it was nothing more than just one
of those things. But as she lay beside him later, in the darkness, listening to him drifting into stasis,
she resolved to see the doctor immediately.

Wanda hurried to her from the kitchen. "Well?" she whispered.
"Positive. I need to get chemotherapy and... he recommends a hysterectomy."

"Oh, sweetie! But... I mean, if it'll save your life..."

"I know. I'll schedule it with him but... How do I tell The Spine?"

"It's going to be hard on him, I know, but he'll want to be there for you."

"But he'll blame himself again!"

"I told him all about my research, hon. He knows better."

"He knew better last time, too."

"Well..."

"It's alright. I'm going to go find him."

She heard a hiss and her heart sank. He stood just inside the hallway, looking down at his hands.

"You told Wanda... Why didn't you say where you were going?" he asked quietly.

Wanda slipped past him with a quick pat on the arm. Marie sighed.

"You know why," she said.

He walked in and pulled her into his arms. They stood there for what seemed like hours. She didn't want to interrupt it. She needed a hug like this. Because making peace with death doesn't mean you aren't afraid to die. It just means you accept it.

"I love you," he whispered at last. Just that.

And she realized how things had changed. In those three words he had said it all. He loved her. He wouldn't leave, he wouldn't hide, he wasn't blaming himself. She was sick and afraid and he would be there. He loved her.

And that was when she broke down at last and sobbed against his shoulder. He was strong for everyone else, so she had been strong for him. But she had been dealing with this alone for a week while the doctor examined and tested her. Let him be strong now. She knew it was something that made him feel worthwhile. And it was what she needed.

"I love you, too," she choked.

He kissed her gently and she yawned.

"Tired?" he murmured.

She nodded. It had been a stressful afternoon, to say the least. He picked her up and carried her upstairs.

"Alright, buddy. Wig off!"

The Jon giggled and unsnapped his hair. Rabbit pulled off his top hat and unnecessarily smoothed his copper skull plates. He'd always liked his dome but the sunshine off it could take down airplanes.
Marie walked into the room with The Spine. Rabbit swallowed hard. She was so thin! He'd watched her get that way, of course, but it still hit him hard.

"Rabbit..." The Jon squeaked softly, clutching his wig to his chest.

"I know, buddy." It was just like Lily...

Marie smiled, though, as though she'd just come in from a garden party instead of a chemotherapy treatment. "You two! That's so sweet!"

Rabbit elbowed The Jon, who managed to croak, in a thin, mournful voice, "Bald is beautiful!"

The Spine scowled and looked at Marie. She was laughing.

Rabbit put his hand over his face. "A little enthusiasm," he muttered.

"She liked it!" whispered The Jon.

Marie walked to each of them and gave them a kiss on their cheek plates. "You're right. Maybe I should just shave off the last few wisps. I seem to have a pretty good skull under there."

Rabbit looked at her bandana and smiled. "Ya look beautiful anyhow," he said. "Don't she, Spine?"

The Spine nodded. Rabbit understood. Of course he thought she was beautiful. But he had never expected the ravages of the treatment that was supposed to save her life.

Neither had they. The surgery had been distressing enough, but she had healed well and she even had permission to resume sex. Rabbit had been listening when she got the call. He wasn't going to admit that, though...

Whether they had resumed, he didn't know. Because then the therapy began and now she was as weak as a kitten. She did look good bald, though.

"Too bad ya can't take off yehr hair like ya used to," Rabbit told The Spine uneasily.

"Actually..."

The Spine removed his hat, clicked something on the back of his neck, and smoothly removed his hair.

"How long have you been able to do that?" Rabbit cried as Jon clapped his hands. "I thought they glued it on!"

"It's anchored, yes."

"Looks great!" Marie said with a weary smile. She took off her bandana. There were only a few strands of wavy blue hair left.

The Spine eased her into a chair. "You need to rest, love," he murmured. He looked at her a moment and kissed her, right in the center of her scalp. Jon gasped but Rabbit grinned.

"Work with what ya got," he said approvingly.

"That gives me chills," she sighed. "The good kind, mind you. I may just stay bald after this."

Jon laughed and sat beside her, hugging her gently. Rabbit envied the brass bot's ability to roll with
things. Jon felt deeply, but he didn't let it hang around his neck. Not like The Spine.

But then, The Spine had more reason.

As the weeks passed, they grew accustomed to a bald Marie. She said she wished she'd done it sooner. Wanda said she was glad Marie was bearing up so well. The Spine wasn't particularly cheerful, naturally, but he stayed with her, went to appointments, and they managed to live reasonably happily.

Until the doctor informed them that the cancer had spread. He talked about other treatment options but The Spine couldn't take it in. It was his worst nightmare. She was still too young! He wanted to scream and break things and tear the place apart. And he could have.

Instead, he sat and held her as he heard her speak words that filled him with horror.

"If this treatment doesn't work, though... I don't want to try anything else."

He felt like he had the first day he had woken up human and hadn't realized he wasn't supposed to keep his diaphragm rigidly controlled. His body needed air to survive but he hadn't realized it. It was one of the worst feelings he could remember, a desperate need for something, his body straining to get it, a clutching, screaming terror... He shook, and she turned to him with wide eyes.

"No!" he gasped. "Marie, no! Don't give up now! Please!"

"I... I'm sorry, love! I was hoping it was working but I've thought this through and... I don't want to go on for years feeling sick and horrible. I've been so happy with you..."

"Then fight, please! Stay with me!" he sobbed, not caring who heard him.

She put her hands on his cheeks and looked into his eyes as he shuddered with misery. "I am, love. It's not over yet. One more chance, okay? Together."

He nodded spastically and held her close.

"So... um..." the doctor murmured awkwardly. "Mrs. Walter, if you could come in tomorrow morning, we need to start right away."

"I'll be here," she said over The Spine's shoulder.

She called her sister that evening. Louise was tough but there was an audible tremble in her voice.

"Well, girl... that's no good. But at least you have more options, hm?"

Marie told her what she had told the doctor and there was silence.

"Louise?"

"How did The Spine take that?" Louise asked quietly.

"Very poorly. But if it works..."

"But if it doesn't! Baby, you have so much to fight for! Why quit after two tries?"
"Three, technically. Because if I'm just going to waste away anyway, I want to spend the time I have left with him! You realize that this is inevitable, right? I don't just mean cancer, or dying, I mean me dying first. I will die before he does. If God has decided it's gonna be from cancer, so be it. There's uglier ways to go."

"Name one."

"I'm just trying to say that if I eat up the time remaining in hospitals, that's all he'll remember."

"You'll finish up in a hospital anyway, and don't underestimate his memory."

"You're just going to argue against everything I say..."

"Of course I am! You're my only sister and you're planning your own funeral!"

"I never said..."

"Are you?"

Marie was silent.

"Told ya."

"Louise..."

Louise sighed the longest, most deliberately patient sigh Marie had ever heard. And that included times when Rabbit was being a martyr.

"Alright, baby. It's your life. No, I'm not being petulant. I mean it. Your choice. You should get up here to visit between treatments."

"Why can't you come here?"

"I can and will, gladly. But how about your son?"

Marie sighed her own long-suffering sigh. "I'm afraid to even speak to him. He was bad enough the first time, and then when it came back... And now, he'll be impossible. But... If this doesn't work, I sure do want to see them all as much as I can."

"What about Spine, though? Has he even seen Bobby?"

"No... well, he's seen photos. But you know Dave would never let him."

"Sometimes, I swear... I could chuck a wrench at that boy. When I think of the kind of father The Spine has been to him... Ungrateful little..."

"Louise... He's not... he just... has a very unusual set of family issues to cope with."

"Right." Louise still sounded just as lethal.

By the time Marie got off the phone, she had resolved to do one thing before she died... no matter when it happened. She was going to reconcile her son and his father.

She didn't expect it to happen overnight. She shamelessly invoked every guilt trip she never gave her
son when she could have all in one go, using her illness as ballast to get Dave to hear her out. As the next few months passed and the treatments began to show a little progress, she managed to get him to agree to see The Spine. The meeting was tense but Dave genuinely tried, and The Spine, she could see, wanted to show more feeling than he dared.

He'd been through so much lately. Dave's distance had been a blow. After Lily died, the only things that brought a smile to her husband's face were his wife, son, and the births of the grandchildren. To have Dave, the boy he'd been so happy to adopt, the child he'd taken on as his own son, turn away from him, was truly cruel.

She couldn't blame him for being hurt. And when he was hurt, The Spine turned inward, reverting as much as he could to his original programming... the automaton who couldn't understand pain. He would return to the womb, as it were. And as soon as he began to feel ready to resume being her husband, she would know beyond a doubt when he began to nibble at her neck. It seemed that he associated sex with humanity above any other activity...

He hadn't attempted a single nibble since her surgery.

But with a little more cajoling, she did at least get him the chance to see the kids... just for a little while in the park. It was something. Julia remembered him and made a great fuss. Her little sister, Melissa, stared at the automatons in deep wonder and ended up on the grass with Jon, who lay on his stomach and beamed at her as she patted his nose. Melissa looked even more like her mother than Julia did, and Jon and Rabbit were besotted with them both.

But it was when Sunshine put Bobby into his grandfather's arms as his father looked on uneasily... It was then that Marie felt tears coming on. It was so familiar, yet from so long ago! The baby, usually screaming, lay quietly gurgling up at the gleaming silver face and smiled. The Spine smiled back, then closed his eyes and pressed his lips together.

"Love?" she murmured.

"It's just... he's so much like his father." He kissed the tiny boy and returned him to his mother, and turned to Dave as if to speak to him.

Dave turned away abruptly, trying to act as though something had distracted him. The Spine turned smoothly toward Sunshine instead and spoke, but Marie wiped her eyes and looked at Dave angrily. She had seen the awkwardness of that moment. She had seen the stab of pain across her husband's face. Why had she thought this would work?

But The Spine was so cheerful when they returned home that she was at last able to coax him to bed. It had been a long time. It stung... things weren't quite the same after the surgery. But she didn't breathe a word about anything except how wonderful it was. She hoped to keep him this happy for as long as she could. She adored sharing his bed. She was going to miss it, she was sure.

Because she'd had the call already. The therapy had stopped having any effect on the cancer. It had even started spreading. And that was that. She wanted to live happily until she couldn't anymore, just like Lily. And then... maybe there was a place after she died where she would be reunited with her little girl.

She wasn't worried about herself. She was worried about him. Because she knew now that Dave would never come home... not literally, not figuratively. The Spine would return to where he began... an automaton dreaming of being human.

And she was certain it would destroy him. She had no plan, no solution. She couldn't stay to comfort
him. It hurt far more than anything to do with her illness.

She didn't even know how to tell him.
Life with Marie

Chapter Summary

The last chapter of her life, but not of the story. A few last memories as her life closes.

WARNING: semi-graphic description of childbirth, loss, tense family stuff... Lots of hurt, with flashbacks to break it up. More comfort in the next chapter.

Chapter Notes

I will be posting this chapter along with a Spine viewpoint of the second half of "When the Music Stops" as well as the next chapter after that, because I don't want to drop this on you and walk away for who knows how long. The chapter about Five meeting Annie Burnett is a steep upward slope and should help a lot.

I sincerely apologize for this one, though. It's a fixed point... I found this chapter hard to write, but it had to be done, because a few more stories remain after this to follow to their conclusions. Marie was a part of a bigger story than I ever intended. And I just figured that the state of The Spine's long life meant that he would be very resistant to the idea of adapting to loss. He could deal with some of it but a soul mate passing on and leaving him would crush him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He stroked her hand. It was so soft... still so soft! He loved her softness. All humans were soft to him, of course. But with her it was so much more. The feel of her, her scent... His thoughts drifted free of the smell of antiseptic and the soft blip of the heart monitor.

"Hold me tighter, love!"
"I don't want to hurt you!"
"Then just a little. Please?"
"You're so soft... your hair smells wonderful..."
"You can smell?"
"Nasal receptors. Your hair smells like roses..."
"Lavender."
"Oh..."

He heard her fond laughter and looked up sharply. No, still unconscious. It was just a memory... his processor was misfiring. He hadn't been in stasis in days... Despite well-meaning family interference.
"Spine, ya gotta rest..."

"What if she wakes up, Rabbit? What if I miss... No. No, I can rest later."

"I'll watch, buddy!"

"You're not even supposed to be here. They barely let me stay even after Peter threatened them with a lawsuit he can't afford!"

"The Cavalcadium leaned on them, actually. There's a few members here. It's like bein' a Freemason. They let us all in."

Silence.

"Spine..."

"No."

His neck twitched and his hands jerked slightly. Rabbit had been right, but how could he rest? She was dying. It was all he had left, holding her hand, being there the few times she open those beautiful eyes in her too thin face and smiled at him. He kissed her hand and cried quietly.

It had been so wonderful. How could it already be over? Hadn't they only just gotten married?

He stood, more nervous than he'd ever been. She wore a soft pink gown. Louise, her only living relative, gave her away. It meant more than she knew. The Spine had never expected so many people to approve of their union.

Three was the Best Man. The Spine had half expected an objection from Rabbit, but there was none. He wasn't terribly surprised, all things considered. Three was Best Man but Rabbit had to push his wheelchair.

Jon and Wanda cried. The Spine considered doing the same. This was terrifying enough, but later... How could he do this? He couldn't give her a wedding night! She knew that, and yet...

"Rabbit!" he sent by their old telegraph link, as his bride approached with her sister. "I can't! I can't marry her! Help me!"

"Whoa-a-a-a-a-a... Dammit, rusty old... That's better. What's eatin' ya?"

"I'm not human!"

"What gave it away?"

"I'm serious!"

"That's the trouble. Yehr always serious. But look at it this way... Nothing you've done has scared her off so far, hm? So maybe you give her a chance, huh? Ya know she'll be miserable without you if ya chicken out."

Marie took her place at his side and smiled up at him nervously. Louise backed away after giving him a nod of encouragement.

"See?" Rabbit sent.

The Spine stared down at his bride, dazzled. She always did that to him, but here, dressed in that
gown, after all still willing to marry him... If he'd had breath, she'd have taken it away.

"it's gonna be alright, buddy. Trust Rabbit. Signing off until after you say,'I do.'"

"Rabbit?" he sent, panicked, looking up at his brother.

Rabbit winked at him and jerked his head toward the judge, who smiled at him and began the ceremony.

It was really happening. In spite of his panic attack, he felt a surge of elation. How many times had he pictured them both standing here? The Spine, automaton though he was, holding a woman's hand and promising himself to her. This time the tears did start, but they were the right kind. She loved him. The wedding night could look after itself. For this moment, the world was right.

He wasn't sure how he got through it, but he would look back on it as one of the most beautiful moments in his life.

Three, on the other hand, would later say that he'd never believed a robot could go pale until he saw The Spine on his wedding day.

"Spine?" It was Peter. He shut the door gently and murmured, "Any change?"

The Spine shook his head.

"Ah. You mind if I stay for a while?"

"No. It's fine," he murmured.

"If you want to talk about anything..."

"It's fine, Peter. Just... I don't feel like talking."

"Alright." Peter opened the book he'd brought and began to read. The Spine drifted back to where he had left off... almost. He remembered the hotel, the moment when she had said she could work with the adjustments she'd made...

"Work with what?" he murmured as she eased him back onto the bed. He looked up at her in wonder, nervous but tingly; something he never expected to feel.

She slid out of her dress and his boiler bubbled like champagne. She was wearing the prettiest slip underneath. He watched in wonder as she removed that, too, and curled up beside him.

"Touch," she whispered, the warmth of her breath tickling his neck. How had his Pappy done that? He didn't even have any fuzz there... you needed fuzz to be tickled, didn't you? "That's all it is, really. We touch each other..." She stroked his chest and he shivered. "And then... well... after a while..."

She blushed hotly. "I guess you'd say it peaks."

"It can't! It feels... incredible when you touch me now..." She was stroking his arm and kissing his throat, and his boiler was going crazy. "But... I can't have a... Y'know, I don't have the ability."

"I might know a way, but... Well, if it doesn't work, what would be the next best thing?"

He looked at her for a long moment. He'd given it too much thought since they'd set the date for the wedding. But he was glad, because now he could bring something to the party.

"I guess... I'd want one of us to, at least," he replied at last, a little smile twitching at the corner of his
mouth. "And since I can't, it'll have to be you."

"What? Oh!" she gasped, as he pulled her close and kissed her. "That wasn't what..." Kiss. "I..." Kiss. "I meant..."

He surfaced a minute later from a kiss that made him actually feel light-headed. "I know, love," he whispered, gently tipping them both sideways. "And that's my answer. You're not the only one who's done research, y'know."

"Really?" she sighed rapturously as he kissed her neck, working his way down. "Wait!" she gasped, leaning away.

He paused, his face resting against her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"Oh... nothing... It's just all so... I just wasn't ready for you to actually know what you were doing!"

He grinned. "I don't. Not first hand. But you hear a lot serving in a war... The guys taught me more than you know. Yet."

"That's your research? Boys telling tales? I actually read things!"

He sighed against her soft skin and she shivered. "I read, too, but they had more practical advice. How about we each show each other what we've learned, hm?"

"Alright," she whispered nervously.

She gasped as he grinned and continued where he'd left off.

He actually smiled a little as the memory paled. Why had he been worried? She'd shown no indication of disappointment that night. And her theories had been correct. The power surge he'd experienced... he was sure he'd fried his photoreceptors. What a bright woman he'd married...

He refocused on her in the hospital bed and his smile faded. It was too soon! They'd had more than he'd ever hoped, and still he wasn't content. It just wasn't enough, and it never would be. He'd grudged every moment they'd been apart...

Don't go...

"It's just a training retreat. It's only three days, love!"

"I know..."

"You're away longer for concerts sometimes."

"But... I have something to do then!"

"Oh, Spine..."

"No... I'm sorry. You know I don't mean for you to miss it, don't you?"

"Of course."

With a kiss, she had left. It had been a long weekend, even with the impromptu poker game Rabbit got going. Why, and how, he insisted on smoking a big black cigar, The Spine didn't know. He hated the funk from it and The Jon actually collapsed from the fumes before they put it out and opened a window... Wanda was furious... especially at Norman, who dropped fifty dollars and came back
smelling like the cigar and the cheap beer that Rabbit had used to put him out when his cigar ash fell on Norman's leg.

Peter got up an hour later to report to the others in the waiting area. The Spine wanted to tell them all to go home, where they'd be comfortable, but he couldn't. They weren't in the room, but they were there, sitting vigil with him in spirit. It was the only comfort left. He felt guilty but there it was. He needed to know they were there.

He looked down at her and sang softly. He did that sometimes, hoping she would hear, even while she rested.

"Love me tender, love me sweet, never let me go..."

He couldn't continue.

Marie's eyes opened. He trembled.

"Marie!" he choked. "How are you? Do you understand me?"

"Of course," she whispered, smiling weakly. "My... mouth is dry..."

He grabbed the pitcher so quickly that he dented it. Cursing under his breath, he filled a cup and helped her drink a little.

Stay... he was thinking as she sipped. Stay and I'll gladly take care of you like this forever, stay and I'll love you, just don't leave me...

"Thank you, love," she whispered. "How long have you been here?"

"Too long," he said weakly. "The same as you."

"Oh, well, pardon me," she said slowly. "I'll ask them to release me right away. The nerve of them, keeping me cooped up. I'll straighten them out."

"Give them Hell..." he murmured, taking her hand again.

She sighed and squeezed his hand. He barely felt it.

"Funny thing," she said softly. "I know you need to rest but... it's so good to see you here when I wake up. I always liked waking with you."

"And I always liked sleeping with you."

Her smile broadened and she closed her eyes as it did, as though too weak to have both active at the same time. "I think that was a pun. A dirty pun, yet. Rabbit would be proud."

Rabbit's puns. He'd been freer with them before 1955. After that, he seemed to be afraid of risking any double entendres.

It seemed the whole household had somehow found out that The Spine had a full male reproductive assembly. He didn't know if some wise guy had gotten curious and spied on him while he was changing, or if it was due to the more obvious fact that he had managed to get Marie pregnant... or whether... He hated to think of it, but it might have had something to do with the first night after they arrived home and some of the sounds they had made the second time he used it.

His first time making love like a human had been clumsy. The feds had programmed him to the best
of their ability, complete with a guidebook of methods and erogenous zones, as well as the full Kama Sutra, which he privately found deeply amusing. He knew why; someone had been watching too many James Bond films. He supposed if he was sent out to spy as they intended, he would do his duty and at least attempt to use the equipment, but not only did the idea strike him as utterly ridiculous, he knew he'd feel horrible if he succeeded.

However, he didn't object to the assembly for obvious reasons. If they had the technology to make him able to make love to Marie properly, he wouldn't say no. But there had been no opportunity to test it, to his staggering relief. They'd tested all the other new parts diligently, but not this one. Though there was a young, pretty tech he'd never seen before or since, who had made a valiant effort at flirting with him not long after the last bolt was fitted. He assumed that was their attempt to test the hardware. They really should have known better. He hoped she'd at least been paid well for trying.

And so he had come home with the bottled-up longing to use it and no experience, like a teenaged kid. Marie had laughed a lot. Too much, dammit. She wasn't supposed to be laughing...

But he adapted quickly, and the second time, later that evening, after Davy went to sleep... Marie had called it life-changing.

She'd called out quite a few other interesting things in the process of making that discovery. He'd been both flattered and embarrassed, and even more embarrassed by the sounds he made when he discovered they'd wired him to have a power surge the moment she achieved... well, it had been awfully nice of them, but if they'd only warned him, he could have adjusted his volume early and wouldn't have woken half the household with his cry of startled ecstasy, and had to try to blame it on a bad dream.

Bad dream indeed! He should always have such dreams.

And he hadn't fooled anyone. Well, Wanda appeared to have accepted his explanation, possibly because she didn't want to live with the memory of hearing her uncle having sex. But not Rabbit, who smirked as he strolled away. Then again, his day would arrive soon enough.

They'd returned to bed, giggling quietly. He'd had the joy of holding her close and replaying those moments, knowing there would be more. It was overwhelming.

"I wasn't real sure about these upgrades, love..." she sighed sleepily. "But I think I can get used to them. I mean, I was happy before but... well, you never know what you're missing until you have it, do you?"

He giggled again. He couldn't seem to stop.

"I think I can relate," he murmured, kissing the top of her head. She snuggled closer. "Did I hurt you at all?"

"A little, but that happens. No big deal. Within reason, I mean. I'll tell you if there's any problem, alright?" She sighed out loud; it sounded sexy and he liked it. "I mean, a little stinging isn't a problem. And it's not like you can get me pregnant, right?"

He snapped back to the present. "Yes... Rabbit does love a dirty joke," he replied, forcing a little smile.

"A smile! You have such beautiful smiles, Spine. I'll miss those so much."

"Don't..."
"But I think it's good to talk about it. I don't want to go without saying goodbye."

"Please don't!" he cried, his head dropping as emotion overcame him.

She just held his hand. He wished she could go on holding it. Holding hands could be so comforting...


He held both of Marie's hands and bit his lip nervously as the next contraction hit and she sobbed in agony. "I can't" she cried. "Oh... Ohhh! I can't do it! It hurts!"

"A little more..." Abby intoned, easing something in the area under a blanket that Abby refused to let him see. He was curious, but not entirely sorry. "That's it... just a bit more... this one's nearly passed but you're almost there... good girl."

"I... CAAANT...!" Marie groaned, doubled up with the primal urge to push, insisting she couldn't but unable to resist. Tears squeezed from her eyes as she clutched at his hands and he wanted to cry with her, but she needed him to be strong. "SPINE!"

"What? What is it?" he asked frantically.

"HOW COULD YOU HAVE DONE THIS TO ME?" she wailed.

"She says you're almost there, Marie," he said miserably, trying to sound as calm as possible.

"I HEARD HER, DAMN YOU TO HELL! DON'T TREAT ME LIKE AN IDIOT! HOW DARE YOU TELL ME I'M... I'm..." She sank back, sobbing, onto the bed.

"Rest a minute," Abby said calmly, as though Marie hadn't just cursed her husband to blazes.

He struggled not to sob himself. He understood the strain she was under, but it still hurt.

"I'm sorry!" Marie howled, looking forlornly up at him. "I'm so sorry, don't believe anything I say!"

He sighed and held her the best he could against his chest, kissing her clammy forehead.

"I know, love. I won't be angry, I promise. Just... don't give up now. Tell me if you need anything..."

"I... I need..."

"What? What do you need?"

"I need..." Her eyes widened and she clutched his hands once more as her body contracted. She groaned loudly.

"Abby!" he screamed.

"I'm right here, dammit!" Abby snapped, returning to the task.

Why did everyone have to swear at him?

"YOU DAMNED FOOL!" Marie screeched.

"What?" he squeaked, surprising himself.

"YOU SHOULD HAVE KNOWN IT WOULD HAPPEN! I DON'T KNOW HOW BUT YOU
SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THAT THING COULD GET ME PREGNANT!"

"But you liked... I mean... you said you...

"Shut up and hold her hands," Abby ordered. "The head's almost out."

"What? Really?" he cried.

"No, I'm making the whole thing up. Yes, really."

They were really showing their true colors today. Still...

"Oh! Marie, she said..."

"I'M NOT DEAF, TIN MAN!"

"Ouch," Abby murmured.

He couldn't help it. His chin trembled and he felt oily tears starting. He was trying so hard but...

Marie roared with a sound the likes of which he had never dreamed of hearing from his beautiful, delicate wife.

"Hold her steady," Abby urged.

He put his arm around her back and she clutched at him and screamed and cried, still held sway by a force alien to her husband, or for that matter, to any husband. He felt her shuddering and braced her carefully as the contraction began to fade. A moment later she lay on the bed, slack, staring up at his tears and weeping and apologizing. And he forgave all... especially a second later when he heard a fitful sound coming from Abby's arms, and turned, and saw her for the first time.

Pink, sloppy, covered in whitish goop with a blue light gleaming from her little chest, thrashing her limbs in the cold of the room and hiccuping her first plaintive wail into the world. His daughter. Their daughter. Their very own little girl.

"Oh..." Marie gasped, peering down weakly toward the foot of the bed where Abby stood staring at the little creature in her arms. "Oh, Spine, look at her! Oh... she's... she's so beautiful, look at her hair! She has your hair, oh, how can she have your hair? So sweet... Isn't she? Isn't she beautiful?"

And she put her arms around him and wept. He kissed her and stared at the baby, now wailing as Abby wiped her carefully with a washcloth and snuck numerous awkward glances at him.

He supposed he could understand. He was feeling a similar shock as he looked at the child that he had fathered. It shouldn't be possible, and until this moment, he realized, he had never truly believed that he had done it. But there she was!

He would never feel this human again, he was sure. This was as human as you could get. He'd fallen in love, taken the woman he loved to bed, and she had given birth to his child. He wiped his eyes.

"I don't know what's up and what's down anymore," Abby was saying to no one in particular. "I'm just going to clean up this impossible child and get the Hell out of here."

The Spine laughed and kissed Marie as she cried. "Thank you, love."

"But I said such horrible things!" she sobbed.
"I understand. And you brought our daughter into the world. It was worth it."

He looked at her now. Their daughter was gone. Dave was in the waiting room. He knew as surely as if he'd seen him that he had come alone and wasn't sitting anywhere near his family. He wouldn't even come see his mother as long as his father was in the room. He couldn't understand when it had come to this. Dave had always been a bit of a loose cannon; not someone he'd expect to be afraid of death to this degree. But that was before he fell in love. And The Spine understood, when he thought of it that way. Dave was afraid to lose her. Yes, he could understand that fear perfectly.

But he also had a duty to his mother. And that had been the challenge.

"She's your mother, you little..." Louise growled into the phone.

"Louise..." Marie said weakly.

Her voice dropped to a hiss. "This may be the last chance you have to see her, alright? Get your butt down here or so help me..."

The Spine slipped his arms around his wife and lifted her carefully. She was so light now, so fragile!

"Alright. See you at the hospital. I love you, too."

Louise put down the phone.

"He loves you after all that?" Marie asked.

"Don't ask me, you raised him." Louise sighed. "I'm sorry, kids. Honest. I should have waited until you left to call..."

"It's alright," The Spine whispered. "It's not like we don't know how he feels."

They walked to the car. He kissed her and gently set her inside, then eased himself into the middle beside her.

"I'll bring the boys by in a while. You just relax and get settled in, hon."

Wanda started the engine and they drove away.

"Bless her heart, she makes it sound like I'm going to stay in a hotel."

He sighed. He had nothing to say. Marie gasped softly as they went over a bump and he cried out.

"Wanda, stop!"

"What is it?" Wanda cried, pulling the car over to the side.

"She's hurting..." he gasped.


Wanda looked at her askance and resumed driving. "Are you sure we shouldn't just call an ambulance?"

"No. I just want it to be another car ride." She rested her head on The Spine's shoulder. "I was hoping the next time we were in the back seat of a car together, it would be more fun," she whispered.
"It was... the last time," he said thickly.

"You were right, though. You didn't fit. But we made it work."

They certainly had! He'd kicked out a window that night and nearly took off the whole door. "I never knew until then how creative you were."

She laughed. It was weak but sincere and it gave him a little comfort, knowing she still could laugh. When Dave finally arrived, the next day, Marie was in her room and medicated for the pain. A little of her hair had grown back since the last treatments. It was bright blue. The Spine could imagine how Dave would react.

But when Dave came to see her, The Spine waited in the hall, not even looking up as his son passed by. He couldn't bear the struggle of trying and failing to catch his eye. That was how it was, now. But he could hear him through the opened door, in the room with Louise.

"Dave," Louise said coolly.

"Hello. She's sleeping."

Obviously. "Yes. The meds are strong."

"Good. She... She's in a lot of pain, then?"

"Yes," she replied, her voice breaking.

"How... um... How long did they..."

"A week at the most."

"Oh."

"She misses you. So does your father. They both love you very much."

"Aunt Louise..." He sounded pained. "I... love them too, but... You get it, right? And he agreed with me..."

"For a while. Wanda disproved the whole nonsense. There's no scientific evidence..."

"Look, I've heard it all. I know. But I've seen data suggesting otherwise and I have a wife of my own to think of, y'know? A wife who already lost a child. And I have three kids, three tiny kids who need their mother. And they adore all of you, and I can't let them, I can't risk them getting sick, and it hurts but I just can't take that chance, alright? I came here because you guilted me into it and because she is my mother and I'll miss her, too. I'm sorry but that's all I can tell you. When... when it happens, that's the end. I won't be seeing them. We can write and call but..."

"Dave?" Marie said weakly, opening her eyes.

"Mom!" he gasped.

The Spine, meanwhile, sat reeling. He'd know, and yet... Now it was confirmed. He could just see them through the doorway, and he watched his son, his precious son speaking to his mother and felt so very alone. He heard Marie whispering to Dave, asking him to standby his father when she'd gone. And Dave promised her that he would take care of him.
He was lying. Of course he was. Looking down at her thin and hopeful face and lying through his teeth.

He heard later that Dave and Rabbit had argued afterward but neither had left, both stayed in the waiting room except to eat or get water, avoiding each other, Dave no doubt keeping his distance., Rabbit no doubt walking right past him repeatedly just to piss him off. What did it matter? The time would come when they would be told it was over. Dave might come up to see her once more. He didn't know. But then he would leave...

He tried to tell himself that he still had a family, but he couldn't go back now, could he? He wasn't the automaton he once was. He had no plan. He had refused to plan for this.

He slipped, without meaning to, into stasis, too exhausted to resist.

The next morning, she woke up when his systems came back online, just as she always had; that was something. He forced a smile as she blinked at him, but two oily tears streaked past it. A nurse came in to check her vitals and change her IV. She looked at him sidelong and said quietly, "Do you want me to call anyone from the waiting room?"

He looked at her sharply. The look on her face was significant, calm but intense. She gave a little shake of her head. He looked back at Marie. She was smiling.

"No..." he choked. Not yet! He'd been prepared to sit beside her forever...

"Are you sure?" the nurse asked with a frown.

She'd misunderstood. "I... I mean, yes, yes, call them all, please..."

He held her hand as the nurse walked out. "Marie?"

"Mm?" she asked sleepy.

"Love... I... I can't..."

No. No, he couldn't do this to her. She had no choice, now. He couldn't add to her burden. All he could do was try and show her that he would be alright. After all, she thought that Dave was going to resume contact... He was grateful now, truly grateful, for that lie. Whatever happened, Marie would be able to believe that they were reconciled.

"I love you," he whispered. "I always will. Don't ever doubt it. If... if you see Lily, tell her we all miss her."

She smiled a little wider. "You don't believe in an afterlife, love," she said slowly.

"But you do. So give her my love."

"Idiot," she whispered affectionately. "I love you, darling. Take care of Dave and the kids. Everything's going to be alright now. But... Love, promise me you won't give up."

He stared at her.

"Promise you won't shut down!" she said with obvious effort. "Promise me you'll keep living!"

He heard the others walking in.

She was looking at him intently. Dave had lied to make her happy, but The Spine? If he promised,
he would have no choice but to keep it.

And she knew it.

"I..." He grimaced, fighting tears. "I promise, Marie."

She relaxed and smiled as each of the others came to her and took her hand, saying their goodbyes. Louise openly wept, the first time The Spine had seen since Armand's funeral. Rabbit put his arms around her and held her close.

Marie turned to him and stared with that same dopey smile. Her smiled faded abruptly.

"What is it?" he croaked.

She whispered, "Love... I have to go now..."

"Go?" he cried. "Marie, no... Wait!"

He rose hastily and kissed her gently on the lips, but as he looked into her eyes he could see that something was wrong.

"Marie?" he cried.

She wasn't gripping his hand anymore.

He stared into her face, frozen on the spot.

*Marie...*

"Spine..." Rabbit whispered, putting a hand on his shoulder.

The Spine sank into his chair, still holding her hand. He felt another hand, human, firmly grasp his shoulder for just a moment. Then it was gone... the door opened and shut. He heard Rabbit's boiler hiss angrily.

Dave had left. Already. Dave was gone and Marie...

"Marie?" The Spine whispered.

She didn't answer. She wasn't breathing. She wasn't moving. He couldn't take it in.

He heard them crying. He couldn't grasp it.

She couldn't be gone.

But she *was* gone.

"Spine?" Rabbit said again.

It came over him all at once.

"Marie!" he choked, rising abruptly from his chair.

He clutched at her shoulders, sucked in a great gasp of air, tried to speak, to beg her to return, but nothing came out.

"Spine!" Rabbit cried for a third time.
He felt strong arms holding him around the shoulders. The Spine struggled against them, screaming, and sank forward halfway across her still form. He buried his face in her too still stomach and sobbed like a human. He vaguely heard the others filing out, felt one arm slide from around him. The other arm stayed around his shoulders, holding him firmly. It had to be Rabbit...

Wanda, Peter and Louise remained as well, waiting with him as he clutched the side of the bed and half-screamed his agony. He thought he heard someone enter the room, murmur something, and leave. It didn't matter. She was gone! The hysteria rose inside him, building into a frenzy.

Warning buzzers triggered in his head. The strain was too great, something was wrong. Something snapped inside his chest and he choked and coughed.

"Spine!" Rabbit cried. "Peter, something's wrong!"

He heard their footsteps as his vision began to dim. He coughed again and vomited water and oil onto the floor. He heard their shocked cries and didn't care. Let everything pour out, let him shut down. The world was a blank slate.

More water and oil gushed forth. He shook violently and tried to sit up. "Spine, buddy..." came Rabbit's gentle voice. He couldn't see him... couldn't feel his arm anymore. "You're mal-mal-malfunctioning, okay? Ya needed that rest... Look, I have to shut you down..."

He tried to speak but something was in the way. It felt like suffocating. He retched once more and there was a click and the bliss of nothingness.

Chapter End Notes

This is the saddest thing I have written in my whole freaking life. And that's really saying something.
When the Music Stops... think it over.

Chapter Summary

The Spine's viewpoint of the day Rabbit managed to get him back on his feet. Literally. And how they kept him there.

Chapter Notes

With a little extra stuff.

If anyone has sufficient influence to convince David Michael Bennett to cover "I Can't Help Falling in Love with You" well... You'd find the fans grateful, I'm sure.

Song: When the Music Stops - Roger Daltrey

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKwkssjEMLk

He stood on the stage, smiling. He was dressed in human makeup so that no one would bother them. Tonight was too special.

They'd been married for thirty years. And he wanted to do something more for her, something extra special, besides go home and make love... although he intended to do that as well.

They'd had a lovely dinner, despite his inability to eat. They'd danced, and would be dancing more tonight. But he knew that she had a weakness for two things especially.

Elvis Presley, and her husband. The first time he'd found that out, he'd had a very nice evening with her...

The music started.

"Wise men say, only fools rush in..."

Marie clapped her hand over her mouth. He could see the sparkle of tears and felt a surge of emotion. She liked it!

"But I can't help falling in love with you. Shall I stay? Would it be a sin? When I can't help falling in love with you..."

Marie was crying. Had he had eyes for anyone else, as the band leader told him later, he'd have seen that most of the women and some of the men were crying as well.
"Like a river flows surely to the sea, darling so it goes, some things are meant to be. Take my hand, take my whole life too, for I can't help falling in love with you. Yes, I can't help falling in love with you."

The crowd applauded wildly, but The Spine nodded to the orchestra and hurried back to his table where Marie stood and threw herself into his arms. The applause grew louder.

"Thirty years together, folks!" the band leader announced. "They must have been married mighty young! Congratulations, David and Marie!"

He kissed her and the crowd whooped.

"I love you so much!" she sobbed.

"I love you..." he whispered.

"I love you..." he whispered aloud into her pillow.

He could still detect her scent on it. It wasn't exactly a sense of smell. But he could identify scents and hers still lingered throughout the room... The bedding, the hairbrush on the vanity, the clothes still hanging in the closet. How could he forget her when she was all around him?

But it was a tease, a torment. She was there, but she was gone.

He'd endured the funeral, barely. Peter had repaired the ruptured tubing that had caused him to vomit lubricants and water after her death. But seeing her sealed into a box and placed in the ground had been almost enough to send him into complete shut down. He'd held the agony back until everyone had gone. Even Rabbit, at his urging, had left him alone by the grave. He'd returned at dusk to bring him inside, making no comment about the oil on his face or the obvious signs that he had spent the time curled on the ground sobbing. He'd silently helped him undress and wiped his face, put him into fresh clothing, helping him like a child. And The Spine had climbed into bed.

He only got up once in the next six months, and that was to lock the door. The next day brought the sound of Rabbit picking the lock, followed by the buzz of drills. He could hear Peter's voice. He sounded angry. But when the door came down, there was no shouting.

He felt a firm hand on his arm where he lay. "I'm sorry, old man. I made a promise. I can't leave you to it. Sooner or later you're going to feel like living again, and I'm not going to let you kill yourself before that happens."

Rabbit and Jon had come in afterward and topped up his water and oil, the same as they'd done every few days since the funeral. The Spine meekly allowed it, the same as he had every few days. He'd locked the door in hopes that they would stop, but not in expectation that they would. Of course not.

Rabbit had stayed in the room for the rest of the day. They did that sometimes, just came in and sat with him. He didn't speak to them. They didn't try to get him to speak. Sometimes they would, telling him what was going on around the manor, and in the world. He was relieved when they left. But he never asked them to leave. There was a sort of comfort in not being forgotten, even when he wanted to be.

He held the pillow tighter.

There were footsteps approaching, a faint buzzing sound. When they stopped, he heard a soft hiss and the tick and clatter of clockwork. Rabbit was early to add water...
He rapped at the doorframe. The Spine sighed very slightly, almost imperceptibly.

“Spine?” Rabbit murmured. “We’re b-b-back, buddy.”

Hissss…

“I d-d-don’t think we’ll be going out again.”

Silence… well, as much silence as you can get in a room with two automatons running on steam. Why was he here?

“It’s not the same without ya… but I think m-m-maybe folks just don’t want to see robuts anymore. They got better robuts in the movies. They even got one on TV that talks like I d-d-d-do. I think he’s a robut…”

The Spine sighed. So they were all useless now.

Rabbit rushed into the room.

“Spine? Please talk to me, buddy! I know it hurts… Believe me, I know…”

“Do you?” The Spine began. His voice was raspy, dry from long disuse and lack of oil.

“Of course! Honeybee… y’know…”

“It’s not the same…” He'd once thought it was, but how could it be? Rabbit seemed so content now...

"'Course it is.”

“She… wasn’t your wife, Rabbit…” he croaked, feeling guilty even as he said it. "You didn’t have a child…” Well, technically, he did... and The Spine had two. But he couldn't even face the thought of Lily, now. Not when he'd lost everything. And Rabbit's child adored her father. "Who won’t speak to you…” The Spine pushed on, his voice trembling. "She isn’t… rotting…”

The Spine buried his face in the pillow… her pillow… and sobbed like a child. He'd cried like this so many times since he’d lost her!

“I love her…” he wept. “I don’t forget… like humans…”

“I know, buddy…”

“How did you survive it, Rabbit? I just… I just want to shut down… but I’m afraid if I do I’ll never want to come back. Maybe I already don’t want to come back…”

He heard Rabbit's steamy hiss of alarm. He knew he was in for an objection. Before Rabbit could respond, The Spine murmured, “Help me, Rabbit…”

“Of course, Spine!”

“Shut me down…” he begged. He didn't expect a yes, of course… but maybe Rabbit would understand, maybe he would help. He couldn't shut himself down. He'd promised Marie that he would keep going...
“No! That won’t help!” Rabbit cried.

Of course. The Spine chuckled grimly. “Good old Rabbit.”

“You didn’t give up on me. I won’t give up on you! C’mon… we need to get you out of this room for a while…”

He grabbed The Spine’s arm and pulled. Nothing happened. Dummins... did you really think you could move me when you never get maintenance?

He pulled harder. There was a ping and a thunk. The Spine heard the jiggety sound of a rolling gear and turned his head slightly, surprised.

Rabbit's right arm fell off.

“Aw, nuts…” he muttered, prying it off The Spine.

The Spine sat up, stunned. Part of him wanted to laugh in spite of everything.

Rabbit seized the opportunity and hugged him with his remaining arm, then used the leverage to drag him toward the edge of the bed. The Spine, still astonished, submitted to his older brother’s efforts and swung his legs creakily off the bed.

“There we go. Let’s go feed some ducks…”

“But your arm…” croaked The Spine softly.

“Oh, yeah…”

The Spine reached down and picked it up. “We’d better get it fixed…”

“Ducks first,” Rabbit gritted.

Stupid, stubborn, son-of-a... “No…” The Spine coughed. Flakes of dried oil sprayed from his lips. He turned and spat onto the floor.

“Ew…” said Rabbit. “You’ve really let the suave ladies’ man thing slip, haven’t ya?”

The Spine cleared his throat, forcing oil through it. “It’s my room, isn’t it?” he managed, sounding more like himself than he had in months. “Let’s get your arm fixed!”

“It can wait…”

Typical. “Now, Rabbit.”

Rabbit gave him a long stare. A smile twitched at the corner of his mouth as The Spine gave him his best determined stare.

“Alright, brother. Help me find the bolt and we’ll do it your way.”

The Spine sighed. His way was to curl back onto the bed and let his life, the part of his life that had been worth living, replay in his head until they gave up on him.

But he’d had no idea how far Rabbit's deterioration had descended. It wouldn't do. At this rate, the copper robot would be a pile of gears in no time, and now that they weren't making any money performing, they wouldn't be able to repair him...
He'd been okay with that for himself. But not for his brother.

When Rabbit's arm had been repaired, The Spine decided to humor him a little. Rabbit was always petulant after maintenance and expected the equivalent of a lollipop for good behavior. So they went to the duckpond. It was no small lollipop Rabbit wanted today; The Spine hadn't been there since the funeral. He perched on the sculpture, staring, while Rabbit tossed bread to the ducks. Grass had grown on her grave, and someone had planted flowers around it.

Rabbit made a few attempts to start a conversation, but in the end, The Spine returned to his room.

The next morning, he was shaken into consciousness. At first the bleak world struck him full in the face as it did every time he came out of stasis.

In the next second, before he could turn inward as usual, Rabbit shouted into his ear, "Have you seen the drill?"

The Spine sat up slowly, staring at him in shock. "Whatever for?" he gasped.

"Oh, um... stuff..."

He was being evasive. He was terrible at it. "Then why would I tell you where it was even if I knew?" he gritted.

"Good point. Well, if you dunno, I'll go find it myself."

"Rabbit, wait!" The Spine cried, jumping out of bed to chase him. Rabbit and power tools did not mix.

He followed Rabbit around all day but the drill was never found, and Rabbit wouldn't even hint at why he wanted it.

The next morning, he heard Jon crying. His first, very much unwanted impulse, was to go find out why. He cursed himself for leaving his paternal protocols online, but of course his fraternal protocols would have brought the same reaction. He couldn't really bring himself to disable either. They were what made him... human.
He hugged Marie's pillow closer and tried to wait it out. Someone would come along and fix it. Half an hour passed, however, and no one asked Jon what was wrong. In the end, The Spine couldn't ignore the sound any longer and went to find him.

"What's wrong, Jon?" he asked wearily.

"I... I... can't..." Jon sobbed.

"Can't what?" he groaned.

"I'll show ya!" Jon cried.

"Jon, no..."

But Jon caught him by the hand and dragged him outside, saying it was in the park. The Spine followed wearily but only ended up standing in front of the zoo gates, staring at them while Jon stuttered and passersby gave them odd looks. Jon tipped his hat to each one. The Spine just wanted to go back to bed and shut the world out again. He'd come here so many times with Marie! The feelings were almost overwhelming. He felt a kind of surging joy that only translated into searing pain.

He looked miserably around at the pond and the archways where he had walked with his wife. She had loved it here.

Jon eventually just slowly strolled home, The Spine following absently behind. Jon hugged him firmly as they neared his room and left.

The Spine stared into his room. He'd been out in the sun all day. It was so dark in there, so gloomy. It smelled of old oil and rusty water, tainting the precious scent of his late wife. He quietly fetched some cleaning supplies and cleaned the room, setting her pillow aside and carefully preserving anything else she had left there.

The bed needed attention as well, but he wasn't ready for that. He opened the blinds a crack, left the cleaning supplies where they lay, and curled up with her pillow once more.
The next morning, the cleaning supplies were gone when The Spine came out of stasis. Morning sun slanted across the carpet. He lay still and stared at it.

It looked like a beautiful day. He closed his eyes.

Peter stuck his head around the door frame.

"Spine?"

"Hm?" he grunted.

"I need help. Rabbit broke the other arm and won't..."


It took until three in the afternoon to get Rabbit cornered. Two more hours of steady pulling, threatening and swearing from both sides were needed for both Jon and The Spine to drag him out far enough to flip his power switch. The Spine tossed him over his shoulder and strapped him to the work table without ceremony, filled his own boiler, and went back to bed without a word.

It made no sense, he decided as he pulled her pillow against his face. They'd been just fine for months! Now he was suddenly indispensable? Sure, he'd always been the one who took care of things... or had he? He'd certainly been in the habit of butting in, but then Marie had come into his life and she, she was the one who made everything work!

And yet they'd gotten along without her, too. They'd been just peachy, he thought bitterly.

Whatever disaster came tomorrow, he decided, they would have to face without him. He went into stasis.

He was roused from stasis five minutes early by the sound of his crackling wireless.

"Jon?"

"It's me, Rabbit..." The Spine sent wearily, hoping he'd change channels and leave him alone for once.

"Spine! Perfect! It's Qwerty!"

The Spine swore under his breath. He was prepared to dismiss anything they threw at him today and here was the one thing he hadn't counted on. "What about her?"

"She ain't responding! She just keeps saying, 'Status red!' Help me, Spine! She's my baby!"

"Calm down, for crying out loud. Maybe there's just a loose plug..."

"I checked 'em all! Please come and help! I think she's dying!"

"Rabbit, honestly!" he sent irritably. He was already sitting up, and his back was creaking awfully. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't had a full maintenance check in nine months. His last one had been three months before... before Marie passed and after that...

He got wearily to his feet and stomped to the elevator. It managed to get him to the top floor, to his relief; he was past the weight limit and he wasn't sure he could make it all the way up the stairs. It shuddered violently as it creaked up the last floor but at last stopped with a thunk,
allowing him to open the cage barrier and walk out.

Rabbit startled violently when he walked into the HoW. "How'd ya ge-ge-get in here so fast?" he cried.

"The lift."

"I hope ya didn't break it!" Rabbit said brightly.

"Uh... yeah. So let's see what's wrong..." The Spine sighed. He looked around. "Why isn't Peter here?"

"He's at a conference."

"What kind of conference?"

"Y'know. Science."

"Science." The Spine stared at Rabbit with his most withering look. "Really?"

"Absolutely!" Rabbit said loudly, thumping the monitor beside him.

There was a crackle. "Status red!" came Qwerty's voice.

The Spine was having deep doubts about this sudden rash of mini disasters. Jon's hadn't even been one. He'd never even said what was wrong.

"Spine!" Rabbit cried, gaping at the monitor. "Ya hear that?"

He wanted to turn and leave. He was 99.995% sure that Rabbit and the others were doing it all on purpose.

"Status red!"

But what if he was wrong? She was his niece... and she had all of Lily's memories stored.

He slipped into his storage chamber and slithered creakily from his body and up into the wiring.

It was seven in the evening when he finally located the tiny piece of code that was triggering Qwerty's malfunction. He corrected it and restarted the HoW matrix. Rabbit cried out when the room went dark.

"Give it a minute," The Spine muttered.

"Qwerty iz online!"

The Spine returned to his body. Rabbit ran up to him and swept him into a hug.

"Thanks, buddy!"

"Uh-huh."

"What? Something wrong? Ya saved my baby, I don't know what we'd do without you!"

The Spine pushed him away. "You'd live. You'd be just fine."

"Spine?" Rabbit asked as Qwerty's monitor slid up behind him.
"Don't do it anymore, alright? I'm going back to my room." He turned and started to walk out. 

"Do what, Spine? Come on, she was really sick! If you hadn't..."

"Don't even get me started on you putting her up to this. What if I'd never found it?" The Spine bit, pausing at the door. "Do you really think I'm worth the risk?"

He walked out. He could just hear Rabbit whisper, "Yeah, cowboy. We both did."

They didn't bother him the next day. He woke as usual and lay all day, watching the slanting light through the window slats and remembering a moment in his married life for every place it lit, every time of day.

At sunset, he resumed stasis, wondering if they really had given up.

The next morning, he was yanked into consciousness by screams.

"Spine!" shrieked Rabbit, both out loud and over the wireless. "It's an emergency!"

"No, Rabbit." When would he learn?

"Spine! I mean it! Petes is on the top floor and... ya didn't tell him ya used the lift!"

This nagged at him. He wanted to dismiss it, but... the thing had creaked alarming when he got out.

"He's leavin' the HoW! Spine! Spine! I just heard the gate shut! Oh Hell he's u-u-usin' it! Spine, please!"

He couldn't risk it. He just couldn't. Ignoring the stabbing pings and snaps throughout his ill-maintained body, he rose and ran for the lift. He heard a grisly sound as he approached, the shriek of metal shearing apart, and a man's distant scream.

Rabbit hadn't set this one up! He couldn't have!

He tore into the hall as Rabbit threw open the folding gate and dived for the cable, which was now zipping upward so quickly it had begun to smoke. Rabbit couldn't stop it alone! The Spine threw himself in as Rabbit began to be hauled upward and quickly caught the cable in both hands. Rabbit managed to hook one boot under a support beam to keep from rising further. The cable passed through their hands at first, smoking more violently. The Spine could see the lift descending toward them both.

Then the cable and the lift began, through their combined efforts, to slow down. Jon ran into the room and cried, "What?" Wanda and Norman were close behind.

"Jon!" The Spine said through clenched teeth as Wanda cried out in shock. "Help!"

The Jon hurried into the lift cage and held up his arms, bracing the bottom as it descended. Rabbit bent low, still gripping the cable.

"Rabbit!" The Spine gasped, shaking with effort. "Help him! I've got the cable!"

Rabbit looked at him with wide eyes. "O-okay..."
He slowly released the cable and The Jon grunted as the weight on him increased. Rabbit quickly stood and grabbed the lift, easing the burden. Jon was strong, but the lift plus the weight of a human was too much for him alone.

"Got it, Spine! Get yehrself out!"

"Just work your way out of the cage and let Peter out! I'll be fine!"

"No!" cried a muffled voice. It was Peter. "I'm not coming out until this thing is on the ground and the three of you are out from under it!"

"Dammit, Peter!" The Spine growled. He carefully, slowly let go of the cable and crept out, ignoring Wanda's constant barrage of suggestions, then grabbed the front of the lift and braced himself. "Alright, you two. One at a time!"

"Go on, Jon!" Rabbit said firmly. "Two of us can hold it easy but I ain't leavin' before you. Don't even try ta argue."

Jon didn't. He hurried out and positioned himself beside The Spine.

"Rabbit!" Jon called.

Rabbit hurried out and Jon and The Spine eased the lift to the ground. The Spine sank to the floor, shuddering.

"Whew!" Rabbit cried, as though they'd just played a game of baseball. "That was almost the end of Walter Robotics!"

"Don't, please..." Peter gasped, walking out with his arm around Jon's shoulders. "I'm freaked out enough as it is... Ugh! You three! I'm gonna have so many bruises but it is so good to be alive!"

"Our pleasure," Rabbit said with a weary chuckle as Wanda hurried to fuss over Peter.

The Spine tried to lift his head but it wouldn't move. "Peter," he creaked. His vocals wouldn't initialize. "I'm so sorry!"

"Why?" Peter asked, sinking to the floor beside him. His legs gave out as he did and he sat down with a thunk. He chuckled nervously.

"I-I-I d-d-didn't tell you I used the l-lift..." The Spine managed, distressed.

"You saved my life, old man."

"And mine!" crowed Rabbit.

"Right!" Peter agreed, tipping his head to look up at The Spine's face. "So I think your conscience can be cleared for this one."

"N-n-n-n-n..."

"And you seem to be malfunctioning."

_Duh._

"Nighty-night, Spine. Time for maintenance."
They shut him down.

He awoke feeling marvelous, physically. He could tell they had gone all out. He wondered how long it had taken...

Peter and Rabbit were sitting on either side of him.

"Everything good?" Peter asked.

"Everything's in working order. Yeah."

"Then let's go feed some ducks."

The Spine sighed and decided not to fight it. "Yeah. Alright."

The three of them leaned against the sculpture. Rabbit produced bread from somewhere on his person and kept the ducks happy.

"So... you did it," The Spine said at length. "You got me out of bed."

"What?" asked Peter.

"Um... yeah, about that," Rabbit said, dusting his hands. "Peter wasn't in on it."

"What?" Peter asked again.

Rabbit explained what he, Jon, and Qwerty had been doing. Peter smiled.

"That's beautiful. Kind of a half-baked plan but..."

"I thought it was clever," sulked Rabbit.

"It was. And to be honest, while I really thought you broke that arm, I did hope it would get The Spine out of bed."

"Yeah. I just pulled a couple of gears out."

"Well, yes, I know, I put them back. Look, Spine... we understand. We've been there. It's Hell. I don't claim to have suffered what you're suffering, but Rabbit and I do know how it feels to lose..." His voice closed off. He cleared his throat. "To lose the woman you love."

The Spine wiped his eyes. "I just don't know what to do now. I still feel her here, but I can't hold her!" He stared at her headstone for a moment and closed his eyes. "I appreciate you trying to make me feel needed..."

"You are, buddy! Yehr tryin' to give up, but you didn't let me do it. I can't let you. I need you to try because I can't give up and I can't make you live. Ya gotta want to live for yourself."

"I don't," The Spine said softly.

"I know."

They sat in the quiet and listened to the soft quacking of ducks.

"Y'know," The Spine began thickly, wiping his eyes, "she made me promise to keep on living.
I took her literally. I'm still as alive as ever. But I know she meant for me to do more than just live."

"Honey told me to take care of the baby," Rabbit said with a little smile. "Ya think they figured if they gave us chores we wouldn't have time ta miss 'em?"

The Spine chuckled quietly. Peter sighed.

"Lily just said she loved me." He chuckled and sniffled all at once. "Then she told me not to forget it."

"Always givin' orders," Rabbit sighed.

"Bossy," Peter agreed.

"Never satisfied," murmured The Spine.

The unspoken postscript, as they stared at the headstones and one particular eucalyptus just beyond the fence, was that they would have gladly taken more orders if it meant their wives could have stayed longer.

The Spine decided to start small. He got up in the morning and made the bed.

He still wasn't ready to wash the sheets. Or the pillow.

He spent the day in the garden with Norman, much the way Peter had when it was his turn. The Spine could see the appeal. Gardening was life at its purest. Plants lived, plants died, plants were reborn. No one wept.

The next morning, he got up. That was his humble goal.

Only today Rabbit brought him a paper he'd gotten in the park. There was a busking festival the next week. He nodded mutely when Rabbit asked whether they could attend. They weren't all that popular anymore, but it didn't matter. For now, there just needed to be a reason to get out of bed in the morning.
Annie

Chapter Summary

Life continues. And events are set into motion for a new life to come into the manor.

Chapter Notes

Again, the disclaimer: Peter in the 80s would just up and sleep with her... I think he's a very naughty boy and should have been a little more patient.

If you're wondering where certain events are, I have added three chapters at once. The second two are to ease the feels of the first. This is the third of three.

I SWEAR this was supposed to be cute... Rabbit in the big city... runnin' wild and feelin' pretty... what the HAIL happened... Well, there is cuteness, but also a very angry automaton.

And this is meant to be a sort of pre-transition Rabbit in a dress but not exactly restored to factory settings. But there is foreshadowing.

St. Macrina's Orphanage, 1956:

Peter held Anna's hand as they walked out of the lunch room. Anna didn't like being separated from him, and holding her hand kept her calm.

"We're gonna have a turkey and everything for Thanksgiving," he told her. "And potatoes and stuffing and..."

"Anna! Oh, there you are, child!" cried Sister Alberta. "Darling, your mama has come back for you, isn't that simply wonderful?"

Anna stared up at her blankly. "Mama?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes, dear! She's brought you a new papa and wants to take you away immediately! Go and get your things now... Oh, Peter, dear, could you help her? You've done such a nice job helping her and since she's so little I do wish you'd help her one last time."

"Um..." Peter stammered. Anna was leaving? He wasn't sure how to feel. After all, she'd cried for her mama for months, so this was good news, right? "Yeah. Sure thing."

"Oh, thank you, dear. I'll come in to help in a few minutes."

Peter led Anna to the dormitory and helped her gather her few belongings and clothes into a bag.

"Are... are you coming too?" she piped.
Peter looked at her quickly and said, "No, Annie girl. She's your mama, not mine."

"Oh. Will you come to visit?"

"Um... probably not."

"Oh. Why?"

"I dunno. We just never do that, Anna."

"Oh." Anna sighed. "I... don't wanna go."

"Anna! You have to go!"

"I want you to come too!"

"I can't!" he cried, stomping his foot. "I told you! She's your mama!"

Anna began to cry. Peter sighed.

"I'm sorry Anna! Don't cry! I just can't come, okay? You're gonna be happy and have a family and maybe I'll get a family soon, too."

Anna nodded but kept snuffling and hiccuping as Sister Alberta hurried in.

"Gracious, what is it, love?" she cried, sitting and pulling Anna onto her lap. "Oh, little one, don't cry. You mama really is here for you!"

"She wants me to come too," Peter muttered. He didn't expect them to let him, but he couldn't help feeling a twinge of hope.

"Oh!" Sister Alberta gasped, giving Peter a startled look. She looked away quickly. "Peter can't go, sweetheart. But you'll be with your family. That's what's most important. And you'll be living in New York City! Won't that be something, such a big place with so many people. You'll make lots of new friends! Now come along. Peter, would you like to see her off?"

Peter nodded and followed gloomily.

Anna's mother was certainly very happy to see her. She cried and hugged her and Anna cried, too. Peter rubbed nonchalantly at his eye. He was glad her mama wanted her. She didn't have to come back; a lot of the parents didn't. He felt a bit better about letting Anna go.

Sister Alberta put her arm around his shoulders and gave a reassuring squeeze. Good old Sister Alberta. He knew she was thinking the same thing. She was crying unashamedly and beaming at them.

Anna's new dad looked uncertain but he didn't seem scary. Peter hoped he would take good care of them.

It was time. Anna ran back to hug Peter and he felt terrible. He didn't want to let her go. She'd needed him so much while she was here and even though he had other friends, there was something special about being needed.

"Goodbye, Annie girl," he whispered. "I'll see you again someday maybe."

"Come visit us, Peter," she said, smiling for the first time since she'd come there.
She hugged Sister Alberta and ran to her mother. Peter watched them drive away. Anna watched him until the car turned and she couldn't see over the door.

He'd see her again. He was sure of it. But it was probably going to be a very long time.

New York City, 1986:

"Annie girl, do you think you'd be interested in living in San Diego?"

Peter looked anxiously at the woman sitting across from him. She stared back.

"Why do you ask exactly?"

"Annie," he said, suddenly nervous. "I... wondered if you'd consider marrying me."

"I might, Peter."

He wasn't sure whether to be elated or crushed. "You might?"

"It's not an easy answer."

"I disagree. I think it's very easy, especially for a bright woman such as yourself. I love you. That's right," he pressed as she raised her eyebrows over her coffee. "I love you and want to marry you. I'm pretty sure the response is a yes or a no."

"Peter..." she said wearily.

This wasn't going the way he'd hoped. "You can say no. I won't throw a fit."

"It's not that..."

"Or maybe it's the terms? Do you, for starters, want to live in San Diego?"

"Well, who wouldn't? But you offer a vague promise of living there with no home, no income, no security, where here I have a definite job in a crummy diner and a very real cheap flat."

"What if I said I could take you away from all that? If I said I could sweep you away to a manor house of your very own with plenty of security..."

She snorted. "I'd ask when you won the lottery!"

"You don't believe me?"

"Believe you? Look at yourself! You're very attractive but those are not the clothes of a California millionaire."

"I never said I was a millionaire. I am an heir, however, with a very real house and property in San Diego. Although, I must confess that I do have family living there as well."

"What, another wife and kids? Because I consider that a deal breaker."

"Uh..." he chuckled. "Not that kind of family. My aunt, her husband, and... my uncles."

"Don't you think it'll be a little crowded?" she asked with a smirk.
"I did say it was a manor. It's not small."

"Uh-huh."

Peter sighed. Here he was, sticking his neck out and daring to give himself to this woman, this sharp, wonderful woman, and she thought he was lying. And he adored her for it. He adored her for everything.

Same as when they were kids. Well, maybe not quite the same!

He'd come into town on one of his travels, five months before, looking for Anna, the little girl he'd known back in the orphanage. Their records had led him here, and sure enough, here she was... Annie Burnette now, working her fingers to the bone in a diner.

He'd walked into the place the morning after he arrived in town. It was crowded with morning diners and the waitress was practically running to keep up, despite, as he noticed, her incredible memory for orders. That hadn't changed either. She really did have a photographic memory, just as he'd noticed in the orphanage... and here she was using it to serve hash browns. He sighed as he slid onto a barstool. What a pity she had to work here!

Then she turned to face him and his breath caught in his throat.

The same big eyes. Signs of more smiling than he'd ever seen her do but no smile now, just frazzled wavy blond hair and blue eyes with bags underneath. She looked directly at him for what seemed like an eternity before asking to take his order. He knew what he wanted and it wasn't on the menu.

He was in love. It had been a long time but he knew it when it hit him.

He took a job that same day on a construction site to keep body and soul together until he could get a chance to get to know her, and more important, for her to get to know him. He didn't dare hope that she'd fall in love with him the way he had with her but he had to try, at least. He knew Lily would have been thrilled to see him find love again, so that didn't trouble him. But this was the first time since he'd lost her that he'd come close, and that included his trip to Louisiana.

No, he had no qualms about marrying again. He just wasn't so sure about telling The Spine. He was barely getting by as it was, on his feet and in good hands so that Peter had dared to plan another trip, but the very idea of even mentioning marriage around him, well... He hoped he could get Wanda to take care of it.

Meanwhile, here he was, trying to win Annie's heart. But he wanted to save as much money as possible for the business of courting Miss Annie and taking her home, without having to tap into the family account, and that meant that his few clothes were clean but worn by the time he found himself sitting with her after many dinners, discussing their future.

She'd been reluctant to go out with him at first, and he hadn't pressed the issue. But when he'd asked again, casually, a month after arriving, she'd shrugged and agreed. It had been a simple walk through the park but they'd spent it laughing and talking like the old friends they were... it turned out she'd recognized him immediately. Of course she had, with her memory! He was more besotted than ever after that.

Trouble was, even though he could feel the increase in her affections with every date following, she clearly was convinced that he was no more than a blue collar worker like herself, a former orphan scraping out a living with his bare hands. Had that been the case, he would have gladly worked his fingers to the bone to take care of her, but as it was, he already had so much of what he needed back
home. They had a nice little income from a new line of home computers designed by Qwerty herself, though he still preferred to work and pay his own way. But that income would mean that he could marry and bring her home, where she could be free of her pushy boss, and men shouting orders at her and pinching her backside... Peter had nearly gotten himself arrested for assault the last time he saw someone do it.

No, she needed to get out of town. But she'd been through a lot in her life and was none too eager to surrender her meager security to someone she'd only known briefly as a child and a few months as an adult. Her parents had been kind but not wealthy and both had passed away already. She'd joked about being destined to be an orphan...

"You don't believe me," he murmured.

Annie shook her head. "I hate to say it, sweetie, but I don't. I mean, I don't think you're lying or crazy but... I guess I just really need some kind of evidence, okay? I need to know for a fact that if I went with you, I'd have a home waiting. I don't like to jump unless I can already see where I'm gonna land. I'm not a gold digger or anything I just need that security, alright?"

"I see. So what you're saying is, you do want to marry me," he replied, winking.

She smiled wanly. "Oh, Peter. So help me, yes. I've been in love with you since I was four."

Now the elation kicked in. "Seriously?" he said, giggling slightly. He cleared his throat. "Then all that's left is settling this matter of not believing I can offer you a home and security in the lovely ocean breezes of San Diego."

"That would be it, yes. I'd love to just run away with you, really I would. I'd come close to asking you to stay the night a few times, to be honest."

"Rrawr!" he purred enthusiastically. "What stopped you?" he asked with a grin.

"Same thing. I need a foothold before I take a risk like that."

"You think sleeping with me is a risk?"

"Damn right. I'd risk falling deeper in love and losing my perspective." She sipped her drink and looked at him sidelong. "You seem awfully confident in your prowess in the sack."

"I do alright," he said humbly.

They looked at one another for several heartbeats.

Half an hour later, he shut and locked her apartment door and turned, his heart racing as she tossed away his hat and her sweater and started on his shirt buttons.

As he fumbled with her bra hooks, she gasped, "This doesn't mean I've agreed to run away with you, understand?"

He kissed her in response. He would have preferred to put a ring on her finger before taking her to bed; it was how he'd been raised, even if he hadn't adhered to it properly. But when she'd looked at him that way, well, his blood was boiling! He still hoped above anything she'd marry him.

But for now, he just wanted to be with her.
In the morning, she got into her uniform while he grinned at her from the bed.

"Aren't you going in to work?" she asked, her face a little flushed from his admiring gaze.

"I have a later shift." And he hoped he could quit soon! "But I'll get up so that you can lock up when you go."

He dressed quickly and they walked out together. He kissed her goodbye on the stoop.

"Annie, I should tell you... I hope this will help you feel more secure about considering my offer," he told her. "I'm a member of the Walter family of Walter Robotics."

"A member of what?" she gasped.

"The Walters... the... y'know, robots. The Steam Man Band, if you've heard of them."

"Oh, my goodness! Yes, I have! Are you pulling my leg?"

"Not anymore," he whispered mischievously.

"Weirdo. So you have robots, huh? Well, if you're offering to introduce me to a robot to prove who you are, it had better be a good one."

Peter stammered, "I didn't mean... They're clear in San Diego!"

"And you have the means to support a wife, apparently. Surely you have the money to have one take the bus out?"

She clearly didn't believe a word of it. "You're pulling my leg now."

"Well, you didn't honestly expect me to believe it, did you?" she asked.

"Well, yeah. I was sorta hoping you'd take my word that I was one of those Walters and marry me on that, but if I have to produce an automaton... I guess I can."

"Sure, sweetie. Let me know when you do. But look, you don't have to impress me. You've already done that, okay? Things are going just fine right here. I mean, we can go on like this, I don't mind."

She started to turn away, looked back, and murmured, "You were right."

"About what?" he asked blankly. How was he going to do this?

"You do alright. Sleeping with you was no risk at all. You have a lot to be confident about." She winked and walked away.

He bolted forward, blushing in spite of himself, and caught her gently by the arm. "Annie, wait... if I can prove to you that I am Peter Walter of San Diego, owner of Walter Manor and the Steam Man Band, would you agree to marry me and come back there to live?"

"Of course I would. There's not much risk of that being the case, but even if there was a chance, sure. It sounds a lot better than here."

He kissed her quickly and said, "What's your ring size?"

She raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Seven and a half. Cocky, aren't you?"

He grinned and watched her walk away, thinking furiously. One of those robots would be taking a
bus trip. Jon was as airheaded as ever. The Spine... it would be cruel to ask him to come help Peter with a romance. Not now.

That left one option. It was risky, but he'd proven he could handle a long bus trip. Peter hurried home and made a collect call to his Aunt Wanda.

Rabbit stepped off the bus a week later. He looked around and smiled.

New York! He hadn't been here in years. It was... a lot dirtier. But full of people, just like always.

"Ladies," he said with a charming smile, winking at a cluster of nuns and reaching up to tip his hat. Oops... he'd forgotten he wasn't wearing it. Some of the nuns smiled, but they hurried away almost as one.

"They really are like penguins," he murmured, turning away slowly.

"Do you need help with your luggage, ma'am?"

Rabbit checked his mental map. Fourteen blocks away one way, ten blocks the other way...

"Ma'am?"

Rabbit jumped. "Huh? Oh, no thanks. I'm real strong."

The man nodded and moved away. Rabbit noticed a couple of men smiling at him. He winked and turned with a swing of his hips, then walked away as gracefully as he could manage in the low heels Wanda had obtained.

The trouble was, as she had pointed out after Peter's call, that while Rabbit could travel alone with ease, New York was a lot further than Louisiana and it wasn't so easy to sneak away on a bus trip that long without someone noticing he was a robot. And while she could paint his chassis the necessary colors to make him look human, he, unlike The Spine, had significant vents on each cheek. To cover them would be dangerous; Rabbit needed those as part of his cooling system.

So, she said, the best course of action would be to give him long enough hair to cover his vents. But when she produced Jon's spare long hair wig, he ended up looking so feminine that she decided the least conspicuous approach, despite his height, would be if she just dressed him up as a woman.

She searched the labs and found an old chest plate with a bust formed into it, from some forgotten project, stuffed into a crate. It was a little rusty but she cleaned it the best she could and replaced his chest plate.

"It could have been made for you!" she cried. "The bolt openings line up perfectly!"

"Yeah, great... Just don't tell The Spine about this, okay?" he groaned, holding his hands self-consciously over his new bust.

But once she had dressed him and done his hair and makeup, he stood, staring into the mirror, puzzling over what he saw.

He looked... pretty danged hot. Fluffy golden curls, big eyes, quite a large chest, a pink wrap around dress with a flared skirt that accentuated the bust size and gave him the illusion of a narrower waist, and the shoes made his legs look great in the stockings she'd carefully slipped onto them.
"Look at you, you're a knock out!" she said, but there was a trace of amusement.

"I look like Tootsie."

"Nonsense! Well, I mean, he was very convincing, too, but you're taller and you don't wear glasses and just look at those legs!"

Rabbit was thinking the same thing and it wasn't bringing him joy. "Like I said, Spine does not hear about this, okay?" he said quickly.

"Then let's get you out of here before he comes out of stasis."

Rabbit took one last look in the mirror. He did have nice legs... He winked at himself, grinned and followed her.

"I don't know why you're so embarrassed," she said as they got into the car. "By rights, if you wanted to be female it would be your choice. We already knew you had the hips for it."

Rabbit shivered a little but said nothing. Sure, there had been times that he had wondered what it would be like, and whether it even mattered, but... he'd been Honey's husband, Lily uncle, Qwerty's pappy... he'd been a soldier, and he knew The Spine wasn't the only one the ladies were screaming for in those concerts. A lady had fainted in his arms once. He didn't really like human women, but it was pretty flattering. He had a lot invested in being a man.

And it was how his Pappy had made him. He felt pretty strongly about that.

Still... He peered into the rear-view mirror. Yes, he was definitely looking good...

"No, thanks," he said faintly, adjusting a lock of hair. "This is just to help Petes, okay?"

"Sure thing, Rabbit," she said.

He glanced at her and realized she'd seen him admiring his reflection. He stared straight ahead the rest of the way to the station.

"Remember," she said as he boarded the bus. "Go straight to Peter's flat. Got it?"

"Got it."

And he'd had a relatively uneventful bus journey to New York City. He practiced acting female and discovered he was good at it. But now it was time to find Peter and show this Annie that robots were real so that she would marry Peter. It was about time he moved on, Rabbit decided. He tried not to reflect for too long on how quiet Qwerty had grown when he told her where he was going. It had to be done. He loved her, but Peter wasn't the only one who needed to let go of the past.. That didn't make it any easier to let her know.

He shouldered his trusty canteen and the handbag Wanda had given him and went to find a taxi. Half an hour later, he gave up. No one here seemed to like the idea of stopping for a lady. He checked his mental map once more, turned in the direction it indicated, and started walking.

Click, click, click... His steps sounded in a steady rhythm as he strode along the crowded streets, between people who parted to let him pass through as they gawked. As Wanda had pointed out, he made a very tall woman. But he received winks, smiles, and flattering remarks as he went, too.

"Still got it!" he murmured, satisfied.
He stopped short. The entire street was blocked off for construction.


He crossed the road, wondering why the construction workers kept making funny noises at him. Humans. They were barking up the wrong tree. More like a whole forest.

He consulted his mental map once more. He could handle a long walk; another couple of blocks wouldn't make it too much worse.

He stopped short five seconds later next to a crowded newsstand. Something was wrong with his dress... it felt like it was stuck to his rear. He turned to check and saw a very astonished-looking man with his hand on Rabbit's bottom.

"Lose something?" he asked, scowling. "Only y-y-ya ain't gonna find it there, bright boy."

The man jerked his hand away.

"Dang rights," Rabbit scoffed. He'd straighten this chump out... "That how ya get to know a lady, by grabbin' her ass? Do I get ta grope yours next? Only I think I'd prefer to shake hands."

"Your butt... it's..."

"Solid muscle, baby. I'm a body builder so ya better ge-ge-get the hell away before a crack ya like a walnut with my thighs."

"Oh, that explains it! Baby, you are so hot!"

Rabbit put his hands on his hips, astounded. Well, of course he was, but this guy was putting the cart before the horse. "Ya ain't real smart, are ya? Keep yehr dirty mitts to yourself if ya wanna keep 'em."

The man scowled. "It's a compliment! I liked what I saw!"

"What, grabbin' a lady's butt is a compliment? Where I come from, ya don't touch without permission."

"What, where you come from, they don't like attention from guys?" he sneered.

"That ain't attention, bozo. That's grabbin' my ass!"

"Ungrateful b!tch! I bet you're a lesbian!"

"Nah, I'm one hundred percent American, jerk. What's that got to do with it?" Rabbit shook his head, puzzled. "Pretty dolls like me go for real men, not jerks who try to get free samples. Now scram, laughing boy, before I tell ya what I really think of ya."

The man responded with a stream of profanity that Rabbit found offensive on multiple levels. It included epithets about his appearance as well as some particularly vulgar comments that Rabbit objected to in the name of every woman he'd ever known and loved. He felt the strangest urge to cry. It pissed him off.

He grabbed the man's collar with an immovable robotic grip. His glove made threatening noises suggesting a seam was starting to give way. "Y'know what?" Rabbit said in low, lethal tones. "I don't appreciate yehr tone, yehr words, or yehr f@$#ing face, and I think I don't need to put up with any of them for one more minute. I could kill you and no one would blame me. But lucky for you,
there's a man in this town who paid good money for me to come to his place an' do him a favor. So you better beat it before I throw you into the traffic."

He tossed the man backward against the news stand none too gently and turned away to the sound of scattered applause.

"Stop right there," said a stern voice. "I need you to come with me."

"What now?" Rabbit groaned, turning. A scowling policeman was holding up his badge. "Oh, sorry, sir. I wasn't really gonna throw him into the traffic..."

"Just come with me."

"Why?" he asked, then sheepishly muttered, "Is it because I rouged him up a little? It's just that he was..."

The officer's scowl deepened. "You're under arrest. You have the right to remain silent..."

"What? Why-y-y would I want to do that? Why am I under arrest?"

"Suspicion of solicitation."

"But I ain't even got anything to sell!"

"Nothing you'd sell a man, anyway!" cried the man who had groped his backside.

"Stay out of this! You're lucky I don't take you in as well!" the policeman snapped.

The man hastily melted into the crowd. Rabbit stood, distressed. He didn't know why the policeman was letting the man get away. Hadn't he groped Rabbit, instead of the other way around?

There just wasn't any way that wouldn't sound weird...

The crowd around them, even those who had clapped just moments before, rippled with giggles as they looked on. Rabbit looked at them darkly. Traitors...

"Anything you do say can and will be used against you in a court of law..." the policeman continued.

It certainly would; all he could think of to say right now included huge amounts of cussing. He could have run away. Even in his state of disrepair, he could outrun any human. If it wasn't for the pumps, anyhow... But that would create more trouble and he was in enough of it already. He hoped Peter could straighten this out.

Rabbit, lip trembling, blinking back oily tears and feeling suddenly very discontent with looking sexy, gloomily allowed the man to put handcuffs onto him and got into the waiting police car.

Peter was contentedly pounding long nails into a post and humming a slightly off-color song when he was called to the phone.

"Peter!" sobbed a voice.

"Who... who is this?"

"R-r-rabbit!"
"You're here? I thought you were coming in tonight!"

"Well I'm not! I mean I didn't I came in this morning and this jerk grabbed my heinie and I got arrested, Petes! I don't like this place!"

"But... Arrested?"

"And they're gonna strip me down and they'll see my fake boobies!"

"What?" Peter cried, astounded. He couldn't seem to get a grasp on any of this...

"Come and get me!" Rabbit wailed pitifully. "This was supposed ta be a happy trip but they said I was sellin' stuff and they won't tell me what and they want money which is nuts because I'd only have money if I'd been selling stuff which they said they stopped me from sellin' only I don't even have it to sell and I only got twenty bucks, Peter!"

Rabbit's voice choked off in a piteous wailing. He could hear shouts in the background. Rabbit could cry awfully loudly...

"Rabbit!" he barked. "What's come over you?"

"I d-d-don't kn-kn-knoowww..." Rabbit choked, wheezing with sobs.

"Can I talk to one of the police?"

"H-h-hey... he wants ta talk to ya..." Rabbit said in a trembling voice.

Peter waited a moment. A rather uneasy voice said, "Sir?"

"Hello?" he shouted as the foreman slipped past to reach the coffee machine. "This is Peter Alexander Walter V and I demand to know why my automaton is in your custody!"

The foreman stopped pouring coffee and stared at him.

"Sir... automaton?"

"Yes! Y'know, a robot!"

"She's a robot?"

Peter's grasp was escaping just when he'd begun to find it. "Wait just a minute. Slow down. She?"

"Well, yes, though she's very tall... I'm sorry, isn't your machine... Holy Hell, this is a weird conversation. I got a robot or a lady here that says she's yours and that she came here to... um... help you with something. But we caught her roughing some guy up down by the news stand down the street and saying you paid for her to come to your place, if you know what I mean..."

"What?" Peter cried, exasperated. "Look, I don't know what you think he... she said but if you think that's a human you're nuts! Put some glasses on and look closer!"

"Look, mister, you're coming real close to joining her..." the officer said sternly.

"Yes, sorry..." Peter said hastily. This was no time to piss off the police. "I just mean that the voice I heard on the phone was that of one of my robots and I would really appreciate it if you'd let him... er, her go. Just take a look at the face. Closely. Please."
There was a silence for a moment, or near silence. He could still hear Rabbit snuffling.

"What the Hell..." came the officer's voice. "I thought her mascara was just running! That's oil!"

"S-st-o-o-op st-taring at m-m-meeee..." wailed Rabbit in the background.

"Sensitive, isn't she? Alright, she's a robot. Pretty nicely made, too. But... Look, mister, I'm very impressed but this really isn't acceptable. You're going to have to come down here and straighten things out if you want the return of your property."

"I ain't property!" he heard Rabbit sob in the background. "I hate you and this whole city! Yehr all m-m-m-mean!"

"Alright, where do I go?" he shouted hastily before Rabbit could get into more trouble. He took down the address of the precinct and said loudly, "I'll be there a.s.a.p.!"

Peter's mind was racing as he hurried away from the questioning look of the foreman. He tried to marshal his thoughts.

She? That was Rabbit! Rabbit sounded like Rabbit. Rabbit also sounded like a distressed woman. Rabbit had been arrested for saying Peter had paid for something he had to sell, but he didn't have anything and hadn't sold anything, but the police still thought he had it and meant to sell it. And that he was a woman. Who had been paid to show up at Peter's apartment.

They thought Rabbit was a hooker.

He couldn't quite stop the snort of laughter as he ran to the subway station. The memory of Rabbit's wails sobered him however. With all he'd been through in his long life, to be treated this way! But even with that, why was he crying? He usually got sassy, surly and rude when challenged. He'd have expected Rabbit, even in drag, to have pissed off the entire department by now, instead of sobbing like a child.

So he couldn't really complain. But it still didn't explain why Wanda did it.

At the station, he found out. They hurried him in as soon as he gave his name. Rabbit was sitting in an interrogation room, still blubbering and sipping a bottle of automotive oil through a straw like Coca-Cola. Peter was impressed and relieved that they had adapted so quickly; all that crying could have been a danger to Rabbit's lubrication system.

Rabbit looked up with a shuddering sob of relief. "Peter!"

He looked back, astonished. The makeup was a disaster. A lot of it was on tissues all over the table. But the body! Like a Viking woman... not a bad shape, but such a lot of it! How had Wanda managed it?

"Rabbit... what happened to you? No, not the arrest, I think I figured that out and I have a feeling they've already dropped the charges. No, I mean... why are you a woman?"

"Wanda thought it would be a good disguise only it just got my butt pinched!" Rabbit cried accusingly. "You men! Think a lady is your property!"

"You men?" Peter gasped. Had Wanda reprogrammed him, too?

"I mean... human men. Yeah... what... why did I say that?"
"Sir?" A lady officer had appeared at his elbow. "We're ready to release her to you if you'd just sign this form..."

"But I thought I had to explain how he... she..."

"No, she's been howling the whole time she's been here and... I'll tell ya, we're actually really kind of eager to get her out of here. My head is screamin'. If you would, please."

Bemused, Peter signed the form and uneasily waved Rabbit out of the room. Rabbit rose so hastily his chair fell over, and hurried after. He hesitated at the door and took a step back to snatch up the motor oil.

"At least they got the right octane," he muttered, sipping it gloomily as they walked in the dusk.

"Alright, why are you dressed as a woman?"

"I told ya, dummins. It was supposed to make me blend in better," Rabbit sighed, calmer now that he'd been released. "But then some jackass decided to cop a feel and the cops misunderstood and arrested me!"

"Someone tried to grope you? I guess you did say something about that... Wow, you must have been pretty convincing!" Peter said approvingly.

He glanced at Rabbit and recoiled. The glare he was receiving in the twilight was deadly, and all the more grisly because of the trails of smeared makeup.

"He said it was a compliment," Rabbit gritted. "Then he called me a bunch of filthy names when I told him to kiss off!"

"Oh... I'm..."

"Sorry? Is this what ladies hafta deal with all the time?" Rabbit growled. "Only I don't think sorry is enough!"

"Rabbit, I don't do that! Come on! And you're a guy and you don't do it either!"

"I know!" Rabbit huffed, tossing his empty oil bottle into a trash can. "But I'll tell you, for a little while there, I felt it. I felt like a lady and I felt like men were scum. And I want my old chest plate back so's I can be a better man than that! And if I catch one of 'em gropin' anyone I'm gonna snap his hands off!"

"Rabbit! You're scaring me!"

"Really?"

"Well, yeah..."

"Good," Rabbit said darkly. "Now take me somewhere to wipe off the war paint and show me where this lady is so that I can charm her for ya. I wanna be back in San Diego yesterday."

"Alright," Peter said, not daring to chuckle. Because here, after all the chaos, was the promise of bringing Annie home.

"Rabbit?" he said gently.

"What?"
"Thank you. This means a lot to me."

Rabbit huffed and smiled a little. "Got it bad, huh?"

"She's amazing, Rabbit. After Lily died, I never thought I could feel like this again. It's different, but..." He chuckled, embarrassed. "Yeah, I've got it bad."

"Then I guess it's all worth it, buddy. You're very welcome."

Back at Peter's apartment, Rabbit cleaned off the makeup eagerly and grumbled, "What now? I gotta wear the chest plate until I get back!"

"Better put the wig back on, then."

"Why?"

"You don't really see a lot of bald women..." He trailed off.

"Not unless they're sick," Rabbit said quietly. They exchanged looks.

"How is he?" Peter asked after a pause.

"Pretty good, I guess. Butting into everything and acting like he's in charge."

"So back to normal?" Peter said with a dry chuckle.

"What's normal? He's back to some of his old habits but he's trying too hard to be okay, y'know? He's tryin' to live up to what we're expecting. He's... just kinda pretending."

Peter sighed. "That's why I sent for you, y'know."

"I know. So now what?" Rabbit asked, wriggling the wig back on.

"Oh! Well... I'd better make some calls. Why don't you top up your boiler and get some stasis for a few minutes?"

Rabbit looked at him sourly but shrugged and said, "Alright, fine. Have yеhr private conversations. Just hurry it up."

Peter stepped out to the nearest pay phone and called Wanda collect.

"That's the strangest thing I've ever heard!" she cried, when he told her about Rabbit. "I just put on the chest plate! Well... I did have to angle his boiler forward to line it up with the vent on the breast plate."

"How in the world did you angle it forward?"

"I just release the locking bolt in the shoulder assembly and..."

"Well, yes, I mean how can it tip forward and still function?"

"Oh! Well, you know how we had to remove some springs to install the upgraded chassis because they were interfering with key joints? Turns out if you angle the boiler forward, they fit perfectly.
Then the whole assembly snaps into place. And the steam injectors switch on automatically. It's like he was designed to be modular."

"Peter digested the new information and said, "What are you saying, Aunt Wanda?"

"Oh! Well... I hadn't meant to say anything, but I can't help having theories. The whole thing strikes me as being an awful coincidence."

"Yeah."

"Peter, you do see what I mean, right? The possibility that Grandpa intended Rabbit to be a female automaton?"

"Now, I don't know..." he said hastily. The way Rabbit talked about it, that was the last thing he'd want to hear. "Maybe he just considered it. After all, he had years to refit him and install that plate and never bothered. Maybe he thought it over and settled on male in the end."

"Maybe. But to go to the trouble to leave in the settings and fittings for the female build, surely he wasn't so very sure of his choice. Peter, when I tipped the boiler forward, the hip assembly actually opened by a good two inches. It got wider, Peter! And I could see that the structure suddenly made a lot more sense. And now the behavior... What if he's programmed to alter his gender protocols when the female build is installed?"

"You're telling me that for all practical purposes, Rabbit is a woman as of this moment?"

"Until we make the modifications and return the male chest plate, yes!"

"Look, I'm not saying you're wrong, but Rabbit is so furious after the crap he went through today that he'd have a fit if we tried to make him a woman!"

"Make him? I never suggested..." she began, angry.

"No, no, I didn't mean that. Sorry. I just think we should keep this between us, okay? If he tells us he wants to be female, we'll make it happen. But as it is, let's just let him believe Col. Walter made him male only. After all, it isn't as though we have any plans or designs to prove the theory. And without proof that his Pappy meant for him to be female, you know he'll refuse."

"No, that's a good point," she sighed. "I guess I just always wished he'd made one a girl. It wasn't easy being the only Walter daughter in decades. A female robot, even a screwy one, would have been nice."

He chuckled. "Poor Aunt Wanda. Well, I'd better hurry up and show him to Annie. Rabbit wants to go home."

"Good luck, sweetheart!"

She still treated him like a kid sometimes... He kinda liked that. Even though he looked older than she did.

"Goodbye... We should be home in a few days," he said before hanging up.

"I hope," he murmured as he dropped in coins and called Annie.

There was no answer. He wondered whether she was working the late shift at the diner. Without a phone inside his apartment, he was very hard to notify about things like that.
"Well, nothing for it," he murmured as he jogged up the steps. "We'll just have to surprise her."

A few minutes later, they were heading for the diner. Peter told Rabbit to wait outside, where it was dark. The copper of his faceplate was too much to pass off as skin inside the bright lights of the diner.

"Well, look who showed his ugly face," sneered a voice as Peter walked inside. He stopped short and stared.

A small cluster of regulars sat at the bar, staring at him.

"What's up, folks?" he asked uneasily as they stared him down.

"Nothing at all!" Annie cried, hurrying out of the kitchen. "All of you, break it up! Al, I'm taking my break!"

"You're ten minutes early!" barked her boss.

"I'll make it up, okay?"

"I could can you any time and get another waitress in five minutes..." grumbled a voice from the kitchen.

Peter fought the urge to smile in spite of the mysterious animosity in the room. If he had his way, Al would be looking for a new waitress by morning.

"What's going on?" he asked as Annie hurried to him and gave him a quick kiss. He glanced at the crowd, who were still flicking him dark looks.

"Oh, nothing. Bill over there says he saw you walking down the street with a tall, leggy blonde. Guess he started early today."

"Oh! Well, I suppose it looked that that way..."

"Wait a minute, it's true?"

Her smile, so laughing and casual before, suddenly tightened, became brittle. No wonder, really. Annie had taken weeks to trust him this much and here he was, sounding so shifty. He'd understood; it was hard to feel secure in anything when your foundation was torn away at such a young age. Even though someone had come for each of them eventually, it had felt like forever. Forever having no one to trust but each other.

And now she wasn't sure about him, either. It was time to give her what she needed... He just hoped she'd meant what she said.

"I want you to meet someone," he said quickly. "The robot I promised you."

She stared at him with a blank stare and a fading smile. "You aren't serious."

"I am. Come on, he's waiting outside. Oh, and he looks female, but that... um... that was just his travel disguise."

"Travel disguise?"

"He needed a long wig to cover some of his parts. So he's wearing one. Blond, actually. That's who Bill saw me with earlier."
She looked at him askance but went along when he led her outside.

Rabbit stood under a lamp post, smiling his most charming smile. It usually made him look dashing, but with the wig... he was surprisingly pretty.

"Hello, lady. My-my-my name is R-Rabbit."

He held out his hand. As Annie hesitantly took it, Peter noticed Rabbit was running louder than usual and moving more rigidly; his stage act. The fans ate it up and clearly he'd decided it would be more convincing to Annie.

"Hello, Rabbit," she said slowly. She leaned toward Peter and whispered, "What the Hell is this? A mime?"

Peter snorted with laughter. "He's a robot, Annie! Look at him! He moves that way because he's a robot. I know, look at his face."

He gently brushed the wig hair out of Rabbit's face to show his cheek vents. Rabbit smiled an awkward, lopsided grin.

"Impressive stage makeup. Look like there's actually a hole there..." she began.

"It's the dim light, I guess," Peter began.

"Stage makeup?" Rabbit demanded, his grin dropping.

"Well, yes. I mean, really, honey, anyone could see you couldn't possibly be a robot!"

"How d'ya figure?"

Peter tensed. This was Rabbit's usual surly reaction to criticism. It would have been a relief to see his core personality asserting itself, had he not been talking to Annie.

"Look, I know what you two are trying to do and I'm flattered and impressed that you'd make such an effort... but I'm also fairly insulted that you couldn't just be straight up with me, Peter! I played along but this is just silly! I don't know what to think of all this, putting on this show when you knew how important it is to me to..."

She trailed off. Rabbit face plates contorted into a grimace and a soft high wail began in his vocal processor.

"Uh oh," Peter muttered. "Look, he's kind of sensitive right now because..."

Rabbit put one hand over his mouth, muffling a sob. "I c-c-c-come all this way and she don't even believe I'm a robot!" Rabbit choked. Steam poured out of his (her?) cheek vents and Annie gasped.

"I'm... sorry?" she said weakly.

"I'm having a terrible day!" Rabbit roared to the sky, startling them both.

Annie stared as oil began trickling down Rabbit's cheek plates and vanishing into his vents.

"She isn't really..." she began blankly.

"Oh... Hell," Peter muttered. "Um... do you need a minute, Rabbit?"
"I ne-ne-need a huuuuug!" he wailed, shaking his fists at his sides like an angry toddler.

Annie surprised him by stepping forward and putting her arms around Rabbit. "Well... of course you do, honey..."

She fell silent as Rabbit eagerly put his (?) arms around her the best he could; Annie was a lot shorter. Peter watched her face intently as she felt the copper and iron chassis beneath the ridiculous pink dress.

"Peter..." she said slowly.

"Hm?" he grunted.

"This... this is a robot."

He laughed. "Yes, that is a robot."

"Damn skippy," Rabbit muttered, cuddling against Annie's hair. "Say, she sure is soft, Petes. That why you love her?"

"It's not the main reason, no. It doesn't hurt, of course."

They heard a jingle. Peter turned to see everyone staring at them through the window. Annie's boss was hanging out the door.

"Break's over, Annie!" he barked. His face twisted into a smirk and he walked out to gape at them. "Cozy?"

"Shut up, Al."

"Aw, come on. I was hopin' you two ladies could come in and put on a show. There ain't no kids present."

Annie glared at Al as Peter clenched his fists. He knew the jerk would press charges but he'd wanted to paste him one for a long time...

Al's gaze flicked to Peter. There was a trace of fear; Peter worked construction where Al flipped bacon for a living, and both knew who would come out of a fight worse off. But Al also knew how much trouble he could make and stared at Peter as though challenging him to give in and throw a punch. When he didn't, the fry cook shook his head and chuckled.

"Break's over. Drop the whore and get back to work. You can have yehr threesome later."

Peter heard a sharp hiss and saw Annie jump back with a squeak. No, Rabbit had pushed her back, clear of the hot steam pouring from his vents. His eyes flickered red. Peter had been afraid of just that. He'd been on the receiving end of The Spine's paternal outrage. But running it a very close second for sheer terror was Rabbit combining a long-standing male protective protocol with a newly awoken sense of feminine indignation. He assumed Rabbit would revert once restored to his earlier settings, but he realized he was rather enjoying this side of him.

Rabbit leaned in very close to Al and grinned, his eyes gleaming in the darkness. "What did you call me?" he said slowly and quietly.

Although, Peter realized, maybe he'd better stop him before he killed someone.

"Rabbit! Stand down!" Peter barked.
"The Hell does that mean?" snapped Al, looking at him sharply.

Rabbit's shoulders slumped. Annie looked from him to her boss and said, "I think it means you live, stupid."

"You watch yehr mouth." Al said in a trembling voice as Rabbit buzzed back to a standing position and stared directly at him. "I put up with enough of your crap..."

"Y'know what?" Annie said before Peter could at last give in to his deep longing to flatten the man. Removing her name tag, she said, "You're right. Let's call it a day. Get yourself a new waitress."

"You can't quit right before the dinner rush!"

"No one rushes to have dinner here, Al. Here," she muttered, roughly handing him the name tag.

"You're supposed to give notice!"

"Count yourself lucky that I'm not letting her give it to you," she said, gesturing to Rabbit.

Peter opened his mouth to correct her and shrugged. Annie would get it eventually. Rabbit seemed untroubled anyway. He was leering at Al and hissing steam like an angry dragon.

"Shall we?" Peter said quickly, taking her hand and catching Rabbit by the arm.

"What about the uniform?" Al roared as they walked away.

"I'll leave it in the dumpster out back," Annie called.

"What?"

They hurried away.

"It's an ugly uniform anyway," she sighed.

"Thanks, Petes," Rabbit said quietly.

"For what?"

"For ke-ke-keepin' me from gettin' arrested fer murder."

Annie giggled. "Wait, seriously?" she asked when they didn't join in.

"Best not to dwell on it," Peter said comfortingly.

"Oh! Well... I guess now we just need a marriage license," Annie murmured, leaning on his arm.

Peter grinned and gave her a kiss. "Got it already. I didn't want to waste one second in making you my wife, Annie girl. You're the only reason I stayed in New York this long."

"Peter Walter... you sweet talker."

"That's so adorable!" sobbed Rabbit.

"First thing when we get home, you report to Wanda to get your old body back."

"I can't wait," Rabbit agreed. "This one cries too much."
Someday, though, Peter thought. Who knows?
Chapter Summary

Meet Annie Walter, while she meets everyone else. Walter Manor can be a bit of a shock the first time around, and life offers a few other surprises.

Chapter Notes

Before we meet the new kid, while he still has a face and doesn't know the difference between an orange.

Song: Annie's Song - John Denver

Annie had never had such a wild ride. Until now, she'd been content with her life. Then she'd seen a face that could only be the gentle boy she hadn't forgotten, despite having been so little when they last saw each other. He was the one person she least expected... and most wanted to see. And time had proven him to be every bit as sweet and stubborn as she remembered. Seeing as how every man since then had been more or less judged based on his simple goodness, it was only natural that she should find herself beside him in front of a judge. The crying robot had been something of a surprise...

The bus ride to California with Rabbit and her new husband had been interesting, to say the least. She could see now how Rabbit could be male... He was pretty in an odd way, considering he was made of rather dirty copper and iron pieces, and he kept crying over odd things, but his conversation was pure guy. He joked about his stupid "brothers", described some of his concerts and military experience, and talked in halting, reverent tones about his late wife. That had been a surprise...

A further surprise had been hearing their careful warning about a large silver robot they called "The Spine." She thought he sounded damned terrifying but they assured her he was a pussycat... only he'd suffered a loss and they weren't entirely sure how he'd react to her. The idea of Rabbit having been widowed was odd enough, but they whispered that The Spine had been married to a human, had adopted a son, and that his son had refused to see him anymore.

"He blamed our power source for his mother's death," Rabbit said sadly. "'Course, he was already mad on account of Lil..."

"Let me tell you about the rest of the family," Peter said hastily.

Rabbit looked momentarily shocked and turned away. She would have to find out what that was all about later.

Peter went on to explain to her about Norman, who was apparently her uncle now and who had suffered some terrifying accident. He flicked a glance at Rabbit and made no mention of what the accident was. Rabbit wiped his eyes and looked out the window. Another question to ask later in
private. In the end, she was told that Norman had some physical deformities but that he, too, was as gentle as a kitten.

But by the time they had explained about Peter's aged aunt (his great-aunt in fact) with blue hair, who looked 25 years old, Rabbit's other "brother" THE Jon who had a drug problem but only when he bounced, another brother who was stored in a vault due to the unpredictable nature of his damaged power source and who she was not to ask about around Jon, make that THE Jon... Rabbit's daughter who was nothing more than a computer inhabiting a rather large facility in the attic, a giant robotic giraffe stored in a large hangar style building on the property... Well, by the time Rabbit had moved on to talk about the cemetery and how he liked to feed ducks there, Annie was feeling that Peter had a bad habit of only sharing what he felt others needed to know. And that she really should have known all of this before signing on with the Walters.

Not that she intended to to change her mind, not at all. She needed a change, and she did love Peter very much. And she hadn't exaggerated when she'd said he was good in bed. She didn't know where he'd learned it or if it was just a gift, but in the few times she'd seen fit to allow a man into her bed, she'd never experienced anything to compare to Peter's lovemaking. It was as though he was afraid she'd shatter, as though he was trying to be as gentle as possible despite his own desire. It made her a little dizzy just thinking about it. The men she'd slept with in the past hadn't really appeared to care whether she wanted more than the standard humping. She didn't like the term, but that was how they'd done it, the selfish jerks. They humped. Yuck.

So while she didn't just marry him for sex (and she could have, she decided, overlooked a lot of faults just for that) she did consider the full package to be worth some eccentricities at home. Besides, despite the stunning automaton sitting beside her, she had to wonder how much they were exaggerating. It was a lot for a woman to believe all in one month... it had only been a little over two weeks since he'd asked her to marry him. It felt longer. In a good way. But she'd gotten into a bad habit of assuming people were trying to sell her a load of bananas and Peter's careful suppression of the truth wasn't helping.

It was somewhere in Arizona that it pinged in her head that the whole thing was in fact so ridiculous that they had to be playing a joke on her. Yes, she could see it now. She would arrive to meet a lovely aunt with bluish-gray hair because of age, and her aging husband who was deformed only with wrinkles, a few more automatons with no wife or kids or drug problems, and out back there might be an old barn, and sure as taxes they'd be watching to see how long she took to look inside just in case. And upstairs... just a computer. Whether Rabbit considered it family remained to be seen.

Yes, she could believe the part about the robots because one of them was sitting and stroking her hand and saying he knew how to read palms (Peter insisted he didn't). But she had them figured out. She'd married into a family of pranksters. There was no need to tell them she was onto them, however. But she wasn't letting her guard down.

This, she decided, was going to be fun.

They arrived at the bus station in the middle of the afternoon and walked around stretching luxuriously. It had been a heck of a long ride.

Peter went to call his aunt to pick them up and Annie smiled. Time to see their faces when she wasn't a bit shocked at the woman who arrived.

But she was surprised. A lovely young woman with pale skin, blue lips and bright blue hair soon
pulled into the station in a vintage Ford. It looked to be in good repair, too... Beside the woman, grinning a grin she would never have believed possible, was a shining golden robot. He had hair exactly like Rabbit's. Annie made no comment as Rabbit easily placed her bags in the trunk.

Peter opened the door for her. "Annie, meet Aunt Wanda and The Jon. Guys, here she is! Isn't she beautiful?"

Jon leaned over the seat and hugged her awkwardly. "I love you!" he said, beaming.

"That sums up Jon," Wanda laughed as the robot inched backward toward the front seat. "Hello, Annie! Welcome to the family!"

"Thanks. It's, um, nice to meet you..."

"It's okay. We're a lot to take in. Don't push yourself. Peter, didn't you warn her?"

Peter sat beside Annie and kissed her fondly. "There's only so much you can warn a person about some things, Aunt Wanda."

_You could have started a little sooner, wise guy_, Annie thought.

"Did you take good care of my wig?" Jon asked eagerly as Rabbit joined them in the car. It creaked ominously as he sat.

"Yeah, yeah, take it! I'm done with girly stuff!" Rabbit snapped, throwing the wig at him. Jon caught it and began to examine it carefully.

"Why, Rabbit! Was it that bad?" Wanda asked as she drove away.

"Worse! How d'you g-g-g-girls do it? The high heels and the slimy men touchin' yehr boobies without askin'..."

"Touching your what?" Jon cried.

"Nevah mind!"

"It was just his butt, Jon," Peter said lightly.

Jon snickered. He stopped abruptly. "Why?"


"Just shut up about it, okay?" snarled Rabbit. They fell silent.

"So how's Spine?" Peter asked after a few minutes.

"I went ahead and told him, Peter. I don't think he's handling it very well. He went to the HoW and stayed there."

Annie saw Peter and Rabbit exchange glances.

"Maybe it ain't himself he's thinking of," Rabbit said quietly.

Peter sighed. There was another question to ask him later.
Walter Manor was huge. She was used to small apartments... but Annie decided she could adapt. If it was her destiny to live in a palace, she would just have to cope.

Not that it was a Beverly Hills mansion. It was an old, old house just reeking of secrets and lives lived. Haunted, if not by ghosts, by life. She loved it almost instantly, much like its owner.

Peter carried her over the threshold and set her down quickly, pulling her against him. As much as she liked the affection, he was holding her rather tightly...

"Peter, I do like being this close, but you're squishing me."

"Annie, I'd like you to meet Norman," he said carefully, stressing the name particularly.

Annie chuckled. Here it came. Sure, Wanda had been young after all, and had strange fashion sense, but Annie had concluded that the real joke had been her age, not her appearance. She might be Peter's aunt but not his great-aunt. Possibly it was one of those flukes? Wanda was a late in life baby or something.

But there was just no way any human could look like they had described Norman. She turned slowly and just managed to swallow a scream.

*Well, whaddya know,* she thought. A guy with a sideways eye and lobster fingers among his other deformities. She felt a little faint but managed to say hello.

To her surprise, the mess of a man before her took her hand, kissed it with his awkward mouth, and welcomed her warmly to Walter Manor. She smiled. Just as they'd said. He was gentle as a kitten.

Wanda hurried in and gave him a kiss, and Annie began to rethink her entire stance on the conversation they'd had on the bus.

"Are you hungry?" Peter asked, taking her hand. "Or we could settle in, or maybe I could walk you around? There anything you're especially curious about?"

"Curious?" she murmured. "Let me think."

She reviewed the various claims and warnings she'd received, through the lens of everything she'd seen so far. The Jon apparently had two different drugs affecting his system. He'd already hugged her and said he loved her. If that was the worst he did, she could cope with it. Then there was this other robot, The Spine. Creepy name, and Rabbit was now hurrying to the lab with Wanda and Norman upon being told that The Spine was no longer upstairs. Apparently he didn't mind anyone except The Spine seeing him with breasts. How scary was this thing, if it frightened Rabbit that much?

But they'd said it was a he, and that he was harmless, and yet there had been a look in Peter's eye as he said it... And this thing, this giant robot had lost his wife. Which made exactly no sense, especially since they were concerned about how he'd react to Annie. Were they afraid he'd decide to get a new wife if they brought another woman into the house? But no, this was not Frankenstein's monster. Peter said he was safe and she trusted Peter. She shook her head and swore off late night creature features. Her imagination was running even beyond the madness around her.

What else had they said? Ah yes, the giant giraffe robot. Well, that would wait. They said it was deactivated anyway. And then there was the other brother in the vault. If they couldn't repair him, there was no sense worrying about him, especially if hearing about him bothered Jon.

Finally, there was one thing left, one person she had to wonder about. Surely that one was a joke...
"Could I meet Rabbit's daughter?"

"What?" gasped Peter. "Well... y'know what? Yeah. Let's get it over with. But... I have to tell you something first. It has to do with her."

She chuckled. "What? You had an affair with the computer?" Peter blushed right through his razor stubble and she gasped, "Not really... I was only joking!"

"No!" he said suddenly. he took her hand and they started walking. "Of course not. But... I was married before."

She stared at him and fought the terrifying urge to punch him square in the nose. What next? Was he going to tell her that this wife was locked in the attic? No, wait, that was Jane Eyre... "Go on."

"Hee... um... you sure you're okay with hearing about her?"

"More okay than I am with you keeping her a secret," she said coolly.

He blushed an even deeper red. "Sorry... it was just... you were hard enough to convince..."

"That doesn't make it right," she muttered.

"No. It doesn't. I apologize. Just please let me explain before you kill me, okay?"

"Alright, you live a little longer."

"Thanks. Well, The Spine, um, he once had a daughter. Not adopted... she was a scientific mystery. He really was her father..."

"You're putting me on..."

"I promise. But humans and robots were never meant to procreate so Lily was missing certain basic commands, parts of her brain that were supposed to direct her heart to beat and organs to function. The only reason, as far as I could determine, that she survived even long enough to be born, much less until she was twenty, was that she had a Blue Matter core just like the robots, and her father was always near her mother to provide additional Blue Matter as it was used up. Basically, the matter triggered the growth cycle and maintained it in the absence of male reproductive cells. So Lily was female since the male determines the sex..."

"Tell that to Henry the Eighth." She froze in mid-step. "But... Seriously? Your robots can get women pregnant?"

"Ssh!" he hissed. "Yeah, but not easily. There has to be almost direct delivery of the Blue Matter and... hee... I mean, he, uh..." Peter swallowed. "To put it bluntly, he has a penis."

"What?" she cried. "He's anatomically correct?"

"Ssh, please! I don't know where he is..."

Everyone was so afraid of this robot... "Good grief, Peter! Whatever possessed you to build a robot with a... a... Is it safe? I mean, what if he goes, y'know, rogue or something?"

"I didn't build him," he said tightly. "And he deactivated it during his wife's illness, along with the protocols that... well, his sex drive is offline, okay? He even had me disconnect the apparatus from his core. All it does now is make a shape in his slacks and make his fans stare, okay?"
She snickered in spite of herself. She'd done her share of that back when they started dating. He wore rather snug jeans for work...

"Yeah..." he chuckled weakly. "Thank goodness no one has asked any awkward questions yet. So... Look, I know you're really getting a lot in a short time here but I need to explain this so... Please."

"Alright. I won't interrupt. Much."

"Thanks. When Lily was in her late teens, I realized... I realized how I felt about her. I was older but I'd never really been serious about anyone and one day she walked into the room and... Well, so it turns out she felt the same way. But as a scientific curiosity, she wasn't born in a hospital... they didn't dare let too many people know about her. She didn't really have a birth certificate. So we made private vows and The Spine nearly killed me when he found out and don't even suggest that makes him a rogue robot..."

"Not at all. That sounds totally normal under the circumstances."

"Does it? We don't get a lot of normal here so I'm kind of unclear on the concept."

"Daddies and their little girls," she sighed. "A man isn't always very objective when it comes to his daughter."

He smiled. "Yeah. That was it. Lily didn't want to tell him, even, but then she had a miscarriage."

She gasped. "Oh, Peter... But... you poor thing. This all must have been so awful for a young guy to go through."

"Worse for her. I didn't have a chance to get excited about it because she hadn't told me about the baby. It was so early on... I must have managed it on the first try. I guess she was saving it to tell me on Valentine's Day."

She thought she might cry. That was even worse! No wonder he didn't want to tell her sooner! She pulled him into her arms and held him tightly.

"So anyway," he murmured, resting his head on hers. "Finally, her core stopped working right and..."

His voice choked off and she suddenly felt very guilty. Here he had lost his first wife and she was demanding an explanation. Even though he had made his feelings clear toward Annie, losing this Lily must have been devastating.

"You don't have to tell me any more," she whispered.

"I do, though. See, her memories were part of the Blue Matter. Just like the robots. And Qwerty... that's Rabbit's daughter... Qwerty has them stored. They've gone out of their way to hide that from me but I did figure it out. And another little family secret they think I don't know... Qwerty has the hots for me."

Annie laughed.

"You laugh but it's true. Don't ask me why all the little girls here are falling at my feet. I was a scrawny little nerd back then..."

"Not anymore," she breathed, feeling the muscles under his shirt, pressing against her. She stroked his back and sighed luxuriously. A tour of the house didn't sound as good as settling into their room,
all of a sudden. But she'd asked to meet Qwerty, and it did sound like this was something that
shouldn't be put off. She sighed and pinched his butt.

"Yeah, I believe we're thinking the same thing..." he said with a grin.

"Later, though. But not too much later, I hope."

"Y'know," he sighed, as they turned to continue on their way, "I still owe you a honeymoon."

"You can start with a wedding night. And make it good."

"I'll do my best."

Oh... she thought, if that's true, I am gonna be sore in the morning!

After what felt like a thousand stairs, they stood before a door labeled simply "HOW."

"How what?" she asked.

"It's the Hall of Wires. You'll understand in a minute..."

He paused and turned as a soft hiss sounded in the empty hallway. "Who's there?"

The Jon stepped out of a doorway and waved sheepishly.

"Jon? What's up?"

"Tell her gently, okay?" Jon murmured. "She knows but... Just don't hurt her too much."

"Jon? You can come in with us if you're worried about your niece."

Jon winced and said, "No... Not right."

He turned and ran down the stairs.

"Would that be the odd behavior you mentioned?" Annie asked.

"It would. I think. Sometimes there's a reason, but... Eh, well, come on and let's meet her."

He opened the door and led her inside.

They emerged an hour later, chuckling.

"Alright, you win. That's a real woman! But... I expected more drama, to be honest."

"So did I! I guess maybe the others overestimated her feelings toward me."

"Maybe she's gotten over you."

"I hope so. It's not like there was any future in it. Even if I somehow fell in love with an artificial
intelligence, it just wouldn't work. Fortunately, that didn't happen."

"No, you fell in love with me, you dumbhead."
He turned and put his arms around her. "And you fell in love with me. Guess we're both pretty stupid."

"Yeah," she breathed as he started nibbling at her neck. "I feel like a real idiot."

"Wanna do something really stupid?"

"Very much. Something completely mindless."

"Then let's hurry because our bedroom is two floors down."

Annie sighed with deep feeling. Anywhere would do, she thought, as chills shot across her skin. But there was family around, and then there was this other robot who apparently just roamed around without restraint.

It had been an interesting, if anticlimactic, chat, when they visited Rabbit's daughter, and she had indeed called him Pappy, so that was confirmed, if not explained. But Qwerty had spoken more like an old friend than anything else, despite her curious monotone voice. She had joked and made it clear as crystal that she was pleased about their marriage.

But she added further warnings about The Spine and Annie found she was developing a positive dread of meeting this metal man.

A couple of weeks later, they stayed at a beachfront inn for a week as a honeymoon before returning to settle in properly. By the time they left, Rabbit was all male, their room had been cleaned by Wanda and Norman who said that Peter kept it in no fit state to share with a wife, and Annie was coming to suspect something rather ominous.

She was fairly certain she had missed a period. She'd lost track in all the excitement but it just seemed like a long time since the last one. What over powered sperm did this man have that he could impregnate a woman on the first try every time? He must have children all over the country...

She decided to wait just until she had calculated the days before telling Peter. She hadn't exactly wanted to have a baby right away but she did want one at some point, and she'd begun to think that just wasn't in the cards at her age. So when she thought it over, she was pleased. And when she thought about what he had told her about his late first wife, she was sure he'd want to know as early as possible. She'd gotten the impression that he had regretted very much not being part of things the last time. She wasn't sure she'd be willing to have more kids, so this could be his one chance for it.

But they'd no sooner arrived home than Wanda hurried to Peter and took him aside.

"Well," he began when Wanda had hurried back to her lab, "I hate to leave you so soon, my dear, but it seems that the stockholders in Walter Tech have been trying to get me to meet with them for about three months."

"Walter Tech?"

"Our line of computers. Qwerty's the brains behind it, I'll admit that, but she can't exactly meet with stockholders, and Wanda knows Blue Matter but not computers. She can't even manage the microwave."

He sighed, pulling her into his arms. She rested her head against his chest and closed her eyes. This was the safest feeling she'd had in all her life. Even her parents hadn't quite provided that, with their
various financial struggles. But Peter had, far beyond removing the burden of constant debt. There was something about spending a week alone with him, walking the beach just like all the couples in the movies. She thought it was cliche until she was there herself, holding his hand in the rich glow of sunset and strolling back to their room to order room service and not answer the door when housekeeping knocked in the morning, sleeping bare in his arms even if it was uncomfortable and her arm fell asleep. Waking to see him smiling at her. He smiled just because she was there in the morning. A week passing in a haze of bliss. She'd read about those and snorted. But there she was... Life couldn't get more beautiful than that. But she'd settle for stable and reasonably nice living from now on.

"I'll miss you," he said sadly.

"Oh, silly. How long do you think you'll be, seriously?"

"The rest of the afternoon."

She laughed and kissed him. "See you at dinner, sweetheart."

Once he'd gone, she decided to look the place over. It was an amazing place, from what she'd already seen. It was large, but everyone was busy or not around, and she couldn't imagine getting too lost...

She was wrong.

By her watch, it had been three hours since Peter left. She'd seen a dozen labs, or the same few over and over. There were some very odd noises, what seemed like miles of guest bedrooms, and a whole wing of dusty offices. Some of them had messages written in the layers of dust on the heavy desks. They could just be read under still more layers of dust.

Most of them read, "The Jon was here." One looked like a recipe for lemonade.

She was getting hungry and tired and finding it harder to think straight. She also felt a little sick. Come to think of it, she had definitely missed a period. A few weeks ago. Just about two weeks after Peter taught her what it was like to have a hard time keeping her voice down so as not to disturb the neighbors... It had seemed to pass so quickly but no, she had definitely been due for one around the time that Peter made reservations for a week at the hotel... And she had been relieved that he couldn't get a reservation for a few weeks because of that.

She traced the events in her mind as she sat on a dusty seat in a long disused hallway, feeling like she'd walked into a Gothic novel. The hallway was darkening as evening came on, the only light coming through a window at the end of it. She saw no light fixtures.

She thought she heard a door close in the distance. She went to the window at the end of the hallway. Peter's car was there, a few floors below her, but she didn't see him. So she was near the front, but that did nothing to tell her which way to go to get back. She could have sworn she'd been on the ground floor the whole time.

Her head was aching. Things started to spin just a little. She shook her head and headed back up the darkened hallway, hoping to find her way to a more central location at least. They would look for her at some point; she'd had a dozen warnings about exploring on her own and had ignored them all, but she was at least sure they would be worried enough to look for her. There was a point where this hallway met another, but by the time she reached it, she was in almost complete darkness and could go no further.
"Hello?" she whispered, squinting up the adjoining hallway.

There was a quiet thumping sound, coming at regular intervals. The hiss sounded again.

"Rabbit?"

She saw two green lights. They were high, approaching from the end of the hallway. They moved up and down slightly as they came closer in the darkness, and soon she could see that they illuminated what looked very much like the face of a dead man... a little closer and she could see that he was remarkably tall and that his expression was cold and stern, even angry.

It was The Spine! It had to be! The realization seized her and her heart thundered with terror. She hadn't realized what a fear she had been developing for this towering automaton until she knew that he was coming toward her in the cold silence of the dark and lonely hallway, and Peter didn't know where she was, Rabbit wasn't there, Wanda, Norman, not even The Jon...

"Stop!" she gasped, but her voice wouldn't work. He marched inexorably closer, silent except for the thud of his feet and the hiss of steam every few seconds.

"Stop! No!" she screamed at last. The robot stopped.

Now what? She felt dizzy and staggered on her feet, stumbled... she had to stay standing! Had to be ready to run... But she felt so faint...

The cold greenish face suddenly lunged toward her. She screamed and fell into darkness. The last thing she remembered was the clutch of cold hands.

"Annie girl, what did I tell you..." Peter was sighing. "You could have at least waited until I could get you a map of the place. We actually have them..."

She blinked up at him. She was in bed! Peter was laying beside her holding a glass of water.

"Drink?" he said, smiling.

She sat up and took the water. "I'm a little fuzzy on what happened..." she confessed. "I got lost, right? That really happened?"

He lay back and folded his hands behind his head. "Yep. You were lucky The Spine found you."

She gasped and choked on her water.

"You okay?"

"Ye... yeah..." she coughed. "The Spine! That was him!"

"Well, yeah. Didn't you notice? He said it was pretty dark but those eyes. Can't miss them."

"I know!" she said emphatically. "Oh, Peter! I was terrified! He's... he's so tall, and it was pitch black by then, I swear it was, and there were these green eyes stomping along and he didn't say anything! I... I screamed..."

Peter snorted. "You didn't! He never mentioned that!"
"I did! Like a B-movie murder victim! I screamed and he stopped but he still didn't say anything!"

"Yeah... he hasn't been real talkative since Marie passed on. Sorry about that. But he caught you before you hit the floor. He didn't mean any harm."

"He... that was why he lunged at me?" she cried.

"Lunged for you, maybe. He said you were wobbling and he could tell you were going to fall and so he jumped to catch you. And you just went limp in his arms. Sexy."

"Oh, shut up."

"No, really, he's had that happen at concerts. Right in his arms."

"He's that scary?"

"No, goofball! They faint because they like him." He grinned wickedly. "I think it's the bulge in his pants."

"Oh, stop..." She shook her head. Corpse groupies. What next?

There was a soft scratch at the door.

"Come in, we're not naked."

"Peter..." she sighed. He certainly was in a silly mood.

The door opened and a tall silver robot dressed in black looked into the room. He wasn't corpse-like at all in full light; he was actually quite dapper. And his expression, to her astonishment, was apprehensive, almost frightened.

"Is she alright?" he murmured.

"She's fine, thanks to you, big guy. Thank you again for finding her."

"Oh... I was just taking a walk actually, but... you're welcome, Peter." He turned to Annie and gave a little bow. "Mrs. Walter? I'm terribly sorry not to have made your acquaintance sooner. I have no defense for my rudeness..."

"Yes, you do," Peter said bluntly. "But you don't need to talk about it, okay?"

The Spine closed his eyes for a moment and nodded. "Thank you, Peter." He looked at Annie once more. "I apologize for the scare. Please don't wander the halls without a map and a light. I wouldn't want anything to happen to a member of the Walter family."

"Alright. I'm sorry to have caused so much trouble and... I'm sorry I screamed. I didn't know..."

The Spine looked down as though embarrassed. "Not at all, Mrs. Walter. It was a natural reaction, given the circumstances. Well... Welcome to Walter Manor."

He nodded curtly, turned and walked out.

"Like I said, not really chatty these days. Poor guy." Peter sighed and set aside her water glass, pulling her close. "I didn't know you were the fainting type."

"I'm not, usually. But I was hungry and tired and... oh... that's right..."
"Hm?" he said absently.

"Peter, I think I might be pregnant."

He gasped. His arm around her stiffened.

"You okay?" she asked, when he didn't speak for a moment. He wasn't upset about it, was he? Maybe he didn't want children after all! He hadn't really said...

She heard a sniffle and looked at him. He wiped his hand across his eyes and she saw that his face was red.

"Peter?" she breathed. Why was he crying?

"Sorry," he said thickly. He kissed her lightly. "I was... Oh, Annie. I was so worried about you when you fainted! Lily used to faint a lot and... I just thought that you might be... Well, it's stupid, of course you couldn't have the same issues she did, but it just seems like any woman who isn't a Walter by birth is cursed in this house and I was beginning to wonder if I shouldn't have brought you here."

"Peter!" she cried, laughing. "You poor darling..."

"Yeah, I know, I'm an idiot."

"No!"

"Oh... but... Oh, Annie, do you really think you're pregnant? Then you need to see a doctor, we have to make sure! If you're right... I can't stand it, Annie! It's too much!"

He kissed her passionately and she felt faint again. It was nicer this time.

So he'd been cracking jokes and being casual and flip to cover the fact that he was afraid she was dying too? The poor silly dork... It was too pitiful and sweet and heartbreakingly adorable and she was making herself sick but she just found him too darling for words.

"Oh..." he gasped, a moment later, jumping from the bed. "You need to eat! Come on!"

She got up and wobbled. He caught her hastily and laughed, scooping her up like a princess.

"I'm sorry, Annie girl! I'll carry you there. I'll carry you everywhere if you want."

"I don't want," she sighed, resting her head against his neck. "But this is really nice."

"I love you," he whispered. "Stay with me, okay?"

"Always, darling," she sighed as he started walking toward the kitchen.

"A baby..." he sighed happily. "Already! That was fast."

"You seem to work that way."

He giggled.

There was a hiss in the quiet hallway after they left it. The Spine strolled away in the other direction.

So he'd been right; she wasn't just hungry, or tired, or scared. Women didn't faint as easily as the
movies suggested, and he'd had his own worries about this new Mrs. Walter. Peter had taken an
awfully long time to find someone he could love as much as Lily. The Spine could certainly
understand how hard that was. He had no expectation of ever finding anyone to equal Marie. And
Lily had been truly special.

They all thought he was upset about Peter getting married. He wasn't. He was delighted. But there
was sadness in it, too, at least for him. Of course there was. How could there not be memories
stirred? But it was perfect, the course of living, moving forward from death back into life, again and
again.

And now, beyond the hope of Peter's new love, a child was expected. Upset? No, indeed. The
Spine's joy was almost more than he could bear.

He just wished Marie could have been there to share it. Sometimes he almost felt she was there.

"A new baby, love," he whispered into the darkness. "How you would have fussed over them... I
don't know what to do for them. You always knew what to do. I just wish you'd known..."

He sighed. He wished she'd known how to stay.

"Someone there?" asked a slightly creaky voice in the darkness.

"Hi, Rabbit."

Rabbit fell in from a nearby room and strolled beside him, making no mention of the oily streaks on
his face. "What's up, cowboy?"

"Annie fainted in one of the hallways. She was overtired and hungry. I brought her back."

"Oh! Is she al-al-alright?" Rabbit asked worriedly.

"Just fine. She thinks she might be expecting a child."

"No ki-ki-kiddin'? Say, that's great news! That Peter don't waste any time..." He looked at The Spine
askance. "You okay?"

"I'm happy, Rabbit. Really. I was afraid Peter would spend his whole life mourning her. She was the
most wonderful girl in the world, but he's human. He needs this. And she would have wanted it this
way."

"Yeah, I hear ya. Now at least one of us can move on."

"One?" The Spine chuckled, wiping his eyes. "I saw how you looked at that new toaster..."

"It's a fine machine..."

"You called it Jenny..."

"She looks like her..." Rabbit sighed. "A guy can dream."

"I like a woman with a mind, but to each his own. You can always find love again the next time we
visit Sears."

Rabbit hissed irritably. "Whaddya think they'll call the baby?" he asked.

"Peter, if it's a boy. Traditional. Peter Alexander Walter VI."
"Maybe if it's a girl they'll call it Rabbit."

"Why would they do that?" The Spine asked, amused.

"No reason."

"Silly idea... Humans don't even use that as a name."

Rabbit shrugged and they walked on in silence, The Spine chuckling over Rabbit's idea. He'd been acting weird ever since he went to help Peter but no one said anything. He was used to it, though. No one ever told him anything anymore.

Well, if it was important, he'd find out sooner or later.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, that's just what they call him. Peter VI, that is, not Rabbit. XD
"Mrs. Walter! Excuse me, Mrs. Walter? Could I have a moment?"

"You don't need my permission for that," Annie said with a smile.

"Oh, yes... heh... cute. Um... hang on... okay. Look over here..."

Annie humored the young reporter. Peter was busy talking to some friends anyway. And her husband was regaling a group of ladies with stories of his last trip to Mexico. She always kept a little of her attention on him...

"Alright. We're on. Mrs. Walter, your son is the youngest student to graduate from UC San Diego."

"So I've heard."

"Yes. Um... you must be very proud."

"That goes without saying. I've always been proud of him." Well, almost always...

"Is he going to go on to earn his Masters or his Doctorate?"

"If he was he wouldn't bother to graduate now."

"Why UC San Diego? I've heard colleges around the country have wanted him, including MIT."

"Peter considered MIT briefly. Then he laughed."

"I'm sorry... why?"

"He said they weren't as advanced as his great-great-grandfather was over one hundred years ago."

"Oh! Do you want us to air that?"

"Probably not."

"Yeah. Okay. So what are his plans now?"
"Shouldn't you be asking Peter all this?"

"Oh... well, he's... he rolled his eyes and wouldn't tell us anything."

"Mm-hm."

"Can I just ask... I heard you sent him to public school. Why not enroll such a gifted child in a school designed for advanced learners?"

"Because we all have gifts, and we all have handicaps. Peter needed to learn some things you don't learn when the world is made perfect for you. And he's better for it. Excuse me, I have to go make sure my husband remembers the crowd he's entertaining are the mothers of his son's classmates."

She smiled and hurried away. This was the usual thing. Everyone wanting to know about the wunderkind. And never really getting what they were after. She shouldn't have said that bit about MIT, though...

She looked over at her son as she took her husband's arm. They had only one child, but what a remarkable child he was... warts and all.

San Diego, 1991:

"What's this letter?"

"F."

"No, Peter..."

"Z!"

"Peter, I know you know this..."

"Q!" He started to giggle.

Annie sighed. She knew he got it. When it suited him, he had no trouble putting the letters in order and identifying them. He'd do it for Elmo! The question was whether he would do it in kindergarten.

"Go on and ask Aunt Wanda to get you your snack, baby. Mama needs some quiet time."

"Quiet time. Tiet quime!" he giggled.

"Please, baby..."

"Blease, paby!" Peter laughed as he ran toward the kitchen.

"Are you sure you want to put him into public school, Annie?" The Spine asked over his newspaper.

Thank goodness he'd finally come out of his shell! He was so reassuring, she'd found. Far more mature than anyone else in the household including her adorable husband. Sometimes you needed that. But right now he was reinforcing her own doubts and it wasn't welcome.

"I am. He needs kids his own age."

"That's what Marie said when..." He let out a burst of steam in lieu of a sigh. She knew he'd been
about to mention his son. And he didn't mention his son. "Let's just say I'm not impressed."

"I know. I... don't really want to talk about it."

"Alright," he said softly, returning to his reading.

He could be like an old man sometimes, but he knew when to quit. Most old men didn't, in her experience.

She was at her wits end with her darling little son. He giggled as much as he spoke, and even though he had shown indications of nothing less than genius, exceeding his own parents by possessing his mother's photographic memory and a natural gift for building small working robots, well... Just try and get a sensible word out of him! Of course, he was just a little boy. She didn't expect many sensible words from a kid his age. But he took it beyond childish play into presenting a pretty good portrayal of a four-year-old idiot. He still insisted apples were oranges and she couldn't manage to work out whether he believed it himself or was just teasing.

And then there was the energy! "Doesn't he ever stop moving?" Wanda had asked in a moment of unusual frustration. And Annie couldn't say; she wondered the same thing herself.

She heard him now, singing some nonsense doggerel he'd made up while he waited for his afternoon snack. Jon walked past the room a few minutes later, carrying a stack of board games, with Peter close behind eating half a peanut butter sandwich.

"Going to play board games?" Annie called.

"Yeah! Up in the HoW!" Peter crowed, trotting away.

"He was carrying Pretty, Pretty Princess..." Annie mumbled. "And Mystery Date... They did have Chutes and Ladders, but..." She sighed.

"Then again," murmured The Spine. "Maybe it would do him good to get out. Um... to play with other children."

School started at last, ready or not.

Kindergarten was easy enough. Peter got into plenty of trouble, but he liked his teacher and wanted to impress her. By the end of Mrs. Keaton's kindergarten, Annie had begun to think she'd blown the situation completely out of proportion.

A month into first grade, she realized it had been more like a sleeping giant, just as big but waiting to pounce. Peter couldn't or wouldn't learn his ABCs, or counting, much less the basic addition problems and simple words being introduced. He could hardly sit still half the time and was always getting into things. Once or twice, he even ran from the teacher, laughing hysterically. His teacher clearly thought he was an idiot and the principal had already scheduled a meeting.

Annie sat with her head back. Rabbit was gently stroking his cool, smooth fingers over her aching head.

Peter (her husband) came in and relieved Rabbit. She sighed sleepily. His fingers weren't as cool, but they were much softer.

"You alright?" he asked quietly.
"I don't know! You know they've asked if they can schedule some assessment tests for learning disabilities?"

"That's crap! The kid's a genius!"

She sighed. "You're adorable, Peter. There's no proof that he's a genius, y'know?"

"Bull. You've seen what the kid can do!"

"Yes, I guess so. But they need to see it."

"Are they testing for that?"

"No... just learning disabilities."

"Then that's all they're gonna find!" he growled.

She sighed. He was right, of course. She resolved to call the school in the morning and see whether they could add a little something to their battery of tests.

It was about two months later that they went in to the meeting.

"Mr. and Mrs. Walter," said the principal, holding out his hand. "Thank you for coming."

They shook hands and he introduced the school counselor, Peter's teacher, and a woman who had apparently done all the testing. She was holding a thick file.

"We have the results from the tests for a variety of possible learning disorders. Here's your copy..."

Annie frowned down at the stack but she and Peter looked it over as the woman guided them through the complicated data.

"Here you see, you indicated results that suggest hyperactivity..."

"Well, I suppose so..." Annie faltered.

"And the teacher confirms this."

The teacher nodded.

"And you say here that he has trouble with letter identification..."

"Well, now, the question was whether he names his letters when asked and Peter generally doesn't seem to see the point because..."

"See the point?"

"Well, yes. He knows them, I've seen every indication of that."

"Such as what?"

"Well... Peter?"

Peter blinked at her and said, "Oh! Well, he never needs to ask for help with them. And he loves Sesame Street."

Annie fought the urge to put her hand over her face. "He shows recognition in daily activities. I've
seen him match the letters in his puzzle with ease and he sings the alphabet song..."

"But he can't identify individual letters?"

"Yes, he can! He... he did it in kindergarten."

"Mrs. Walter," the teacher said tightly. "Peter's kindergarten teacher said he wrote the letters but
never named them. This year he either can't or won't identify letters with the class or sound out
words. He just sits and stares into space!"

"Well..." Annie said nervously. "Maybe he just thinks it's too damned boring."

Peter put his hand hastily over his mouth. She knew it was to cover a laugh but her face meanwhile
was bright red. What a stupid thing to say! These nuts were just looking for a reason!

"Really, Mrs. Walter! The curriculum is designed to accommodate all students equally..."

_Equally?

"Giving them a foundation in what they need to know..."

_Need to know? Who decides what they need to know?

"So that they can go on to institutions..."

_Institutions?!?

"Of higher learning and be able to be competitive..."

_Competitive? He's only six!

"In the field of their choice. We make it fun for them..."

"To pound piles of data into their heads?" In for a penny, in for a pound. And she'd heard enough.
"How can you make it fun to sit and regurgitate stacks of meaningless drivel designed to make them
into good office workers? Hell, don't you have any other careers in mind for these kids? Is there art
and music here?"

"We have art once a week..."

"That's it?" she cried. She shook her head.

"Annie, now..." Peter began uneasily.

"Well, really! And I believe I asked whether you could test him for giftedness on top of this stack of
negative labels waiting to happen. Whatever happened to my one measly test to see whether he
might have something to praise instead of a pile of tests designed to damn him for the rest of his
school career?"

"Mrs. Walter... If you continue with this tone we'll have to reschedule this meeting..." the principal
interrupted.

Annie seethed but said quietly, "I beg your pardon. I will keep my voice low so that I may be
allowed to speak."

He looked at her sourly. The test woman looked uneasily between the two of them and muttered,
"We don't really have a test for giftedness for children his age..."

"Then wrangle one up, dear. Our son is just a little boy and you all are putting a terrible lot of his life on the line based on a battery of ugly assumptions. The least you can do is see how good he is, not just how bad."

"We don't use the term 'bad' here..."

"But you have a plethora of stand-ins. Anyway, I'm sure that you can find a way to get him to cooperate. After all, you're the experts, right? We poor parents are just flying on a wing and a prayer but you all are trained child educators, can't you work out a way to reach one difficult little boy?"

The sarcasm was thick but they looked at each other with obvious discomfort.

"Well?" she pressed. "Challenge him. He likes games and loves to show off. Trick him into performing his best."

"Trick, Mrs. Walter?" the school psychologist said skeptically.

"Yes! Make a game of it and maybe he won't scent the fact that you want something from him. He makes a game of things to keep himself entertained. Sometimes the game is in knowing what we want from him and finding a way to get out of it. So yes, trick him."

"I guess that could work..."

"Good. If you need help, let me know."

As they walked out, Peter muttered, "Annie girl you were amazing, but now they're pissed off at us..."

"Let them be. I'm on the point of pulling him out of this stupid school!"

"He has so many friends, though."

"He has a few. Michael seems to like him. But if they're going to pigeonhole such a little boy... It wouldn't be right to leave him here."

She brooded over it all evening, however. At bedtime, she read The Lorax to Peter for the nth time and sighed.

"Peter, sweetie. Do you like your school?"

He shrugged. "The teachers are kinda stupid."

"How, baby?"

"Very!" He giggled.

Learning disabled indeed! "Yes, but in what way are they stupid?"

"They want me to say the ABCs! We did that last year!"

"I'm sure it's just a review..."

"I already did it. I don't want to do it anymore."
"Okay, but why won't you sound out words?"

"It's stupid. I already know how they sound."

"Peter!" she said, frustrated. "You don't do it because you don't know! It's to help you remember!"

"I already remember!"

"I mean... you do it to keep the teacher happy, okay? And later you'll learn things you don't know."

"Phooey. They never tell me anything I don't know!"

She stared at him. "Don't they, darling?"

He shook his little head vigorously.

"Then... can you do me a favor, love? It's very important. They're going to ask you to come in and do some more tests and I want you to show them how good you are. Show them how much you can do..."

"I hate their tests! They're boring!"

"But..."

"No more!"

He curled into his blanket and made snoring noises.

"Oh, Peter..." she sighed. "Well... Goodnight."

She kissed his cheek and walked out, frustrated. She hated being in the middle and so far both sides were standing pat.

"Oh! Mrs. Walter... Mr. Walter couldn't be here?"

"I'm afraid he has business. This is just a brief meeting, correct?"

"Well, yes..." The school psychologist sat hastily at the table. "You can sit here, Peter."

Peter sat at the far end of the table instead, where he tipped his head back and studied the ceiling.

"Yes... this was part of the reason I asked if Peter could join us. The test results were inconclusive since we couldn't get Peter to cooperate..."

Peter blew a loud raspberry. Annie glared at him but he was still looking up at the ceiling.

"I thought if you could see how he behaves when we attempt to assess him, you might understand what it is we're trying to achieve."

"Or I might understand why he didn't cooperate," Annie said quietly. "But I thought the concern was that he was learning disabled."

"We're finding a number of behavioral concerns as well."

"You're finding a lot of things after looking hard enough," Annie gritted.
"We're finding what's there, Mrs. Walter. Peter?"

Peter made a burbling sound at the ceiling.

"Peter, please come and sit by us."

Peter swung his legs in a careless sort of way.

"Peter," Annie said firmly. "Remember what we're doing later? The visit to the electronics store?"

"Mmm?"

"If you still want to, you'd better get over here now or I won't have the patience left to do anything this afternoon."

Peter sat up slowly and dragged his chair over to their end of the table. He sat with his head in his hands, glaring at the psychologist.

"Peter," she said calmly. "What is this?"

She was holding up a letter A.

"It's the Eiffel Tower," he muttered.

"No, Peter. It's the letter A. Now what's this?"

It was a letter Q. "It's an oyster."

"It's a letter Q. Peter. What's this?"

She held up an M. "Mount Kilimanjaro."

"It's a letter M. Thank you, Peter."

Annie couldn't believe it. "Alright, so he's proven he knows them!" she said.

"No, he's proven that he is having a difficult time accepting authority and working within a classroom setting."

"Peter," Annie said calmly. "Please wait for mama outside. You can sit upside down in the big chairs."

Peter trotted out eagerly. He loved sitting upside down.

After he left Annie glared at the psychologist and said, "He just proved he knows the letters so well that he sees no need to repeat them. He has proven that he can't comprehend your obsession with making everyone act exactly the same. And he is a six year old who knows what the Eiffel Tower is, can pronounce Kilimanjaro and knows it has two peaks, and that he knows that oysters have a foot they use to dig themselves into the sand. He is bored in your curriculum made for everyone and you're telling me that to prove he is adjusted, healthy, and bright he has to suppress all that and act like everyone else? What the hell institution of learning is this?"

"You're missing the point, Mrs. Walter..." the psychologist said quickly.

"I think not! And I will be finding a better school or a better way for my son to learn what he needs to know."
She stood and turned to go.

"Peter has behavioral problems, Mrs. Walter! He is Oppositional Defiant and is obviously struggling with basic reasoning..."

"Well, if he is," Annie snapped, "then so am I."

She stomped out with the psychologist close behind her. Peter jumped up from the big chair and ran to her, eager to leave the office. The principal stepped out, smiling.

"There some trouble? I heard shouting."

"I assure you, if I was shouting, you'd know it," Annie said. "Come on, darling. We're done here."

"Mrs. Walter! If we could schedule another meeting when you've had time to think and calm down a bit..."

"I don't think so, no. I'll be pursuing other options, thank you."

As they walked out, Peter hesitated. "You need to fix that," he said.

"What?" the principal asked dazedly.

Peter pointed. "It's supposed to read, 'California Distinguished School.' But you misspelled 'distinguished' see? You left out an I."

The principal peered at the sign. "Oh... Thank you..."

"You're welcome. Goodbye."

He trotted out after Annie. When they reached the car, she grinned.

"You little skunk. I pointed that out when we walked in!"

Peter grinned back and said, "Yeah. But I remembered."

They drove home singing. She had no idea what to do next. Maybe home schooling. But she felt lighter. She felt she'd snatched him from the jaws of a beast. He was defiant, sure. But sometimes you should be.

Chapter End Notes

I figure Peter was a little snot, too.
Upgrade

Chapter Summary

Qwerty's been trapped inside the manor for decades. It's time for her to move on and for the Qwerty we all know to take her place.

Chapter Notes

Still not quite up to date. Here's another twist for you, taking canon (and actual events) and warping them beyond recognition.

I will not for any sum try to explain that whole boy band thing they included in the timeline at some point, not sure if it's still there. And the Crystal Pepsi thing I'll only touch on lightly.

Also, I starred out some swears in here. I'm not nuts about the words and starring them out makes me content so just humor me. They're included because I still say Rabbit would swear loud and long at every opportunity... But especially when angry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1991:

"Your spin!" Jon cried.

Peter spun, the purple plastic bracelet swinging from his bony wrist. "Three! I get a ring!" He scooped it up and jammed it onto his finger.

"Your turn, Qwerty!" Jon said, looking at the metal claw she had produced. The claw spun the spinner, losing a bracelet and necklace in the process. Jon scooped them up hastily and fussily replaced them on the claw arm.

"Beautiful," he said.

Peter giggled. Jon always said that about Qwerty. Jon was silly.

Qwerty moved her piece. "I get the crown."


She scooped it off of his head and gingerly perched it on her monitor. Jon looked up at her and smiled. Despite his objection, he didn't look sad at all about losing the game.

"Qwerty always wins," Peter grumped.
"I'm a pretty, pretty princess!" Qwerty chimed as the crown tumbled off of her monitor.

"Yeah," Jon said with a smile.

Peter shrugged and put his jewelry back into the container. "Someday I'll make you a pretty princess, Aunt Qwerty!"

"How?" she asked, shaking the jewelry from her claw.

"I'll build a body for you! I can make robots!"

"Little ones, yes, sweetie. A robot such as Jon's is far more sophisticated."

"I'll make a bigger one. I'll make a body like Uncle Jon's. Then you two can dance together!"

Jon looked at him with wide eyes. "Wh-why would you say that?"

"Don't you want to dance together? You're always dancing by yourself..."

"Yeah, I love to dance but... Never mind."

Peter laughed and shrugged. "Wanna play something else?"

"Sorry, little one. Auntie Qwerty has work to do."

"And I... have to... be somewhere else now..." Jon said hastily.

He hurried out the door. Peter shrugged again. Grownups were weird.

2008:

"Pappy... I have to tell you something."

"What is it, baby?" Rabbit murmured sleepily. He had convinced her to let him be an automaton inside her matrix, but she had forgotten to pull out some of the human programming. He had always kinda liked the sleepy program, however.

"Peter... Six has been building something for me."

"Oh?"

"A body."

"Oh, a body, huh?" Rabbit chuckled.

There was only the hum of her systems for a long moment.

"I... uh... heh... musta mis-heard ya, baby. Did you just say Peter is building you a body?"

"Yes, Pappy," she murmured.

"Hm. And when was he gonna ask your Pappy if this was a good idea?"
Anger grew as he spoke. The nerve of that snot-nosed little so and so! What did he think he was doing?

"Pappy... I'm old enough to make that choice myself."

"Old enough? Yehr my baby! I'm suppose to protect ya from nut cases!"

"He's not a nut case! He's my friend and he's trying to help me!"

"Oh, that's great. I'm expecting you to say he's doing it because yehr in love and wanna get married!"

"Oh, Pappy!" she scoffed.

"Well, that's how you sound! All girly and gushy and stickin' up for him! Did he even ask his dad before he started playing God?"

"You know Five is having memory lapses! And was your pappy playing God when he made you?"

"Well, now, you're just making it all confused! That's not the same thing, baby!"

"You're right, it's not!" she shouted. "I'm already alive and I just want to be able to go out and live my life! Why shouldn't I get to live like you all do?"

"Baby... it's too dangerous!" Rabbit faltered. "I... I can't lose you, too!"

Qwerty sighed. She relaxed visibly and said quietly, "I'm sorry, Pappy. I can't go on like this."

"What?" he gasped.

"I can't. I'm stuck here while you all come and go, and I want to get out and live, and feel, and love... um... people. I just can't do this anymore, alright? Please don't cause any problems! I'm overseeing the whole thing myself. It'll be okay."

"But... I just don't know..."

She sank back against him and sighed. "I love you, Pappy. But I've been here for so long. I have things I want to do that I can't do here. Not really."

"Like what?" he asked miserably.

"Just... life."

"Alright," he said weakly, holding her close. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be, Pappy. You're just worried about me."

"Yeah. Now more than ever."

Peter was doing the final scans. Qwerty had all her files bundled and marked, some to stay in the HoW matrix, some to join her as she downloaded herself into the little automaton Peter had built.

Rabbit looked worriedly at it. It was well made, with the same sweet little face she had been forming in her matrix for years, when she wasn't playing human. He liked seeing her older automaton form once again, instead of the peachy human avatar. The face was pink with new copper, smooth and
well constructed, with only a few seams and rivets showing. A wig of brown hair lay ready for use.

The Spine and The Jon had joined them. They said they were worried about her, but Rabbit suspected they were there in case something went wrong, either to assist in the work... or to stop Rabbit from murdering Peter.

Not that he'd made any specific threats. They had made a vow of peace after Vietnam. Rabbit abided by it, and yet every time he looked at the beads of sweat on Peter's brow as he looked over the data, and thought of the many ways this could go wrong, well, Rabbit had the feeling that his vow of peace might not be enough to stop him if Qwerty was lost today.

"Alright. We're good to go. Qwerty..."

"Ready, Peter," she intoned.

"Wait!" cried a voice.

Rabbit put his hand to his throat. He had been on the point of saying it but hadn't had the chance. They all turned and saw Jon, staring wide-eyed at the monitor.

"Are... are you sure everything is alright?" Jon said frantically.

"It's alright, Jon," The Spine said in his most soothing baritone. "All the data has been bundled and Qwerty will be a robot soon. Let's just let..."

"No!" choked Jon, turning to the monitor.

He caught Rabbit's eye as he did so and looked away sharply. Rabbit cast a questioning glance at The Spine, who looked baffled.

Jon stepped to the monitor and murmured something into its microphone. Rabbit couldn't quite make it out.

"It's going to be alright. I'll see you soon," she replied. "With my own eyes."

"But..."

"Please, Jon... I promise, everything is going to be better after this, okay?"

The Jon's face crumpled. The Spine walked over and put his arm around him. Rabbit was rather touched. He hadn't realized how much Jon was worried about his niece.

As The Spine led Jon away, Rabbit saw the brass bot cast an unmistakable, very out of place look of anger at Peter, who was looking down at his data. What was that all about?

"Initiating download," Qwerty piped promptly.

"Just a sec," Peter mumbled, punching buttons. "Just want to double check something right quick..."

There was no response.

"Qwerty? Oh..."

"What? What is it?" Rabbit cried.

"Oh, don't worry. She just started it already. It's okay, everything looks good."
"But you we-we-were gonna check something..."

"Double check. Just part of the wire connections. I already checked it once so it's all good. I can't interrupt the download now anyway."

Rabbit leaned against the wall and stared at the little copper robot. She had a huge database even after paring out unnecessary files and things she had only needed to run the household, which would be incorporated into a Qwerty Beta program designed to replace her in that capacity. He supposed she'd want to change her name after this to avoid confusion and wondered whether she might consider taking her mother's name, and whether he wanted that or not.

Most of Lily's memories were being left behind as well; Qwerty had confided that she no longer felt the same way about Peter V and the memory of him naked was one she could do without. Rabbit was glad to hear it. It had been awkward to think of her being both his daughter and The Spine's, for a start. And he wanted her to live her life, just as she had wished. She didn't need to begin it hopelessly in love with someone.

Peter watched the progress on his monitor. "2% so far. Could someone possibly get me a snack? This is gonna take several hours."

Rabbit rolled his eyes and slid to the floor to sit. The Spine shrugged and left to for the kitchen. The Jon stood, wringing his hands. Rabbit wondered whether he was having another LSD trip. He hadn't had one in a while.

"Sit down, buddy. All we can d-d-do now is wait."

Jon looked at him and Rabbit almost recoiled. He looked terrified! But Jon always had been a softhearted character.

"It's alright, Jonny boy. We'll wait it out together," he said gently.

Jon nodded weakly and sat, staring down at his hands and wiping his eyes from time to time, saying nothing. Rabbit sighed. It was going to be a long day.

"Download complete!" cried Peter.

Rabbit jerked out of stasis guiltily. Jon was already jumping to his feet and hurrying to her docking station. Peter was once again typing madly, his fingers flying over the keys. The Spine reached down and gave Rabbit a hand up.

"Well, here it comes," The Spine murmured. "Are you ready for this?"

"No," Rabbit confessed. "I'm scared to death, buddy. But... I swear Jon is even more worried... I dunno what that's all about..."

"I'm going to power her on," Peter said.

Rabbit forgot Jon immediately and rushed to her side. Peter looked at him nervously.

"Maybe you should..." he told Rabbit.

"Does it matter?"

"You're her father. It seems kinda symbolic."
"Alright," Rabbit said.

He found the switch, tucked beneath a panel in her back, and gently clicked it. They stood in anxious silence as her body ran through a systems check. There was a soft ping and Peter nodded.

"Exactly as programmed," he murmured.

Her eyes opened. She looked around in wonder. Her eyes stopped on The Spine.

"Shiny..." she breathed in a light, high voice, eyes wide and staring.

He straightened his tie uneasily. "Qwerty," he said with a slight nod.

"Qwerty," she responded, smiling. She turned to Rabbit. "Qwerty."

Rabbit had a creeping feeling deep in his core.

"How did it go?" Peter asked her. "Are all the files in place and accessible?"

"Qwerty," she replied warmly. She looked at Jon. "Qwerty!"

"No..." Jon whispered brokenly.

"What?" Peter asked blankly.

"This is fun!" she cried. "Are there any more flowers here?"

"Flowers?" gasped Rabbit.

"I guess you're the only ones. I will greet you all again in the language of your people!"

She proceeded to nod to each of them in turn and say, "Qwerty." Rabbit slowly turned his glaring eyes toward Peter, who was already pale.

"She thinks we're flowers," Rabbit said in a very calm, very low tone.

His voice betrayed only the slightest tremble as his vow of peace fell to ashes. Five seconds later, he was face down on the floor with The Spine's knee in his back.

"Let me go! Dammit to Hell, Spine, that hurts!"

"I detected an error over the wifi, maverick," The Spine responded coolly. "Don't think I wasn't monitoring your vow of peace."

"Let me f***ing go!"

"I need you to calm down first."

"When my baby f***ing kno-kno-knows me and doesn't think her G** d***ed name means hello, then I'll f***ing calm down!"

"Why is the pretty flower crying?" asked Qwerty, staring at Jon.

Jon, who had burst into tears the moment that The Spine had tackled Rabbit, sobbed harder at this. He took her hand and held it. She swung her arm blithely in response.

"Are you my mystery date?" she asked pleasantly. Jon gasped.
"What the Hell is that supposed to mean?" Rabbit roared, struggling in vain against The Spine.

"Just lay still and let your core cool, Rabbit. Peter will find out where the error is and..."

He trailed off. Peter had slumped into a chair with his face in his hands.

"Peter?" The Spine said uneasily.

Five strolled into the HoW. "I see she's already online! How's the upgrade feel, Qwerty? Ready to go dancing?"

"Oh look!" she responded. She smiled benignly but didn't see fit to elaborate.

Five looked around, finally taking in the scene. "Peter? Peter, what is it? Did something go wrong with the upgrade?"

"Upgrade?" Rabbit shrieked, almost throwing The Spine off in his fury. The titanium robot shifted his weight and Rabbit slammed to the floor once more, cursing loudly.

"You titanium son of a -"

"Um... Spine?" Peter interrupted. "You wanna let your brother go?"

"Not if you care about your son, Peter. No, I don't think so."

Five still didn't appear to be taking it in. "Oh, now surely it isn't that bad."

"I'm a pretty, pretty princess!" crowed Qwerty.

"Oh, dear..." Five murmured.

"There's your upgrade!" Rabbit bellowed. "There's your G**d***ed f***ing upgrade! He's broken her! He's turned her into a f***ing idiot!"

"Hey!" Qwerty barked, as loudly as Rabbit. "I'm not a f***ing idiot! I'm a f***ing upgrade!"

Five choked with apparent laughter and The Spine glared at him, sparing Rabbit the effort of doing so from the floor.

"Now, everyone calm down. Spine, Rabbit needs to power down while we take a look, alright?"

"Rabbit..." The Spine began apologetically.

"No, y'know what?" Rabbit growled. "I don't even care. Go for it. Shut me off. Don't even bother to power me back on."

"Now, Rabbit..." sighed The Spine. He shook his head. "See you once we've done the diagnostic."

"Whatever."

The last thing Rabbit heard, as his brother accessed his power switch, was Jon sobbing.

Click.

He came out of stasis strapped to a table. The Spine was looking down at him sadly.
"What is this?" Rabbit cried. "Let me go!"

"I have to talk with you first."

"They couldn't do it, could they?" Rabbit gasped, panic rising. "She's broken! She's lost... she's... she's dead! Spine! Spine, my little girl! I can't handle this! I can't lose her like this, Spine!"

"Calm down!" The Spine cried.

Rabbit arched his back and screamed. He couldn't stop... She was lost! His little girl...

The Spine tore through the straps and pulled him quickly into his arms.

"Shh... Remember how you've handled this in the past... Hold still, now... Let your boiler settle... Bellows in and out slowly..." he murmured soothingly, holding him tightly. "I can't tell you everything while you're panicking. Come on Rabbit..."

"My baby..." Rabbit choked, his panic giving way to sobs. He clung to his brother and wept.

"I guess that's a bit better," The Spine sighed, rubbing his back ineffectually. "She's not dead. The data loaded out of order. Peter and his father will have to get it sorted but it's going to take a while. Some of the data is in use and has changed sectors. At this point, the damage is done and Peter says he needs time to write a program to separate and reorganize the files she downloaded all at once to make sure that they're in the correct sequence and can communicate with each other..."

"How? She's a supercomputer! How could she have messed up so badly?"

"It only takes a slight error, y'know. She's never had a robotic body. And she's been distracted lately, with the excitement and with worrying about you."

"She... she sh-sh-shouldn't worry about me..."

"Her father? Of course she does. You worried about Pappy, didn't you?"

"Yeah..."

"Alright. So he's going to write the program and get her files reorganized. Until then, it won't harm her any to walk around the way she is."

"She's like a senile old lady, Spine! We'll have to watch her every minute..."

"Well, as to that, we have a volunteer to take on that duty."

Rabbit wiped his eyes and stared. "It's Jon, isn't it?"

"Yes. He's surprised us all. He seemed adamant about taking care of her. Kept mumbling about how you did the same for her mother. It was weird."

"Well... she didn't seem real impressed with me, so..." His voice broke and he choked out a couple of sobs more before whispering, "I guess if he's lookin' at my example, he'll do alright."

Jon did his best. Rabbit tried to assist, but it seemed that his initial tantrum had left an impression on her. Though she had lost much of who she was, her memories from the point of activation remained. This meant that as she grew more lucid through being allowed to converse with family members, she...
remembered everything that had been said and slowly learned what it all meant.

And she found out that Rabbit had called her some very nasty names.

She wouldn't hear of the suggestion that he was her father. She made faces at him and picked fights and called him "big stupid baby man," asking how he liked it. Rabbit finally took to avoiding her, just to keep from either crying or smacking her.

The Spine had his own problems. To their collective horror, Qwerty had developed a fixation for him, following him around and trying to hold his hand. No matter what he said, Peter could no more get her to consider Spine her uncle than he could get her to see Rabbit as a parent.

The AI she had built to run the manor had installed far more smoothly than she had. Despite a few quirks, such as having a smart mouth and a fondness for mustard, it did its job. The Spine loathed it but still stayed in the HoW, doing the various jobs he had always done. He coped by swearing a lot at the AI, tell it not to be stupid and keeping it from shredding the row of sombreros still hanging on the wall.

Trouble was, she had given it the name Qwerty as well. It explained, once it came online, that she had intended to take on another name, but hadn't decided what.

As it happened, however, Rabbit's outburst had left her thinking her name was F***ing Upgrade. Despite her disgust for Rabbit, she took this as gospel and would only agree to leave off the expletive when they explained that it was Rabbit's favorite word. Rabbit scowled but didn't argue. It was for her own good, and besides, he really did like the word. A lot. It shocked people, and as he sometimes joked to The Spine, shocking each other was just how he and Honey had done it so it brought back happy memories. The Spine always asked him not to explain any more.

And so she was Upgrade. She learned to walk quickly, but still moved like an oversized doll. She insisted on having a flowered hat and fortunately settled for a simple cap with one flower. She liked to draw, and usually did so very well, and she grew more skilled at music as Jon worked with her, and even sang. Peter had given her a pleasant voice, at least, when she wasn't crying or generally having a fit.

For it turned out, in the absence of the lucid memories of her years with her polite and exacting mother, that she was very much her father's daughter. She was passionate, emotional, quick to anger and fussy about just about everything, in the beginning, at least. Five pointed out that she had always been moody, it just didn't register as well when your only means of expressing emotion was to flicker the lights.

The time came when it was necessary to go out and perform in the park. They didn't have the heart to just shut Qwerty off, so she was given a tambourine and allowed to join them. By then, she was much more controlled and came along when asked... as long as Rabbit wasn't the one asking.

They came up with an act that included her. She had a song that Jon insisted she had written herself, before the download. She followed The Spine around a lot, sometimes as a joke and sometimes on her own. And for one song, she danced with The Jon while Rabbit and The Spine sang together.* Jon had included that one... and Rabbit didn't seem to care for it.

They asked Jon from time to time whether she had shown any hint of remembering who she was. Jon would mournfully confirm that she hadn't.
The Spine discovered one day that she was drawing, instead of the flowers she usually favored, a young man who looked suspiciously like The Jon... if he had been human. He was usually wearing jeans and a shirt with all the buttons undone, sometimes less. In one drawing, he was completely nude, laying blessedly face down on a bed. He was always smiling. She would sit and stare at the drawings but couldn't seem to explain why she drew them. But The Spine found The Jon later, while she was in stasis, holding the drawings and crying softly. He decided not to ask.

Life settled into some kind of normal. That was the best you could get in Walter Manor.

The Spine felt badly for Rabbit. He knew what it was to lose a child, and he knew what it was to have a child choose to be lost.

And he also knew he would never give up hoping that his son and Rabbit's daughter would someday return.

Chapter End Notes

*Moanin' for You, a Mills Brothers cover they used to sing in Balboa Park. I just found someone had reposted the video that was taken down, so here's the link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9wvYeHO3cE
Father and Son Again

Chapter Summary

You really only get it when you go through it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Walter Manor, 1952:

"I was waltzing with my darlin' to the Tennessee Waltz, when an old friend I happened to see. I
introduced him to my loved one, and while they were waltzing my friend stole my sweetheart from
me..."

Davy looked up with wide eyes at his father. He had been in the manor just one day, and he couldn't
take his tiny eyes from the shiny surface of The Spine's face.

"You have a new fan," Marie said sleepily, watching from the bed.

"You're awake... I tried singing softly."

"I heard him fussing, too. But if you want to get up with him, I guess I can cope."

He grinned and continued humming and bobbing, looking down at the boy. "I know it sounds crazy,
but I think he looks like you."

"Clearly," she sighed happily.

"But... do you mean that they found a baby that looks like us?"

"That's what she said she'd do. I told her it didn't matter but she said it helped in case we didn't tell
him he was adopted."

"Why would anyone do that?"

"I guess they think it'll bother them. I can't see it, either. We went to a lot of trouble to get a child,
same as anyone. I guess he'll know we wanted him enough to go through all that."

"We did have help! But... wait..." He examined Davy's face carefully. "So he looks like me, too?"

"Well, when you wear the makeup!"

"He looks like me..."
"And you just fell in love with him even more, didn't you?" she laughed.

"I couldn't. I'm in up to my ears already."

He kissed Davy's cheek and the baby fussed hungrily. "Oops... I guess he wasn't just lonely."

"I'll get his bottle," she said, hopping out of bed.

The Spine kept dancing the baby around, keeping him calm until she returned.

"Mama will be back soon with your food, buddy. That just gives me time to tell you I love you," he murmured. "Welcome to Walter Manor, Davy boy."

Walter Manor, 1995:

"Things going better, Peter?" The Spine asked.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. Money's still tight, but the kid's doing better, starting to learn to humor his teachers."

"That's important," chuckled The Spine.

"And thanks to his mother's hard work, they are letting him take on more challenging material."

"I wouldn't fight Annie either!"

Peter continued to tinker with his repairs. "It's a challenge. I don't know how you handled two! Oh... sorry, old man."

"Why?"

"Well... I'd sort of assumed... we all assumed... that the subject was verboten."

"What subject? My family?"

"Mostly Dave, honestly. Well... it's all pretty delicate, isn't it? I've avoided talking about Lily myself, I admit, and Marie... well, there it is. It's all awkward."

The Spine sighed. "Is that why you never ask me about Peter? Advice, I mean."

"No, that's because I'm too stubborn to take advice," Peter chuckled. "But now and then I've wanted to ask questions. I just didn't want to reopen old wounds."

"I appreciate it, but it's really unnecessary. He'll... he'll come to his senses eventually."

"Will he? Sorry! I was under the impression that he'd lost them," Peter said sourly.

"I really do understand why he did it. I just wish he'd seen it our way."

Peter shook his head. "You're more generous than I am about it. I'll never understand it if I live to be one hundred."

"You have a son, though. You wouldn't want to shut him out even if he turned his back on you."
"Well, no, but I'd be pretty pissed off. I mean, Dave... how could he go so long without so much as a letter or a phone call?"

"He... probably thinks I'm angry."

"You could call and tell him you're not."

Peter worked in silence. He stopped and sighed.

"But you won't."

"No."

"Pride?"

"No... Maybe a little. He said that was it, though. So I'll wait as long as it takes. Unless he contacts me..." The Spine shook his head.

"I guess he made himself clear. I'm sorry, old man."

They finished the rest of the repairs without speaking.

Balboa Park, 2009:

"Rabbit, there are children present!"

"I'm just makin' toast, Th' Spine!"

The audience, small but enthusiastic, roared with laughter. The Spine fought the urge to join them. It wasn't just that he was at last performing again, or that they were so well received, that made him so happy.

It was them. Halfway through the crowds. Golden hair, a familiar face, laughing with two almost identical younger laughing faces. He could tell just as if it were twenty years earlier. He had sent to Rabbit by wifi and he had seen them, too. It could only be Sunshine, Julia, and the generation after that... who he soon hoped to meet.

After the performance, they gathered their instruments and chatted with the audience. The Spine wasted no time in hurrying to her, but Rabbit still beat him there and swept her up in a hug.

She beamed at him. "Rabbit, I believe you already know Julia."

"Julia, baby!" Rabbit cried. "I'd have known that smile anywhere!"

Julia smiled. "Grandpappy Rabbit!"

Rabbit giggled. "In the copper."

"Grandpappy Rabbit, this is Emma."

"Yours, honey? Hey there, pixie!"

Emma smiled shyly. Rabbit winked and looked up at Julia happily.
"Look at you! You're as pretty as your mama! And almost as pretty as your great grandma."

"What?" laughed Julia. "Oh, right! Honeybee!"

Rabbit sighed with feeling. "Julia the first. Yeah. I wish Honey had met you all. Then she'd feel like she really had kids and grandkids."

"But she did!" Sunshine said, puzzled. "One, at least."

"Oh... yeah." Rabbit glanced briefly at Upgrade.

"I'd like to hear an explanation for that look," Sunshine told The Spine softly as Rabbit slumped away to chat with a few more fans before they left.

"I'd like to give you one," he replied. "But it's kind of a family secret at the moment. Walter family, that is. I mean..."

"I do know what you mean," she assured him. "Walter Manor."

"Right. Where are the other kids?" he asked carefully, holding back the question he wanted most to ask.

"Julia is the only one who really remembers you all. The others weren't interested in 'silly robot bands.'"

"We get that a lot... But... Why did you come? Isn't Dave still... Oh, no. You didn't split up, did you?"

"No, sweetie! I just thought it was about time we stopped hiding. I told Dave that it was time to clear the air and start over. I'd like to be the first to say I'm sorry, Spine!"

She was smiling but there were tears in her eyes. He pulled her into a hug.

"There's nothing you need to apologize for, Sunshine," he murmured.

"I could have acted sooner. I didn't want to make waves at home. Silly, a woman with a psychology degree who can't handle her own husband's irrational fear..."

"It's psychology, not mind control. He's the one who makes his own choices."

"I know. But... Spine, you have the chance to see him again, soon."

He had the feeling that his excitement was written all over his face, despite his practiced blank stare. In spite of everything, there was nothing he wanted more than to be with his son again. He laughed softly, tried to speak, and choked almost immediately, his face contorting with pain. It was too much!

Sunshine took his hands and smiled. "Ssh, Spine. I thought so. I told him you'd forgive him. Maybe I shouldn't have..."

"No," he whispered. "Of course I will! I have! I just want to be his father again but he made himself clear so I left him alone."

"Oh, sweetie... Things have changed. Just a little. He got... Well, don't leap to conclusions, but he's had his own cancer scare."

The Spine's systems hiccuped and Sunshine jerked her hands free as his grip tightened involuntarily.
He stared at her, neck servos twitching.

Rabbit was at his side in an instant, steadying him. "Whoa, there, cowboy! The po-po-po-po-position of glitching automaton's been filled so just stop yehr malfunctions before I gotta challenge you to a duel," he joked loudly. The he muttered rapidly, "Spine 2925 silver reboot systems." The Spine sagged in his arms and Sunshine gasped.

"Spine! Rabbit, what's going on?"

"He... ugh... weighs a ton. Really." He slung The Spine's arm over his shoulder and tried to look casual as the automaton's server hummed back to life. "After he lost Mary, we found out he ain't as young as he used to be. He's better than the rest of us but now and then he malfunctions. He blew a few gaskets at the time cryin' over her and threw up a lot and Petes never really has figured out how to fix it. Spine don't even know it happened most of the time. The fans think it's part of the act. But what happened, baby? Why'd he freak out?"

"I should have prepared him better," she said miserably. The Spine was standing on his own feet once more, completing his start-up sequence. "Look, Dave just had a small cancerous mole removed, no sign of spreading. He's perfectly fine, Spine. Too much time baking in the sun, that's all. But the experience made him realize that you never know where it'll come from. He's ready to come back."

"Yeah?" Rabbit gritted, showing far less forgiveness than The Spine had. "Where the Hell is he, then?"

"Sitting in the car," she sighed.

The Spine, coming back online as she said it, jerked upright. "He is?"

"Whoa, hold on..." Rabbit interrupted. "So he shows up just like that? Just turns up after twenty-six damned years and says, 'Hey, Pappy, sorry I was such an ungrateful little bastard. Now that the sun has given me cancer I decided I have a father again.'"

"So did we," she said meekly. "Pretty much..."

"Only because he woulda made yehr life miserable otherwise!"

"Rabbit!" The Spine snapped. "That's enough! I just want to try and heal this..."

"What the Hell is he expecting? He's been away longer than he was here!"

"Which is why I want this!" The Spine barked. He lowered his voice as the fans still chatting with Jon and Upgrade turned to stare. "It's been long enough. You can stay here or go home! I'm going to go see him!"

"So he can break your heart again?" Rabbit growled as The Spine started toward the parking lot with Sunshine. "After what he did, I wouldn't trust a thing he said..."

The Spine looked back and said coldly, "If your daughter was lost, even if she did it on purpose, even if she was gone for fifty years, you'd forgive her. Wouldn't you?"

Rabbit looked as though he'd been hit with an aluminum baseball bat. Sunshine looked back and forth between them.

"I have the feeling you just crossed a line," she murmured.
The Spine turned away from the sight and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Rabbit..."

"No..." came Rabbit's voice, very faintly. "Go on, then. Do what ya gotta do. I... I'm gonna head back..."

"Rabbit..." The Spine said, turning.

But Rabbit was already walking away. He brushed past Jon and Upgrade on his way. Upgrade tipped her hat absently and smiled at a light post. Jon stared after Rabbit, his expression inscrutable.

"More family secrets?" Sunshine asked hesitantly.

He sighed and bit his lip. "I lost my temper. I'll explain it to you later, family secret be damned."

They resumed their course, Julia and her daughter following. The Spine felt terrible about Rabbit, but was distracted by his anxiety and eagerness about seeing his son again.

He saw the car. The same red mustang, still in cherry condition. Inside it, a man he would have known anywhere, no matter how he had aged. He couldn't help it now. He broke into a run, slowing only as he entered the parking lot. There he stopped, staring at the car. Dave turned and saw him and looked away quickly.

He wanted to scream his name, to weep and laugh and just hold his son once more. Instead, The Spine composed himself, walked slowly to the car and looked in the window. "Dave?" he murmured.

Dave opened the door slowly and got out. "Hi... Hi, Dad."

The Spine sobbed softly, "Davy boy... son... I... I'm so glad you came..."

Dave looked apprehensive. "Dad... I'm sorry," he whispered. "I've been an idiot. I realized that a long time ago but I never thought you'd see me after... after I abandoned you when she died. I know you probably hate me for that..."

"No..."

Dave seemed to need to talk, to unburden himself. He rubbed at his eyes with his fingertips. "Well, you should. I have reasons but no excuse. I should have listened to you. I just... didn't want anything to mess it up, y'know? With Sunshine. It was too perfect and... I had my doubts about Blue Matter and when Mom got sick it was like confirmation of all the data I'd seen. Watching you losing her... I was terrified, Dad! I was so afraid of going through the same thing... and I just left you to suffer alone..."

His voice broke and The Spine at last had his chance. He held his arms out and Dave gave him one searching look, the same look he'd given him the day he had wandered off at the Rose Parade. And at last he burst into tears and stepped into his father's arms.

"I'm sorry, Dad!"

"Ssh..." The Spine breathed, stroking his back. "It's alright now. I only wish you'd come home sooner. I've been waiting. I was angry for a while. I was angry at everything and everyone. But I never hated you. I only missed you."

"Dad..."
A car drove by. From it came a rousing chorus of, "Whoooooo!" followed by laughter and someone shouting for them to get a room.

"I guess... You don't look old enough to be my father..." Dave murmured. "More like my son."

"Let them yell. Or better yet, let's go back to Walter Manor!"

Dave looked doubtful. Sunshine approached at last and wiped a tear from her husband's face.

"That would be wonderful," she agreed. "We can catch up."

She looked at The Spine as she said it. He sighed silently. She had no idea what she was asking. But he had promised.

When they got home, Rabbit was nowhere to be seen. Peter V met The Spine at the door and said, "So. Little brother strikes again."

The Spine smiled weakly. "How bad is it?"

"I didn't get the chance to ask but I figured you were involved. He's gotten kinda used to Upgrade's crap, and you piss him off better than anyone. He came charging in here trailing steam like an old locomotive and went and locked himself in the HoW."

"Look, I'll talk to him..."

But Peter was looking past him in shock. He laughed delightedly.

"Sunshine! Dave! Dave... you swine! Is that why Rabbit's having a fit?"

"Not entirely," Sunshine muttered, looking sidelong at The Spine.

He caught Dave up in a hug, laughing. David flailed as Peter cried, "What are you doing back after all these years, you son of a-"

"Shut it, Peter," Dave said dryly, pushing himself free and glancing out the open door. "We've got a lot to talk about, okay? I was a swine, yeah. Fair enough..."

"What's a swine, grandpa?" asked Emma, trotting inside with Julia.

"Oops..." Peter muttered. He looked down at her. "Hello! Welcome to Walter Manor! Would you all like the tour? Dave could have given it once but I suspect he'd find a few surprises now. The Spine here has something he needs to take care of so I'll show you around."

"Peter..." The Spine began as he led them away.

"Hm?"

"Has Six made any progress?"

"A little more each day. Still doesn't have all the bugs worked out, though. You'd think with all these new workers..." He shrugged.

The Spine watched them file out. His great-granddaughter waved as she walked away. He dropped his hand from waving back and started up the stairs.
The door was indeed locked. He gave it a careful thump in the right place and it popped open. He walked slowly into the darkened HoW.

"A N3W AUTOMATON HAZ 3NT3R3D. GR33T3RINGZ TH3 SP13N."

"Where is Rabbit, Qwerty?"

"That ain't Qwerty," came a soft, forlorn voice. He turned and saw blue and green eyes staring at him from the deepest corner of the HoW.

"RAB1T 1Z 1N TH3 NORTHW3ST CORN3R OF TH3 HALL OF WIR3Z."

"Thank you, Qwerty," The Spine sighed.

"WOULD U LI3K SOM3 MUST3R?"

"No," The Spine said shortly, making his way past loops of hanging wire.

"ADDING..."

"Stop being stupid, Qwerty."

"0K."

The hall settled back into a soft hum as The Spine crouched before Rabbit.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I shouldn't have said it."

"She ain't lost."

"I know."

"Spine..." Rabbit pleaded. "How much longer does he have work on that program? What if he gives up? What if he finds out she got erased? What'll I do?"

He put his arm around Rabbit and held him. "Well... suppose he does..."

"Spine!" Rabbit cried piteously. "What the Hell... Yehr supposed ta tell me I'm overreacting!"

He buried his face in The Spine's vest and howled.

"I know." He settled next to Rabbit. "But it's still her. You'll just have to start fresh."

"She hates me!"

"No..."

"She tells me three times a day!"

"Oh." That made it harder...

He held Rabbit and sighed as Qwerty's screen scooted silently around them, running diagnostics and commenting on Rabbit's oil leak.

"I always said..." sighed Rabbit at length, "that I didn't want an upgrade..."

"That was a pun. You must be feeling better."
"I'm not. But... I do wanna see Sunshine and the girls some more. And... how was it, Spine? Seeing him again?"

"It was... oh, it was a dream come true!"

"So it was like she said?"

"Better! Oh, Rabbit... He's back, and he's sorry, and everything is okay now!"

Rabbit snorted. "I ain't heard ya this happy in decades."

"I haven't been."

"Yeah. I understand."

"Well... come downstairs with me. It won't fix things for you to sit in here with that idiotic AI."

"Why does it always try to put mustard on everything?" Rabbit asked, getting up.

"I have my theories. But I'd rather not talk about them."

"Hm. Yeah. I get it."

When they went downstairs, they found Sunshine happily talking with Annie.

"It's just so thrilling! Spine never talked much about any of you but you could tell how much he... Oopsy!"

"It's alright, Annie. Where are the girls?"

"They're out back running around," Sunshine said.

They went outside and saw Jon running after Emma, who was giggling. Upgrade watched them. She turned as they approached and stared at Rabbit for a long moment.

"What..." Rabbit asked faintly. "Why are ya staring at me?"

"You remind me of something," she said quietly.

"Wh-wh-what?" Rabbit gasped.

"It was..." She put her finger to her forehead and said brightly, "I hate you! My turn, The Jon!"

She bolted, in stiff, shuffling steps, after the others.

"You see?" Rabbit gritted.

"I'm sorry," The Spine said gently. Rabbit glanced at him. His angry expression wavered.

"I'm going back inside," he whispered, his voice trembling. "Before she decides to tell me again."

The Spine watched him hurry away.

"Upgrade..." he said, when she returned. "Why do you always tell Rabbit you hate him?"

"Who's Rabbit?" she asked pleasantly.
"He's..." The Spine began, but she was already turning away to follow a butterfly.

"Here doggy!" she cried brightly.

The Jon ran up. "This is fun!" he giggled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing new..."

Jon looked toward Upgrade, his smile fading, and sighed. "I almost thought she remembered yesterday," he mumbled.

"Rabbit needs her to, Jon. This is tearing him apart."

Jon looked down at his hands.

"Jon... I'm not putting any of this on you, you're doing great, alright? I can't look after her because she... well, she keeps trying to get me to snuggle her." He shook his head. "And she got a bad impression of Rabbit that day. We all really appreciate you watching over her."

Jon wiped at his eyes. "Spine..." he whispered. "She... she's... she's got to be in there somewhere."

"Of course she is..." The Spine murmured, frowning. Even when he was upset, Jon wasn't usually this somber.

"Because if Peter can't find her... if he can't get her back..." He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes and whispered brokenly, "I don't think I'll be able to stand it... I'll... I don't know what I'll do!"

"Jon?" The Spine said softly, worried.

Upgrade toddled up to Jon and patted his head. "Tag, dummy."

She shuffled away.

Jon sobbed softly beside him. "Why did she do it?" he moaned. "Why did she leave me... us?"

The Spine was getting the feeling there was more here than anyone knew. Of course, it wasn't the first time he'd suspected something, there had been clues for years, but he didn't dare mention it to Rabbit.

"She was willing to risk losing her mind in order to be free," he told Jon gently. "The HoW was a prison to her. You've been in prison... You know how that feels."

"Yeah. She said that too. But I just wish she'd been happy with... I wish I could have been able to... Spine... I want to tell someone but..."

"Tell them what, Jon?"

Jon looked at him miserably for a moment, finally closing his eyes. "Nothing. I just wish it had been enough. That's all."

"Oh... yeah. It's a shame," The Spine muttered.

They watched her shuffle about after Emma, and fell into silence. The Spine looked sidelong at Jon, wondering how he could have doubted what was now staring him in the face.
Chapter End Notes

What's all this? Read on and find out.
The Definition of Family

Chapter Summary

Raising questions about whether a group of automatons can really say honestly that they're siblings, and whether it matters... when it comes to love.

Chapter Notes

No, I'm not going there. It's a twist though. Even The Jon has to grow up, if only a little.

Someone just posted this on Tumblr: http://bee-the-gatekeeper.tumblr.com/post/124040088176/kazook-yeah-spg-landofcryptsandhelium-i-am

It's the song I'm referring to here, the one I'm suggesting was written by Upgrade when she was an AI (obviously just in my headcanon). And it does sound like it could have been written in the 70s.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2008:

"Qwerty? I have great news!"

Qwerty's monitor swung forward eagerly. "Is it ready?

Peter VI nodded excitedly. "Just a few last adjustments and we'll be ready for download!"

She wanted to leap, to sing! And once she was in her new robot body... she would do both.

"But..." he said slowly.

If she'd had blood, it would have run cold. She knew what was coming.

"You've got to tell your pappy."

"I know."

"I've told The Spine and The Jon already..."

"You told Jon?"

"Well... yes."

"How did he react?" she asked uneasily.
"You're worried about him? I'd be more worried about Rabbit!" He shivered. "I hate to say it, but Rabbit gives me the creeps..."

That was her pappy, alright. "Just tell me how Jon reacted, Peter!"

"Well, he didn't. He didn't really do much of anything. I don't think he really understands."

Qwerty wasn't comforted. Didn't understand? On the contrary, she was sure that he did.

1975:

"Jon, could you do me a favor?"

Jon looked up from his finger painting and beamed. "Sunshine! Of course I will!"

"Could you look in on Qwerty for me when I'm not here? I only come in once a week now and I think she needs company. Lily is so distracted now with Peter and The Spine hasn't had much to say to anyone since he found out."

They sighed as one.

"So maybe go see her sometimes?"

"M'kay. I do anyway but she and Lily were always talking girl talk before."

"Well, now they're not. It's really complicated, so keep it simple, okay?"

"Okay!"

Jon entered the HoW that afternoon, after The Spine went for a walk with Marie.

"Uncle Jon?" Qwerty typed.

"Hi, Qwerty! How are you today?"

"Fine."

"Oh, good! I was just walkin' around and I thought I'd come up to see you."

"Oh."

"Whatcha doin'?"

"The usual."

"Oh. Is it fun?"

"No."

"Ah."

Silence.
"Hey, ya wanna see my new mouse?"

"Mouse?"

"Yeah!" He fished in his pocket. "He was eatin' my socks so I decided to keep him."

"You want a pet that eats your socks?"

"No, I'll give him cheese an' stuff. Where is he?"

"Did you put him in a cage?"

"Nah, just my pocket! It's big enough."

"But... he probably ran away!"

"Oh. You think so?"

"Well, yes, he's a wild mouse, they don't just stay put!"

"But I told him to sit!"

The teletype machine went crazy. "Ugh! He won't sit unless he's trained to sit! How old are you, anyway? Wild mice aren't suitable to have as pets!"

Jon smiled. "I know."

"You know?"

"Gotcha talkin', though!"

"What?"

"You were just givin' me short answers but now you're talkin' to me. I like your voice."

"What, the paper?"

"No, silly! Your real voice."

Silence.

After a minute, she said, "I don't have one..."

"Yeah, you do."

"You can hear it?"

"Of course I can hear it. It's really nice."

"Oh..."

The Jon grinned and sank into the beanbag chair.

"Let's make up a song together!"

Qwerty slid her monitor forward, bemused, and listened as he began to hum.
"It would be easier if we connected..." she said hesitantly.

"What? You can do that?"

"Well, yes. I hook up a wire to you and you enter my matrix..."

It sounded filthy. Jon giggled loudly.

"What?"

"Oh... nothing... it just sounded like... pffft!" he snorted. "No, it's okay... it's okay, we'll just play like this. I should ask your pappy before I do any connecting to anything."

"He doesn't... oh, Unkie Jon!" she typed, shocked. "Were you thinking... What a terrible thing to... that's just... dirty!"

"Oh, I don't know. It all depends on who it is..." he said with a sly grin.

"Well, it's me and that isn't funny!"

"I'm sorry." He hadn't really meant anything by it, but he decided it was time to change the subject.

"You should be!!!" she typed.

"I am. What song should we write?"

Pause. "I don't know..."

"How about something about mice?"

"I don't think so."

"Something to make you feel better, then? Something about being happy?"

"I'm not happy."

"Something about being unhappy?"

"How would that help?"

"Something about being just okay?"

"No... well..." There was a long pause.

"Qwerty?"

"Yeah. That's good. Something about... something I've been thinking about lately. About Pappy, and Sunshine, and Lily, and Uncle Spine, and... and all of you... You all keep coming to see me even when I don't talk much, because you don't want me to be alone. I do appreciate it but I just feel so bad sometimes. I feel alone."

"You're not," he said gently, feeling warm all over.

"I know. And... that's what I want to write. I am not alone."

"I love it," he said, smiling. What a nice idea for a song!
1983:

"Qwerty?"

The HoW was dark and silent. It had only been that way a handful of times since the "birth" of Qwerty. It had been that way after Honeybee died, after Rabbit went away to Vietnam, after Armand died and after Lily's miscarriage.

And now it was time once again for mourning. Qwerty couldn't wear black. So she made the HoW black. The only light was coming from a pair of gleaming blue eyes. She'd always thought he had pretty eyes.

Marie was gone, and it was a like losing everyone all over again. A confidant. A friend. And due to the assimilation of Lily's memories, it was like losing her own mother.

But with all that, she still didn't have the heart to totally shut out Jon. There had always been something special about him. He was Sunshine's good friend and Sunshine had become Qwerty's friend. Jon had sat with Qwerty after Armand died, when her Pappy had needed rest and Sunshine couldn't be there. He'd played games and sung songs with her. He'd very politely asked Rabbit's permission to interface with her so that they could play properly. Rabbit had agreed on the condition that they were both in automaton avatars. Why he refused to allow her to show Jon his human avatar was a mystery. She'd shown it to Rabbit, and he'd just given it a long, scowling stare before declaring an absolute no on its use. Admittedly, it was rather attractive; she knew he'd been a hippie for a while and had thrown that into the design. But it was just Jon. What danger could he possibly be?

He certainly looked harmless enough now as he stood, hatless and wigless, staring up into the wiring hopefully with a little panel open on his skull plate.

"Won't you let me in? I know you're sad. But you know I won't let you be alone."

Qwerty gloomily extended a wire and connected it to his head port.

Jon sank into a chair, smiling. That was better! Now he could comfort her! He'd been so worried when he came into the HoW. Wanda had been up to tell her earlier. Everyone was busy taking care of The Spine, and he surely needed it. But Qwerty was complicated. Jon knew that losing Marie, for Qwerty, would be like losing her mother all over again. The last time she lost someone important to her (besides Lily) she had tried to kill herself.

Whenever Jon thought of that, he started to cry. Just a little. If no one else remembered Qwerty, he did. He always would. There had always been something special about her.

He drifted into her special inner world and saw her, standing in darkness alone. Poor thing...

His avatar appeared. He melted into it and turned to her.

"Come here," he murmured, and she threw herself into his arms and wept. "Go ahead..." he murmured, stroking her hair soothingly. "I won't tell you everything's okay. It's just... how it is. Sometimes ya gotta cry about that."
Rabbit did come up after a little while to check on Qwerty. Jon told him everything would be alright. He would stay until she was ready for him to go. He liked being there anyway, and she was sad. And that was reason enough. He also knew that Rabbit was the only one strong enough to help with The Spine, who had suffered a malfunction, and that The Spine needed his big brother. Rabbit, weary from head to toe, thanked him, told Qwerty he loved her, and left.

"Thank you, Unkie Jon," she murmured. She was curled against him on her sofa. He liked it. They'd played games before in this space, but she'd never cuddled him. He supposed she didn't want to upset her pappy. He was kinda needy...

"You can rest. I'll still be here."

"I'm not tired."

She cuddled a little closer. Jon felt... strange.

It happened now and then. He didn't entirely understand it. He would look at her, and a strange little buzz would pass through him. It felt good but he wondered about it, whether it was the drugs or a short in his wiring. He'd considered love, but he'd felt love. It was warm and open and happy and it included everyone, including Qwerty.

But the little buzz wasn't for everyone. It was just for her. Maybe someday he would ask someone about it.

"Unkie Spine must be even worse than we thought. Pappy wasn't even worried about you interfacing with me."

"Yeah. I guess he's got too much on his mind to worry about whether we're using the 'meatbag' avatars."

She giggled a little. "He always calls them that! He says such funny things sometimes!"

She took a deep breath and cried a little in the next moment, as though making up for the moment of lightness.

"It's okay to laugh, if you feel it," he told her, giving her a squeeze. "It helps."

"Yeah." She sighed. "Y'know why Pappy said he didn't like your human avatar?"

He'd seen it? "No, why?"

"He said it looked like Tommy."

"Tommy who?"

"From the musical. Roger Daltry."*

"Oh..." he breathed. That sounded so cool! "He never did like The Who..."

"I think it was more the way it looked than anything to do with their music, silly."

"Oh. Weird."

But he had always wondered about it, and maybe it could keep her thoughts distracted for a while, if that was possible with a computer of her capacity.
"Qwerty... do you think I could just look at it?"

"Well..." She sat up and looked at him a little shyly. "I dunno. It was just... I was actually thinking of Tommy when I made it. The hair, you know. Lily and I always kinda dug Tommy..."

"If you don't want to show me, that's okay."

"No, I'm just warning you. It's... sort of sexy."

Jon beamed at her. "You think I'm sexy?" he said slyly.

She rolled her eyes and he laughed. She was cheering up a little and that pleased him. He never teased her much but if it got her out of her funk, he was all for it.

"You're my uncle," she said simply, as if that dismissed all possibility of finding him sexy.

"Then there's no danger in showing me," he said.

"Alright. Pappy never actually said I couldn't show you."

"That's the same as saying you can!"

She giggled, and in the next second, there it was. Jon sat up, staring at the figure before him. He hadn't expected this! The human avatar was the same height as he was, with the same hair. His skin was tanned, his eyes dazzling blue. The face was all at once familiar and foreign, young and surprisingly handsome. He wore just jeans, and a shirt with the buttons opened. It really was sexy!

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's great," he said, smiling. He'd never thought of himself as sexy. "I... I wish I could try it out. Does it feel real? Can you breathe and eat and sneeze and pee and... Well, that's enough for a start! Can you?"

"Yeah! Well, I did as much as I could manage with what I had. I have Lily's data but not male... um... information. You wouldn't really need to pee, of course, or anything else you do with those parts... hee... It's programmed to respond to you, though, so that's not my problem!" she giggled, embarrassed.

"Oh, Qwerty... That sounds amazing!" he sighed longingly, staring at the fleshy figure before him. "But Rabbit said..."

"I know." She smiled impishly. "But... if you want to just try it on, I won't breathe a word about it to him."

"What?"

"Go ahead! I'm old enough to make my own choices, don't you think?"

He grinned and jumped up. "Yes, I do! How do I switch?"

"Just touch it."

He reached out and put his hand on its shoulder. There was a soft crackle and he was looking out of eyes that blinked and felt air, feeling the tickle of fabric on his skin, breathing, his heart pounding with excitement at the newness and at being a real boy. He had nose hair! And eyelashes! And genitalia... That was odd. But the jeans were tight against them and he kind of liked it. He wondered
if that was wrong... He'd never really thought about it.

He looked at her and laughed and it felt glorious.

"Nice, isn't it?" she giggled.

She was smiling at him. Her beautiful smile... His heart was thundering in his chest. He was so glad she had cheered up and yet, it was more than that. Her smile... it warmed him. It made him tingle, it made tears come to his eyes.

She stood and winked, and suddenly she was wearing her human avatar. It was just like the robotic one, made to look fleshy.

"Our secret!" she laughed.

She was laughing instead of crying. He should be trying to keep her that way, but he was too distracted to think much of it. She was so beautiful... He couldn't remember seeing a woman more lovely. He'd never realized... She reached out and took his hand and he felt it, her skin warm against his. His body, out in the HoW, felt the familiar buzz. Here, it felt like a chill running over the outside of his body, and a terrific heat inside it. He felt her soft skin and trembled, wanting to feel more...

No... She's my niece... It's wrong... This isn't supposed to happen!

"Pappy says that the only good thing about fleshies are the soft hugs," she said with a smile. She stroked his hand. "But it's just nice to be able to feel, isn't it?"

He felt as though his mind was opening wide. It reminded him of an acid trip, but he wasn't hallucinating. He watched her... it was like a dream... he couldn't tear his gaze away.

*How did I not understand? I've seen so many romances since I was built...*

"It's wonderful," he whispered, shivering.

"Oh, sorry... I think the shivering was why Pappy preferred a nice firm hug."

"Can I have one of those?" he asked hesitantly.

"Of course!"

She put her arms around his upper body and squeezed, resting her head on his shoulder. He wrapped his around her in turn. She was soft, and warm and... and wonderful! He closed his eyes... swallowed hard... so many things were happening at once... He thought his heart would burst. He hadn't had a heart until now, and it was pounding so hard it ached. It wasn't a malfunction, the little buzz he had felt just for her. It was a feeling. The love he had thought he understood had opened into vast dimensions.

But she was his niece! This wasn't supposed to happen, but he couldn't make himself let her go. He wanted to say it, to open his mouth and just tell her... There was something about the design of this simulated flesh being that made the feelings so overwhelming, so fiery and intolerable. It rose into his throat before he could stop himself.

"I love you," he said breathlessly, grimacing a second later. Oops!

"Oh! Well, I love you, too..."

What?
"...Unkie Jon."

He gasped and swallowed hard, his throat suddenly aching. How could she have missed the longing in his declaration? How could she have heard the benign affections of an uncle? He wanted her, needed her... he couldn't stay in this body, not knowing what he knew, not with her thinking he was safe... He wanted to do more, to kiss her and show her how he really meant it... but he couldn't. She loved him, but not as a lover. He wanted, with a power he could hardly deny, to be just that. She was all he could see, all he wanted. And he wanted her desperately.

But to her, he was Unkie Jon.

"Are you alright?"

Fighting tears, he forced himself to say, as calmly as possible, "I'm ready to go back to my regular avatar."

"Oh! But... Well... alright."

In a flash they were robots, in appearance, and in feeling. It helped, but only a little. The physical longing had vanished. But he could never go back to the way he was. Not now.

_I love you..._

He wiped his eyes and she frowned. "What's wrong?"

"It was so nice that I got all teary about it I guess," he lied.

"Silly," she sighed. "You know, I feel a lot better. You've been up all night, haven't you? I'll bet that's why you're shaking. The transfer was too much strain. Even robots need rest, y'know. You can go into stasis... the real thing, not the kind where you stay with me. I'll be okay for a while."

He wanted to run, to keep running. What would everyone say if they knew? But she was sad, she needed him...

"Not here..." he faltered. "I can't rest here... I need to be in my room... I'm alright. Let's... let's play a game or something..."

"I can send you out to your body and you can go to your room, silly."

He wanted to refuse, but he wanted even more desperately to escape. He nodded and was returned to the HoW.

Jon hurried down the stairs, crying silently. No one asked why. They all thought they knew.

_I love her. And I can't love her._

He curled up in his room, shaking with sobs, and went into stasis.

1992:

"Pappy? What's wrong? You've been tense since you came in."
"Sorry, baby. I didn't mean for it to show."

"What is it?"

"Did you know that Peter... that's the fifth... has agreed to modify The Jon to run on some cru-cru-cruddy soda drink?"

She stared. "You're joking..."

"Thank you! That's exactly what I said! 'Ya gotta be kidding me!' And he swore he was serious. It ain't even April first."

"But... but why?"

"Money's short, baby. Peter said it's getting so bad that it was either this or sell one of us."

"That's a horrible thing to say!" she cried.

How could she have ever thought she was in love with that man? How could anyone as sweet as he had once been have become such an adult?

"But it's also the truth," he sighed. "When it gets that bad, ya gotta do what ya gotta do. I just wish he'd found something else..."

"But how does it help? We'll have to keep buying the soda!"

"They're providing it. It's part of the deal."

"And if they stop making it?"

Rabbit was silent.

"What? Peter can just change him back, right?"

"That's the thing I was angry about," he muttered bitterly. "The contract says no cha-cha-cha-changin' him back."

They sat in her inner chamber, staring at the checker board between them, neither even considering making a move.

"So..." she whispered at last. "If this stuff doesn't do well, he'll die."

Rabbit clenched his fists and nodded. She stared at him. It hit her all at once and she was not prepared.

Jon...

"Pappy..." she choked.

"C'mere, baby," he murmured.

She sat beside him and he put his arm around her. As she rested against his shoulder, staring at the abandoned chess board, she felt as if everything had been thrown into sharp contrast against the bleak backdrop of a world without The Jon in it. It was a world she had no desire to behold. She would sooner die... and she meant it this time.
She didn't love Peter anymore. She had already figured that out. She just hadn't realized he'd been replaced. But he had and she knew it now. The truth burned in front of her eyes, and she couldn't believe it hadn't been as clear before.

Had she really even loved Peter, or had she loved the idea of being in love, of how human it made her feel? She had been so young... but now, she was on the point of having to watch The Jon be changed into something else, and maybe die from it. She could lose him.

And she couldn't stop crying at the thought.

She said none of this to her Pappy. He thought of The Jon as his brother. She wasn't troubled by that; she had asked her mother long ago and been told that the Walter automatons considered themselves family but were not in fact related. If one of them took a fancy to another, it wouldn't matter, really. Not from a genetic standpoint. They weren't male or female, not blood relatives. It was all up to them how to define themselves.

That was the psychological aspect of it. Outside of the obvious drawing of Rabbit's Blue Matter that made him truly connected to her as a parent, they could decide what was family. And psychologically, she had never seen Jon as a relative. Uncle had only been a word, a title. He had been a friend, someone who had been there for her from the day he was asked to help keep her safe from herself. He was older, and yet he wasn't. He didn't feel older.

He wasn't her uncle, not really. That said, it still came as a shock to realize that she had fallen in love with him.

Her pappy held her close, murmuring soothing words mingled with apologies for having made her cry over her uncle. She saw no reason to correct him. After all, Jon clearly saw things that way; he hadn't interfaced with her since the day Marie died. She suspected hugging her so tightly in a soft, sensitive human body had felt terribly inappropriate to a man who considered himself her uncle. She could tell him the truth, but what good would it do? As far as he was concerned, they were family.

But it hadn't felt that way in his arms. She hadn't suddenly fallen in love or anything, but she had liked it, and she had from time to time thought fondly of how it had felt. Pappy gave pappy hugs, and Unkie Spine just had a fatherly air about him. But Jon, especially in that body, felt like a secret boyfriend...

Her tears resumed quietly, prompting Rabbit to tighten his arm around her. Typical, she thought. From one hopeless romance to another. The stupid part was that with Jon, it didn't have to be hopeless. If he only loved her, they could interface and be together all they wanted!

At least... until they stopped making Crystal Pepsi.

"I know, baby... shh..." Rabbit murmured as her quiet tears grew into sobs.

2005:

"I've tried ebay, Amazon... there's just none left!"

Qwerty couldn't make elaborate facial expressions; not that Five could see. But she could manage a flat stare, which was all she needed.
"Why come up and tell me this?" she asked coldly. She always sounded cold, but she hoped he understood just how cold she meant it...

"Because... because this is something I don't dare tell anyone else. I don't want a lawsuit but if they find out, if there is one, well, I guess I'm hoping they just won't find out so it's between you and me. And Jon."

"You're going to change him back..." she said.

She couldn't bear it. She had been so afraid when they told her that even Pepsi had no more surplus stock to send. She had been watching him, waiting to see him suddenly wind down and stop. She was sure she would just shut herself down when he did.

"Ssh! Yes. I don't even want Six to know about it, okay?"

"But they'll all find out when he starts filling his boiler up with water!"

"Oh... right, that's a good point..."

"Are you feeling alright, Peter?"

"I'm a little scatter-brained, that's all. This has been on my mind for a long time." He sighed. "Look, we have leftover cans, we always had to let them sit and go flat so seeing them already open won't raise suspicion, no one has to know what's inside... Look, are you in or not?"

"I'm in!"

"I thought so. I know how angry you were when we took that deal."

"It was a stupid thing to do," she said bluntly.

"I know... I'm sorry. Rabbit and The Spine were pissed off, too."

"Are they helping?"

"No. Just you. He'll be here in a few minutes, so I'm going to set up."

He started preparing the tools he had brought, arranging them at the folding work table they kept in the HoW.

"Why just me, Peter?"

He look up at her slyly. "I think you know why. I need someone who can back up his memory, someone who can watch over him while I work. Someone who will risk anything to save his life. You weren't willing to help last time, naturally. But you have a lot invested in helping me now, don't you?"

"How do you figure?" she asked evasively.

"I've noticed, if no one else has."

"What?" she asked, thankful for her naturally flat tone.

"You used to be sweet on me, Qwerty. I'm sorry if that's embarrassing but you were. Weren't you?"

"I was a kid..."
"So was Lily. She didn't grow out of it. And you got her memories. Yes, I know about that. I know you integrated them into your matrix. So what changed?"

"I've been separating them gradually..."

"That's what I mean. There's a power drain every time you go through your sectors and separate the files. It took a couple of years but I figured it out. Only complex work like separating minute bits of data would cause a drain like that. So I figured it was something to do with those complex memory files, and it explains why you've been acting differently. And why you can't stop chattering about Jon."

"Who... who says..."

"The Spine. He's here the most, isn't he? Well, Rabbit's here a lot but I suspect you are careful not to mention Jon around Rabbit..."

She would have blushed if she could. "Spine needs to mind his own business."

Peter laughed. "Qwerty... he is. He told me you were talking his ear off about Jon. He still doesn't understand why, but I do! How long have you liked him?"

"Since forever. He's very likable."

"You know what I mean."

She gave in. "I don't know. I figured it out in 1992, okay? When I was so afraid of losing him. I figured out why I was so afraid. I... Peter, I'll be honest."

"Hm?"

"I love him, Peter. I love him, and I'm in love with him... and don't take this the wrong way but you were just a crush compared to this. He's so amazing... He has such nice eyes, and he's so strong and kind and attractive, and I'm so happy when when I see him. The highlight of the day is when he comes here. I just want him safe and happy and... and yet I want more."

"Sounds like the real thing. Have you told him?"

"No! He's my uncle!"

"Technically..."

"You know what I mean. He thinks he is. I can't tell someone who thinks he's my uncle that I'm in love with him!"

Peter grinned. "Sure you could! This is really cute, y'know? Automaton love."

"Oh, shut up. I'm just an AI."

"Just an AI," he snorted.

Jon stood outside the HoW, crying softly. He'd been emotional lately anyway. They'd had to water the Crystal Pepsi to make it last and it didn't agree with him. He felt weaker every day and now... now he'd come to the HoW as Peter had asked, and he'd heard them talking, heard Qwerty say, "I love him, Peter," just as he had slowly dragged his feet to the door. And he had stopped in his tracks.
There were only two people she could be talking about, and he had dared to hope for a moment, but then he had heard the rest and doubt began to grow... was she in love with The Spine? It made more sense, he interfaced with her every day! And he was everything she had described...

It just wasn't fair! Here he at last understood what had eluded him for too long... that Qwerty didn't see her uncles as being off limits romantically, that she didn't see them as uncles at all! He should be dancing and singing, but if she loved The Spine...

His vortex blooped and he felt very sick instead.

"It's alright," he whispered to his koi. "It'll be over soon."

He turned away. He didn't want to be repaired now.

"But seriously!" Peter was saying. "You could actually be happy together. He could interface with you and you could... well, you could do things right. I've always wondered about your inner world. He could actually go there."

Jon shuddered. Something was failing. He leaned against the wall, unable to take a step. It didn't matter...

"I suppose..." Qwerty replied. "If he loved me that way. But don't you tell him, you hear me? Not a word!"

The fit passed. Jon tried to keep going but his steps dragged. He clutched at a door frame.

"But why? He's a sweet guy! He won't be angry or anything. I bet he feels the same way, too! You could get together when Rabbit's not around, nudge nudge..."

"I don't want to hear anymore!" Jon sobbed silently.

"He already won't interface with me! I don't know why!"

Jon froze in the middle of trying to move his right leg.

"Really? How long has that been going on?"

"Since 1983... Y'know, the day Aunt Marie died."

*I haven't since 1983... The Spine has but I haven't...*

"Weird. Well, look, I won't tell you how to live your life. But if you want even a fraction of a chance with Jon, you'll have to tell him."

There was silence.

*Jon.*

The hallway was spinning. Was it his fuel supply or...

"Alright. I'll go get him. Let's get him running right and then you can think about love and romance."

Jon sank to his knees. He heard a rumbling sound... footsteps? He didn't care... She loved him. He had to get in there...

The door of the HoW opened. Jon fell forward onto his face. The rumbling was coming closer. Were
they having an earthquake?

"Oh, no! Jon! Why are you turned around... come on... on your feet, I can't carry you and I don't have help..."

"It's alright, Peter."

Jon tried to stay conscious. It sounded like The Spine... *Spine... I've got to see her...*

"You don't have to leave us out of the secret. We'd all find out eventually," The Spine said, close to his ear.

Jon was rolled over. He felt strong arms lift him and carry him into the HoW.

"I guess you're right... he can't be in the band after this..."

"Sure he can!" That was Rabbit. "Until they can prove we ran out."

"And then?" Peter asked.

"I have some promising theories about that oven bot in the vault..." said another, younger voice.

"Six! Does everyone know?"

"Spine..." Jon tried to say. He could see him but he couldn't seem to speak. "She loves me..."

He was placed onto a table, staring up at Qwerty's monitor.

"Jon, you silly idiot..." she intoned.

"I love you..."

At least, he wanted to say it. But his lips wouldn't move. He stared at her monitor, managing a weak smile instead, and she stared back, puzzled.

"I'll have to shut him down. Engage memory backup."

"But... I'd have to interface with him..." she said. "I told you..."

He could see Peter through cobwebs, smiling. "So you will. So do it."

"Peter..." she said reproachfully.

Peter removed Jon's wig and opened his port plate.

"What's all the fuss?" Rabbit was asking. "We interface all the time!"

A cable was plugged into Jon's head.

"Sweet dreams, Jonny," Peter murmured with a wink.

And then he was in a data stream, being pulled toward a blue light. In a heartbeat he stood in Qwerty's blue room.

"Qwerty!" he cried eagerly, but she wasn't there. He had no avatar to use to speak anyway. He tried binary instead.
"What?" came her voice at last.

"Um..." She sounded angry. "Can I have an avatar? The human one!" he added hastily.

"The human one? Why?"

"I love... it. I love the human avatar."

"Why have you avoided interfacing for so long, then?" she asked as the avatar appeared.

He bonded with it and took a deep breath, laughing. "Qwerty! Come and join me!"

"Join you? This isn't playtime! I have to help Peter save your stupid life!"

"Oh."

"Honestly, the things you idiots do! And does anyone listen to me?"

"I... What?"

"No! They just change and try to kill themselves while I'm stuck in here, worried sick!"

He sank onto the sofa. "I'm sorry..."

"Well, you should be! Now have fun being a boring human by yourself while I go and help save you from oblivion!"

Jon's face felt hot. He wasn't sure why. He reclined on the couch and played with his toes until the room seemed to dim and his eyes closed.

Qwerty returned to her blue room when the repairs were complete. Jon was curled on the sofa, smiling in his sleep. Silly dork, she thought. She stood for a moment, admiring the avatar. She had taken images of his face and build, measurements and eye color all into consideration when constructing it. But she had chosen the clothing... Jon, as far as she knew, always wore the same shirt and pants, changing only his socks and shoes as they wore out. It wasn't very sexy...

Jon smiled in his sleep. She hoped he was having a lovely dream. She'd crafted the dream program with care... there were no severe nightmares but sometimes just a little uncertainty...

"Did you tell him, Qwerty?" Peter asked, out in the HoW.

"Oh, give me a minute!" she grumped. She wanted to stroke his cheek to wake him and resisted. That would likely have awkward results...

"Jon?" she said.

"Hm?"

"Wake up."

"M'not in stasis..."

"You're asleep, silly. It's part of the human program."

"Oh..." He stretched and sighed. "It's nice..."
She giggled softly and sat by his feet. "Yeah, it is. But we're done. You need to charge and then you'll be up and steaming."

"Oh... good."

He opened his soft eyelids at last. His blue eyes met hers and she sighed silently. He had such pretty eyes, that she had hardly needed to change them at all when she made his human form.

"This is how humans feel when they sleep?" he asked groggily, sitting up. "I'm all stiff!"

"What do you expect when you sleep curled up on a flat sofa?"

He looked at her. She smiled weakly. He was so cute, robot or human...

"Qwerty!" he cried abruptly, eyes wide.

"What!" she gasped worriedly. "What? What's wrong?"

He began to hiccup and cough as tears descended his cheeks. To add to her alarm, he laughed right through it. "Nothing! E-everything's right! I just remembered..."

"There's been a malfunction!" she cried. "I'll tell Peter..."

"No! Don't... I feel fine! But... It's just that I heard you talking to Peter before they brought me in..."

"Oh, no!" she gasped, staring at him.

"It's okay!" he insisted.

"But... how much did you hear?"

"All I needed..." he said softly. "I heard you say you were in love with me."

"Oh!" she squeaked, staring at him in shock. "I... I'm so embarrassed!"

He slid closer, pulling her into his arms. She didn't resist. "Please don't be."

"I don't understand..." she babbled stupidly.

"I want you to understand, though." He kissed her cheek... she could feel his breath against her ear as he whispered, "You're not the only one."

She couldn't believe it... It was overwhelming. He was holding her so close, looking at her so tenderly! He looked into her eyes and she almost had to look away. But she wouldn't, not now! She held his gaze until it passed down to her lips.

"Jon..." she gasped as he kissed her.

He kissed too softly at first, new to human lips. He increased the pressure and she responded, heart pounding. She had included every system of the body in her simulated avatars and she was glad of it now... She could feel his hand curl into her hair, the softness of his lips, the tickle of a loose curl on her cheek, his breath on her skin. In the next moment, she sobbed and pulled away.

"I'm sorry..." he said hastily.

"No..." she gasped, holding him as he tried to release her. "Don't apologize! I'm not upset... it was
just... Oh, it was too wonderful, Jon!"

He brightened and kissed her again, and she could feel him trembling. She didn't pull away this time.

"Qwerty..." he breathed at last. "I love you."

"Oh! I love you, too!" she sighed, and started to cry.

"Oh, Qwerty!" he sighed, pulling her against his shoulder. "Why are you crying?" he whispered, stroking her hair.

"Just... so happy..."

"Silly..."

They curled together on her sofa, her head resting against his bare chest as the loose shirt slipped aside. She had just assumed when she designed him that hippies didn't bother to button their shirts, and she was enjoying it now. She'd always found this avatar attractive. Pappy was still out in the HoW... but, well, he couldn't see them, could he? She stroked his skin and he shivered.

"Don't... don't do that..." he said quietly.

"Why?"

"It... makes me feel like doing things. I think. I felt it the last time I wore this avatar. I wanted to do things with you, or I thought I did... I've never done them so I dunno."

"What things?" she asked shyly. She hadn't programmed a sex drive into them but she had included a natural range of responses. If Jon had felt the urge to... well, it only meant that he'd been in love with her even then.

"Maybe later, okay?" he said breathlessly.

"Are you scared?" she cried.

"Uh-huh," he said.

She giggled. "Oh. Alright. Maybe someday."

"I'd like that..."

"But not now?"

"I... need time to get used to this. I've never had a penis before."

She surprised them both with a loud shriek of laughter.

"All good in there, baby?" Rabbit called.

There was no response. Rabbit frowned.

"Qwerty?" called The Spine. "Maybe I should connect and make sure everything's alright, Peter."

"Yeah, go check on 'em." Rabbit urged.
"Sure..." Five said. "Well... maybe not..."

"Well, if the adjustments have affected her communications I need to check. Funny, I wouldn't have thought temporarily backing up The Jon's memory would be that overwhelming for her..."

"Everything's fine!" Qwerty's monitor shrilled abruptly, startling them. "Sorry... I was doing a diagnostic."

"A diagnostic of what?" asked Six.

"Never mind," said Five hastily. "Qwerty knows what she's doing. Jon can keep her company while she... while he recharges. He'll be doing cartwheels in no time. I mean, he'll be out here doing cartwheels. Come on everyone. We're finished, we might as well go get some rest."

As they walked out, The Spine said, "Aren't you bothered by leaving her alone with Jon?"

"Nah," said Rabbit cheerfully. "He's her uncle."

"Rabbit, you know as well as I do that technically..."

"Yeah, yeah, technically he's not. B-b-b-but Jonny don't know that. He thinks it's all real, y'know? Nah, leave 'em alone. They're probably playin' Pretty Pretty Princess again."

Five, several steps behind them, muttered, "Or Twister..."

Six looked at him with a half smile and raised an eyebrow. Five shook his head and Peter's half-smile broadened into a full smile.

"No way..." he giggled softly.

"Well, yeah!" Rabbit piped. "Jon's the only one who could play it anyway."

"I do alright..." The Spine said petulantly.

The HoW lights dimmed as the door closed.

2008:

Jon stood, his hands wringing against each other relentlessly. He was usually okay with just about anything. He could get scared, or sad, or even angry, but it always passed quickly like a cloud from the sun.

But today, he was afraid, and it didn't pass away. He was sure that something would go wrong. And if she died, he didn't want to live either.

Rabbit, standing away from them, looked just as scared. Poor Rabbit.

"Alright. We're good to go. Qwerty..."

"Ready, Peter," she intoned.

"Wait!" Jon cried.
He looked at her monitor. "Are... are you sure everything is alright?" Jon said frantically.

"It's alright, Jon," The Spine said. "All the data has been bundled and Qwerty will be a robot soon. Let's just let..."

"No!" choked Jon, turning back to the monitor.

He caught Rabbit's eye as he did so and looked away sharply. They'd never told him. They knew how he'd react. It was better this way. At least, until she went crazy and decided to take a chance that could kill her!

Jon stepped to the monitor and murmured, "Qwerty! Sweetheart, I'm so scared! Please stay with me!"

"It's going to be alright. I'll see you soon," she replied. "With my own eyes."

"But..."

"Please, Jon... I promise, everything is going to be better after this, okay?"

The Jon's face crumpled. The Spine walked over and put his arm around him. He allowed The Spine to lead him away, casting a dark look at Peter as he passed. This was his idea...

"Initiating download," Qwerty piped promptly.

"Just a sec," Peter mumbled, punching buttons. "Just want to double check something right quick..."

There was no response.

"Qwerty? Oh..."

"What? What is it?" Rabbit cried.

"Oh, don't worry. She just started it already. It's okay, everything looks good."

"But you we-we-were gonna check something..."

"Double check. Just part of the wire connections. I already checked it once so it's all good. I can't interrupt the download now anyway."

Jon fought tears. What if it had been something important? He just knew it was!

Peter watched the progress on his monitor. "2% so far. Could someone possibly get me a snack? This is gonna take several hours."

Jon couldn't move. He couldn't leave her. Rabbit sat down and The Spine went to fetch the snack.

"Sit down, buddy. All we can d-d-do now is wait," Rabbit murmured.

Jon looked at him. How could he be so calm? That was his daughter! He saw Rabbit's eyes widen slightly.

"It's alright, Jonny boy. We'll wait it out together," he said gently.

Jon nodded weakly and sat, staring down at his hands and wiping his eyes from time to time, saying nothing. Rabbit sighed.
"Download complete!" cried Peter.

Jon jumped to his feet and hurried to her side. Peter was once again typing madly, his fingers flying over the keys.

"I'm going to power her on," Peter said.

Rabbit hurriedly joined Jon beside Qwerty. Jon watched anxiously as Peter hesitated.

"Maybe you should..." he told Rabbit.

"Does it matter?"

"You're her father. It seems kinda symbolic."

"Alright," Rabbit said.

He found the switch, tucked beneath a panel in her back, and gently clicked it. They stood in anxious silence as her body ran through a systems check. There was a soft ping and Peter nodded.

"Exactly as programmed," he murmured.

Her eyes opened. She looked around in wonder and Jon almost collapsed with relief. She was working!

She stared at The Spine.

"Shiny..." she breathed in a light, high voice, eyes wide and staring.

He straightened his tie uneasily. "Qwerty," he said with a slight nod.

"Qwerty," she responded, smiling. She turned to Rabbit. "Qwerty."

Why is she doing that? thought The Jon.

"How did it go?" Peter asked her. "Are all the files in place and accessible?"

"Qwerty," she replied warmly. She looked at Jon. "Qwerty!"

Jon's feeling of relief shattered. "No..." he whispered brokenly. Sweetheart...

"What?" Peter asked her blankly.

"This is fun!" she cried. "Are there any more flowers here?"

"Flowers?" gasped Rabbit.

"I guess you're the only ones. I will greet you all again in the language of your people!"

He couldn't bear it! They were still so calm, watching the disaster unfold. He wanted to run away, to forget, to die! He'd never felt this horrible... when humans died, he could bear it, because he felt they had souls that had just passed on. But Qwerty? Where would she go? If she was erased, that was it. There would be no more Qwerty. Ever!

She was once again nodding to each of them and saying, "Qwerty." Rabbit was glaring at Peter and
Jon's sorrow turned to fear.

*Spine!* he sent by wifi.

*Shush, buddy. I have this.*

The Spine stepped casually behind Rabbit.

"She thinks we're flowers," Rabbit said in a very calm, very low tone, a slight tremble in his voice.

Jon could feel it. A break in Rabbit's programming. His vow of peace. Rabbit's eyes flashed red and Peter recoiled. He was going to kill him!

The Spine smoothly swept his leg around and under Rabbit's, gave him a precise push in the center of his back, and dropped onto him even as he struck the floor, neatly pinning him. It was almost graceful except for the thunderous slam Rabbit made when he landed.

"Let me go! Dammit to Hell, Spine, that hurts!"

"I detected an error over the wifi, maverick," The Spine responded coolly.

They went on shouting but Jon didn't heed them. Rabbit had seen it, they'd all seen it now. Jon stared at her and shook with wracking sobs.

"Why is the pretty flower crying?" asked Qwerty, staring at him.

Jon sobbed harder at this.

*Sweetheart... she's gone... I love her so much and she's gone!*

He took her hand and held it, hoping for some sign that she was still there. She swung her arm blithely in response.

"Are you my mystery date?" she asked pleasantly.

Jon gasped. They used to play that... Maybe she remembered?

"What the Hell is that supposed to mean?" Rabbit roared, struggling in vain against The Spine.

"Just lay still and let your core cool, Rabbit. Peter will find out where the error is and..."

And they were shouting again. Jon, no longer hearing, looked into her eyes. They really were very pretty, almost as pretty as the ones she had on her avatar.

"Are you in there?" he whispered, but she was busy glaring at Rabbit. "Please don't be gone, sweetheart..."

Qwerty shouted incoherently at Rabbit and Jon gave in to his grief and sank to the floor, unnoticed.

They eventually shut Rabbit down. The Spine hauled him downstairs and Jon shut down Qwerty so that Peter could start tracking the error.

"Any news?" asked The Spine when he returned.

"These files are all out of sync! They must have saved to the wrong sectors! She has her core
personality in the right place but her memory files are complete chaos! What the hell happened? We had them all set to communicate with each other and now they're throwing random bits of data at her... this will take years to untangle!"

"What?" cried Jon and The Spine together.

"Surely not, Peter," Five said, peering at the computer. "Oh... yeah. Well..."

"So what happens now? She stays shut down until you fix it?" asked The Spine.

"No!" Jon gasped. They all looked at him. "I mean... she's okay to be powered on, right? Her personality is there. She just doesn't know us... it's... it's like amnesia."

"But Jon, she's like a baby! We'd have to look after her every minute!" Peter said.

"I could do that!"

"Jon..." The Spine began.

"Please..." Jon begged. "I don't think it's right to just switch her off. What if he never figures it out?" His voice broke and he stopped. The Spine frowned.

"Good point," Five said quietly. "She'd have to start living with what she has. She may have to grow up all over again, in the unique way that automatons do. So she might as well get started."

"Yeah!" Jon cried.

"But Jon looking after her..." The Spine objected.

"I can, Spine! I can look after her! It's... it's what Rabbit did for Qwerty's mother! I saw them so I know what to do! He took care of her all the time. If Rabbit can do it, so can I!"

"Another good point, Jon," Five said, glancing at Peter, who nodded.

"But..."

"We'll try it, Spine. You can stay with them if you're worried."

The Spine sighed tightly. "I have to go update Rabbit," he muttered, turning to go.

"I'd strap him down, first, okay?"

"Already done," he said, walking out.

Jon looked at Qwerty. He already missed her. She was there, and he was relieved, but to be with her every day, with her not knowing she loved him, not knowing how much he loved her! But he would do it. Because he loved her, whether she knew it or not.

"You alright, buddy?" asked Five.

Jon turned to him. He caught the look on his face and whispered, "You know?"

"We both do," Peter said.

"But you didn't tell Rabbit or Spine..."

"Was there any reason? This is between you and Qwerty."
"Yeah," Jon said, his voice shaking.

"You sure you're up for it?" Five asked.

"I'd follow her everywhere even if I didn't do it. I can't let anyone else take care of her. She's like my wife... It's like Rabbit and Honey, y'know?"

"I know," Five said, and Jon could see that he took him very seriously. "But don't you think Rabbit might disagree about who should take care of her?"

"Oh... but he's so upset, and he shouted at her. She looked really angry. I don't think she likes him very much."

"Oh..." Peter drawled. "She really didn't. That could get ugly..."

"Ouch," said Five. "Poor Rabbit. Well, in that case, I guess you're the man for the job. You seem pretty sure."

"I never felt like this about anyone before. This is special. And when Peter fixes her, I want her to remember that I never gave up."

"Jon, you've grown up." He chuckled. "Took you long enough."

"I have? Yeah. I guess I have."

They looked at Qwerty as Peter typed busily away.

Chapter End Notes


Gotta admit the look is similar. And I picture Jon Sprague, barefoot, shirt like this, open at the front... He's quite the lil cutie, really.

And a little double entendre for the ending there...
Daddy's Little Girl

Chapter Summary

It all hits the fan.

Chapter Notes

Just so we're clear, the backstory of Matter Mistress Bunny involved her being a Walter guy who got hit with a Blue Matter blast. So don't freak out, have some patience with the process. For now, we have male twins in the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2011:

"I don't wanna go on tha table!"

"Qwer... Upgrade, come on! We're trying to help you get better!" Jon groaned.

"No!"

"Upgrade, please!"

"I don' wanna!" she barked, her voice suddenly gruff.

"Spine, could you...?"

The Spine closed his eyes and sighed. He'd been off to one side, trying to stay out of it. Rabbit stood even further away, curling and uncurling his fingers.

She suddenly smiled coyly and squeaked, "I'll go if The Spine holds my hand!"

The three older Walter automatons groaned as one. The Spine shuffled miserably forward and held her hand as though he was carrying a very dead fish. Upgrade beamed and suffered herself to be eased into the upright repair table, strapped into place, and eased back into a nearly horizontal position.

"Everything good?" sighed Six.

"Can't Five help, Petes?" Rabbit said uneasily.

"You know his memory has been getting worse. Besides, we have enough help."

The Spine eyed the workers scurrying around the table. Wanda had one assistant back in the day. Now she had a fleet, plus Peter's additions.
"'Scuse me, Spine," said one, squeezing past him.

Rabbit grumbled a little more about things changing and glanced at The Spine.

*You okay there, cowboy?* he sent, using the wifi link.

The Spine glanced uneasily at Upgrade, who was cuddling his arm. He sighed, glaring longingly at the ceiling. He'd been, if anything, more intimate with her while linked, up in the wiring, but she'd been lucid then. There had been no awkwardness, no inappropriate snuggling. No, he was most certainly not okay, but Rabbit didn't need any extra weight.

*I've been better. But I've also been worse. Don't worry about it, okay?*

*I sure appreciate this, buddy.*

The Spine shrugged and Upgrade's grip tightened.

"I still don't like it," Rabbit said aloud.

"Don't like what?" Peter asked absently.

"Don't like what?" Peter asked absently.

"All these new people! Who are they, even?"

"Sam's over there," Peter said, pointing to the one who had just slipped past The Spine. "And that's David... Breanna, and Bunny."

"Bunny? What kinda name is that for a guy?"

Bunny, tightening a strap on the table, raised a sculpted eyebrow in Rabbit's direction.

"What kind of name is Rabbit for a robot?" he asked casually.

"Now wait just a cotton-pickin' mi-mi-minute there, chrome dome..."

"Shush, both of you!" Peter muttered.

Bunny chuckled and walked away, idly rubbing his smooth scalp.

"It's complicated, alright?" Peter said softly to Rabbit.

"What's with the Mr. Clean look anyhow? He got cancer or something?"

"That's not... No, he doesn't. Look, I'm homing in on the final adjustments, so could we discuss this later?" He typed for a moment and added, "Besides, you have new members in the band, too."

Breanna was removing Upgrade's hair piece. She stood very close to the Spine. He could smell the faint scent of some kind of perfume. It was... nice. She smiled at him and he felt uncomfortable. He forced a small half smile as she turned away. She had the prettiest sashay when she walked... He looked away. Members of the household and staff had hinted that she might be interested. But he just wasn't ready. He might never be. Just as well. It really wasn't ethical...

"If you mean that Mike guy..." Rabbit was grumbling.

"Yeah!" Peter said brightly. "Michael Reed! You know I went to school with him?"

"Yeah, swell. He's a nice kid and all..."
The Spine sighed. People had dropped hints about Michael Reed, too. He didn't find them amusing. Rabbit did, of course...

"And Steve..." Peter said.

"What, that character with the long hair? The chump who said we sound terrible?"

"Only in concert! And then he turned around and said he could fix that."

Typical Rabbit. The Spine was pleased with the new additions to the band. Michael Reed was a superb musician and worked cheap. And Steve had already proven his skills. He was even talking to the theater where he worked about letting them perform there. The Walter workers had proved helpful as well. David had allowed them to play songs he'd written but had no time to develop, and Bunny had a lead on a steady summer engagement at the zoo. But trust Rabbit to complain! Although he couldn't blame him. Now was not a good time to present Rabbit with new things to assimilate.

"Whatever. I still haven't forgotten the time the guy danced with Qwerty in the park..."

"Oh, I saw that video. That was cute as heck! And she's called Upgrade. You might as well accept it."

"Someday she'll be well and she'll know her name," Rabbit gritted. "I know my baby."

"And with any luck this will be the day we finally run the cleaning program and get your daughter back."

The Spine looked at them sharply. What? He heard Jon, still beside him, gasp.

"Wha-wha-what?" choked Rabbit. "You never told me that!"

"I've told you before, and then screwed up and had to cancel. I remember how badly you took it so I'm very careful what I say now. I don't even want to mention it unless it's guaranteed."

"Spine," Jon said thickly.

"I know, buddy."

But he was uneasy. If his suspicions were correct, Upgrade would wake and remember her pappy, and someone else dear to her heart. And Rabbit would not take that well, either.

Rabbit clutched his throat and squeaked, "That means..."

"Yes," Peter punched a button and grinned. "It's a go, people! Get to your consoles. It's time to bring Rabbit's baby girl home!"

"Drama queen," Sam said placidly, peering into a laptop.

Peter stared at him for a moment, shrugged, and walked to Upgrade. "It's time. Jon, Spine, I think you should let Rabbit have some room."

"No!" Rabbit gasped, still on the other side of the room. "No... she don't want me there."

"Let's just power her down," The Spine begged. "Then Rabbit can stand by her."

Upgrade blew a loud raspberry. Jon shook his head and powered her down.
"Alright, Rabbit," Jon said gently, a slight tremor in his voice.

Rabbit walked to her as The Spine slid his arm from her limp hands and hurried over to stand by Peter's console. The Jon was gently laying her arms by her sides and stood, staring into her face worriedly.

"Do you think it'll work, Rabbit?"

"I dunno, Jon. Ya done real good, though, buddy. Ya took real good care of her."

"It was no trouble," Jon murmured, stroking her hand and gazing down at her face.

Rabbit stared. "Jon..."

"Hm?"

"Um... Yehr gonna rub off the finish."

"Sorry."

Jon shuffled over the stand by The Spine, who wondered how Rabbit could miss the obvious. But then, so had he, when it had been Lily. And he felt sure Lily's romance had been far more obvious.

Rabbit looked down at her sighed as Sam and David opened her head plates and plugged in wires.

"Come back to me, baby. I don't think I can go on without my little girl," he whispered, taking her hand.

"Running program," Peter called.

Rabbit stood there for the next three hours. Workers would come and check sensors in her head, Jon would wander past as though pacing, The Spine asked Rabbit if he needed water. But he wouldn't leave her side and The Spine understood. It was the first time Rabbit had been able to hold her hand.

The last of the data was eventually sorted, according to Peter's laptop. The cables were removed, the head plate closed. David and Bunny each took a side and tipped the table forward so that she stood nearly upright.

Breanna replaced the wig. The Spine inched forward nonchalantly, watching Rabbit worriedly, and caught Breanna's eye. He froze, realizing that in moving forward, he'd stopped right beside her. She looked away as suddenly as he did. He heard someone in the lab chuckling but refused to look around.

"Alright, Rabbit. Like last time, only better, I hope. Power on," Six said.

With trembling hands, Rabbit flipped the tiny switch and waited. Her systems hummed, buzzed, clicked. A soft ping announced that she was online. She opened her eyes.

"Pappy!" she sighed, smiling. "Did it work..." She looked around at them all. "Oh! It did!"

Rabbit clasped his hands nervously. "Baby... you know me?" he squeaked.

"Of course!" She looked around, frowning. "Everyone looks so serious! Was there any trouble with the download? Why am I still strapped in, I want to try the body..."

Her questions were interrupted by a roaring cheer from the Walter Workers. Peter was sitting and
laughing with tears in his eyes, visibly relieved. The Spine applauded. And Jon stood still, tears starting down his face.

Rabbit at last broke down and stepped forward to embrace her.

"Baby... You're back! Oh, Qwerty, honey, It's been over two years!" he told her tearily. "You forgot all of it?"

"Two years?" she cried. She looked at Peter. "What happened?"

"The numbering sequence. Your brain couldn't find the needed files and it was too delicate to just move them. I had to create a program from scratch to move every file just so and reestablish the right connections to ensure proper data processing. You didn't forget what happened during that time, either; I included a command to isolate the data until you could get your bearings. The two years are in a separate memory file, if you want to access it."

She looked up at the ceiling the way she did when scanning... and gasped as the memories came through. "Oh! Oh, Pappy, I am so sorry!" she gasped.

"I know, baby..."

"But I don't hate you! I love you!"

"It's okay," he said thickly. "It's all okay now."

"And Uncle Spine... oh, that is so embarrassing!" she squeaked. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do that at all!"

The Spine grinned. "Just as long as you don't do it again."

"Oh, Uncle Spine..." she scolded, looking around distractedly. "But... where's... Where's The Jon?"

Jon stepped forward, grinning broadly through his tears.

"You're back," he half-laughed, half-sobbed. "You're finally back!"

The two of them stared at each other and she reached one hand toward him.

"Jon... Oh, Jonny, you never gave up!" she whispered. "You poor darling! I was with you all this time and never knew you!"

Rabbit took a clumsy step backward as Jon hurried forward and took her hand. The Spine inched still closer, glancing at Peter, who was watching with the same worry in his eyes. He knew!

"Um... What the Hell is this?" Rabbit murmured, scowling.

"Oh... it's... um..." Jon stammered, looking at Rabbit.

Upgrade pulled Jon closer. "No more secrets," she breathed. "You've suffered enough for me. Pappy, I-"

"Secrets?" Rabbit interrupted. The Spine crept forward.

"Pappy, Jon and I-"

"Um... Oh, her feet are still strapped in!" Jon said rapidly. "I'll just get her out of those..."
He carefully removed the remaining straps and lifted her from the table. As he set her down, their eyes met and he stood holding her, looking into her eyes with the most serious expression The Spine had ever seen him wear. The room was dead silent.

"You can get away now, Jonny," Rabbit said, his tone dangerous.

Upgrade glared at Rabbit even as she caught Jon by the arm, keeping him near her.

"Qwerty, honey, let Jon go."

"No, Pappy. I'm trying to tell you something important!"

"Then letting Unkie Jon go and you can tell me," Rabbit gritted.

"Maybe you'd better..." Jon began, turning to her.

She kissed him full on the mouth. They all gasped in shock. Jon looked startled for a second before his eyes closed. They popped open just as quickly when Rabbit shouted.

"Just what the Hell do you think yeh're do-do-doing to my daughter?"

The two parted hastily and turned startled faces on Rabbit.

"You wouldn't let me talk so I showed you!" she shouted.

Rabbit stepped hastily between them.

"Get out of here," Rabbit growled at Jon.

"Rabbit!" The Spine barked.

"Down, Spine. My vow of peace is just fine. But it ain't gonna be if my little brother comes anywhere near my daughter again!"

"Rabbit! I'm not really..." Jon squeaked.

"Not really what?"

"He's not your brother! Not... not like humans are!" cried Upgrade frantically.

"You can say that again! I trusted you to take care of my baby when she wouldn't let me near her. Is this how you took care of her?"

"I... I'm sorry..." Jon said shakily.

"For what?" cried Upgrade furiously, trying to get around Rabbit.

"You were alone with her every single day! What else did you do to her?"

"Rabbit!" The Spine shouted. "That's going too far!"

"I'm going too far? Me? He was suckin' on her face and..."

"He was kissing her. Which, in case you didn't notice, she initiated. They're in love, Rabbit!"

"That's right!" she cried, dodging around him at last. She stood in front of Jon, shielding him and glaring at Rabbit.
But instead of raging more, Rabbit looked thunderstruck. "No," he said softly. "Don't... don't hate me, baby... I just got you back... I can't go back to that..."

"Pappy..." she said tearfully. "I don't hate you! I love you, but... I love Jon, too. I love him so much, Pappy!"

"Baby..." Rabbit said helplessly. "I... I just... why didn't you say... I never woulda left him alone with you."

"Oh, Pappy! He never did anything to hurt me! He was a perfect gentleman while I was sick, even though we were lovers before the download..."

The room went silent.

"Lovers?" Rabbit roared, his rage rekindled.

The Spine inched closer.

"The vow ain't broken, Spine!" Rabbit bellowed. "Just back off!"

"No, you back off," The Spine replied. "You're under a lot of strain and you're not thinking straight. Go cool off before you say something else you'll regret."

Rabbit gave him a glare that would have curdled milk.

"You know I'm right," The Spine said gently.

Rabbit's chin trembled. With a strangled sob, he hurried out.

"Pappy!"

Upgrade broke down in tears one second after the door slammed. She turned and embraced Jon, who held her tightly.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," he said weakly.

"Stop apologizing! You're the only one here who hasn't done anything wrong!" she wailed.

"I could have told him. But I guess I knew he wouldn't like it."

"Oh, Jonny!" she howled. "I can't bear it! I can't choose between you!"

"Upgrade..." he breathed, kissing her head. "Please don't be sad..."

"Now... don't get too upset, Qwer... Upgrade," The Spine murmured. "Your father is petulant and ridiculous but he wants your happiness above anything else. Given the time, he'll come to accept your relationship."

"Are you sure, Spine?" Jon murmured.

No. Not one tiny bit. "I think he will," he lied. "He may never be thrilled about it, but I think he'll see that you've proven you're ready to love her the way she deserves. I meant it and so did he. You did a magnificent job of caring for her. You cared for her... like I cared for Marie."

"He was so tender and gentle," she sighed, looking up at Jon. "Even when I was rude and mean... How could anyone not love him?"
"A good question," sighed The Spine.

"But Pappy doesn't care!" she moaned. "Oh, Jon! He'll never forgive me!"

She broke down once more. Jon, holding her close, looked pleadingly at him.

*What do I do, Spine? She's so unhappy!* he sent.

The Spine watched them both, anger rising in his core.

*Just hold her, Jon. I'll talk to Rabbit.*

The Spine grew angrier with every step, but he fought to keep it in check. The soft voice was the best choice, or so Col. Walter had often told him. He found Rabbit exactly where he expected him.

"What do I do, Honey?" he was saying. "I waited two whole years to get her back and I ain't got her at all! He had her then, and he has her n-n-n-now!"

"Rabbit," The Spine whispered. He sat beside him and put his arm hesitantly around his shoulders.

"I just want to have her as my baby before she runs off to be someone's lover!" Rabbit cried. "Is that why she did this? She wants a boyfriend? We were happy! Why did he have to me-me-mess it up?"

"I understand."

Rabbit shook his head vigorously, still looking at the graves. He sighed. "Well... Yeah. I guess ya do."

"She wanted out of that room for years. You didn't grudge her that, surely?"

"Not when ya put it that way. Who would let their baby stay trapped in a room if they had a choice? Bu-bu-but I was so afraid she'd die..."

"We all were. But she's alive! And now, finally, she's back, she has her own body, and you can take her places and really be her father."

"No. I can't. She's got herself a boyfriend..."

"He isn't taking your place. She just loves Jon, that's all. She isn't abandoning you."

"How, though? How can she love him like that? He's her uncle!"

"That wasn't what you said..."

"I know!" Rabbit snapped. "It's just... what does she even see in him? Huh? He's like a big 4-year-old sometimes, and then on the other side there's the acid and free love..."

"I always had my doubts about whether he really participated in free love."

Rabbit closed his eyes and sighed. "Trust me, bro. Jon ain't what you might call a... virgin."

"Oh. So then..."

"Hey, that's right!" gasped Rabbit. "He knows all about... about... He mighta done it with my baby already! Here I was startin' ta feel better, thinkin' maybe she just meant they loved each other, but
maybe they really were lovers!"

"Rabbit..."

"How d'ya like that? Sleeping with a guy's daughter right under his nose!"

"Don't get worked up again!"

"You realize she made him a human flesh body avatar in there?"

"I'd rather not think about it..."

"Anatomically correct!" he roared, throwing his hands into the air. "They both coulda worn those meatbags and then they could've really... Ugh! If he really was anatomically correct, I'd be heading in to chop 'em off!"

"Rabbit!" The Spine barked. He related to the idea a good deal more than Rabbit did and didn't appreciate the sentiment. "That's... ugh, that's just disgusting."

"I can't stand it, Spine! He ruined everything!"

"Would you rather share her or lose her?"

"Those are the choices?" growled Rabbit. "Maybe she loses me! Maybe her Pappy ain't good enough anymore and she'd be just as happy without me!"

That did it.

"He didn't ruin everything!" The Spine roared. "You're ruining everything!"

Rabbit stared at him, shocked.

"I felt sorry for you! You had to go two years with her saying she hated you, and I know it was Hell so I pitied you! But now she knows you and loves you and you act like an ass! Do you know how lucky you are, you idiot? I just got my son back, Rabbit! My daughter is never coming back! There's not even a headstone, just a damned tree! We destroyed most of her things and photos to protect the family, all I have is a handful of data files in the HoW! And you're having a childish fit because Qwerty... no, make that Upgrade, found love and happiness and you don't want to let her have that and her father as well! I know she's special to you! But if you love her, you'll let her damned well grow up and be with the man she loves instead of making her choose! And I'll tell you this, brother of mine, if you do draw that line in the sand I will do everything in my power to persuade her to choose him! He hasn't made any demands! He loves her without jealousy, without thinking of himself! I thought you did but I see I was wrong."

He turned away from Rabbit's horrified look, aching. He was still angry, still so very angry. But he hurt, remembering, and hearing the things he'd said to Rabbit repeating in his mind as he started back toward the Manor.

He made it two steps before the sobs began. He didn't go further. He half turned and looked back guiltily.

Rabbit had sunk to the ground against the sculpture and crouched there, shuddering with misery.

Rabbit?

You're right. Just go. Just get away from me.
"I shouldn't..."

"I ain't gonna do anything stupid."

"The Hell you're not."

The Spine returned and stood beside Rabbit. He made no attempt to apologize, even though he felt so deeply sorry for having said it all.

"I'll stay until you're ready," he whispered.

"It's hard..." Rabbit choked. "I want her happy but..."

He heaved a shuddering sigh and sat at last, staring down. The Spine settled in beside him.

"I know, buddy."

They returned to the house when Rabbit was calm enough. They found Upgrade sitting with Jon in the library, still quietly crying. She looked up with a rather sticky glare when they entered and Rabbit started.

"Oh..." he gasped. "Don't look at me like that, baby!"

"Rabbit. Say it," The Spine prompted as her chin trembled.

"I-I'm so-so-so-sorry!" Rabbit cried.

"Pappy!" she wailed, jumping up and tackling him. He oofed and put his arms around her.

"Qwerty, baby..."

"Upgrade," The Spine prompted.

Rabbit sighed. "Is that what you want, baby?" he asked. "Ya wanna be called Upgrade?"

"Yeah, Pappy. I'm sorry, too..."

"No, baby! Yehr right... This is all your choice."

She laughed messily and buried her face in his vest. Jon got slowly to his feet.

"Jon," Rabbit said. "I'm real sorry, buddy. I just wish you'd said something. But..."

"What?"

"You two... when you say yehr lovers, whaddya mean exactly?"

"Rabbit..." The Spine warned.

"It's okay, Spine," Jon said. "Well..."

"No, let me," said Upgrade. She looked at her father with a frightened but determined expression. "Pappy, we meant it. Jon and I have... y'know... made love. Inside my matrix. I... Well, I figure I'm old enough, don't you?"
Rabbit's face went through an alarming course of expressions and his hand, against his daughter's back, curled into a fist and relaxed again. Jon backed away.

"Sure, baby," Rabbit said in a strangled voice. "You're old enough to decide who you love and how. Of course." His face contorted once more and The Spine could see him mouthing a string of potent swear words before regaining control. "But... don't expect it to be easy on yehr Pappy. I'm real jealous of my baby girl."

"Pappies are supposed to be."

"Within reason," The Spine murmured.

Rabbit looked at him with a pained expression. He flicked a brief glance at Jon and closed his eyes. The Spine decided to assist.

"Upgrade, why don't you and your Pappy take a walk in the park together? Just you two, considering all that has happened today."

"Yeah!" cried Jon with visible relief.

Rabbit closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them he smiled charmingly, and gave Upgrade his arm. "Come on, baby. First ya gotta come see something important. I mean, if you're okay with it."

"Oh," she breathed. "You mean Mama's grave, don't you?"

He nodded. "That okay with you, baby?"

"Of course, Pappy! I want to. I've wanted to for years."

They walked out. As the door closed behind them, Jon sank to the floor.

"What have I done..." he said faintly.

"Feeling regrets? After all that?"

"Not about her... I love her! But we're lovers and... and.. and I promised to love her forever which is kinda like a wedding vow and that kinda makes Rabbit my father-in-law."

"Sort of..."

Jon groaned softly and The Spine sighed. There was only so much he could fix. He patted Jon awkwardly on the head and went to the HoW to work, for once welcoming the simple stupidity of the Qwerty AI.

Chapter End Notes

I find it curiously hilarious to have Rabbit arguing with Bunny.
A Few Short Tales about Walter Workers

Chapter Summary

The newest set of characters, familiar faces; how they came to the manor, what happened then. A collection of short introductions.

Chapter Notes

Not much left now, but there's a few little things I just can't leave untold in my endless AU. There's a bronze robot in storage, a copper robot in need of an upgrade, a couple more robots with adventures outside the manor, and a fleet of new people to meet. So let's start with the new people.

2008:

"Welcome to the Manor! I understand you two know each other."

"We took a couple of classes together," said Breanna.

"And went out on one double date," Paige said with a smile.

"And we're pretty much best friends."

Peter smiled, but Breanna got the feeling he was outside the joke. Miles outside. "Well, good. Let me show you the labs. Um... have you worked with robots before?" he asked.

"Not like these," said Paige as they started down a long corridor. "It's an honor to have this opportunity."

Breanna nodded. "The Walter automatons are the stuff of legend!"

"My great-great-grandfather was an amazing man. To think he did it all for the love of a woman."

"Did he really? I thought that was a myth!" cried Breanna.

"Gospel truth. Though rumor has it he would never have won her over, not really."

"I don't understand," Paige said.

"Yes, what do you mean?"

"Well, many women and men married for companionship and as a cover, back in the day, despite sharing certain qualities with Miss Moreau. It's entirely possible she might have accepted him at some point, but I doubt she ever considered him attractive."
"Whoa, you're saying she liked women?"

"It's just a rumor, mind you. But all the evidence is there, and since there's no descendants to object, I'd say we're safe outing her. Even the Colonel himself suggested as much in his memoirs. Although..." he chuckled sheepishly, "it could be as easily suggested that he was exhibiting a petty male friendzone response to being rejected. Genius is genius but he was still a man and those were not enlightened times."

Breanna laughed. "I'm sorry," she sighed. "I guess it's better to remember people are flawed."

"Well, at least he was cute," Paige said, stopping before a portrait of Col. Walter. "Of course, that's superficial but..."

"Oh, my goodness!" Breanna cried, looking at the portrait.

"What is it?" Peter asked, turning to look.

"Paige! Doesn't he look just like..."

"He totally does! Just like David!"

"And Bunny!"

"Well, naturally..." Breanna laughed. "Considering..."

"Who?" Peter asked.

"That double date I mentioned," Paige said. "It was with a set of twins. Dead ringers for your great-great-grandfather."

"No kidding? Well, if they're local, they could be distant relatives."

"Could be..." Breanna murmured. "They do like computers... and they don't appreciate rejection," she added softly.

"Who does?" Paige whispered.

They continued walking. "We haven't met any of the robots yet," Peter said uneasily. "I wonder what they're up to..."

"Up to?" laughed Paige. "You make them sound like naughty children..."

There was a crash.

"Up to," Peter said emphatically. "Come on, ladies. Trial by fire!"

Before they could run to check, they heard the pounding of feet and a copper robot pelted around the corner, skidding to a halt in front of them.

"Oh, hi!" it said with forced brightness. It flicked a glance down the hall behind it and turned back to them with a smile. "I... um... Petes, who's the skirts?"

"The ladies, Rabbit. Don't get us sued, please. And you shouldn't be running like that unless you have proper maintenance. Which you don't."

"Neither do you, night owl."
Peter stifled a yawn. "My leg isn't going to fall off just because I lose a little sleep. These are the new workers, Paige and Breanna."

Rabbit took each by one hand and kissed their fingers in turn. "Llllladies," he purred.

"Rabbit! What the hell have you done to this room!" barked a deep voice.

The next moment, a tall, silver man dressed in black stepped into the hall.

"Oh, no," he said shortly.

Breanna gasped. She'd known he was attractive, but seeing him in person brought a new realization.

"There it is again," she hissed to Paige. "The same face!"

"It's like David in robot makeup," Paige whispered.

The figure froze, staring. "David..."

"Um... This David you mention," Peter said stiffly. "Could you not mention him anymore? It's a long story."

"Alright," Breanna said, blushing with embarrassment.

"No, it's alright, Peter," the silver robot said quietly. "Who might you be?"

"They're the ne-ne-ne-new workers, Breanna and Paige," Rabbit told him as though it was obvious. "Where've you been, The Spine?"

"Cleaning up after you," The Spine muttered out of one side of his mouth.

Breanna stared, impressed. How was he doing that with a face made of metal?


"Thank you, but I did that already. Well, ladies, here at long last are two of the original Walter automatons, Rabbit and The Spine. The resemblance you noted to your friend is explained by the fact that your friend looks like Col. Walter and these two have faceplates molded from Col. Walter himself."

"Both of them?" Paige said. She peered at Rabbit, who leaned away.

"Watch it, lady. I ain't a mu-mu-museum exhibit."

"Sorry," she chuckled. "But I can't see much similarity."

"Are you kiddin'? I'm the spittin' image of Pappy!"

"He, uh... called the Colonel Pappy," The Spine explained.

"Still do!" Rabbit grumbled.

"How sweet!" Paige cooed.

Rabbit smiled his most charming smile. "Heeyyyy, she's smart!" he said pleasantly.

"We really should be moving on," Peter said quickly.
As they walked away, Breanna looked back at the robots. Rabbit waved. The Spine just stared after them. She blushed again, unsure why. As they rounded the corner, she saw his mouth move into the littlest of smiles. It was reflected in his eyes. Though slight, the expression affected his face such that he went from stern and intimidating to warm and handsome in one simple motion. Her heart gave a tiny thud. And then they were out of view.

"Bree?" Paige said loudly.

"Hm? Oh, sorry!"

"Like what you see?"

"Oh, yes... they're very... lifelike."

"The very intention of my great-great-grandfather in their construction," Peter said blithely as the tour continued. "The human-like behaviors were all part of his plan to..."

As he rambled on, Breanna's mind wandered. Funny that The Spine looked so much like David. She liked David, but they hadn't hit it off the way Paige and Bunny had. But his face had been nice. Very nice.

Especially in silver.

Breanna sighed softly. She'd expected a lot of things in coming here... but attraction to a robot was not one of them.

2009:

"Michael Philip Reed."

The young man held out his hand and beamed. Jon and Upgrade stood on either side of him, smiling. The Spine looked at Jon askance, but saw little sign of the usual pained look that had become part of the younger bot's expression. He was getting better at tending Upgrade, and she was growing more lucid... not fast enough, but nevertheless more lucid. Still, Six was hard at work and surely Rabbit would soon have his daughter back.

Meanwhile, here was a winsome young man, slightly plump, smiling with childlike delight at the silver automaton before him. The Spine took the offered hand carefully and welcomed him to Walter Manor. "To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit, Mr. Reed?"

"Michael," the young man said in a soft, sweet voice. "I met them in the park... I was doing a little busking and he looked like he needed some help."

"Upgrade was trying to grab fish from the koi pond again," Jon said gloomily.

Michael laughed. "It was pretty funny. I mean, she didn't catch any so it was alright."

"I would have if you hadn't thrown off my aim, meatbag!" she roared. The next second, her eyes glazed over and her smiling gaze drifted slowly toward the ceiling. "Pumpkin."

"And?" The Spine prompted uncomfortably, inching away from her.
"Well," Michael said with a giggle. He clearly found Upgrade more amusing than anyone in Walter Manor did. "Jon said sometimes you need an extra pair of hands in your band and I thought maybe I could help out a little."

"He what?" The Spine cried.

"You were saying we needed someone on banjo for a few songs!" Jon said brightly. "Lookit!"

Michael turned around. Strapped to his back was a banjo.

"He's even got one!"

"Well... yes but... money's really very tight, Jon..."

"Oh, you don't have to pay me. I mean, if it's just weekends during the day, I can do it for fun. If money gets better or you want me to do an evening gig, I could let you throw some cash at me, but don't worry about it right now."

"That's very generous but..."

"It really isn't... it would be an honor to play with the Steam Man Band!"

"We were thinking of changing that name." The Spine blinked at him. "Well, Mr. Walter really is the one who has the final say. And of course we should hear a sample of your abilities."

"Okay!" Michael whipped the banjo around, tuned it a little, and began to play.

"I didn't mean now... I still have to find Mr. Walter..."

The Spine stopped. He was... really very good! Remarkable even. He folded his arms and listened, enchanted.

"Shouldn't we find Peter?" asked The Jon after a minute.

"Hm? Oh, yes. Come along, Mr. Reed."

"Michael." He played as he followed, Jon and Upgrade trailing behind.

"Where did you learn to play?" The Spine asked.

"Oh, you pick stuff up." He changed songs.

"Truly remarkable."

2010:

"Hello! I'm Peter Walter VI."

"Oh... Sam Luke."

He sat, and motioned for Sam to do the same. "And why do you want to work for Walter Robotics, Sam?"
The man before him gave a short sigh. "Look, Mr. Walter..."

"Peter."

"Right. I know I should spin you some BS about being a team player and wanting to be part of the amazing science whatever but honestly, I'm working my way through the want ads. Breanna suggested applying here when I lost my job, but I was surprised when I got called in for an interview. I'm not even sure what you people do. Well, outside of robotics and music."

"You don't sound like you want the job at all. Is there any point in asking you what you consider your qualifications?" Six asked, frowning.

"Well, now... I didn't say I didn't want it. I just want us to be clear here. I'm not Steven Hawking, hell, I'm not even Bill Nye."

"Even Bill Nye? The man is brilliant."

Sam chuckled. "I like him, too. Anyway, qualifications... well... I didn't make great grades but I'm no idiot, I can lift and carry and know my basic maths and sciences and I'm willing to learn. And I can sit in if the band needs a bass player."

"Oh! You say that off hand but that's actually a very nice bonus skill around here."

"Ah!" Sam said, smiling in a surprised sort of way. "Well, in that case, I should add that I play six string and a little drums."

"Yes, you should add that. Very nice. Now, there are other concerns, but in the interest of the honesty you request, I should let you know that this isn't the long-shot you think it is. Science is what we do and yes, we have robots. But there really aren't many people coming in to apply who know how to maintain robots like these. Basically, technical knowledge is a plus but everyone is learning on the job. Breanna, for example... Brilliant mind, builds small robots for a hobby, but she's had her hands full learning the ropes. A lot of the work is assisting me, and a lot is dealing with the robots. And you should know up front that the pay isn't great but does include room and board."

"Oh! Well... This is a pretty central location. Seems like a nice big place. Living in would be alright. I'd still keep regular work hours, right?"

"Technically..."

"What does that mean?"

"You'd be sort of... on call. In your off hours. Like a doctor."

"Fancy. But I could still go out, right? Do gigs in clubs, stuff like that?"

"Oh, sure... I mean, you're not a hostage here. But you might not really... want to..."

That sounded oddly ominous. "Any particular reason?"

Peter sighed. "I am sort of obligated by law to warn you... There are side effects to working with Blue Matter. If you happen to work your way up from ordinary grunt to working with the actual Matter itself, your appearance will change."

"Change how?" Sam cried, astonished.

"Hair color, for example. Surely you've noticed if you're friends with Breanna."
"Y'know, I figured she'd just started dying it. Maybe got drunk one night and watched Coraline or something."

"I don't think she did anything to it. That's just her work. And you also get excessively pale."

"It's possible to be more pale than this? Don't worry about the hair, though. I don't seem to have the luxury of keeping it. So what happens if I remain a common grunt?"

The term amused him. In fact, a lot of things Peter had said amused him. Breanna had said he was a dork, but Sam was actually starting to like this guy.

"Well, your hair will still be delightfully ginger," Peter explained. "And you'll be less pale... um... if, as you said, that's possible."

"Ah."

"Well, what do you think?"

"Well, I have no motivation to be more than a common grunt so I guess I'll give it a go."

"Great!" Peter said, beaming. "Between you and me, we need the help. We're advertising for a few more, in fact."

"Someone with more science experience, I suppose?"

"No, they just have to be bright, willing to work, honest and in reasonably good health."

"Oh! Well... I know a couple of guys who meet those qualifications. They also made very good grades. And for a bonus, they're a matching set."

"Twins?"

"Yep. Losing their hair, too. But not ginger. Blond. Well, they were in high school, anyway."

"I think I've heard of them... one of them is dating Paige?"

"That's them. Breanna made the same suggestion to them but they're being weenies about it. And they really can't afford to."

"Well... do you think they'd be happy to be common grunts?"

"To start. But if there's a chance that the job handling Blue Matter pays better, I think these two bright youths just might decide to master the skills necessary to do it. If you see fit to hire them."

"Sam, I would appreciate it if you would call them. Right now. Fact is... we haven't been able to get any other applicants to come in for an interview."

"Really?"

"Yeah... there were a couple of appointments made but no one ever gets as far as my office."

He knew he should probably ask why, but he suspected it was the guy who looked like a Picasso and used an axe as a backscratcher. He'd met him on the way in. Real nice guy. Looks weren't everything.

"So if you could talk to them for me, I'd really appreciate it. Because if there's a chance that these
"Sweet..." breathed Bunny.

"Kinda freaky if you ask me..." David muttered.

"That's what's so great about it!" Bunny cried. "Would you f***ing look at this place?"

"Well, yeah. I'm looking at it. Like, right next to you, my eyes are right on it so yeah, I would," David babbled dully.

Bunny turned a slow stare on his twin and raised an eyebrow. David looked back with a bland smile.

"Alrighty then," Bunny said dryly. "Come on, dork."

"You're a dork."

"No, you're a dork."

"You."

"You're a bigger one."

"Well, yeah, 'cause I'm two inches taller than you so yeah, I'm bigger by definition."

"I totally would have made a dirty joke out of it making myself the awesome but if you want to take the village idiot approach it's all good," Bunny said pleasantly as they reached the doorway.

David gaped. "There's actually no door. There's really not a door. Paige was serious, there is no freaking front door."

"So there's no door, then?" Bunny said.

David threw both hands toward the open doorway. "Guh! No damned door!"

"Hello?" Bunny called, ignoring him.

"Here it comes," David mumbled, dropping his inane behavior, to Bunny's relief. He was nervous, too, but that was no excuse to give up and act like a moron.

And besides, Paige had warned them about what came next and he didn't want any nonsense at a time like this. He squinted in through the open doorway. Sure enough, they saw a figure moving toward them out of the depths of the shadowy foyer.

"Hey, there!" David called as though it was any ordinary person that approached. "We're here for an interview."

The man blinked impressively, considering one of his eyes was sideways.

"Gotta draw that later," Bunny muttered. "That is so wicked..."
"Ssh."

"Oh, sure!" the man said lightly. "Yeah, come on in. You're here to see Six, right?" asked the man. "Name's Norman, by the way."

"Nice to meet you," Bunny said delicately, trying to relax. Meeting people was awkward for him at the best of times, but even with forewarning and the pleasant demeanor, meeting Norman was formidable.

They walked into the manor and followed him through a dimly lit dining room that held a bowl of apples and a pungent red chair.

"Don't sit there. It's possessed. I sometimes forget to mention that..."

David started to laugh. The laughter died in his throat. Norman didn't even look amused in an abstract sense.

"Really?" Bunny breathed, peering closely at it.

"Get out!" intoned a deep voice from somewhere in the shadows.

David and Bunny jumped as one. Norman sighed deeply as a tinny snicker followed.

"Rabbit..." he sighed.

"There is no Rabbit! There is only Zuul!" groaned the voice.

"What the hell...?" David said. Bunny giggled, until he caught a glimpse of glowing eyes coming from one corner of the room.

"Just follow me," Norman said wearily.

They complied hastily, following him up the stairs. Behind them, they heard the sound of heavy footfalls. Bunny glanced back to see a rickety copper robot stumping along behind them, leering.

David glanced back as well. "Should that be happening?"

"Just ignore him. He thrives on attention and doesn't care what kind he gets."

Bunny looked again, bemused. The robot waggled his eyebrows. Bunny was impressed by the facial mobility, but David, beside him, shivered.

"Freaky as hell," he muttered.

"I know. This place just keeps getting better!" Bunny whispered.

They stopped on the second floor and Norman chuckled dryly. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. I must be getting forgetful. Or distracted," he added, looking back at the robot. "Of course we can take the elevator the rest of the way."

Behind them, the robot stopped and let out a loud hiss of steam. Bunny thought he could hear muttered swearing as Norman led them around the corner to a small elevator.

As he started to close the cage door, Norman looked at the robot, now peering at them around the corner, it's blue and green eyes bright in the dimness.
"Don't even think about it," he said firmly. "You're too heavy to use it."

The robot's head slowly slipped back around the corner as the elevator rose.

"That's better. Well, Peter should be in the HoW with The Spine. You'll like him. The Spine, I mean. Nice guy."

Was he saying they wouldn't like Peter? "But... what was that thing? You called it a rabbit..."

"That's his name."

"Weird," David murmured.

"What's his deal, though?" Bunny asked, frowning. "I mean, he's cool as crap but that stalking stuff is kinda disturbing..."

"He's Rabbit. That's all I'll say. Ask Peter."

Bunny looked at David, who shrugged. Norman didn't want to talk about Rabbit. Fine, then.

"This is some place, though, isn't it?" he said a moment later, his voice brightening. "Very Victorian, nice location. My wife and I..."

He went on as the lift slowly crept upward, showing beyond a doubt that he had no trouble with conversation, just with Rabbit. Bunny decided that was easy to understand... he thought Rabbit was creepy-cool, but there was a certain edge of fear to the encounter...

Which he loved! He wondered what the other robots would be like.

They opened the cage at the top of the manor and stepped out. When they rounded the corner, there was a soft hiss of steam.

Rabbit was leaning against the wall at the top of the stairs, leering at them. The lift had been very slow...

Norman pretended not to see him and turned the other way. "The HoW is this way," he muttered.

Bunny looked back and Rabbit waved.

They reached a room with an actual door. Sure enough, above the door was a sign that read "H.O.W."

"How what?" David asked, glancing uneasily back at Rabbit, who was slowly walking toward them on the shadowy side of the hallway, dragging one foot slightly.

"It's not gonna work, Rabbit," Norman said to the ceiling. "So, the HoW is actually..."

Rabbit's head creaked to one side as he lurched slower and slower toward them. He groaned with the sound of metal twisting. Bunny was wanting more and more to get the job. He had a powerful need to draw this robot...

Norman seemed to have forgotten what he was saying.

"Um..." David began, inching backward.

"Oh, sorry, right!" Norman said, turning away from Rabbit.
Rabbit suddenly rushed forward, stopping sharply behind Norman. Bunny gasped, his heart giving a thrilling lurch, but David squeaked in alarm and stumbled backward.

"Be cool, man... it's just an act!" Bunny whispered, looking at the robot in sheer delight as it stood, breathing steam ominously on the back of Norman's head.

Norman didn't even flinch. He looked very tense, however, as he forced himself to continue speaking. "So. You asked about the HoW. It's not meant to say "how" but in fact stands for Hall of Wires RABBIT! Enough already!"

Rabbit snickered again. Norman opened the door and hurried them inside, closing it sharply behind them. Inside the room was a kid with a shock of wild blond hair, typing at a console. He glanced up and smiled, his hands continuing to type as if of their own accord.

There was a thump on the outside of the door. A few seconds later came another thump. Pause... thump... pause... thump... pause...

Thump.

"Peter!" cried Norman. "He's doing it again!"

"Spine?" the man said without looking up.

"On it," responded a very deep voice from somewhere above them.

"Is he like Jarvis or something?" Bunny asked, squinting up into the mass of cables and red flashing lights.

"He's one of the robots," Norman said a little breathlessly, looking sidelong at the door.

"Up there?"

The thumping stopped a moment later, and was replaced by what sounded very much like petulant stomping that faded into the distance.

"He's bored," the deep voice reported. "Jon and Upgrade went for a walk."

"Aw, crap," growled Peter. "A bored Rabbit could cost me! Spine, can you find something to keep him busy?"

"Threaten him with maintenance," came the voice.

Peter chuckled. "You try it. I have to meet with these promising young men."

"Young men?" David whispered. "He's got to be younger than we are..."

"Not any older, anyway," Bunny agreed quietly. The guy looked about fifteen!

Norman chuckled softly. "He's twenty-four. I'll be going, then. Good luck!" he said warmly, and left. Moments later, they heard him shriek.

"Norman?" cried Peter, running to the now open door.

There was the sound of mad laughter and loud footfalls running down the stairs.

"Rabbit!" Peter bellowed. The footfalls increased in speed.
"Fine..." came the response from somewhere down the hall. "I'm just fine... he decided to wait for me and jump out... I'm fine... It's okay. He usually leaves you alone for the rest of the day after a good scare. I'm... I'm going to go prune the hedge..."

It was then that it finally hit Bunny that he'd been hearing the sound of steam and machinery behind him. He and David turned as one to see a snake-like form with a human head staring at them. David screamed but Bunny choked.

"So damned cool..." he sighed.

And then, with one smooth motion, a robot body rose from the floor and the head was dropped into it. Bunny caught a very awkward glimpse of what looked like an embarrassingly accurate silver sculpture of a man before arms descended and clothing was placed rapidly onto the figure. Within seconds, a robot stood, straightening a nice fedora and nodding politely.

"I'll take care of it, Peter. Gentlemen," he said politely, striding out.

"Maybe if we run, we can get out of here alive," David hissed to Bunny.

"Are you putting me on?"

"You want to work here?"

"Dude, you don't? Besides... it's this or homelessness."

David sighed.

"It's gonna be okay."

"Keep telling me that."

Peter turned to them with a watery smile. "Poor Norman... Rabbit never has entirely forgotten... um... well... Shall we repair to my office?"


"Wow. All these years and I never knew that about you."

"No one ordered sarcasm."

"I really think they did."

"Well, take it back. It's raw."

"That was a pun."

"You got a problem with that?"

"Um... it's this way..." Peter saïd slowly, gesturing toward the door.

Bunny sighed and followed. "Don't screw this up!" he hissed as he passed David.

David sighed dramatically as he trailed along behind.

In Peter's office, they sat in dusty chairs while the man fussed with a computer.
"Okay, looks like you have pretty good qualifications..."

"In what?" David exclaimed. "It's not like either of us knows that much about science!"

"Well, that's not really required to start here. You need to be bright, willing to adapt, flexible about your living situation, open to new ideas..."

"Which is doubletalk for poor, desperate, and homeless," David said dryly.

"Dude, seriously!" Bunny snapped under his breath. Aloud, he said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Walter..."

"Peter."

"Oh... um, okay. Well, David isn't really sure about this. He thinks it's kinda... well... silly. Plus one of your employees friendzoned him..."

"Seriously?" David cried.

"Look, I wanna be honest, okay? Also, I think you know I'm dating another of your employees so there's that awkward little issue. But I really want to work here. I guess... I guess if David doesn't..."

David looked at him apprehensively. They had worked separate jobs before but never lived apart. Bunny didn't quite feel easy about it, either, but after all, sometime they had to grow up...

"Well, we would like to hire you both, if we could, but of course we wouldn't dream of forcing anyone to... Oh, what now? Stupid... this computer! Ugh!"

He began punching buttons on his keyboard frantically. David's eyes widened. He reached somewhat feebly toward the computer and pulled his hand back again.

Bunny smiled. This could help...

"I can't get this thing to... Ugh!"

"What is it?" David asked eagerly. "I, uh... I'm pretty good with computers."

"Could you take a look, then? I was just looking at your file and then the whole thing just froze."

David stepped around the desk and snorted. "How old is this equipment?"

"Oh, about ten years..."

David snickered.

"That's not that old..."

"Maybe for a tortoise. Which moves faster than this will, honestly."

"Well... we had thought about bringing in a newer network... but I work in robotics and while I can use a computer I don't really know the whole officey networky stuff... But I get the feeling you do."

David was pressing the power button on the CPU. "I've worked in IT, yeah..."

"Is it possible I could persuade you to sign on as our in house computer guy, then? Your brother could work with the robots and you could do maintenance on the systems. Of course, your job would also require working with the robots somewhat... we were never able to fully integrate
them to Windows so there's a complex system in place to keep them up to date."

"But you don't do networks, you said. Who did all this computing in the past?"

"Well, that would be my father. And... unfortunately he's recently been diagnosed with early onset dementia. He's the last one to do any major work. I've been getting by on virus scans and luck."

Bunny could see it. David had his bearings and a purpose. He looked back at Bunny with his eyebrows raised, as though asking for permission to take the job Bunny had hoped he would want to take.

"Well? How about it? I can see that Bunny here wants to work with the robots and you would have plenty to do with the new network once we get it... it would depend on what you recommend we get, mind you, but I'm open to what you suggest. If you can keep the cost down."

"I can... Well... alright. I'll do it."

"The position does involve working with the Blue Matter, understand?" Peter added quickly. "I'm, um, required by law to tell you that. It's just more the interface and input than the actual chemistry and such..."

"I can deal with it. I... I guess my hair would turn blue?" David said.

Bunny chuckled. "No worries about that here. I gave up on my hair a long time ago."

"Oh, is that what it was?" Peter said.

They heard running feet. A loud voice shouted, "You so much as breathe on that fedora and I'll turn you into a jello mold, so help me!"

"Every time..." Peter sighed. "Come on, maybe we can talk them down."

2011:

"This place is freaking amazing."

"We have a small theater, if you'd care to see it," The Spine said.

Steve grinned. "Sweet! I'm always interested in a theater."

They passed Breanna as they walked. She smiled and The Spine felt a curious warmth.

"New worker?" she asked.

"Oh, no, Miss Breanna. This young man is Mr. Steve Negrete..."

"Steve. Just Steve," he said, offering his hand.

"Well, welcome to the Manor! If you're not signing on, then what brings you here?"

"I've been helping these mooks fix their sound issues on stage."

"Oh, thank goodness for that!" she laughed.
The Spine frowned. She looked at him and her smile vanished.

"Oh! I mean... they sound fine but there's always room for improvement!" she said, blushing blue.

Steve laughed heartily.

"I have to go," she said rapidly, hurrying away.

The Spine looked after her gloomily. Did she really think they sounded bad?

"Cute kid. I think she likes you."

"What?" The Spine said in an unexpectedly squeaky voice. He cleared his throat for effect and muttered, "The theater is this way."

Steve followed, still chuckling.

When they reached the little theater, to their surprise they found a small group of Walter Workers playing on the stage. David and Bunny were performing some nonsensical mime routine as Paige laughed in the audience and Sam sat of to one side, drawing in a sketchbook and periodically throwing out wisecracks. Michael Reed, now a good deal thinner and more fit than when he had first followed Jon home, stood to one side, playing his banjo.

"Steve!" Michael cried when he saw him.

"Hey, buddy. Spine here is just giving me a tour."

"'Bout time! You've been a big help in the stage act."

"I try," Steve said humbly.

The mime performance had broken down and Bunny had David in a full nelson somehow, considering David was taller. The Spine cleared his throat for attention and they both looked toward the doorway.

"Hark!" cried Bunny. "Where is thy sword, sir knight?"

"Dork," David said mildly, dropping to the floor. Bunny fell over him and kicked him irritably.

"I fong thee, thou goatish malmsey-nosed gudgeon!"

"And these are the children," Sam said, without looking up. "Sounds like one of them has been looking at the Shakespearean insult generator again. Hello, Steve. Good to meet you."

"You've heard of me?"

Now he looked up, astonished. "I was the drummer at the last concert! You don't remember?"

"Oh, no way! You're one of the nerds, too?"

The Spine looked at Steve uneasily but Sam laughed. "Always. Seriously, though, do I look that different in white?"

"Kinda transparent actually..."

Bunny had descended the stairs and gave Paige a quick kiss. "Hey, Sam told me about you. Natty
dreads."

"What does that mean?" Steve asked.

"I... dunno," Bunny said blankly. "I heard it in a video game..."

David appeared at this and The Spine took a step backward as the four of them huddled, creating a veritable cyclone of video game conversation. He still didn't understand the appeal. He was an automaton; most games were about as challenging as putting two magnets together. In fact, considering that he did have some iron in his construction, they were less challenging than that.

Paige walked up, smiling, as Michael Reed gave a brief nod and hurried out. "That did it," she said. "I'll be a video game widow in no time."

"A what? Ah, yes... very amusing."

"Oh, Spine!" she chuckled. "So... have you seen Bree?"

He looked at her in surprise. Her tone was broad and unmistakeable. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Briefly..."

"Oh, that's not right! You should see a lot more of her."

"Mr. Negrete, I'll leave you in their capable hands," The Spine said hastily, turning away.

"Oh... Sorry, Spine," she said quickly as he strode away.

"Don't worry about it," he sighed, turning the corner as quickly as he could.

He didn't stop until he reached the HoW. Instead of separating and getting to work, however, he shut the door and sank back against it, groaning softly.

He didn't know which was more troubling; the fact that everyone was trying to pair him up with Breanna, or the fact that in his heart, he wished it was that simple.

It hadn't been long enough. It just hadn't. It couldn't be. Breanna was attractive... so very attractive! But he'd planned to live at least sixty years with Marie, and he'd not had it. How could he even consider falling in love again, and watching another love die? And that was all he had to look forward to if he sought love once more.

It had been beautiful with her. He still loved her. He couldn't even consider loving another. Not yet, anyway.

But he smiled as he let the clawed hands separate him from his chassis. It was kind of nice to have a pair of beautiful eyes cross his path throughout the day. Maybe someday soon, he would feel ready to open his heart to the entire woman.
Come on Everybody...

Chapter Summary

Saying goodbye, and saying hello again...

2012:

The duck pond reflected sparkles of bright sunshine onto the headstones as Upgrade stared down.

"You always did like Jon, didn't you, Mama?" she sighed. "I went even further and fell in love with him. I think you'd approve. I think you'd love him as a son... I kinda think you always did. He was pretty silly back then..."

He was silly now, too, she thought with a smile. She adored him for it as she did everything else about him. But of course it was different now. He'd been so childlike when she had first started observing him around the Manor. Now, he was older, like her. They were both silly, both had fun together, but sometimes it was the kind of fun only adults had... Either way, they thoroughly enjoyed life together, or at least they tried. As much as she adored her Jon, their relationship had been complicated from the start... by others.

"Pappy doesn't see him the way you did. I don't expect that, of course. But I just wish he could be happy for me. I really should have waited to tell him Jon and I were sleeping together..."

That had gone over like a lead balloon... and she didn't really blame for that, either. The ridiculous part was that she had wanted so much to get out of that computer and just be a person, with a father and a lover and family around. But now that she was out, she wasn't happy. She didn't want back in, but it just seemed that when she got one thing she wanted, another thing would appear that was needed to make her happy.

In this case, however, there were two things. She wanted her Pappy to make peace with her choice of mates, and she wanted to see the world... and beyond. She knew she could never bring them both. They were tense enough at home, with workers and family to help keep the peace. But both of them traveling together, with the one who had come between them? That was what hurt the most... they had been pushed apart by their love of her. It shouldn't be, but it was. No, she would have to choose just one to come along.

And realistically, even two robots traveling the world could be a problem. They were property. She knew it was different here, but not out there. Out there, they were clever toys. She would have to travel with a human, too.

It just kept getting more complicated.

"What can I do, Mama? I love Pappy but... if I have to choose, I couldn't possibly leave my darling here. Not my sweet Jon... And that's what you're supposed to do. You have to leave home sometime, and get married or something, get a job, get your own life..."

She sighed, placed a kiss on her hand which she then placed on the stone, and shuffled into the
manor.

That night, she lay beside Jon, sighing. Pappy had been civil today, but the tension was driving her mad. She had to get away, and as much as she hated to admit it, she knew which of them was causing the problems. Jon had shown no jealousy of Rabbit. It was more than personal preference, she now realized, that would decide who she took along on her travels. Rabbit was just not adjusting to the changes.

Jon pulled her into his arms and kissed her. She picked up a signal from him; he was switching to their private wifi channel. For him, this was the equivalent of winking slyly and locking the bedroom door. Any other time, she gladly would have discarded her nightie and fired up the mind link; her little inner world was still the most intimate thing they shared, now in combination with real physical affection. It was new ground and they had thoroughly enjoyed exploring it.

But tonight, she had so much on her mind! She pulled away and lay her head against his shoulder with a sigh.

"What's wrong?" Jon whispered, stroking her back.

"You know, sweetie."

"Yeah. Rabbit. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be."

"The other kind of sorry. I just feel bad for you."

"Yeah."

"I guess he's kinda upset because we're... y'know... lovers."

"And he shouldn't be. I'm so happy with you, Jon. I love making love to you! Why can't he just be happy for me?"

"Yeah, it isn't like Rabbit never did it... the first time they took out the power for four blocks!"

"Oh, Jonny, don't!" she cried.

She had glimpsed her parents in bed together when she was very young and thought nothing of it. Now that she knew more about it, the last thing she wanted to think about was her father making love to her mother!

But Jon was giggling. "He thinks we don't know..."

She glared at him.

"Sorry. So do you just want to go into stasis, then?"

"Well..."

She didn't. She wanted to connect to his mind and make love to him. But she had to ask him something first.

"Have you ever thought of traveling? I mean, we went to Biscuit Town that time. But maybe we
could see more together..."
"That would be nice! I wonder if I'm still mayor back there..."

She was still confused about how that had happened, and she had actually been there. "But... I mean a real trip, Jonny. A long trip. I just need to get away from..."

She couldn't say it. Jon kissed her head.

"Rabbit."

She clouded up and began to cry. "I don't want to, but I can't stand it another day! Not without some hope of getting away for a while!"

"Ssh... it's okay. We can do something... but there's concerts booked all summer at the zoo..."

"Well, maybe after summer..."

"And you could come to the zoo, too. We could look around between sets."

"But won't you be late back to the stage if you're walking around with me?"

"They won't mind!"

She doubted that. But she was grasping at the straws offered.

"Alright."

"But..."

"What?" she moaned.

"There's concerts in the Fall, too!"

"Jon!" she cried miserably. "Maybe I just have to travel alone then!"

"No! No, I want to go with you, but... how will they play the concerts?"

"Oh... well, I have some theories that might help here."

"Theories?" Jon asked.

That was a whole other topic, one that couldn't be told quickly. If she mentioned it now, he would be too distracted and she wanted his undivided attention. Jon had been stroking her back this whole time... she'd included a complex network of sensors in her design and Peter had done a terrific job installing them. His closeness was lovely, especially since he now came to bed wearing only a pair of pajama bottoms, and his caresses had fired up longings she didn't want to ignore another minute.

"I'll tell you after," she murmured, kissing him.

He helped her out of her nightie and wrapped his arms around her tightly. She opened a file marked simply "bed" and sent out a signal on their private channel. He laughed quietly and connected.

Peter Walter VI was drawing rapidly, if not well. Around the sketches he wrote extensive, complex notes only he could read.
He'd had his own theories. He'd been working for years on the idea and he had some very good leads. But without certainty about which would work, and with money tight, he'd lacked the opportunity to make attempts.

After his recent chat with Jon and Upgrade, however, he was fairly certain he knew which approach would most likely succeed. He could afford one good attempt to repair the robot stored in the vault. Just one. With Upgrade's help, he was almost ready to embark on the project.

But he had been assured that if he meant to do it, he would have to tell Rabbit and The Spine first. And with that news would come a request made by the couple... to travel, to see the world and Kazooland beyond. It wouldn't be an easy thing to present to the others, considering it meant that Jon would be leaving the band, and that Upgrade, Rabbit's daughter, would be moving out, as it were. Leaving with her lover, Rabbit's estranged brother/friend.

Peter wasn't weeping about it; the tension caused by their family situation was driving him nuts. He was concerned about sending them out unsupervised, but he meant to speak to the staff about volunteering to accompany them. He had a pretty good idea which members were more likely to accept the job. His top candidate was someone who wasn't heavily involved in the science, knew basic maintenance and repair, rolled with the changes... and who didn't much like being stuck behind the drums.

The good news was that Upgrade's repair plan for Hatchworth could be the solution to the loss of band members. If he, Peter, could bring the damaged robot back up to specs and program him to perform by the time summer was over, then it would just be a matter of outfitting him and planning the trip for the others.

And telling Rabbit. And The Spine.

He was called for dinner eventually. Gathering his notes, he hurried down and wolfed his meal while his mother attempted to get his attention.

"Peter!" she said sharply.

"Hm?" he murmured, finally looking up.

"You've been distracted the whole meal! What in the world is so absorbing?"

He glanced uneasily down the table, lined with chattering Walter employees and relatives. The robots didn't usually bother to attend.

"It's big, Mom," he said softly. "We need a meeting tomorrow. Everyone together. Things have come to a head with Upgrade."

"How do you mean, 'come to a head'? Is she threatening you or something?" she chuckled.

"No, silly. She's done. She needs to get away."

Annie sighed. "I don't blame her, poor love. All those years trapped and then when she gets out..." She shook her head. "I'm so proud of you for that, y'know."

He flushed slightly and muttered, "She did a lot of the work."

"But your pappy never could do much with robots. I mean, maintenance, sure."

She waved down the table and Five winked. His memory was slipping but his flirting game was
"Well, she was a huge part of it," Peter murmured to his mother. "And that's just the thing. She has a theory about repairing Hatchworth."

"So have you."

"Yes, but... after speaking with her, I really think it can be done!"

Annie stared at him. "Peter! Oh, that would be amazing! You know how much they miss him."

He nodded excitedly. "I'll be ready to try it in just about a week! The only trouble is getting materials and... well, as I understand it, he needs a new face."

"A what?"

"They streamlined him before storage. Stripped off unnecessary parts. I guess it made him more comfortable or something, I dunno. Well, I've been all over this house over the years and never saw so much as a box marked as having contained his missing parts, much less a box with them inside. I have his specs but I'll have to mint a new face. I just need a suitable model. I... don't sculpt."

"Maybe Rabbit could? Or Jon?"

"I guess... but it's just easier to find a face and mold it. Faster too."

"Do you even know the size?"

"It's in the specs..."

He dug through his sheaf of papers and showed her a sketch of a robot with a slightly pear shaped body, a bowler hat and an impressive handlebar moustache.

"Would you look at that!" she giggled. "Those old-timey moustaches!"

"I understand it's not optional, either. Apparently it covers the vents on his face and he won't step out of doors without it. I'll have to have one made to order... I think something in silicone... Anyway, here's the measurements."

Annie looked, and then squinted down the table. She smiled.

"Well, I have an idea who might fit these parameters," she said, pointing unobtrusively at a man having a sword fight with his butter knife, pitted against Matter Master David.

Peter blinked. "He seems to be the man of the hour."

"Hm?"

"Oh... just thinking out loud. Yes, I think you're right."

The following morning, they all sat gathered in the library. Upgrade, surprisingly, was sitting holding her pappy's hand while Jon sat on the other side of the room.

*Alright there, maverick?* The Spine sent.
Sure, cowboy, Rabbit replied. Why wouldn't I be?

Well, your daughter is suddenly cozying up to you while Jon is out of reach. It just makes a man think.

I ain't a man so I guess it doesn't work for me, Rabbit joked.

You know what I mean.

Maybe they're on the skids!

The wifi had no tone of voice but The Spine raised an eyebrow and Rabbit knew his eagerness had come through loud and clear.

Do you really think that's likely? The Spine sent.

It could happen...

Seriously, though?

N-no... So you think something's coming? The meeting and all?

Yep. I think maybe the tense family scene has gotten out of hand and Peter is here to straighten things out.

What tense family scene?

You know what. You're at the center of it.

Rabbit frowned. Everyone was settling into their seats and Peter was fussily tapping a stack of papers on the coffee table in front of him.

They started it...

Rabbit... you said you accepted their relationship. And you've been a grade A ass about it.

I aim for quality. Anyway, shut up, Peter's gonna start babbling.

Rabbit...

Shush!

"Alright, everyone," Peter said brightly. "A few points. First of all, the flowerbeds are coming along well since replanting. That's in the nature of a warning not to dig them up again. There is no treasure under the poppies, Rabbit."

"Could've been..." Rabbit muttered to the ceiling.

"Uh-huh. Similarly, no using The Spine's chassis to replant your cactus, Jon."

"But Rabbit said it was like a desert in there..."

Rabbit snickered softly. The Spine glared.

"Just put it in a pot, okay?"

Peter sighed as a grin spread across Rabbit's face. Tricking Jon had always been fun but these days it
was positively therapeutic. He felt Upgrade's hand in his and his smile faded away. Maybe The Spine had a point...

"Now we come to a couple of really big items. First off, well... might as well get it over with. We have some... news. Upgrade and Jon have an announcement to make."

What?

Rabbit looked around sharply, first glaring at Jon, who cringed, then gaping at his daughter. "No... Not that!"

"Not what?" she cried.

"Not... anything I could possibly be thinking of, right? No freaking way. Baby, tell me..."

"Calm down, Pappy!" she cried. "No, we aren't getting married, if that's what you mean."

"Married? I was afraid you were pregnant!"

"Honestly! How could I be... oh..." she breathed. "Well... no! I'm not pregnant, Pappy!"

She giggled nervously and looked at Jon, who had stood suddenly and had a strange look on his face. Rabbit couldn't believe it. It obviously hadn't occurred to them that if Rabbit and Honeybee had managed to create a sentient life form, that Upgrade and Jon could find themselves in a similar situation. Everyone knew they were at it every night... Rabbit unhappily pushed the thought aside and looked across the room. He couldn't tell whether Jon was alarmed or excited at the suggestion that he might be a father.

So help me, Jon... Rabbit sent.

I never... I... I... 

Rabbit! The Spine sent sharply. 

Pappy! Upgrade shot simultaneously.

Oops. He had used the regular wifi...

Upgrade said loudly, "I'm not pregnant."

"Right..." Jon breathed as he sank slowly into his seat.

"How did we even..." Peter began. "Scientifically speaking, it's extremely unlikely that two Blue Matter automatons could actually create life. It's a whole different dynamic!"

"Awwww..." Jon moaned. Upgrade sighed.

"You actually wanted to?" Rabbit cried. "After all that you and your mama went through?"

"Mama went through it because she was afraid to tell anyone. We know more. We coulda built it a body, too!" she growled.

"Well, that... That could work actually..." he murmured, impressed.

"And then you'd be a grandpappy!" she said, beaming.
Rabbit had visions of his old dream of the tiny robot baby with the ringlets and suddenly understood their disappointment.

Peter flailed his arms and got Rabbit's attention. "Can we just... Look! They're going to do some traveling, okay? They want to see the world."

There was murmuring in the room. Rabbit just stared at Upgrade. Of course she did. He knew she had wanted to see it. They had talked about going to see it together someday if they could. And instead they had stayed, he had kept her there, under his thumb, watching her every move, sulking because she was in love. She wanted a life, she wanted kids, she wanted to see things, and she wanted her boyfriend and her pappy to get along. She wanted a lot of things her mother had wanted... And he wanted his little girl to have everything she needed to be happy, everything her mother had had and more.

But if Peter was right, she couldn't have kids. It had been a fluke when he and Honey had managed it, but this was different. All he could give her was the chance to travel, and the chance to have her boyfriend and pappy get along. He had been so angry, so uncomfortable, when Jon had turned out to be her lover. It felt wrong on so many levels, but it was no worse than when Peter had married Lily... and he had encouraged that.

He felt horrible. Plain, flat out awful. This day was bound to come and he had wasted their time together being petulant. His baby girl was leaving at last, as all kids would, given the chance... She was beyond grown up and loved a man, such as he was... No. Jon had grown up, too. He could see it as the brass bot looked on from across the room. His eyes were on Upgrade. He was worried. He shouldn't have to be worried about her here...

"Jon's leaving the band, okay?" Peter said firmly.

The murmuring in the room grew to a thunder of responses, objections, congratulations, envy... except for Rabbit. He was now staring down at the floor, stroking Upgrade's hand. After a minute of chatter, the group slowly fell silent, all looking at him.

"Pappy?" Upgrade whispered thickly.

"You're gonna take a trip. Just you an' Jonny, hm?" Rabbit said softly.

It wasn't the kind of lethal softness he used before an outburst. It was a weak, broken softness. A resigned sort of voice, somewhere between grief and acceptance. When he looked up at her, there were tears starting but he blinked them away.

"Yes, Pappy."

"Good," he murmured. "You've been trapped in that room and this house all your life. There's a bigger world outside of San Diego. I want my baby to see everything her Pappy has and mo-mo-mo-more."

"Oh, Pappy!" she sobbed.

He put his arms around her. "Don't cry, baby," he whispered, close to her ear. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't take you myself. But... you're a lady now. You're a woman and you have a man of your own. Guess my dumbheaded brother grew up finally. He ain't been the same since he fell in love. Just as good though. Still golden right down to his heart. Not like me."

"Pappy, don't!"
"It's alright. I'm trying to do the right thing here. I've been an a$$hole and I know it, and you know it, everybody knows it. And I want you to go and see good people and give me a chance to miss what I should have appreciated since Peter brought you back to me. I love you, baby girl. Go with your lover and be happy."

She buried her head in his shoulder and wailed. Rabbit chuckled and waved Jon over.

"Come on. Time to get over myself. Come and comfort her, Jon. Ya been doing that already."

Jon beamed and hurried over, squeezing himself next to her on the opposite side and putting his arm around her. There was a soft round of applause from the Walter workers.

"I love you," Jon whispered. "Everything's gonna be okay now, sweetheart."

"I know!" she howled.

Rabbit chortled.

"This is all very sweet, really," The Spine said, smiling broadly. "But we're booked for the entire summer, Peter."

"Ah, well, that's the other item. Jon is going to stay for the summer. We'll need time to come up with replacement band members."

"Why is that plural?" asked Rabbit.

"Sam here has agreed to accompany Jon and Upgrade on their travels."

Sam waved and smiled, and Rabbit could be heard sighing with deep relief.

"That's a load off!"

"Thank you," said Sam. "I think."

"But... we ain't gonna be the same with just two robuts."

"Well, now, who said there would only be two robots?" Peter asked.

"What, ya gonna build another?"

"No... but I have every confidence that we can repair one."

The Spine, who had inched to the edge of his seat when the travel plans were announced, slipped off his chair, rattling the building when he struck the floor.

"Sorry..." he gasped as Rabbit rose and helped him to his feet. "Are you suggesting that you can repair Hatchworth?"

Jon looked at him with shining eyes. "Peter an' Upgrade figured out how to fix him!" he cried joyously.

Rabbit was grinning broadly for the first time in months. "No kiddin'? That's my baby girl!"

Peter cleared his throat and Rabbit waved a hand dismissively and otherwise ignored him.

"That's just wonderful, Peter!" The Spine cried. "When do we begin?"
Peter laughed. "I begin. Well, with Upgrade's assistance. And you go perform at the zoo. I'll update you daily on our progress."

"But we can't be at the zoo when he comes back online! He do-do-don't know anybody else here!" Rabbit cried.

"I'll make sure you're home for that. Besides, there's another part that requires help from a band member."

He looked once more at Sam.

"Apparently my head is the right size," Sam said benignly.

"Sam has also agreed to be the model for replacement facial plates. Hatchworth's have gone missing."

Rabbit, Jon and The Spine looked at Sam for a long moment.

"Yeah, that should work," Rabbit said slowly.

"There's a bit of similarity in their facial structures," The Spine added.

"I always thought Sam looked like Hatchy," Jon said quietly.

"Really?" Sam said, surprised.

The Spine was looking down. Rabbit grinned sheepishly. "Yeah, buddy. You, uh... kinda freaked us out when ya first came here. That orange moustache mostly... And then ya had to start wearing the da-da-damned bowler hat..."

"No way..." Sam chuckled. "Would that be why you were always rude to me?"

Rabbit looked nonchalantly at the ceiling. The Spine said, "No, he's just like that. But it was why Jon was always making you pick up his sandwiches."

"It was just like when Hatchy would make them for me from his hatch!" Jon wailed. Upgrade snuggled against him.

"Yeah, Hatchy always gave ya a funny look, too..." Rabbit giggled. "He knew they went straight to your boiler."

"Well, I think the meeting is done," Peter interrupted. "We've wandered onto tangents and I've run out of announcements. We start work repairing Hatchworth in one week, once the parts are in. I hope to have him out of the vault within two weeks. He'll have the summer to re-acclimatize somewhat to life on the outside and will hopefully be ready to start work on stage by the fall."

"So soon?" Rabbit asked, dismayed.

Peter sighed. "Yeah. They wanted to be on their way after the summer zoo schedule is completed."

"Alright," Rabbit murmured. What could he say?

The summer passed in relative peace. The concerts at the zoo were lively and they were more popular than ever. Jon sometimes was late or distracted but they covered for him, knowing those
were the days that Upgrade had slipped in, disguised, and walked through the zoo with her love.

They all enjoyed the zoo... though the animals had odd reactions to The Spine, whose height and silver chassis they found threatening. Some days, he, too, had company when Miss Breanna came to help out and would walk and talk with him. Rabbit couldn't help noticing their mutual attraction... as did everyone else in the manor. And while he giggled at the suggestion that Michael Reed was a romantic prospect (a thing that made even Michael laugh), it was no joke that Breanna was the one who was showing all the signs. The Spine, on the other hand... well, he didn't avoid her. But whether he was just being friendly, or was falling in love and fighting it, Rabbit couldn't say for sure.

And he certainly had little time for romance once he got home at night. Hatchworth was brought out of the vault soon after Peter's announcement, to their collective delight. But while Peter could install files to bring him up to date historically and musically, The Spine still needed to take the time to help teach him to perform, and to craft an act that included him and excluded The Jon. Jon himself helped with the guitar lessons and while he sometimes looked a little sad about the changes, his happiness at seeing Hatchworth again seemed to counteract his regret.

Upgrade took the time to be with Rabbit, now that he had at last come to accept things as they were. They talked for hours, as though they hadn't known each other for years. Rabbit was happier than he had been since he had gotten Honeybee back. But eventually the time came when the zoo engagement came to an end. They performed one last concert and then the travel plans were made, tickets bought. Everything was ready. Everything was done.

Except for the goodbyes. Rabbit hated goodbyes anyway, but this one... well, this one just might break his heart.

They had decided to start by seeing the world, Kazooland would wait until they had.

Upgrade walked through Walter Manor with The Jon the day before their flight left, visiting favorite corners and giving a stern warning to Qwerty, the HoW AI she had left behind. Walter workers wished them a good trip. Family members hugged them. Their flight would be leaving early, and Peter and Rabbit would be seeing them off. Even The Spine had begged off, saying his goodbyes the day before like the others.

"Unkie Spine," Upgrade said as he held her in a fatherly embrace. "I want you to know that you've always been very special to me. You were the first family I really had besides Mama. Even Pappy was distant then. I think that was why I was so attached to you for those years when my mind was gone. I remembered that you were special."

"Thank you, sweetheart..." The Spine murmured. Among the staff members, he called her "Miss Upgrade." But as family, he treated her like his own daughter. "We all love you, you know. You have been a wonderful surprise... just like Lily." He closed his eyes for a moment.

"Unkie Spine?"

When he opened his eyes, they were oil slick, but he smiled through his tears and said, "And like her, you have come from the love of your parents, and become a wonderful woman."

"Oh, Unkie Spine!" she cried, hugging him tightly.

It had seemed strange sometimes that The Spine felt like an uncle while Jon felt like a peer, a lover. But so it was. The Spine had been a solid adult presence when she was just a tiny growing
intelligence. Jon hadn't really entered her life until the day he pretended to have a pet mouse. The Spine had always been there for her with his steady, fatherly air, even when he didn't know it. The Jon had always flirted... even when he didn't know it.

The Jon gave The Spine a hug as well, and despite being almost the same age, was given more advice than he could have wanted before being let go to finish packing with Upgrade. There wasn't much left, though. They visited Honeybee's grave before going back to find a small family going away party waiting. They bundled up the few remaining items in their room late that night and fell at last into exhausted stasis in each others arms, the contents of their room all in boxes or suitcases around them.

The next day, they hurried with Sam, Peter, and Rabbit to the airport. There were many curious stares. Rabbit tipped his hat often and The Jon smiled and waved. Upgrade was having a harder time. She had wanted this, but now... How could she say goodbye to Pappy?

Jon squeezed her hand as the approached the gate. "We'll be coming back, sweetie."

"I know! But it's hard anyway."

Jon gave Rabbit a hug and moved back to let Upgrade say goodbye.

"Oh, Pappy!" she wailed, throwing her arms around him.

Rabbit held her for as long as he could. "Come back soon, okay? Even if yehr ju-ju-just gonna leave again. I'll miss you so much, baby! But I want you ta have a great time! Take lots of pictures!"

"I'll try, Pappy! I love you!"

"I love you, too, baby girl," he whispered. "Now you stick with these two. They'll protect you, and Jon will love you almost as much as I do."

She giggled messily and kissed his cheek plate before walking away. She couldn't stop crying, but she wasn't going to give in to it. It was time to break away, no matter how much she would miss everyone. They waved and hurried into the plane.

Rabbit watched his daughter's plane taxi and take off. The last time he'd been on a plane was to come back from Vietnam. he'd been in a crate in the cargo hold, half dismantled, half-mad from the torture, blissfully offline. But there had been one good thing... he'd been coming back to her.

But she was gone. And as much as he missed his little girl, it felt a lot better this time. She was gone, but she was well, happy, and she'd be coming back.

"She's all grown up now, Honey," he whispered as the plane flew away. "I promised... I'm sorry I didn't do a better job taking care of the baby, but... lucky fer her, she had you to make her who she is, and the rest of the family to make her amazing."

Peter, next to him, sighed.

"This might sound stupid," he said quietly. "But I think I know how you feel."

"Hm?"

"Well, I built her body... we designed it together, but I made it. I don't have kids, but... well, never
mind. Let's go home."

Rabbit grinned as they walked away. "You're ha-ha-havin' Pappy withdrawals?"

"Yeah. Weird, huh? I haven't even thought about kids... I don't even have a girlfriend. The idea of me reproducing!"

"Ya never know, kid. One thing that never changes, Petes... Kids come along when they want to, not when you expect 'em."

"Scary," Peter muttered.

Rabbit chuckled. "Yeah. But nothing a guy can't handle."
Open Up That Chest Cavity

Chapter Summary

I think the title says it all.

1937:

The Jon was crying. This troubled Hatchworth. He wasn't going to be locked away for long.

"You can't put him in there!" Jon wailed.

"We've talked about this, Jon," The Spine said firmly.

"It's alright, The Jon. It's only a temporary measure for the safety of the humans in the manor," Hatchworth said pleasantly.

"But you're my little brother!"

"That is incorrect, friendo. I am taller than you are. I am also not your brother, unless it is in the most limited and somewhat abstract sense, according the 1933 edition of the Oxford English dictionary." He beamed at them, pleased with his knowledge.

"Hatchy!" moaned Jon.

"That is accurate, isn't it, sir?" Hatchworth asked the Colonel timidly.

Col. Walter looked at him sadly from the other side of the door on the other side of the room, peering through the glass. He supposed his human ears were insufficient to receive the question.

"Why can't he just stay down here in the cellar? There's the door and we can visit him!" Jon cried.

"Yeah!" Rabbit agreed loudly. "It ain't fair to lock Hatchy up just because of a little crack!"

There was a thoomp and a large pastry popped out of Hatchworth's chest. It burst open and three angry weasels scattered around the room, hiding in various corners. The Spine looked at Rabbit with one eyebrow raised.

"See... wa-wa-wa-wasn't that adorable?" Rabbit said weakly as The Jon tried to coax one of the weasels out from behind a pickle barrel.

"I liked the kittens better," Hatchworth said with a peaceful smile.

He whistled softly through his nose vent and the weasels scurried back and leaped back into his hatch with a flash of blue light. The crack sparked and a shower of tiny blue crystals spilled from it onto the floor.

"Spine..." Rabbit whimpered. "Can't we at least come in and see him sometimes? Blue Matter ain't gonna hurt us!"
"You know we can't, not until there's a way to repair him. And without the means for the Colonel to come near him safely, even if he finds the answer, we can't even open the vault."

"But Pappy made us! He can handle the Blue Matter!" Jon cried.

"He handled it when he was young and fit, which was quite dangerous enough. And Pappy has tried to repair him, which has made his health even more fragile than it was. I'm sorry, fellows, but... there's really no other way. Hatchworth will remain in stasis most of the time, and I'm sure that the Colonel will find the answer before long and Hatchy will be back to making sandwiches."

Jon nodded and cried, hugging Hatchworth, who patted his back calmly.

"There... there..." he said in a monotone.

He felt badly for Jon, worse than he felt for himself, and knew no way to soothe him. It was the same with Rabbit. The poor fellow had lost his girlfriend just a few years before, and Hatchworth had not understood but tried to sympathize by thinking of how he had felt the day he made a perfect sandwich and Rabbit had sat on it. Yes, that had been a hard day.

The Spine was a tower of strength, as usual. But Hatchworth suspected that his tall friend was in fact very tender inside, inasmuch as he was able to be. Rabbit and The Jon had always been naturally affectionate, almost human. The Spine had found it difficult to understand why Rabbit couldn't accept that Honeybee was no longer an option. Or at least, he had acted as though he didn't understand... and then he had played such a sad and tender song for Rabbit to sing, and Hatchworth had listened and cried, because Rabbit was sad.

The Spine was acting as though he wasn't sad now, too. Yet Hatchworth could see a little too much oil lubricating his eyes.

Hatchworth started, just ever so slightly started, to cry. Then he stopped. He didn't mind going into the vault. If they saw him cry, they would think he did. But he was only sad because they were. He was untroubled by spending time in the dark, alone. It gave a fellow time to think.

And that gave him an idea.

"I will dream," he said abruptly, turning to The Jon. "Very beautiful dreams. Worlds beyond our own. It will be very lovely. So do not be sad, friendo."

The Jon brightened at the idea. "You can draw them for me when you come out!" he cried. "You're good at drawing!"

Rabbit smiled through his tears. "That's right, just like I taught him!"

The Spine smiled stiffly and turned away. He clearly thought that he was not fooled by Hatchworth's show of bravery. Hatchworth sighed inwardly. The Spine was fooling himself, for Hatchworth was sincere. He meant to dream of things they could not imagine. He had done it before.

And when he came out, he would draw them all.

2012:
Face plates had been made in the shape of Sam's features from a carefully made cast. The bowler and stovepipe vent had been found carefully stored, still with no sign of the old face plates, and a new moustache, durable and heat resistant, with matching sideburns were laid ready. Rabbit had fashioned a small beard, insisting that Hatchworth had always had one. The Spine had never much liked it but agreed that it had been a part of the set.

Peter put on a hazmat suit and opened the combination listed in the spec sheets. Rabbit, Jon, and The Spine together caught the edge of the vault and pulled. A puff of blue dust burst from the length of the doorway.

Inside they saw a few dusty boxes, behind which they caught a dull glow. A Blue Matter core.

"Spine!" Rabbit breathed as Jon leaned in to look.

"Let's get these boxes out!" The Spine cried, excitement getting the better of him. At long last!

Rabbit laughed and hurried in, scooping up the first box. Jon hurried in as Rabbit exited and stopped with a squeak, staring. The Spine looked in and gasped. There was a skeleton! A quick scan revealed it to be some kind of rodent.

"It's alright, Jon. Just a couple more boxes and Peter will be able to get in and do the work."

Jon nodded and lifted a box. The Spine followed suit and Peter, at last, entered the vault.

"He's a real mess," he told them by radio.

"Is he in stasis?" The Spine asked anxiously.

"Yes... no, wait... I think he's looking at me!"

Sure enough, the skeletal robot had creakily tipped up its head and was looking at Peter.

"Go on, make the repairs!" Jon cried, bouncing.

"Right!" Peter said briskly. He opened the box he had brought along and pulled out a small compact laser and a scanning device. Beneath those, a new invention... a tiny 3-D printer.

He scanned Hatchworth's chest. The bronze bot looked down mutely and watched him as he did so.

"Doesn't he know how to talk?"

"He did," The Spine said worriedly.

"Maybe he forgot?" Rabbit offered.

Hatchworth stared toward the doorway blankly.

"He can't see us. He really needs those glasses," Jon said sadly.

"Yeah, about that," Peter said as he fed data into the printer. "Why not just replace the eyes?"

"He likes glasses," Jon replied.

"But he could have working eyes and wear glasses with plain glass."

Rabbit began to laugh.
"What is it?" Peter asked.

The three robots said as one, "There would be no point in wearing glasses if you could see without them, would there?"

"I take it that was his argument in favor of keeping his faulty photoreceptors?"

"Yep. Pappy had the money to make better eyes for him after the first war but Hatchy wouldn't take 'em."

All the while, Hatchworth was staring at Peter with a blank, childlike gaze.

"He's been in there too long," The Spine muttered. "Does he even know us anymore?"

*Hello, friendo.*

The Spine jumped.

"You heard it too?" Rabbit cried.

Jon began to cloud up. "Morse code!"

*Hatchy! We're gonna make you all better!* Jon sent.

*Oh, good. I have many stories to tell you, The Jon.*

*I know, Hatchy!*

Jon was crying now, despite the huge grin on his face. Rabbit gave him a hug as they watched Peter remove the necessary parts from his printer.

"This is just a patch for now. We can replicate permanent parts once he's out of here."

The Spine grinned. *Hear that, Hatchy? You're coming out of there!*

*I am glad to know it, The Spine. Where is Pappy?*

Their smiles faded.

*He's... he's gone, Hatchy. He's passed on,* The Spine told him, glancing at Rabbit.

Peter used his laser to heat bond the piece over the crack. There was a hiss and the core, which had been sparking and crackling, became stable and quiet.

*I suppose then that this is Peter Walter II?* Hatchworth offered.

*No, buddy. It's... It's Peter VI,* Rabbit told him.

*Oh. Then they have all passed on... It has been many years. Humans expire rapidly.*

*Yeah, buddy. Too rapidly.*

*Meaning that they have died?*

*That's what that means, yes. I'm sorry, Hatchy,* The Spine said.

*Why? Did you kill them?*
No! I mean I am sorry to tell you such sad news, The Spine replied hastily.

Oh, I am glad to know that you have not gone rogue like me.

Peter finished his welding and reached into his box again.

You're not rogue! The Jon cried.

Yeah, dummins! It wasn't your fault!

Well, that is true, Hatchworth agreed.

Peter began to place faceplates on Hatchworth, tightening small screws. Piece by piece, he fastened a bronze likeness of Sam the drummer to Hatchworth. He clicked his features experimentally as they were installed. At last the hat was placed on his head. There was a loud thoomp when it at last was suctioned into position and he blinked blindly at Peter.

"Oh! Right!"

Peter pulled a pair of glasses from a small case and placed them onto Hatchworth.

"Hatchy, boy... you're ready to go far."

Jon rushed in and helped Hatchworth to his feet and hugged him fiercely.

"Hatchy! I've missed you so much!"

Hatchworth worked his jaws for a moment and said, in a dry and creaky voice, "I have missed you as well, brother Jon."

"You called me brother!"

"There was a small definitive allowance for that in the Oxford English Dictionary..."

Jon laughed, and cried again. "Come on out!" he shouted, leading Hatchworth past Peter who was at last hesitantly removing the helmet from his suit.

The Spine and Rabbit each hugged Hatchworth. He hugged them back, to The Spine's surprise.

"Hatchy... you never really understood hugs before..."

"I believe I have worked out the concept since I was left here to think," he said pleasantly.

"Rest those vocals," Peter said. "I need to do maintenance on you and you're going to need those pipes."

"They are not pipes, Peter Walter VI. They are a complex array of sound producing fibers..."

They let Hatchworth continue as they walked him upstairs, laughing happily. It was clear he had no intention of resting his "pipes" and they didn't have the heart to stop him.

Hatchworth was welcomed, carefully, by the whole household throughout the next several weeks. He was found to be much the same as ever, except that he sometimes seemed to drift off into his own little world, drawing, as promised, the things he had imagined. As Peter installed historical data files
to help him adapt to the world he now lived in, he began to grow more lucid, and had many questions about the things he saw in the fresh data.

"What is organic produce? Is not all produce organic matter?"

"There have been many motion pictures I have missed. I see that there is one with a fearsome tough named Dirty Harry. Might we view this one sometime? Of course he could not be as bully as James Cagney..."

"What is Juicy Juice? Is not all juice juicy, The Spine?"

"How does one twerk? Rabbit, stop wiggling your pelvic assembly, I am trying ask a question."

"By the way, Rabbit, I happened by the lab while The Spine was receiving maintenance. He had removed some of his clothing and I am very confused. Why would a robot need a... Why are you shushing me? I was only going to ask about his belly button. That seems like a silly thing for a robot to have..."

"Ah, The Jon. Rabbit is behaving very strangely. I was only asking about The Spine's belly button and got a lot of shushing. I think possibly Rabbit thought I was going to ask why The Spine now has a scrotum. That is a peculiar addition as well... why are you giggling? Is he going to use it on that Breanna girl? That seems like a waste of his time and might cause abrasions... Why, yes, I can whisper..."

"Speaking of unnecessary sexual accessories, I understand this Upgrade is a female, and that she is Rabbit's daughter and your lover. How does that work? What? You're leaving? Will you explain it thoroughly after you get back? It's okay, I can wait... Oh, you mean after you come back from your trip... oh... I will ask Rabbit, then... stop trying to stuff your hat into my mouth!"

"Wait, before you go... why does Rabbit think he is Santa Claus? I could have sworn he was a girl."

This one, even beyond the others, threw them for a loop. Peter checked his memory banks for corrosion but Wanda, when she was told, was thoughtful.

"Obviously there's a fault in his memory there," she said to Annie later. "But there must be a reason he thinks Rabbit used to be female."

"But why wouldn't the others think so?" Annie asked. "If Rabbit was ever adjusted to his feminine settings, surely The Spine at least would remember, if Hatchworth does."

"Well, we never really told him about... you know..."

Annie grinned. "I remember it fondly. But he has heard what Hatchworth said. Don't you think he'd say if Rabbit had ever been a girl?"

"I don't know but it just seems like an awful coincidence."

"I agree, and yet if you hadn't seen Rabbit's alternate settings, what would you think of Hatchworth's mistake, if it is one?"

Wanda sighed. "I'd think he was just confused from being locked away for seventy-six years. Well, I'm making a note of this, either way. I still think it's Grandpappy's original design."

"It may be. But we can't prove it and Rabbit is content turning that charming smile on the ladies and giving The Spine competition for their attention."
"I know," Wanda sighed. And there was really no other argument... at least, not unless they found those specs.

Summer ended at last and Sam, Jon and Upgrade left. Preparations were under way for Hatchworth's debut concert. The fans online were arguing hotly about the circumstances, which troubled The Spine, but Rabbit said all publicity was good publicity. The Spine didn't agree but tried to look on the bright side just the same. And Hatchworth's fingers turned out to be just as nimble on guitar strings as they had been making sandwiches, so there was a lot of bright side to look on.

"The Spine! I would like to sing my very own song for the humans!" Hatchworth said, a few weeks before the concert.

The Spine smiled indulgently. Everyone had time for Hatchworth. Hatchy had been well into "adulthood" when he was locked away, but his emergence into a modern world left him a bit childlike, and The Spine's old paternal protocols wrapped around the experience comfortably. He had almost forgotten how much he really loved being a father.

"Do you have a song then, Hatchy?" he asked, putting down his newspaper.

"I have begun one! The musical files are very interesting, and I have augmented them with downloads from the Youtubes. There are many interesting singers there. But I have noticed that you all have made your fame on very simple and bouncy songs that do not challenge the listener so I have begun to write a catchy and simple minded tune that we may sing."

The Spine's smile had grown brittle. On the other hand, Hatchworth had been his "brother" long before he had known what fatherhood was like. And one thing certainly hadn't changed about Hatchworth; he had no filters to speak of. He said what he thought. The Spine's thoughts drifted to Breanna's relief on hearing that Steve would be helping them sound better...

"The Spine?"

"Hm? Oh, well... let's hear it, buckaroo."

"That is very peculiar, The Spine. You are not a cowboy. Here is my song."

Hatchworth had brought his practice guitar. It was glued and taped in two places but still sounded good enough for the purpose. He began to strum what was indeed a very lively tune.

"There's a knock, open the door, a human sized package..."

That could be taken the wrong way, The Spine mused... but didn't interrupt.

"Rip through tape like butter, cardboard like toast!"

Just like Hatchy to refer to bread...

Rabbit strolled in. "What up, dawg?"

"What?"

"Sh!" snapped Hatchworth. "I am singing The Spine my new hit song. You may hear it too as you will be singing it with us."

"Gee, thanks," Rabbit said dryly, sitting beside The Spine.
"No time for instructions, the fire's dying..."

Rabbit chuckled. "Two birds with one stone, right?"

Hatchworth blinked. "Oh, that's good... I was stuck on that part." He strummed and sang, "Two birds, one stone! Fill the tank with water, turn the ignition, Hatchy boy you're ready to go..."

They blinked in surprise as Hatchworth wailed a long, pure note, his face shining, literally, with joy.

"Faaar!" he crowed. "Catch hatch fever! Faaaaaaaaaar!"

"Wow," Rabbit murmured. "Could he always do that?"

"I don't know, honestly..."

"There's a hole in your floor, we've got to patch it up! Give it a cover, a latch, a hinge and a turn wheel, now you're talking hatch fever, oh..."

"Ya can't just describe a hardware project!" Rabbit scoffed.

Hatchworth scowled, strummed, and continued, "What's worth a living if you can't make a living?"

"What does that even mean? We ain't living!"

"Faux living. Is there a difference? Do not confuse me." He strummed again. "A fever's a fever! Come on, everybody, prepare to get catchy..."

"Should I be scared?" Rabbit asked.

The Spine thumped him in the shoulder as Hatchworth launched into a bouncy, wordless refrain.

*Don't poo poo his efforts! He's trying, alright?*

*But listen to him! This song is all over the place!*

*Well, it worked for Jon!*

*True.*

"Open your heart to me..." Hatchworth crooned, beaming. "Come on, everybody, open up that chest cavity!"

"Whoa!" barked The Spine. "No, no..."

"What now?" Hatchworth snapped as Rabbit bent double with laughter.

"That's, um... don't you think that's a little morbid?"

"Kids, don't try this at home!" Rabbit crowed, falling backward and giggling madly.

*Thanks a lot. Could you back me up here?*

*Oh, no, we mustn't discourage him, cowboy!*

*I'll deal with you later...*

Hatchworth was smiling blandly.
"Hatchy?" The Spine prompted worriedly.

"That is very funny. I will include that in the song."

"But... you can't tell people to open their chests!"

"I will warn them that it would be dangerous to follow my lyrics to the letter. That will help us to avoid lawsuits. Peter VI is always talking about them..."

"Um... okay..."

Hatchworth strummed. "Follow instructions..."

"What, like the instructions to open your chest?" Rabbit snorted.

"Not at all. Good and useful instructions like eating all your vegetables and studying your spelling and being kind to birds. I will figure all of that out later."

"Ah."

Strum. "When all of that's finished prepare to catch Hatch Disease..."

"That sounds bad," Rabbit commented.

"It's not a real disease. On this planet."

"What does that mean?"

"I would rather not talk about it. I am sure it would be a fearsome strain. I would not wish it on anyone."

"Oh, I dunno... Hey, Spine, ya remember that episode of Red Dwarf with the good viruses?"

"I never watched Red Dwarf, Rabbit."

"The Hell you didn't... anything with space. Don't be embarrassed about it. Yeah, so they had those viruses that gave ya luck and sex appeal and other good stuff. So what if there was a virus that made you live longer? Or gave you super strength?"

"I would like a virus that makes my memory files align properly," Hatchworth said dreamily.

"It ain't that kind... well, that would be nice..."

"Depends on the memories," The Spine said quietly. Rabbit frowned at him.

"I will consider these happy viruses in my song." Hatchworth strummed. "Hatch disease, that sounds bad, it's not a real disease, but if it were on another world then we're sorry, we wouldn't wish it on anybody... unless it makes you stronger and live longer! Well, then that's just a good thing, wouldn't you agree?"

"You're just singing our conversation!" Rabbit objected. "And... it works, how do you do that?"

"We can all do that, Rabbit. Shut up," said The Spine.

"But for now they're just words and a good time, come on everybody, get down with the robots!"

He smiled.
"That's it?" Rabbit cried.

"Well, no... I thought then the beat could drop."

"What?"

"There is a music called Dubstep..."

"Oh, no, nope, nuh-uh..."

"It would only be a tiny baby Dubstep! It is very popular with the teenagers..."

"Hush, Rabbit," The Spine ordered. How's he even going to put it in anyway? We'll talk him out of it later.

Yeah, alright.

"There's not much left to tell which hasn't already been stated, consider yourselves 99.9% Hatchworth acclimateeeed!"

Another long, pure note. The Spine was enjoying them but Rabbit was right. The song was a disaster.

"That should about do it," Hatchworth announced at last. "So when do we record it?"

"Whoa there, buckaroo... um... I mean, Hatchy. It's going to need a little work..."

"Oh, yes, of course. I will talk to Michael Reed about putting in the Dubstep." He rose and walked out.

"But..." The Spine stammered, trying to rise quickly and follow him. He heard a grinding sound and sank back into his seat. "Hatchy!"

"What the Hell was that?" Rabbit demanded.

"Just a little issue with the hip servos. I'm fine." He'd had a little trouble with his back lately, but the parts could always be replaced... when he got around to it. "Hatchy?"

"That sounded like the opposite of fine... I thought I was the one who wa-wa-was f-f-fallin' ap-part."

"You are. Hatchy, come back in here a minute!" he barked.

"Ah, Michael Reed!" Hatchworth cried, in the hallway. "How very fortuitous!"

"Wait..." The Spine said lamely. "Dammit."

"Talk him out of it, huh?"

"Shut up, Rabbit."

But to The Spine's relief, Hatchworth's choice to go see Michael Reed was their salvation. It turned out that the melody and even the lyrics were salvageable with the assistance of the One-Man Band. The two were closeted in the music room for much of three days, working on the various instrumentation.
They sat at last in the little theater, listening to a version of the song Hatchworth had haltingly sung to them before. There was a bubbly piano introduction and then Hatchworth sang them the exact same words, with the gaps filled in. Certain parts were indicated to be for Rabbit and The Spine. And a Dubstep recording had been prepared for the dance break, as intended. And to their considerable shock, it was pretty good.

"Well?" Hatchworth said at last.

Michael Reed grinned. "Pretty good, huh?"

The Spine smiled. He had a feeling that even if it had been as terrible as they had feared, the gentle Michael Reed would have bent over backwards to make it usable. Hatchworth had been so delighted with it, and Michael was too kind to disappoint him.

"It's very good, Hatchworth. I see that you and Mr. Reed..."

"Michael."

"...Have shaped it up nicely. I believe we will be able to include it in the act."

"Rabbit?" Hatchworth prompted.

"Yeah, it's okay."

"Thank you, friendo!"

Hatchworth beamed as though Rabbit had given it a glowing review. This was proof that Hatchworth remembered Rabbit very well indeed. The Spine continued to smile but felt oddly uncomfortable, remembering Hatchworth's statement about Rabbit.

It worried him. He didn't dare mention it, but he had the nagging feeling that Col. Walter might just have designed Rabbit that way. He'd seen Rabbit's framework... the hips were a little wide and the structure appeared to adjust in such a way as to make them still wider. Others had joked about it and he had let them rather than bring it up. It was far too awkward to consider, after all.

It didn't really matter, though, did it? Honeybee was the only one who would have cared, and who could say whether it would have even troubled her? She was programmed to be straight-laced but where were the moral limitations on a robot? And Rabbit had always lapsed into behaviors that were, if not feminine, certainly not masculine. He was just... Rabbit. And if The Spine saw him as a brother, recent events had made it pointedly clear that even that wasn't true.

Still, he was glad Marie didn't have to grapple with the question. She would have done her best and loved Rabbit just the same, but he had a feeling it would have given her a hard time. After all, Rabbit hadn't shown any other sign of being feminine in the past... Or had he? And had Marie in fact noticed? He remembered that Marie had confided in Rabbit, not Honeybee, the day they had found out she was pregnant. She had let Rabbit hold Davey as a newborn, and watch him as a toddler... and Rabbit had been best friends with Louise for years. He swayed his hips like a stripper when he really got going on stage, and purred like a torch singer when he sang a ballad.

Well, now, at least, Rabbit was male, or as male as he could be. If that changed, he would cope with it then.

The night of the concert was approaching. They had rented a venue in town so as to test the new act
on familiar and friendly turf. Hatchworth was his usual calm self that morning, so The Spine took the time to have Peter VI oil his back to tide him over until he could get new parts in.

By the time he came stumping out of the lab, Rabbit was running through the manor, shouting for Hatchworth.

"Rabbit! What's up?" The Spine demanded as Rabbit skidded to a halt in front of him.

"He's disappeared!" Rabbit cried.

"Surely not..."

"Surely yes! He ain't around so he's disappeared! I shoulda known he'd be scared to do it. He's never been onstage before, Spine... not with an audience anyhow!"

"Hm... have you checked the vault?"

"Well, no! Why would I?"

"Just in case he's gone somewhere familiar and comforting, somewhere he was for longer than he's been out."

"Are you crazy? He'd hate the vault after all that!"

"You would, but Hatchy has always been different. He could have come to cherish the security of those four walls. Let's check, anyway."

"He won't be there..." Rabbit insisted.

But he was. They heard him softly crooning to himself as they approached.

"If your mustache makes a sandwich, serve it on a platter..."

Rabbit looked askance at The Spine, who shrugged and peered in around the heavy door.

"Hatchy? Everything alright?"

"Hello, friendo," Hatchworth said stiffly. There was a slight tremor in his voice.

"Look, it's okay, buddy. We've all had out moments where we were nervous. We're all trying something new together..."

"I know it, The Spine," Hatchworth said, a tad sharply.

"Ya need a hug?" Rabbit said hesitantly.

Hatchworth stared at him. Rabbit shrugged.

"I will be out in time," he said quietly. "You two can go back upstairs."

"We need to head to the theater in twenty minutes, Hatchy," The Spine said.

"Oh."

"There anything we can do?"

Hatchworth looked down at his hands for a moment. His gloves were still off and his bronze fingers
twitched open and shut repeatedly.

"Spine... How do you face them? The people... how do you watch them watching you?"

"You don't," The Spine said mildly. Rabbit looked at him sharply.

"But I have seen your little films. You look at your audience."

"Honestly, Hatchy, if the footlights don't prevent me from seeing the crowd, I either blur my photoreceptors or I pretend the audience is naked."

Rabbit snickered.

"I suppose you never had to find a way to cope with a bad night," The Spine gritted.

Rabbit sighed, "I wasn't makin' fun of ya. It just sounded funny. And yeah, I usually deal by picturing the audience in crazy Steampunk clothes and robot makeup."

"That's how all of our audiences dress, Rabbit."

"Yeah, that makes it easier..."

The Spine sighed deeply and turned to see that Hatchworth was standing beside him.

"Alright, I'm ready."

"Just like that?"

"I never said I wouldn't go. I just needed a little time in the dark again. I am worried, but I think that our act will amuse the humans. And it does my heart good to know that I am not alone in my worries. If you two can go on stage despite your liabilities, I surely will shine."

"Yay, Hatchy!" Rabbit cried. He frowned suddenly as Hatchworth walked past.

Was that a subtle insult?

No. It was an oblivious, unintentional insult.

Is that different? Only he just made it sound like he could do it if crummy junkbots like us could do it...

And he's right. Come on. I like Hatchy to be confident going out on stage.

He don't have to be so confident that he thinks he's better than everyone else!

We'll see how it goes. Maybe he'll turn out to be as good in front of an audience as he thinks he is.

Rabbit stumped along behind them, scowling.

The Spine had decided that he would call the concert a success if they just got through it without offending anyone. Peter had installed filters in Hatchworth to prevent the eruption of 1930s slang, some of which was violently racist... Not that Hatchworth was. He appeared to love everyone. He just didn't know what to call them.

They made their entrance as usual, the humans first, then The Spine and Rabbit. The audience was
enthusiastic, also as usual. But would they accept the change to the band?

The answer came immediately. Hatchworth came out, smiling and waving, and the crowd roared. Hatchworth beamed and waved.

The Spine glanced at Rabbit, who grinned back. They were over the first hurdle.

Hatchworth played and sang beautifully, smiled at the crowds and capered about as though he had been built to entertain, making jokes and helping to cover for a malfunction in Rabbit's microphone. By the end of the concert, The Spine was through worrying. Hatchworth was going to be just fine.

Rabbit, too, was a lot more tolerant of Hatchworth's ego by then. Jon had been good, but a bit soft on stage, especially near the end of their time together, when much of his time was spent with Upgrade and his jokes were more and more gentle. The audience loved that about him, but it made the show quieter. Audiences tended to drift away to other attractions at the zoo.

Now, with Hatchworth, the audience stayed in place, wondering what would happen next. And Hatchworth, with an energy which stood out in contrast to his enormous patience, did not disappoint.

They sat in the parking lot after the concert. The bus was loaded with their equipment. Steve Negrete was finishing things up inside. Michael and the temporary drummer had each gone home. The Spine's phone, given to him by Peter the year before with the insistence that they keep up with the times, buzzed from time to time. He was fairly certain it was Peter trying to find out when they would be home. Steve could tell him, he decided, staring into the starry night.

"So much space," Hatchworth sighed. "It isn't as big as the worlds I saw in the vault, but it is real, and that makes it better."

"It would be nice to get up into it," The Spine murmured. He heard Rabbit chuckle softly.

"I am content to see it from the Earth." Hatchworth folded his gloved hands over his abdomen. "You didn't tell me it was so much fun to dance and sing."

"Ya did great, Hatchy," Rabbit confessed.

"Thank you very much. I do believe I did. We blew them, did we not?"

"Blew them away, Hatchworth!" The Spine cried as Rabbit dissolved into giggles. "If you don't know how to use the euphemisms..."

"Oh, alright. Was the other one bad, then?"

"It was perfect!" Rabbit gasped, wiping oily tears of amusement.

The Spine groaned softly. "It was offensive to humans, Hatchworth."

"Oh, I see. Something related to the sex."

Rabbit was struggling to fill his bellows. "Oh, I can't stand it! Too funny..."

"Yes," The Spine said loudly, feeling a terrible urge to giggle with him. "How did you know, Hatchy?"

"Everything offensive to humans seems to be connected with the sex. For instance, Miss Breanna looked terribly angry when I asked her whether her breasts interfered with her ability to cleanse her lower body."
Rabbit's laughter vanished in an instant. "You didn't..."

"Hatchy! Why?" The Spine gasped.

"Well, I overheard the Matter Masters saying that The Spine is failing to notice things and the one with hair said it was because of Miss Breanna's breasts. Naturally I assumed that they must be blocking his view and therefore would most likely obscure her view of her lower body while bathing..."

Rabbit was struggling once again, trying not to laugh and failing as he attempted to scold Hatchworth.

"Did you tell her that, or just ask her about the bathing?" The Spine asked desperately.

"I was only able to manage asking about her bathing habits and the size of her bust before she chased me out of the laboratory. It was very awkward," Hatchworth grumbled.

The Spine sighed, partially from exasperation, partially from embarrassment, largely from relief, and just a little bit from contentment. The concert had gone well and his satisfaction with that was hard to dim. It helped a great deal that Breanna had no hint that he was the indirect source of Hatchworth's questions about her breasts... he filled his bellows deeply and let the air out slowly. The Matter Masters need to mind their own business. Breanna had a nice figure of course, but what business was it of theirs which part of it he happened to notice most...

"Yehr st-st-steamin' a little heavy there, bro," Rabbit snickered.

"I run on steam, goose. That a problem?" he said gruffly.

"Oh, just listen ta that, Hatchy! Ya know ya hit tha bullseye when Spine goes cowboy on yehr butt!"

"I still do not understand how The Spine can be a cowboy. He always liked them, I recall, but Pappy wouldn't let him go to that dude ranch on account of the farmer thinking he was a demon after he scared all the cows..."

The Spine shrugged and leaned back against the van, letting them carry on talking without him. Rabbit he expected it from. Besides, he was getting used to being the butt monkey around the manor. It seemed like everyone was trying to push him into Breanna's arms...

Breanna's arms. He shivered. How odd, robots didn't do that.

He smiled as his thoughts wandered far away from the conversation and into meadows with pretty, blue haired girls sitting on picnic blankets. He barely even noticed when Rabbit told him it was time to go.
Masquerade

Chapter Summary

Just when you think you're ready to let go of the past...

Chapter Notes

Short installment, setting up the next chapter.

Halloween, 2012:

The Spine straightened his hat. It wasn't the usual one. It was white and broad and matched his shirt. His drop-holsters were in place and he liked the effect they had on his legs. Paige had seen the costume and winked. He overheard her later telling Bunny that she always thought chaps and drop holsters looked like "crotch frames." The Spine noticed they did seem to draw attention to certain parts of the body. He kind of liked it, too. He hardly ever wore jeans and they made him feel sexy, something he wasn't used to feeling. The "crotch frame" effect just seemed to heighten the sensation.

Although his current feeling of masculinity could be due to the fact that he'd reconnected certain parts. Not that he intended to use them. It was more symbolic of a hesitant intent to finally think about women other than his late wife. Maybe.

Breanna was downstairs somewhere. He wasn't sure what to think about her even now. Marie had said she wanted him to go on living... but he'd invited Dave and Sunshine to the party, as well as their kids, and the thought of attempting some sort of flirting behavior in front of his son... Well, no need to rush. He could go on living another night.

"Hey, bro! The guests are sta-sta-starin' ta show up!" Rabbit said, swinging around the corner. "Sayyyy, hey good lookin'! Save some sex appeal for the rest of us!"

The Spine turned, and smiled. Ordinarily he'd have given Rabbit a blank stare, but tonight he almost felt as though it was accurate. "Captain," he said, looking at Rabbit's costume.

Rabbit nodded and the bicorner hat slipped forward. "This thing is kinda big."

"Get a sash."

"Yeah, on my way to do that."

"I thought you'd wear something scarier..."

"Well, Miss Paige is dressed as..." Rabbit trailed off. "Oh, Spine, I'm sorry... I shoulda warned her..."

"Warned her about what?"
"Buddy... she's dressed as Airheart."

The Spine's boiler stopped for just a moment. It recommenced a moment later with a loud bloop. Rabbit gasped.

"Spine!"

"No... how could she know about her?" he gasped. "And... Dave's going to be here!"

"No! Not Lily, cowboy! The girl in the song, the airplane girl!" Rabbit cried hastily. "I just... figured you'd be bothered by it... Y'know... by what we were just talking about..."

"Yes, Airheart."

"Right." Rabbit was giving him an annoyingly searching look. "You remember me saying that, then?"

"Why wouldn't I?" he asked, frowning.

"No reason! So, you okay with it?"

The Spine let out a long plume of steam. Rabbit. "That's alright. I guess that would be a strange costume, now that I think about it. It's okay. It's just that... even though I miss Lily, you know I just don't dare let anyone know about her."

"I know, buddy. Well... so, since you're dressed as Rex and she's Airheart, I figured I'd dress as old Cap and complete the set. There's a lot of old timey get-ups showin' up at the door. But you should see David and Bunny." Rabbit whistled impressively.

"I look forward to it." Their costumes had been a long-awaited surprise.

He walked out into the ballroom at last, as Rabbit rushed to his room for the scarf. Already an impressive array of costumes filled the floor and crowded the refreshment tables. The Spine picked up a cup of water and took a sip, looking around him. Breanna was helping at one of the tables, dressed in a blue saloon girl costume. He smiled. The message was pointed and thrilling. She matched his Rex Marksley costume exactly. Maybe Paige's hints weren't far from the truth...

He continued to scan the room and saw who he was looking for just walking in. He smiled broadly and hurried to them.

"Dave!" he cried, hugging his son.

"Dad! I mean... Spine..."

Sunshine giggled. "I don't think anyone heard you. And if they did, with those costumes, you could pass it off as a joke," she murmured.

Dave was dressed as a cowboy as well. His was a more realistic design, well-scuffed and dirty looking.

"Good taste," The Spine chuckled.

"Julia has taken the kids trick-or-treating around the neighborhood. They'll be along later," Sunshine said, brushing feathers out of her face.

"That's... um... an interesting costume," The Spine said.
She was dressed like a duck.

"I'm going to go up to Rabbit and ask him to get me some bread," she laughed.

The Spine had to laugh at that. How she had come to live up to her nickname since she had married Dave!

"Hey, isn't that Rabbit? Why isn't he wearing a costume?" Dave asked, looking across the room.

"What? He was wearing one..." he began, turning.

He stared. That certainly looked like Rabbit...

"Well!" Sunshine giggled. "I see you have a couple of doubles."

On the other side of the room, sitting with Paige on his lap, appeared to be Rabbit. Appeared, but to The Spine's sharp vision, not Rabbit. The makeup was detailed and skilfully applied. The work of an artist. A bald artist.

This would have been funny were it not for his companion. Standing beside him, slouched and talking with his arms moving constantly, was a tall silver man. He looked over and saw The Spine watching him. He tapped "Rabbit" on the shoulder and as one they looked at The Spine and, with cartoonishly exaggerated robotic motions, tipped their hats.

His eyes narrowed.

"Wow, that's a pretty impressive display!" said Sunshine.


The Spine smiled at him gratefully. Their movements did sort of invoke thoughts of the Hall of Presidents...

He turned away and immediately saw Breanna. She was looking apprehensively back and forth between him and the twins, smiling sheepishly when she caught his eye. He gave her a reassuringly smile. She waved a little. He waved back.

"Who's she?" murmured Sunshine, startling him.

"Oh... um... just Miss Breanna. She... she works here."

"Interesting. She kinda looks like she likes you..."

He was staring at Breanna's eyes. "That's what Paige says," he murmured absently.

"What about you, Dad?" Dave asked.

"What?"

"Do you like her?"

"She's... she's a nice person..."

Dave grinned. "Dad, it's okay. I'm a big boy, alright? Mom wouldn't want you to live on alone just because of her."
"I know..."

"Then don't. Don't wait if there's a chance, y'know? Certainly don't do it on account of us. We don't want you to be unhappy."

"I guess... I'm just afraid to watch someone else die," The Spine murmured. "I'm sorry..."

"No, I understand. Well, fact is, even humans can't avoid that, can they? I can't really say much about it. It's different for you. But it's life, Dad. You have to live it or stop living, one way or another. So live. Even if it hurts."

Sunshine wiped her eyes. "Dave, you dummy, don't make me cry! That was amazing..."

It was. The Spine smiled at his son. "That's how I remember you. That same spirit. Don't ever lose that again, okay?"

"Dad..." Dave sighed. "Please don't..."

"Alright. We don't have to mention it anymore. I'm just very proud of you."

"You two..." Sunshine sighed. "I hate crying at parties!"

"Alright. We'll behave," The Spine sighed as Breanna finished filling cups with punch and walked toward him. She looked nervous.

"Right on cue," Dave whispered. "Mrs. Duck, may I have this dance?"

"Quack! Good luck, Spine!" she laughed.

They left him alone to meet her. Breanna was almost there. She really was very pretty... and Dave was right. It was time to try again.

"Good evening, cowboy! Your costume looks great!"

"Thank you... um... Would you like to dance?" The Spine asked nervously.

Her eyes widened. "Oh! Well, yes... I'd love that! I mean... I haven't danced in ages."

The song was soft and slow; a surprise at a Halloween party. He saw that Steve Negrete had set up a sound system but Paige and Bunny were standing behind it. Something felt a little contrived but he chose to ignore it.

It was nice, dancing again. Breanna was soft and smelled of pumpkin spice; all the ladies in the manor had been smelling of that lately. She looked up at him and the scrambled for something to say.

"Oh! You mentioned, um... your costume is also very nice. That's a familiar design..."

"Yeah, it's from those sketches Bunny did for..."

"Rex Marksley," he finished.

She blushed prettily. "I just figured that so many people were dressing as characters from that album..."

"No, it's very becoming! That's... that's the girl who swoons in... in his arms... um... isn't it?" he finished, suddenly embarrassed.
"Don't worry, I don't swoon easily," she laughed.

"Oh... no, I hadn't really expected..."

"I'm teasing, silly!"

"I... I know," he said. He'd had a moment of picturing her swooning in his arms and was troubled by how much it pleased him.

They danced in silence for a few moments. The Spine saw Dave pass by. He gave a quick jerk of his head behind Breanna's back before he and Sunshine moved on.

"Miss Breanna..."

"What is it?"

He blinked and stammered, "I just wanted you to know that... well... you... look beautiful."

She blushed again. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry if that was too forward..."

"No, it was very sweet," she replied quickly. "But..."

That little flush on her cheeks... it made her eyes gleam! So beautiful... "It's true," he said sincerely.

"Spine..." she said uncomfortably. "I don't understand."

"Understand what?"

"I don't mean to embarrass you, but... I don't want there to be mixed signals between us."

"You... I... You're trying to let me down gently, aren't you? Before I really make an ass of myself..."

"No!" she gasped. "I guess... I guess I was trying to let myself down gently."

"I don't understand..."

"Oh... this isn't what I was going for... Look, I'm saying that I don't want to get my hopes up if you aren't likely to ever see me as, well... more than a coworker. Y'know, more than a maintenance worker." She looked steadfastly at the goggles hanging against his chest and murmured, "More than a friend, even..."

He almost stopped dancing. "Then, you are interested? I mean... I'm not presuming?"

"Yes, Spine."

He had to be sure. "You are interested in me... romantically?"

She nodded nervously. "I really am... does that make you uncomfortable?"

"A little... but it's not because I don't like it. I just... want to be careful. I've been through a lot of heartache, and I'm nervous about stepping into that again."

"Do you think that's all there would be if we... you and I... y'know. If we get together?" she whispered breathlessly.
He looked into her eyes again and felt electricity. "No," he breathed. "I don't."

"Spine... could we take a walk? I think we have things to talk about that we can't discuss here... especially since they're now playing Monster Mash."

He looked up in surprise and realized everyone around them was doing a lively dance while they still stood holding each other. Bunny and Paige stood by the sound system roaring with laughter.

When had his life become a sit-com? She was right; everyone was watching them! And worse, using them for entertainment! Maybe it was cute and funny to them, but it was gravely serious to him. Even so, The Spine surprised himself by thumbing his nose at them as he sauntered out the door with Breanna.

In the hallway, she said, "So, then... you want to start dating? Pretty much?"

"Is that what they call it?" he asked as they walked. "I've never really done that... calling at the door and taking a woman to a restaurant and dropping her off..."

"Well, you wouldn't be here, either."

"No, I suppose not."

They turned a corner and The Spine stopped and turned to her. She looked nervous.

"It seems so odd, just discussing it this way," she said.

"I agree. Usually there's, y'know, some kind of display or gesture..."

"Gesture? Well..."

She stepped closer. He was not so out of practice at romance that he couldn't feel where things were going. He felt conflicting desires... one telling him to stop her, and one telling him to pull her closer still.

"I could make a gesture," she said softly, taking his hand. "I've wanted to for a long time. There have been times in the labs when we were alone that I came close."

"What stopped you?" he asked, gently touching her cheek with his free hand.

"Well, usually you were in for maintenance, strapped to a table. It would have been fairly creepy."

He laughed in spite of himself. She smiled sheepishly.

"I don't know," he said, still smiling. "A lot of people like it like that..."

She blushed fiercely and bit her lip, giggling. Steam poured from his back as the full implications of what he'd said dawned on him.

"Oh! I... shouldn't have said that!" he gasped. "That was so inappropriate!"

She laughed now, pulling him still closer. "I don't know about that," she whispered, tipping her head up toward his. "It doesn't have to be."

He was starting to wish he'd left certain parts and protocols dormant. They were responding a little too well.
"Miss Breanna..."

"Just Breanna. And before talk about strapping each other down, maybe we ought to start small."

He knew what happened now, but he couldn't bring himself to do it, as much as he wanted to. It had been so long! But there was no need. Breanna looked into his eyes and pulled him as close as she could. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

He was startled despite the anticipation, but tried not to show it. His arms slipped around her, pulling her close. Some deep part of his code, or at least a part he had tried to store deep within his matrix, had missed this feeling... she was soft and warm and wonderful...

And not Marie. Not Marie! It hit him with the force of a sledgehammer that he could still feel his wife in his arms even as he held Breanna. He expected to see golden brown curls when he opened his eyes. He loved her still... how could he betray her by holding and kissing a beautiful woman?

He knew it was irrational, knew that Marie herself would have pushed him into Breanna's waiting arms and told him not to look back. But even so, all he saw in his mind when he recognized that was Marie smiling at him while he kissed someone else.

He pulled away.

"I'm sorry," he whispered brokenly.

"What's wrong?" she gasped. "Wasn't it nice?"

"It was... really... but... I haven't kissed anyone since..."

"Since your wife passed away."

He looked at her sharply.

"You think no one knows?" she asked gently. "It's not common knowledge but yes, Peter told me. He was trying to warn me. I guess everyone in the Manor knows I care about you."

"Then you see why I can't..." he choked.

"Can't... yet, maybe. We don't have to move that fast. But... I do think you're interested..."

"I am! But you feel so much like her... I feel like she's all around me sometimes and I still miss her so much that when I do feel like I'm able to move on, I feel guilty..."

"Why? If she loved you, she'd want you to be happy."

"She did... she does... but... I can't! I just can't yet!"

"What?"

"This was a mistake. I'm sorry, Breanna."

"Spine!" she cried as he turned and ran down the hallway.

"I found one!" shouted Rabbit, appearing from a side hallway with a red sash in his hands.

The Spine sprinted past him, the floor shuddering under his feet. He couldn't remember the last time he'd run like this. His joints weren't happy. But he had to get away...
He couldn't do it. He ached with longing and still he couldn't. He wanted to be near her but how could he ever be? How could he just forget thirty-three years with his precious wife? He dragged his sleeve across his eyes as he ran.

"Spine?" Rabbit called.

He didn't stop running until he'd reached his room.
Not so Photographic Memories

Chapter Summary

The Spine has to decide whether to move forward or continue his life as a professional widower. The transition is going to be even more painful that he'd expected. It's going to involve going back and remembering why he is so afraid to move on.

Chapter Notes

What? You thought he was just really tough inside and out? We all have our ways of coping...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1897:

"Pappy! Pappy, help me!"

The wall shuddered. Colonel Walter leaped to his feet and nearly fell on his face running to check.

The Spine had powered down in his dressing room every night since they had returned from Africa. He heard Iris groaning in frustration as he ran out, as well she should. A woman in her condition needed her rest.

He found the other robots already there, placed around him and holding him steady. The Spine looked up, his simple features tilted in a mask of terror, his newly green eyes pleading.

Those eyes... if only he'd known.

He'd had so many repairs to do on each of them after the war. So much damage! He hadn't been able to bear taking them home crippled and frightened. Just as they were cleaning up the mess, The Spine had taken an explosion to the face from what he thought was an empty casing, cracking the blue matter irises in both eyes. The Colonel had, in desperation, settled on temporarily fitting The Spine's eyes and one of Rabbit's with green matter salvaged and carefully purified... but while Rabbit had some ill effects, The Spine had them doubled. It seemed as thought Rabbit's one blue eye allowed him to remained connected with reality, even when he woke screaming in the night from the vivid matter-augmented nightmares, remaining aware and able to seek out the comfort of his fellow robots.

The Spine, however, was unreachable until the dream faded. All it took to trigger it was being around something that reminded him of the battle. And his fellow robots did just that.

The Colonel had found out too late that the green matter had connected with The Spine's processor, triggering and even amplifying the flashbacks. Too late, as Rabbit, with his unique perspective, had explained, because it had curled itself into the tiny passageways; there was no removing it now
without potentially erasing everything The Spine had been. And Colonel Walter had grown to love all of his automaton children. So since The Spine was largely himself during the day, the Colonel refrained from removing the green matter lenses. The risk was too high.

"Pappy! The monsters... the monsters!" The Spine sobbed for the nth night in a row.

"They aren't here, son! Please come back to us..."

"He can't hear, Pappy! He ain't here at all! Poor Spine!" Rabbit wept.

Three cried, too, and held on tightly. Hatchworth sat, silent, on The Spine's legs to hold him steady.

"Monsters..." The Spine gasped.

"It's alright, son. Somehow we'll chase them away," the Colonel sighed.

The attack took two hours to settle. Colonel Walter sat, an hour later, drinking the blackest coffee Matilda, the cook, could produce.

He had told the others to go into stasis but Rabbit had followed him to the kitchen.

"Wha-wha-what's wrong with him, Pappy? Why does he cry every night?"

"He's seen terrible things, Rabbit..."

"So have I," Rabbit said quietly. "So have Three and Hatchy."

"Yes, but I'm afraid Spine has a difference that means he is having a harder time of it. He can have nightmares."

"So can we..."

"Yes, since I added that setting, you can dream. But The Spine was having such a hard time understanding that humans and animals have feelings, that with his size and strength, he was a danger to us all. Do you remember?"

"The kitten," Rabbit said almost inaudibly.

"Yes. He understood when Iris cried out that something bad had happened, but couldn't grasp what. It fell to me to provide him with the settings to understand feeling, pain and remorse. It seems I have done so far too well."

"But he knows how ta be careful with little animals now, Pappy! You can turn it off!"

"Sadly, no. It is part of who he is. Somehow I failed to correctly adjust those setting when he was new, as I did with the rest of you. I had to add them because of his need to understand the pain of others, because of his enormous strength. He had to have it become a permanent part of his mind. I couldn't risk it happening again... it was bad enough with the kitten. If it were a human next time..." He shook his head. "And to remove it now would be to remove everything he remembers of the last two years."

"Then he'd forget tha elephants, Pappy."

"Yes. And he'd forget the moment he understood that he is my son. He'd forget learning that he is
gifted at leadership, at caring for others... do you see that he would lose who he is? Rabbit... I know you are very young, but I see in all of you such wisdom and humanity, more than many humans possess. I would feel I was killing him."

Rabbit opened his mouth and closed it again. Col. Walter knew that the concepts had grown too difficult for the young robot to grasp. He was too good at arguing to give up otherwise.

"Go on and rest, Rabbit. I need to think this through."

"Yes, Pappy."

He stared into his mug as Rabbit stumped out of the room. There was nothing for it. He had to lock the memories away somehow or The Spine would never be safe to be around, especially with the baby on the way. He couldn't bear the idea of wiping his mind entirely, and he wanted him to remember that he did fight and help people, but the horrors he had seen... Those must be found and put away somehow.

And that was the answer. He downed the last of his coffee, grimaced at the bitterness, and went to his lab.

"Spine, old sport... Do you see that it must be done?"

"I do, sir. I trust you."

The Colonel sighed and clapped The Spine on the shoulder. "Good man. We must begin immediately, before you enter stasis for the night. When you're done, you may find gaps in your memory, but you will be able to rest. Lay back."

The Spine obeyed. The Colonel began to fasten strong leather straps to hold him in place.

"Rabbit, Three, Hatchy... hold him."

"But he has straps on, Pappy!" Rabbit argued.

"Please just do as I ask. He'll need you here, and he may damage the table during the worst of it."

Rabbit complied, his eyes round with worry.

The Colonel opened The Spine's head plate. "Alright, son... this part won't be pleasant. I will place the diodes to connect the new sector and then I will need you to find every memory that hurts you and place it in that sector. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," The Spine said. His voice trembled slightly.

Colonel Walter carefully soldered the parts into place. The Spine shuddered but was held firmly.

"Alright, there?"

"Yes, sir," he rasped.

"Excellent. Now the tricky bit. Start from the beginning of your memories. If you have had a nightmare about it, locate it and send the information to this place."

He tapped it lightly with a screwdriver. "Then we can see whether you are still able to function after each one passes through. Then we sever the connection to conscious memory."
"But it'll still be there, Pappy!" Rabbit complained.

"Isolated. I don't dare delete it outright. Not only is it a part of his mind, but someday he may evolve to the point that he can overcome the effects of the green matter in his eyes and retrieve the memories of the brave and valorous acts he performed despite the terror he faced. You all have your memories and can set them aside. He can't, thanks to my bungling..."

"Sir! No... you were saving my eyes..." The Spine whispered.

"It was only meant to stay in place until we arrived home," the Colonel said thickly. "Now you're stuck with them..."

"It wasn't your fault!"

"And yet I bear the guilt. Please, son. Do as I ask, and we can both find peace."

"Yes, sir..."

The Spine closed his eyes and grimaced almost immediately. "No!"

"Send the information, quickly!"

There was a soft hum. The Spine trembled.

"Can you speak?"

"Yes sir..."

"Sever the connection and move on."

Another hum. The Spine grew still.

"Spine?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Good. Next."

They worked for two hours, the same span as most of The Spine's nightmares. In the end, The Spine could find no more memories terrible enough to isolate. The Colonel thanked The Spine and sent him into stasis.

"Alright, tonight is the first test," he told the others. "If it's successful, I'll set the design to isolate anything powerful enough to cause a malfunction or nightmares. And then it will be best, I think, to hide it."

"Hide it how, Pappy?" asked Rabbit.

"I'll have to see to it that he doesn't know it's happening. He would likely become curious and look at the sector, and malfunction."

"But what if too many memories are sent there? What if he forgets everything he don't like?"

"He'll be offered a choice each time his core begins to overload. If the memory is not severe enough to isolate, he'll be able to correct it then, after which he'll forget it once more. I trust in his judgment. He was always wise before the war, wasn't he, lads?"
They nodded.

"Well, then. We shall have to trust that he will want to remember everything that he can. And someday he will mature as humans do, as you all will, and learn to cope with painful memories."

"But Pappy!" Rabbit persisted. "What if he doesn't and just forgets all the stuff instead?"

"Then... perhaps he's lucky," he sighed.

The night passed without incident. Colonel Walter sat with him through the night, dozing in his chair, but The Spine powered on the next morning, calm and collected.

"Seems we have a success, son," the Colonel told him.

The Spine nodded. Before he could speak, however, the Colonel powered him down and sighed.

"And that means I have to make you forget this, too."

He made the adjustments and switched The Spine on again.

"Seems we have a success, son. I've corrected your settings so that you can rest. Your nightmares should stop after this."

"Very good, sir."

He rose from the table and walked to the door. He hesitated.

"Sir? Thank you."

"No need, my good man."

"I mean... Thank you for not deleting me outright."

"Spine! How could I even consider..."

"But you did. You had to consider it. I was a danger to you and your family."

The Colonel sighed. "You are my family, Spine."

"I, sir? I am just a robot, your creation..."

"Not at all. You are all my children. And just because a child is a problem, it does not mean that he must be abandoned. Now go rest. I feel confident that we have corrected the problem."

The Spine nodded and walked out.

"Just a robot, indeed," the Colonel whispered. "After what I have seen... so much humanity, more than many humans possess! Spine... You are so far from simply being a robot."

December, 2012:
Things were cool and strained in the weeks that followed the Halloween party. Rabbit kept trying to ask The Spine what had happened and once he overheard Paige asking Breanna the same thing, with the same results. Neither was willing to discuss it.

Breanna caught him alone a couple of days after and apologized, telling him she wasn't angry and that he shouldn't do anything that made him uncomfortable. He felt a deep surge of gratitude and affection for her in that moment and wished that he could just find it in himself to love her without feeling he was betraying his sweet wife. But while he was no longer new to love or loss, he was new to this. He had no experience in moving on after losing a wife.

It became the elephant in the room among the rest of the household, but that couldn't be helped. There was a large and friendly Thanksgiving party that month in which no one dared to even wink at them. They all knew something had gone wrong. They just didn't know what. He was aware of how many theories were flying around. The workers often forgot just how well he could hear, and he knew that the most popular theory was that they had slept together while everyone else partied, and were too embarrassed to let anyone find out.

He wasn't sure why that would be embarrassing. It certainly was better than the tired old story about the robot who kept getting dumped by human women. But possibly they thought, due to the widespread secrecy about his marriage, that he hadn't known how to make love to her, resulting in an embarrassing failure. He felt tingly when he thought of it; he knew how, and sometimes wanted to very much! But like all other feelings that struck him about Breanna, it came with a burden of anxiety and guilt.

They had a concert scheduled a few weeks before Christmas. Steve had obtained an old shuttle bus for them to take on long trips. It would be awkward, being cooped up with the band and Walter workers on the drive, but it couldn't be helped. And the opportunity to go and play a concert was well-timed. He needed the occupational therapy.

The concert went well; the fans adored Rabbit's Santa hat joke, and Hatchworth was doing very well now on stage. The drive home saw a more relaxed and merry group than the one that had gone there.

"Oh, it's a very Steam Powered Giraffe Yulemas Special Show..." sang Rabbit, Hatchworth, Michael and Matt as Steve drove up into the mountain pass.

The Spine smiled. It was nice to have everyone happy and not trying to be careful about what they said. He caught Breanna's eye.

"It was a great concert," she said over the noise. "You looking forward to stopping off in L.A.?

"It'll be good to spend the holidays with the kids, sure," he said carefully. "I think they're excited to have a robot grandfather."

She laughed. "Not every kid has that. I hope they don't tell everyone though!"

"Yes, that could get awkward..."

He really was excited to spend time with them. He knew they'd come to see him on Halloween, but he wasn't sure whether he had seen them or not, and it troubled him. He remembered walking into the hall with Breanna, the sweet but painful kiss, running to his room. He hadn't run in a long time... The rest was a little fuzzy...

Rabbit was looking at him.

"What is it?" The Spine asked.
Rabbit shrugged and turned back to the chaos.

"Hey!" barked Steve. "Get belted in, dammit!"

Hatchworth, who had removed his in order to retrieve his hat, hastily fastened his seat belt.

"I need to get something out of the back, Steve," Breanna called.

"Just be quick, okay?" he responded. "We don't need trouble with the cops."

"Yeah, Steve's already wanted for piracy!" Rabbit bellowed.

Breanna giggled and carefully worked her way toward the back. The Spine watched her out of the corner of his eye. He wasn't thrilled with the idea of her being out of her safety belt...

"It's a good thing it didn't snow again," Steve was saying to no one in particular. "This road can get pretty nasty in wet conditions. But..."

The bus abruptly lurched sideways. The Spine could feel it turning as if of its own accord.

"Ice! Aw, hell!" Steve shouted, scrambling to regain control.

The Spine braced himself, hoping Steve knew what he was doing. He saw the others do the same. There was a squeak of dismay from the back of the bus.

"Ow! Steve, what..." Breanna cried as she fell over a seat.

"Grab on... dammit! How big is this thing..."

The edge of the road slid closer. They were high; if they went past the shoulder and broke through the railing, they'd plummet into a deep ravine. Everyone was screaming. The Spine heard a shriek of pure terror as the brakes at last engaged and the bus began to grind to a stop. Everything was slowing down except Breanna!

She shot past him through the bus. His sharp reflexes responded. He snapped his seatbelt and kicked off, hard, and the momentum hurtled him forward toward the windshield. She was about to crash through it; he caught her by the waist and whirled in midair, tossing her hard into Steve's arms the second before he struck the glass himself. She screamed and glass broke around his ears.

He was outside.

It was starting to snow.

He flew right over the barrier into darkness.

---

error

where am I

systems offline

breanna? rabbit? where...

communications systems offline
help me

systems offline

The Spine couldn't move. He could see snow. He could hear wind. He couldn't move!

systems offline

i know!

He looked up at a steep, snowy hill. He had to. He was on his back, with snow gradually piling on his face. If they didn't find him soon, they wouldn't be able to see him at all.

If they were looking. If they were alive.

He was terrified. He couldn't remember what had happened at first. When he managed to access the last memory files available, he saw Breanna flying through the air as though gravity had stopped working, heard screams. He had caught her, saved her life by throwing her back to Steve... he could just remember Steve, gasping with terror but still possessing his remarkable reflexes, wrap his arms around her as she landed. Her arm had struck the steering wheel. Probably broken, but it could be worse... he should know. There was breaking glass after that...

Static. Had the others survived? Why wasn't Breanna strapped in? Wait... she'd gotten up to get something... they'd hit ice... The snow had stopped for a while, as Steve had said, but the melted snow from earlier in the day must have refrozen on the road.

A flake of snow landed on his eye. He couldn't even blink it away. Panic built as the snow accumulated.

help me! somebody please! i can't move please someone come and help me!

He wasn't used to feeling helpless.

peter... hatchworth... someone... steve... dave... he lives in los angeles, maybe dave... no...

Reason was beginning to slip as his fear increased and that only made him more afraid.

lily... marie... pappy... no... they... they're gone, they can't... i can't stand it! i can’t...

isolate... There was a crackling sound. accessing...

what?

There was no response. The Spine stared up into the darkness, his eyes almost completely obscured by the snow. What was happening to him? He had never panicked like this before... Life had its difficulties but physical weakness was seldom an issue for him. But surely this wasn't so terrible... if he only waited someone would come...

But the idea of being buried in snow, awake but unable to move, no one knowing he was there... He'd never experienced anything like it, well... not since the Great War, when he'd been blown into a muddy field and had actual jeeps run over him because they couldn't see him... His spinal connections had been interrupted and he'd been so frightened but his voice module had failed and all he could do was close his eyes and wait... Rabbit found him eventually, after a long and terrifying night...
How had he forgotten that? What was wrong?

unable to isolate file... data is in continuous loop

what?

reverting primary module to long term file storage

What? His panic peaked as his eyes and ears stopped working. No... he was being transferred to another part of his file storage. He remembered it now.

The panic folder.

It opened every time he was overcome with horror, overwhelmed with what he had seen, what he had done... Anything he couldn't process or endure. And as a robot, he had a hard time with strong emotion, more than he cared to admit. But why was he here, now? Ah, but the answer had been offered already. The panic folder storage had also been damage when he plummeted into the ravine. He had panicked, and it was too much for the damaged folder because there was no sign of his ever calming down. It saw him as the entire problem and isolated him instead. And here he was.

It wasn't as though he could save himself anyway. If he had to wait for rescue, better to wait where he didn't have to see the snow rising higher over his body. He tried to remain curled in a corner of the storage until as it were, avoiding the risk of accessing the contents of the files around him, but the titles were visible. There were files relating to copper elephants, Russian soldiers in the Great War... he supposed that was because the Russians had armed women and children and sent them to fight, a horrifying thing to witness after the fact... There were files from times that he had been sure he had remained calm as a fish. He wondered how many family members knew he had blocked the memories. He remembered being told more than once that something happened that he didn't recall, and feeling sure that faulty human memory had recorded the situation inaccurately.

He saw more files... so many more! Rabbit being damaged, Vietnam... One of these specifically read, "Medical experiments." That was chilling. He'd convinced himself they'd kept him unconscious for a lot of those. Maybe they hadn't... He left that one where it was and moved on.

"Marie."

He stopped. What could there be there that he couldn't face? It was stamped well before her death... not long after his rescue in Vietnam. That should have been one of the most joyous times of his life! In fact, he reasoned that the worst of their lives together could only be a comfort now.

He opened the file.

"Spine? I need to tell you something."

He smiled and kissed her forehead as she rested her cheek against the smooth plates of his chest. Her arm was draped over him and very little else. He liked it. The hotel bed was strong enough for his heavy form, even when... well, even when they had made love in it.

He stroked her back and murmured contentedly, "What is it?"

"I... thought it would be best to keep it to myself but I can't! I feel like I've betrayed you and I can't have a secret like that hangin' over my head when I'm in your arms..."
Her accent always came out when she was upset. He usually found it endearing, but the word "betrayed" had struck him to the core.

"Marie?" he whispered, afraid of what was coming.

"There was a man... while you were gone, before I found out you were missing... it had been so long since I'd heard anything, and I was so lonely and missed you so much, but that's no excuse..."

He bit his lip, staring up at the ceiling, fighting tears. It hurt! It hurt so much, and she hadn't even come to the point! But he knew, he just knew what she was going to say. She had succumbed to the loneliness while he was away. He was sure of it. She was so beautiful... it only made sense that men would make advances, and without him there she had fallen prey to one of them! Even as she stumbled over her words he struggled with how to respond.

"Isolate files?" a voice asked, inside his processor.

He ignored it, too intent on his cycling thoughts, miserable in them but unable to let them go. For a moment he was angry that while he was in prison, only dreaming of holding her in his arms, she was in the arms of another. But in the next moment, he remembered his dreams of being human, making love to her in a different life, a different home... Had it been so different, at heart?

They had both struggled, both needed comfort, needed to survive.

It hurt. But he wasn't, couldn't be angry. That was then. And he was home. He loved her more than his life. How could he not forgive her?

In the scant seconds it took his swift processor to come to this point, she at last found her words. "I was so tempted! I cried for hours after I got home because I almost... almost kissed him!"

He blinked up at the ceiling. There was a moment of absolute stillness before he gasped, "What?"

"I know! I'm so sorry!" she sobbed.

"Marie? Are you telling me that while I was away you were attracted to another man..."

"I'm sorry! It was just for a moment... he was really nice and we were good friends and I was so alone but that don't make it right!"

"That... was it? You felt like kissing him?" he pressed, astonished. "And you feel terrible about that?"

She nodded and clung to him, still weeping. He held her gently but firmly and struggled not to laugh. It was serious to her, and that in itself was precious to him. She felt terrible just having been tempted...

Why had he filed that away, he wondered. But of course... the moment he thought she was about to tell him she had slept with another man, he had activated the storage folder. The entire memory had been saved inside despite the realization that nothing had happened between them! But surely he could have prevented it from being isolated if it wasn't harmful after all.

The memory continued, showing him stroking her hair, kissing away her tears. He had gone on to tell her he forgave her, and she had told him that she understood if he'd been weak himself. He got the feeling she thought he might have slept with other women while he was away. But he hadn't...
He had never even looked at another woman!

So why was the file still here?

He remembered this day, remembered being deliciously curled up with her in their hotel room all morning and much of the afternoon, ordering room service for her because they had no interest in going out, making up for lost time together, making hundreds of fresh memories of her face, her scent, the softness of her skin... She had slept very well that night. He had needed plenty of stasis himself.

The answer came as the memory resumed.

*His dream self abruptly shuddered and began to weep. Marie looked at him in horror.*

"Oh, baby, don't..." she whispered through trembling lips.

"No," he gasped. "Don't be afraid... I'm not angry with you, Marie. I told you I forgive you. You didn't even do anything I need to forgive!"

"But... I feel as though I did..." She sat up and looked at him. "If you're not hurt, then why are you crying?"

"I'm sorry... I'd forgotten... how could I have forgotten? I don't deserve to forget!"

"Forgotten what?"

"No..." The Spine whispered, horrified.

He had to stop it! This was it, the thing that had made him forget! Something terrible was coming; a memory, retrieved temporarily, of something he had been unable to face in the past, filling him even now with a wordless horror as he scoured the sector for the code that would stop the memory from unfolding. Strangely, however, he was so caught up in the attempt that his confession played out entirely, largely unheard except for the occasional snatch of it as he struggled in vain to break the seal that held him inside the file. The government was mentioned, secret missions, each before he would cry out and try anew to escape. He gave up at last and reluctantly caught up the conversation once more, hoping the worst was over.

And it seemed that it was.

"I forgive you, darling. There's nothing to forgive, though. You did what you had to do," Marie was whispering, holding him tightly.

*He pushed her gently away with shaking hands and turned to swing his legs off the bed. She sat up and put one hand gently on his back.*

"I betrayed you..." he whispered hoarsely, tears slowly sliding down his face.

Betrayed?

"Not by choice."

"But I could have said no... but then... Lily..."

"You see? I would have done the same!"
"I don’t want to think about that..."

"I'm sorry, love. But you know what I mean. Neither of us would risk harm to the kids."

"But... there had to have been something I could have done, some way I could have prevented it! But
there was no way out, Marie! They built me this way, gave me these parts, just to become a
government whore!"

Whore?!? What had he just confessed to having done? Maybe... maybe it was a metaphor? He never
had liked the idea of being used for espionage...

His dream self couldn’t speak. His whole body began to shudder violently. Marie squeaked and
jerked her hand away.

"What's going on?" he wondered as he, in the past, began to glitch.

"Spine... darling, I forgive you, I promise! Please calm down!"

"I can't! I can't bear this!"

"Then lock it up again!"

"What?"

"It was locked up before, wasn't it? Something brought it out but you can put it back! Store it, forget
it, be at peace! I already know and I understand, now please don't let yourself hurt anymore!"

"I de-de-de-deserve to h-h-hurt!"

"No!" she cried.

"I do!" His head glitched sideways.

"Stop it!"

"Marie... I'm so sorry..."

She clambered, still bare, to the floor and looked up into his face. "If you love me at all, don't make
me live with you like this!"

It wasn't fair and she knew it. But that was Marie. She did what needed to be done to help those she
loved...

"Lock it up right now!" she said sharply. "You were happier not knowing! We all know you have a
place for the things you can't handle, love! Everyone knows except you... but it's open now, you can
have peace again, so put it there before you shut down completely! You're home and you're needed
and you did what you did to protect us! So take care of yourself, for our sakes! I love you, Spine!
Don't let this be between us! I won't if you won't."

"I'll... I'll t-t-t-try..."

He looked miserably into her face as the shudders increased, steadied his vocal assembly, and cried,
"Isolate!"

"Compiling data."
And with a few more commands, he found himself sitting and looking down at her. This was where his active memory resumed.

She smiled, wiped her eyes, and stood.

"Everything alright now?" she asked in a slightly shaky voice.

He couldn't remember sitting up. Had he blacked out? The idea was unnerving. He retraced his steps.

They'd made love and had been laying around bare ever since... but here he was, sitting, with her standing in front of him. There was oil on his face. He carefully wiped it away.

"What... what happened?" he asked her.

"Oh, nothing..." she said casually.

"But I was crying... I was either thinking of something very bad, or..." he grinned shakily. "Doing something very good."

She smiled. "It was good earlier. I think it's about time for it to be good again."

He pulled her close, still sitting, enjoying the vantage point that gave him. Her bust was right below his eye level from where he was sitting... She gently put her arms around his head and held him there, against her breast, and kissed his head. Life was good.

"Just don't forget me, okay," she murmured.

"How could I?" he asked with a deep sigh. He pressed his head happily against her softness and murmured, "And why would I want to?"

She giggled, but it sounded nervous. He worried for a moment but dismissed it. Of course she was nervous. Poor thing... she'd thought he was dead for months. No wonder she was still so edgy.

The file had completed playback at the moment he had isolated the memories, but he had allowed himself to ponder the events after, trying not think of what had happened, where he was now, trapped in a small sector of his panic folder. He had no access to his usual functions and couldn't mark the hours. It just made it worse, stuck there trying to ignore the painful memories around him by burrowing deeper into this one. He couldn't block them here, even if the folder hadn't been damaged. And among them, he knew, was an entire file outlining every detail of the months he spent doing something on government orders that he had described as betraying his wife.

Even thinking of Marie could only help so much because of the nagging worry. He loved his wife still, but she was no longer the only one in his heart. He felt it acutely now as he remembered the accident.

Had he saved Breanna? If he hadn't... if she, too, was gone, well, he didn't care if they never found him. Because he couldn't live with that now. He had nothing left.

He wanted to make himself a promise that if he came through this and found she was alive, he wouldn't waste another minute. He wanted to think that when he saw her again he could take her in his arms and be grateful for what he had. She had feelings for him, and he... he was almost certain he loved her.
But he knew that he couldn't make that promise. There was more between them that day than Marie. She would have applauded the day he found love again. Sweet, sainted woman! What had she lived with until her dying day for the sake of sparing him the need to remember? Until he faced and purged whatever horror he had endured, he couldn't be with Breanna. It had been bad enough that he would have left Marie out of guilt, he saw that. Bad enough that he hadn't quite been able to blot it out when it came to loving another woman.

Another woman. That was the possibility nagging at him. What had he done? But he couldn't look for it now. Not alone.

It was hours before he found relief in a sudden nothingness. He knew just enough to feel, for a split second, the utter joy of knowing what was happening and then everything winked out. He might have finally shut down for good; he couldn't say. But he welcomed it, yes, even if this was his eventual demise. Anything to escape this torment!

But he awoke, according to his clock, approximately thirty-eight hours after flying over the edge of a freeway south of Bakersfield on a frozen night.

That was the first thing he noticed. His clock was active and had noted where he had been the entire time. The second thing was that it was bright. A broad roof overhead, large bright lights, familiar voices. But he still couldn't move.

Worse than that, his damaged panic folder remained open. The files were still locked, but it would take no more than a passing thought to open one and restore it entirely to his memory. He couldn't tell them it needed to be repaired! He stared at the bright lights, fighting a fresh round of panic as Peter VI moved in and out of his line of sight.

"His boiler is firing up, Peter. He's upset!" said a voice nearby.

Rabbit!

"How can you tell?"

"He always does that! Put him in stasis until ya get his b-b-b-body workin'! He's probably scared 'cause he can't move!"

"We're going to fix that, though."

"Don't tell me, tell him!"

"Oh... Can't you wifi..."

"The connection's busted or somethin'! I can't get a response."

"Then he may not be conscious after all."

"His boiler fired up, stupid!"

"Now there's no need to..."

"Ugh!" Rabbit grumbled. "Just shove over, kid."

The Spine saw his older brother's face move into his line of sight.
"Hey, lil bro! You hear all that? Sure ho-ho-hope so... Just stay cool, okay? No need to panic."

We all know you have a place for the things you can't handle, love! Everyone knows except you... Of course. Rabbit knew what would happen if he panicked. Had they all known this for his whole life and kept it a secret? He felt he could trust nothing anymore... He tried to listen, though, to do as his big brother said. But he was so afraid!

"Petes is gonna get you all fixed up. He's been workin' but he had to switch ya on, just to check a few things, okay? He'll shut ya back down so you can rest. We're in Louise's hangar at the airport, buddy... In L.A." His eyes shifted briefly. "Oh, lookit that boiler... Look, just focus on brother, okay? Look at my grimy photoreceptors and listen to me talk. Yehr a tough cookie and yehr gonna get through this."

The Spine grappled for control, eyes on Rabbit's. He could feel it working.

"His boiler is settlin' down again."

"Hear that? It's Louise! See, nice and safe with family. Dave was here earlier. He'll be back in a while. He had to go grab something ta eat. Big dummins sat up with ya for hours. Ya scared us real bad, kid. But I never been so proud of my little brother. Bree got away with a broken arm. Without you, she'd be dead."

And Steve... The Spine thought. He felt very weak, and not just because he was incapacitated. He wanted his big brother to keep talking, to make it all better. But that panic folder still hung at the back of his mind. He was curious... wanted to see... but if he saw, what horrors awaited?

Please put me in stasis! Shut me down! Rabbit, make them shut me down before it's too late! I can't...

"Uh-oh. He's freaking out again," Louise said. "Shutting him down."

"What?" I haven't checked to see if he can move anything yet!" Peter complained.

"His processor is on and functioning but he didn't move this whole time, idiot boy!" Louise barked.

"Ouch..." Peter said, sullen.

"Spine, buddy... aw, man, yehr eyes look so scared. Poor rob. Go to sleep now, okay? It's gonna be alright."

Still disoriented, The Spine thought, No, it isn't... I have to look eventually... have to see what I did and face it... don't send me back into the darkness! Rabbit!

Whether he willed it or not, darkness resumed.

The next time he became conscious, it was through a regular systems check. The buzz and click was familiar and comfortable. But before it completed, there was a soft pulsing buzz.

Long-term storage damaged. Please seek maintenance.

The startup sequence completed.

"What was that? I heard an alarm!" someone said.
The Spine looked around. He could move! "P-Peter..." he croaked.

"Whoa, yeah, grazed the vocals a little. I can repair that."

Rabbit was there. He took The Spine's hand and helped him sit up.

"Where's Bree?" The Spine asked.

"First question out of his mouth, Rabbit. You called it," Dave said with a smile. Despite his tone, The Spine could see the worry still in his face.

Rabbit smiled slyly, but the smile flickered and faded. "She's at Dave's buddy. She's okay but she needs her rest. Broken arm and all."

"What's wrong?" The Spine asked, anxiety rising. "Why are you so serious?"

"Whoa, whoa there!" Rabbit cried, putting an arm around his shoulders. "You scared the Hell out of me, that's all! When you we-we-we-we-went through that windshield..." He grimaced. "We kinda scooched to a stop and sat there lookin' at each other. Hatchy ran out first... I'm sorry... I was in shock I guess. Didn't know robuts did that! Anyway, we couldn't get down but we could see yehr legs and you weren't mo-mo-movin' and I thought..." His voice choked off.

"You thought I was dead."

Dave wiped his eyes and gave The Spine a hug.

"I guess that's the best word for it," Rabbit agreed. "I was afraid we'd finally get down there and find that the legs were all that was even there. You're one tough sonofa... well, anyway, even you couldn't take a flying leap off a cliff without payin' tha price. Ya got some damage and I bet you don't remember much."

"Why would you say that?" The Spine asked slowly.

Rabbit looked at him sidelong. "You remember?"

It all broke at last. The Spine, to his embarrassment, began to sob. His voice trembled uncontrollably as he cried, "Yes! I couldn't move! It was horrible! And... and... and..."

"Louise!" Rabbit cried, alarmed.

"Rabbit? What's wrong?" Dave asked.

"I think I know," Peter said. He started digging in his toolbox.

"And I thought you would never find me!" The Spine gasped. "I thought I was trapped forever just like that time in the Great War!"

"Louise!" Rabbit roared. To Spine, he said gently, "What time was that, then?"

"When you found me under the mud! It the road, when I was damaged and couldn't move!" The Spine choked.

Rabbit put both arms around him, as if he was a child. "Buddy... you forgot that. You always forget. Go ahead and forget it again, okay?"

"I can't!"
"You need to, buddy. You never could handle seein' too much bad junk. Pappy said so."

"I can't, Rabbit! It's damaged and they're all there, the... the bad things... they're all waiting to be restored to my memory files! Help me!"

"Oh, no..."

"Alright, what's all the screaming about? I'm old, I need my rest!" Louise grumbled, stumping up on a cane.

"Come on, Methuselah... Spine needs more repairs!"

**File restore in progress,** a voice chimed, inside The Spine's processor.

"Shut me down!" moaned The Spine. "Before I remember..."

His whole body shook violently. He felt Rabbit tighten his grip.

"Sh-sh-sh-sh-shut m-m-m-me d-d-d-d-d..."

"Dad!" Dave cried, wringing his hands, knowing from a lifetime of experience that he needed to stay back. "Rabbit, what's going on?"

"His panic folder is stuck open!"

"Holy crap!" Dave gasped. "Rabbit... if he remembers all that stuff... Do it, shut him down!"

"Too late!" Rabbit cried, holding him as securely as he could manage. "Dammit... I need backup."

**Hatchy! Hatchy, get up!** Rabbit sent.

Hatchworth rose from a nearby table and calmly walked to them. "Hello friendo! You frightened us."

"Hatchy, you remember back when we were kids? You remember Spine's nightmares?"

"Uh oh."

Hatchworth put his arms around The Spine from the opposite side. The Spine sighed and closed his eyes. His family. Strong, safe... they wouldn't leave him alone. A memory was coming. He needed to see one in particular.

"We gotta ride it out." Rabbit was explaining to the humans. "If we shut him down it'll just come back on when he wakes up! If we ride it out we can shut him down and fix the folder. Ya fix it now and some of it might still be on the outside."

"How do you know that?" Peter demanded.

"Same thing happened that time I found him in the road," Rabbit sighed impatiently.

How many years had Rabbit been helping him cope with his terror? How long had he kept the secret?

The folder was active, selecting the first memory to restore. He was afraid... but if it had to happen, then... he needed to focus, to look for one from Vietnam...
"Rabbit!" he sobbed, clinging tightly.

"Yeah, buddy?"

He had nothing to say. He just needed to hear his voice as he fought his terror, deliberately pushed into the files and scoured them for the right entry. But there were so many from those years! He could glimpse the contents in brief snippets, like a sped up video. Death, violence, blood, mutilation, torture, Rabbit's screams, his own...

And then, right in front of all of them, a file with nothing but quiet dinner parties, music, a woman... Satin sheets, a look on her face that could only be...

"Rabbit!" he gasped, terrified.

"What?" Rabbit cried, his calm cracking at last.

The look on her face... her features twisted in the throes of passion, lips parted with desire... he couldn't have been close enough to see it!

"Is it going to g-g-go away again?" The Spine choked.

"What?"

"The... the memory..."

She looked like he was... they were... But he would never do that to Marie!

"All of them, big guy. We'll put them all away and you won't hafta deal with them anymore!"

"Are-are y-y-you s-s-sure?"

He'd been in bed with this woman! He'd made love to her... Marie... how did you forgive me for this?

Rabbit didn't answer for a moment. He wasn't sure! The Spine's grip tightened with his growing terror and Rabbit hissed with a startled burst of steam.

"Spine! You're hurting him!" cried Louise.

The Spine forced himself to relax just enough to loosen his grip. But the panic was terrible... He had to have more answers, but he didn't want to see this!

File restore in ten seconds...

And it was set. The memory he had been viewing was now opening. Panic won out over determination. He wanted to know... needed to know... but he was so afraid!

The Spine screamed. "No... it's coming! It's going to restore! I'll see it... I'll-l'll know...! Rabbit, I can't stop it!"

"I know, buddy," Rabbit gasped, still recovering from The Spine's grip. "That file is wide open and trying to go back into yehr consciousness, one memory at a time. Back in the 30s, Pappy set it to restore if ya kept it open long enough and looked at any of the files in case you were ready to start facin' yehr fears. Ya never are but you always look. It was Marie again, wasn't it?"

The Spine nodded, unable to speak. The countdown was almost done...
"They were supposed to come back in order, when you're ready to see ’em. But you skip to her every time. Anyway, once the shaking passes, I'll shut ya down and let these wise guys find the chip and fix it. Grab on tight, Hatchy."

**File restore active.**

He could hear Hatchworth as he slipped away.

"It will be alright, Spine. They are only memories. They do not hurt us now."

*The Hell they don't.*

As helpless as a leaf in a whirlpool, he slipped into a memory he had, like the others, never wanted to see again.

**Chapter End Notes**

Bakersfield concert. You have to drive through a high snowy pass to get there from the much warmer San Diego and Orange County. I've been through there a few times. Black ice could happen...
And That's My Back Story.

Chapter Summary

Because it makes no sense at all for the government to install expensive hardware and never use it... and much to The Spine's sorrow, he is very good at his job.

Chapter Notes

Bond. Spine Bond. Nope, it just doesn't work the same...

WARNING: Murder mentioned and graphically described. This is espionage after all. Specifically, an artificial throat being cut.

If you're wondering how we came to this, you've missed a chapter. I added the other a few days ago.

Tokyo, 1965:

Rabbit and The Jon were with him for only a little while when they flew overseas. Each was sent to separate locations, and forbidden to tell the others where that was. But he knew that Rabbit and The Jon ended up in Vietnam almost immediately; they had worked out how to use existing lines to send brief messages to each other, even from a great distance and each let him know that they were safe inside their platoons... or as safe as they were likely to be.

The Spine had to tell them the same, but his mission was quite different. He was sent back to Europe... after he had been briefed and prepared for his assignment.

It had been interesting at first. Exciting, even. They rerouted his steam vents to discreetly function, and fitted him with a new material, a synthetic material the likes of which society would not see widely used for decades. It was strong, durable, flexible, and felt like human skin. A thin layer of this was attached to his chassis with care. With surprising speed, The Spine found himself looking into a mirror at what appeared to be a flesh and blood human being, one designed to be more than usually attractive. It even looked good when he smiled.

He had no hope that they would let him keep this and use it freely the way they had with other upgrades and parts. They had little choice then, since he was still the property of the Walter estate, and they had no wish to be conspicuous. But they had been unable to avoid it. The Spine, who had in past service been a pillar of stability and a stickler for regulations, had turned out to be as changeable as the man he now appeared to be, causing delays in their plans for him. The technology he carried had always had a purpose, but with Marie's pregnancy, there had been doubt as to whether he, and it, were reliable.

How little he had realized all that would come to mean for him and for others. There had been a brief
bliss at the time; that moment sitting in the doctor's office, dressed as a human, hearing the doctor tell his wife that she was pregnant and congratulating them both. He never for a moment suspected her of being unfaithful. The doctor, an old trusted friend of the family, had made it clear with a look of bewilderment that the child she carried was The Spine's and he had never felt so thrilled... or so human! How could he wish for more than this? How could he even think of betraying the woman who had shared all of life's most glorious moments?

But in the end, the question was how he could not.

He spent a few glorious weeks in Tokyo, becoming familiar with living as a human man, training in certain cover behaviors... how to discretely slip away if his false skin was damaged, making spot repairs, concealing the few small inconsistencies in his design, making it appear as though he had just shaved in case anyone should come to see him early in the morning. He wasn't sure why he had to be concerned with early morning visitors... surely he could simply tell them he had risen early and shaved then, should the question arise. It hardly seemed likely that it would, yet he was trained to cope with this as well as other telltale human morning behaviors. He supposed the government was being thorough.

Until the day he got his orders.

His tech had been edgy lately. He had awkwardly and fussily taken measurements for the final sections of synthetic skin, those beneath the clothing. He had told The Spine that they needed to complete the suit in order to prevent tears at weak gaps in the material. The Spine was embarrassed at first, but eventually grew bemused. How Marie would have laughed at the idea of them completely covering him in "skin" right down the most personal areas! He wished once more that she could have the chance to inspect the work personally. But he knew that as much as he missed her, and as much as she would enjoy the novelty, she preferred him as an automaton and would be just as glad not to see how strange he looked now.

He had been completed at last. The parts were tested, right down to the most private, for appearance and realistic motion, bringing his embarrassment back afresh.

"Why are we doing this again?" he asked his tech unhappily as the parts were checked for damage and found to be durable.

"We want to make sure the covering holds up under strain."

"Strain?" The Spine scoffed. "What kind of strain are you expecting? I'm just going to be gathering information."

The tech glanced at him and returned to his notes.

"Aren't I?"

"Oh, yes, you are."

The Spine frowned. "What is it?"

"What is what?"

"Geoff... come on. I thought we'd become friends."

"Well, sure... in a professional sort of way..."

"You're holding something back."
"I hold back a lot of things. It's my business to hold things back. Get your pants on. The general wants to see you once we're done."

The Spine pulled up his shorts and hopped into his slacks hastily. "No one told me to see the general..."

"He wanted to make sure you were ready first. Just head up, he's waiting."

"Geoff... you'd tell me if something, well... bad was going to happen. Wouldn't you?"

Geoff didn't look up. The Spine sighed uneasily. Geoff had his orders, obviously. He stepped into his shoes carefully, slung his coat over his arm and walked out.

He was immediately admitted to the office when he arrived. Three men waited with General Sutton.

"Mr. Hancock, come in."

Mr. Hancock was his human name while he was in Tokyo. The Spine walked in and shook their hands carefully, applying exactly the right amount of pressure, before taking the offered seat. The men were looking him up and down the entire time, to his discomfort. He assumed they were examining the disguise but he very much wished they would stop.

"Mr. Hancock," said the general. "These men are from Washington. They are here to debrief you on your mission."

"I see."

About time, too. He was enjoying himself but he was worried about his brothers and wanted to get this done and move on to Vietnam to join them. But his eagerness evaporated rapidly as the men opened their dossiers and began to explain what was expected of him. What followed was something he had never anticipated, even when he received the original upgrades. But the time the three visitors left him alone with the general, he sat in a state of near panic.

They couldn't mean it. They couldn't expect him to seduce anyone! He had certainly received the programming, the training... but he had assumed it was with the goal of charming those around him into a false sense of security... not into the sack!

He looked up at the general, who was watching him carefully since the men walked out.

"Sir, please..." he began hoarsely.

"No."

"You don't even know what..."

"I do. You don't want to have to do it. But Captain Walter, we have dropped a lot of money into making you attractive and... ahem... functional. There's no telling what she might have up her sleeve... or anywhere else. This is an extremely dangerous woman. But she has an eye for a tall, dark and handsome type. It's a known weakness and we intend to exploit it. You think that only works against men? It's a lot more common with them, but here we are. If you can charm her into your bed, there's a chance that you can get information she has managed to keep concealed for years."

He fought the urge to beg. Maybe reason would work... "If she has kept things that close, why would she tell me just because I sleep with her once?"
"Once?" the general asked nonchalantly, and The Spine's hopes plummeted. "The idea is to work your way into her trust. You'll have to become more than just a one-night stand."

*What about that one nightstand...* The Spine thought miserably. How he wished he was back in Balboa Park! Why had he ever allowed this to begin, years ago? But if he hadn't, he would never have had a daughter...

"I just can't sir. I'm sorry. I'll fight in the field, I'll gather information, I'll do just about anything you want, but I can't do this. I can't betray..."

He stopped short. He realized they already knew about Marie, but he still hoped that they knew very little.

But even this hope was crushed. "Your wife? And children?"

There was a meaningful look in the man's eye. The Spine braced for the worst. He knew where this was headed.

"Would it help at all to know that you will be saving the lives of millions of children if you succeed?"

"I realize..."

"Including Lily's?"

He could barely speak for shock. They even knew her name! "But... there must be another way..."

"There isn't. I'm afraid it must be done, Captain. Many before you have done the same duty, men and women less likely to come out alive. Those we've sent to charm Madame Renoir, to a man, have been lost. She doesn't take rejection well. But they were human. Your risk is relatively small."

*That's easy for you to say... Marie...*

"But if you need additional motivation... I don't like to do this, Captain. But the government has turned a blind eye to your illegal activities in the past. Your marriage, the adoption... those we can dismiss. The marriage even served as an easy means to get you properly trained to use the experimental equipment, seeing as how you took no interest in the young lady we sent to flirt with you."

Well, that answered that question. He could get no satisfaction in the answer, however, knowing that they had used Marie as an unwitting tool to train him at sex.

"But your daughter..." the man continued.

"Don't you dare..."

"...Is a scientific mystery... one our people and others have wanted to examine for years."

"No!"

"It hasn't been easy hushing up her existence. Yes, we have been doing that. We're protecting ourselves as much as you. But if we saw no reason to cover up the matter any further..."

"Please!"

"I would find it necessary to suggest that she be examined to ensure that she does not represent a
threat to National Security."

"How could she be a threat? She's a child!" The Spine cried mournfully.

"She's a fusion of human and chemical anomalies. I could make a list as long as my arm why she represents a scientific wild card in human reproduction, and a very dangerous one."

The Spine clung to the arms of his chair, staring at the floor, the now familiar dizziness rising. He had managed to conceal it this long but the emotional strain was too much. Saline tears forced themselves from his eyes; one of the adjustments made for greater realism since he had arrived.

It was wrong! How could he be in such a position? And they would know if he made a half-hearted attempt. They would know if he didn't really try to become this woman's lover.

"Take a day to think it over..."

"Ye-yeah..." he stammered, head swimming. "I need to think..."

"You leave tomorrow evening. I'll see you at 0800 tomorrow for your decision."

The Spine hardly remembered leaving the office, wandering the halls of the base, still fighting waves of dizziness. He came to awareness standing in the doorway of the lab. Geoff was looking up at him from his desk.

"Spine?" he said sharply. He must have been saying his name for... he didn't know how long.

"What? Oh... Geoff..."

"You, uh... got your mission, then?"

"Geoff... did you know?"

"Know what?" Geoff asked, looking back at his papers hastily.

"You did. You had to have because they told you to make sure my disguise was complete right down to the most private parts, didn't they? I had to look and feel accurate. Because... because I'll be prostituting myself..."

"Spine, it's not..." Geoff began, rising quickly from his seat and closing the lab door. "It's not like that. It's serious business. You realize how important this is? They could send in one of the professionals but none of them are durable enough to get out alive if she finds them out! And they have to know what her people are planning, Spine! The last time her organization got one past us, a lot of people died..."

"I know. I... I'll do what I have to do." He sank into a folding chair and groaned. "I haven't been given a choice."

Geoff was silent for a moment. "They threatened them, didn't they? Your family."

"My little girl," The Spine choked. "My... my baby girl... I went through so much already to protect her and..."

He gently wiped his fleshy, human face as more tears flowed from the installed ducts.

"Hey, now... it's not easy refilling those, come on!" Geoff said with forced brightness. He handed him a towel.
"Sorry... I'll do it but... how can I ever face Marie again? I know I have no choice, but to go to bed with another woman... and such a horrible woman! How will I be able to go through with it?"

"Well... I've given that some thought, actually."

The Spine looked up in surprise. "I don't suppose you know a way to get someone to go in my place?"

"None at all. But I have some ideas about how to make it easier on you. Inhibitors."

"What?"

"A way to detach yourself. There are a few options. One, we make it so that you think she is your wife..."

"Too dangerous... and revolting. I don't want anything tainting my memories of Marie. No."

"Alright. Can't argue with that. Then we have to block your emotional response. The... um... equipment works at your discretion. I think I can assume you know enough to time it right, and to make the appropriate sounds and facial grimaces..."

The Spine put his hands over his face.

"Spine? I'm sorry. But it's time to talk about this. If you mean to go into that woman's social circle and work your way into her... well, into her..."

"Geoff!"

"Then you're going to have to give some thought to how to make it seem like you really want her, and like you're really excited to make love to her. You don't have to think she's your wife. But you need to call upon those feelings and copy them to complete your mission. What I'm telling you is that though you have to act like you're in the throes of passion, you don't have to feel it. I can fix that."

"Can you? Only they programmed me to... to climax when she does!"

"Ugh... yeah, I read that. Cheap trick. I suppose it's been nice at home but at work it's just kinda gross. So let me tinker with that file, okay?"

The Spine finally surfaced. "How?" he asked skeptically.

Geoff pulled up a chair and whispered his ideas.

East Germany, 1965:

She wasn't young. No one had any illusions about her age. Her power was an attraction to many, but her tastes were limited and The Spine possessed some and had been equipped with others.

He moved through the party calmly, attracting admiring stares, nodding to certain individuals that his files told him it would be wise to show that respect. His gaze sometimes lingered upon certain attractive young women, usually the loveliest in the room. This was designed to show that he was interested, seeking, and that his tastes ran to only the most beautiful. Even the most subtle means were employed to flatter the armored and wily Madame Renoir.
He knew every quirk of hers, every flaw, every habit. He was designed to become her lover as surely as if she had crafted him herself. After accepting the mission... with the risky stipulation that his cooperation would mean that his family would be safe from government interference in perpetuity... The Spine had been made aware of the necessary details by an operative who clearly relished his work.

"You'd think she'd be hard to seduce, but she isn't. Half the battle is being tall, dark, handsome and mysterious. You were already part of the way there so we added some skin and the right kind of back story. When you get there, you'll be a rising young German musician named Herr Franz Sanger. She loves musicians, pretty typical female. And she has this weird romantic ideal of having a gorgeous man catch her eye across a crowded room. I think she's seen too many musicals. Well, once she gets her sights on one, she convinces herself that here is true love and gets him into bed as fast as she can. She thinks her skills there are enough to keep him I guess. Or she's just really horny. Anyway, it's all sunshine after that until the day that her common sense starts to elbow its way in and remind her that young and handsome men don't usually go for her type or at least not her age, then the jealousy starts. She's actually driven away guys who I guess really had the hots for her and a lot of them dump her or sleep with someone else, and a lot of those guys have been found floating face down somewhere with their throats... um... that's why we designed your neck the way we did... The most simple and final way out of her life is through death. That's true of a lot of women... anyway, as long as you play into her fairy tale, you'll be in the sack with her almost before the party breaks up. She's actually a pushover! So just lay on the flowery speech, act like you can't resist the pull of the mystical forces that have brought you together, flatter, stroke, lay it on thick. She must seem like your moon and stars, even in bed. Scream her name a lot. She's not ugly, but like I said, she's no spring chicken. So just use the tricks in the dossier and she falls into your lap. Literally."

He was kind of coarse about it, but by then he could cope. Geoff had made the changes, leaving only the emotions needed to remain and carry out the mission.

And the tricks worked. The Spine followed the plan to the letter. He first noticed her as he chatted, alongside his contact, with local political figures and wealthy members of the party. He was careful after the first time that their eyes met to look slightly surprised, to linger that way, to appear reluctant to look away. And he looked back often, sometimes displaying the smallest of smiles, sometimes allowing his eyes to slip down the length of her sparkling evening gown, lingering briefly on her breasts.

By the time his contact had worked his way around the room to her, quite a lot of silent flirting had occurred. Her body language read clearly; he had passed the first hurdle.

"Madame Renoir, allow me to introduce Herr Sanger."

She looked him up and down. He could see her gaze slow down in telltale areas of his body that had been blocked from her view by party minglers.

"Well... hello," she purred as her eyes slid up his body so slowly he could almost feel it. She extended her hand to him; he took it and held it as if reluctant to let go. "So your name is Sanger. I believe in your language that means 'singer.' Is it only a name, or a description as well?"

"It is both, Madame." He quirked a smile. Leaning forward slightly, covering her hand with both of his, he murmured, "As is yours."

She put her free hand to her mouth with practiced carelessness and giggled in a low voice. "Do you mean to say that I am a painter, or a painting?"

"A work of art, Madame."
She arched her neck and smiled mysteriously. "I see. Is there any particular painting that you think of, then, when you see me?"

"More than I can name. Renoir had many masterpieces. Some told exciting tales, some showed beautiful scenery. Some, madame, depicted delicate and graceful young women."

"Delicate and graceful indeed, for many of them were painted without their clothing."

"That is true... He also painted many nudes."

"And which of these kinds of paintings am I, do you think?"

Looking her directly in the eyes, he whispered, "To me, Madame... All of them."

"Oh!" she gasped as the message sank in. She fanned herself gently with her dance card. "You sing already, Herr Sanger, fair and flattering words. But possibly you will favor us later in the evening?"

"It would be my... pleasure... Madame," he replied, kissing her hand without releasing her eyes from his gaze, his lips lingering just a second longer than necessary.

Her cheeks colored slightly and she appeared ever so slightly out of breath. He noted a rise in temperature and nodded to himself. Her weakness indeed. The dossier they had provided before sending him out was well constructed, the debriefing accurate. He was sure to succeed at the rate things were going.

He offered her his arm. "Meanwhile, would you care to dance?"

She accepted it and joined him on the dance floor.

He remembered dancing with Marie, and there was a time that this would have been an obstacle. It would have been a torment without Geoff's changes. But with them, he was able to carry out his mission calmly and even enjoy the work. It was a challenge, a puzzle to be solved. With the right set of actions, Madame Renoir would succumb to his advances and he would have the opportunity to observe her actions, possibly even look through her things in search of information, collecting all he saw through cameras connected to his photoreceptors. If caught, he was able to fake his own death and escape. Discovery was a risk, but it failed to frighten him, not because of the emotional adjustments but because he feared nothing as much as having to continue. He could still feel fear, in fact, though reduced somewhat; Geoff had primarily inhibited the feelings of guilt and regret, each in its own small file in his processor. But fear he needed. It gave him an edge, and kept him from shrugging off the mission entirely and leaving.

He was sharp, knowledgeable, strong, able to charm his target and free of any guilt should he succeed in making love to her. It was a means to an end for him, to gather the data. Even his random spells of dizziness would work to his advantage, making him seem overwhelmed with desire. And when he had what he had come for, well, then he had no qualms about telling her he no longer loved her. Geoff had seen to that. The Spine was cool inside while projecting an air of deep passion.

He was the perfect spy.

It couldn't have been easier. When the music program began, he played the piano and sang a passionate love song and his eyes never left hers. He flirted carefully with her throughout the evening, and was favored with a number of "accidental" glimpses of her cleavage, seemingly unintentional collisions between certain parts of him and certain parts of her, and once in a heavy crowd, she slid her hand down his backside and finished with a small pinch. Geoff would be flattered to know it; he had put a lot of work into giving The Spine a realistic bottom.
The guests left in twos and threes. As they did, he lingered. His contact, in the role of the friend who had brought him to the party, came at last to tell him it was time to go and Madame Renoir assured the man that her chauffeur would bring "Franz" home when they had finished their chat. His contact, with the skill of his job, said he would see him later and left, with no sign that he knew the plan had worked.

"Alone at last," she murmured when the last of her guests had left.

"Oh, my. I do beg your pardon, Madame. You must be very tired and I am imposing. I should go..."

"Go? So soon?"

"It is very late..."

"Or very early."

"Indeed. I am sure you would like to go to bed."

He had no illusions about how she would interpret this. He fully expected her to take the bait, and she did.

"I would," she murmured, sliding close. She tilted her head up to his and breathed, "But I do hate to sleep alone."

He hesitated as though nervous, leaning in slowly to kiss her. Ugh... she'd been drinking gin... He shut off his nasal receptors and went in at last for a passionate kiss. But it was all show, all acting. He knew what a kiss should be like and that was what he delivered. She responded enthusiastically and he simply noted it and went on to the next step. He would soon be in a position to infiltrate her most private and secret activities...

Starting with the most obvious and particularly private. One more little push and he would be invited into her bed, he was sure of it. Time to lay on the chatter.

"What spell have you cast over me?" he asked huskily as their lips parted. "I feel as thought my will was no longer my own! I must... Madame, I must have you!"

Ugh. It couldn't work, but the dossier had been specific...

And right. "No more talk," she moaned, kissing him again. "Show me, instead, what your heart is trying to say!"

Terrible, he thought. No imagination at all. Marie would have... well, it was best not to think of that now.

"You... want me to... make love to you, Madame?" he whispered, his lips close to hers.

"You know I do!" she cried, clutching at him. "Don't make me wait any longer!"

Thanking Geoff inwardly for the thousandth time for rendering him unable to worry about the deeper implications or just plain distasteful nature of what he was doing, he swept Madame Renoir up, mid-fake swoon, and carried her into her bedroom.

He lay the following morning beside her, the sheets draped loosely over them both. The plan had played out perfectly. She had been as much under his control in bed as she had been at the party,
despite the impression he had given of being under hers. How long it would take to earn her trust, he couldn't say. Her entire life was built on lies, from her livelihood all the way down to her lovemaking. But for now, she would surely invite him to more parties... and into her bed afterward.

Geoff had done his job well. The program allowed him, The Spine, to remember appropriate actions and responses while tuning out feelings of guilt, or more troubling feelings of revulsion. There was even a chance, before the adjustments, that he would feel physical pleasure during the act, but thankfully this was adjustable as well. He wanted Marie alone to be the one to cause those responses, create those feelings. That was his one solace, that it would remain work, a means to an end, and that his physical unfaithfulness should never lead to one second of pleasure. Everything Madame Renoir stood for filled him with revulsion, but more than that, it was the one way he had been able to preserve of his fidelity; that in his heart and his passion, he would be true to Marie. Everything he did here was acting, down to the last shuddering groan. Which, he noted from her expression, she clearly found convincing.

With that secured and his feelings dampened, he felt a businesslike satisfaction in his work, with only the barest nagging worry about what would happen after. Because he knew that when he had succeeded, and he meant to succeed for the good of all, with so much at stake... When that had happened and he was away from this place, he would turn off the inhibitors, face the emotions brought by his actions... and pleasure or no pleasure, his heart would break. He had no idea what happened then. But he had no intention of letting himself be at peace with this. He still felt he should have found some way out of being unfaithful, even physically and under duress, to his wife. He was sure he could have prevented it somehow. The fact that this was completely irrational was a thing he chose not to notice.

He went through the motions of rising in the morning. He went into her bathroom and shut the door, jettisoned the alcohol he had been forced to drink the night before, and turned on the shower. Anyone outside the room would hear what they expected... A man emptying his bladder upon rising, and taking a shower.

And he could shower, if he was careful. He needed to keep the skin clean anyway. When he stepped out, he noticed that a gentleman's shaving kit was waiting. Bringing men into her bed was certainly no isolated experience for Madame Renoir!

He lathered his face and used the razor to gently remove the soap without scraping the false skin. A small amount of dark human hair, stored in the chassis for the purpose of the disguise, was sprinkled into the sink as the soap drained away, leaving a few telltale particles behind and giving the appearance of having shaved properly. He walked out patting away the last of the soap with a small towel, a larger one around his waist.

She was awake. Golden sunshine illuminated her face. Ye gods, she was even older than he'd realized. Not as old as he was, but certainly no woman of thirty-five as she had tried to suggest. Her eyes traveled up and down his body, lingering on the loose red towel at his waist, and he suspected round two was approaching.

He smiled charmingly and sat on the bed beside her. The towel came loose at his waist but settled over his lap. "You're even more lovely in the morning," he murmured.

"And you are a terrible liar."

"Then my actions will speak for me, as they did last night." He kissed her warmly.

"Mmm," she purred, after he leaned away. "Well spoken... as before."
"Last night... Madame, I can't begin to tell you how moved I was. It was glorious."

"Call me Evette, my treasure. And you should talk. You clearly are no innocent."

"I confess that I am not," he sighed, gently gripping the loosened towel. "And yet I feel as though I had never been with a woman before you. And no woman will ever again be able to fulfill me as you have."

_A terrible liar, am I_, he thought as she pulled him against her.

"Then let me do so again," she murmured.

The Spine turned off his nasal receptors yet again. She hadn't so much as brushed her teeth the night before. Her breath was terrifying and she needed a shower. He kissed her deeply as she tugged the towel from his grasp and threw it over the side of the bed.

"You live here now," she informed him as her hands once more moved over his body.

"As Madame wishes," he murmured.

Five months later:

The Spine lounged against the piano, playing a tune he had crafted just yesterday. He wondered whether he would ever use it in the future. If things went badly tonight, he wouldn't have the opportunity.

He had been hers for four months before the jealousy reared its ugly head. That was the best description, he had concluded. He had been hers. She paid his way, kept him, possessed him in any way she could, physically most of all. She gave him access to her music room, never let him out of her sight, made him the centerpiece of her parties, displayed him publicly sometimes and worshiped him privately others. It was a strange experience, to be sure. For that period of time, she was besotted, obsessed, lustful, and frightening, thinking all this was love. And he was obliged to return these attentions until he had found what he wanted.

And find it he did, and such a lot of it! He had searched everything that came near his eyes, some of it very reluctantly, since he had been instructed to search her as well as her home. But every centimeter of each was examined before he was done. There was a snippet of film inside of a specially designed coin, a secret compartment in her Rolls Royce, the smallest of tattoos on the bottom of her tongue. He found out the location and combination of her safe and was able to scan/photograph the contents within a few minutes. One thing only remained in his mission.

_Getting out._

She walked in and stood, staring at him. "You're up early."

It was time. She had to hate him enough to want him either dead or at least out of her life. He was going to have to inflict some serious damage, psychologically speaking. And despite his usual good manners, he was more than ready to do what it took and draw blood. He never wanted to see this house or this woman again.

The curtain was up, and he had a show to put on. He only hoped it would bring down the house,
without crushing him underneath.

"Madame," he said shortly, glancing only briefly in her direction. "You're looking well."

"So formal! Why do you not call me Evette?" she cried, a note of desperation in her voice.

He stopped playing and sighed down at the ivory keys. She had a Steinway, the real deal. He had enjoyed playing it; it seemed likely no one else had for a long time. He could only hope that they made sure he was well away from it before they killed him. It would be a pity to damage the finish...

"You know why."

"I told you to think about it! To reconsider! I can do so much more for you... for your career..."

"My feelings in the matter have not changed."

"Franz," she said in a trembling voice. "I beg you..."

The proud woman, abasing herself. It almost troubled him, or it might had he not been carefully programmed to remain aloof. He must be that much moreso while putting an end to their affair. She was a pitiful creature, he had discovered. Clinging to him in bed, hoping to fill a void that would always remain. She couldn't love. This he had seen for himself, month after ugly month.

What was worse, he had seen what she had done, what she had caused others to do. Her shame was so much less than the suffering that lay at her feet, and the worse torment that would come to the world if he didn't get word back to his people.

"Do not beg. It won't make me love you again."

She half-gasped, half-sobbed, her hands covering her mouth. "Franz!"

"I'm sorry."

In a way he was. Marie had her children and his love. This woman had nothing, for all her wealth and power. But he did not hesitate to carry out the plan. A vicious dog could not be allowed to savage others just because it had been mistreated.

"Truly," he pressed coldly, "I had thought once that this was the work of the stars. I thought that you and I were drawn together by the hand of destiny..."

"We were!"

"We weren't. It was lust. I see that now. Lust and deprivation on my part. It clouded my eyes. I needed you..."

"As I need you, my love!"

He chuckled dryly. "A different sort of need, Madame."

Her expression grew hard, belying the tears starting down through the layers of pancake makeup. "You were hard up? You wanted to get laid? You said you loved me! And I, Franz! I love you!"

He wouldn't look her in the eye. "Love, Madame? I think you mean possess. You want me. Yes, you need me. As I needed you, and more. My youth makes you feel young again."

If she only knew how old he really was! But his words, meanwhile, had delivered their barbs.
"Young again?" she screeched.

"You don't deny it, surely? You're a horny old woman... You once admired my legs and one minute later had me between yours."

He could swear her eyes flashed red. He mentally congratulated himself. He was delivering a level of coarseness that would make Rabbit blush.

"How dare you! You try to make me out to be some aging cat prowling after you?"

"Aging?" he scoffed. "You flatter yourself..."

The rage was brimming over. "You only want to cover your own lies! Admit it! You're leaving me for another woman!"

Right on cue. "Nonsense..."

"It can only be that! That was no mere lust, not in the beginning! You loved me, worshiped me! But you, you fickle bastard! You can't feel anything for long, can you? You took advantage of me, made love to me until it suited you to move on, you gigolo!"

"You're becoming irrational." He stood. "I'm already packed. Your accusations are very entertaining, but there's no reason to prolong this ridiculous drama."

He walked toward the bedroom, hoping that this time things would go smoothly. If she decided to take the high road and let him go...

But no. "Franz!" she shrieked. She ran to him, clutching his arm as if to hold him back. "I'm sorry! Forgive me! You're all I have, you're everything!"

"Let me go!"

"No! You can't! You can't leave me!"

She'd seen too many Joan Crawford movies, he decided as she caught at his neck and tried to pull him into a kiss. How sad, he thought, without really feeling it. He carefully removed her, but she clung to him. He pushed her, carefully. It was very gently for him, but still roughly had he been a human man. She fell to the floor with a squeak and glared up at him, panting with the effort of her attack.

"I beg your pardon, Madame. I would offer you a hand up but I know you would only take it as a promise. I am yours no longer. You will find others who desire your ready charms. I would have to be very hard up indeed to seek them again."

She stared daggers at him, scrambling to her feet.

"For your sake," he said, a little more gently, "let me go and go on with your life."

He turned away. It would be now, whatever it was... he doubted from her expression that he would be allowed to simply take his suitcase and go. He heard the sound of her running across the room, and was not surprised in the least when a vase smashed against his head. He contrived to collapse in a heap while the false skin leaked a blood-like substance onto his silk shirt. What a waste of a vase, he thought. It had been very expensive... everything she owned was.

She was sobbing beside him in an instant. "I'm sorry! Oh, my love, speak to me! I didn't mean it!"
There was no end to her cliches. How this could have ever been love, even to her, was a mystery he would never solve.

"Blood... oh, no! No... I'll... I'll get a towel!"

He hadn't expected her to strike the first blow, or to exhibit sorrow over his injury. This was uglier still than he had expected. But having come so far, he had to press forward, and he knew just the thing. While she was running to the bathroom for a towel, he pulled from his trouser pocket a love note that he slipped hastily inside his more conspicuous shirt pocket, leaving just the top of it visible. A love note to another woman.

He had tried leaving it in his to drawer, carefully "hidden" since she often snooped through his things. But there hadn't been time to await her next jealous search. He needed to get his information back immediately, and so he had told her he was leaving her.

But he had the letter handy, just in case. It was flowery, filthy, and absolutely shameless, describing acts he would never have dared to put into print before the inhibitors. And he had chosen something symbolic with this part of the plan. Though the note gave no name, he had written it to his wife. Someday he hoped to write her another that was at least as raunchy and that she would actually get to read.

And as Madame Renoir began to mop up the fake blood, she found it. She lost no time in pulling it from his pocket.

"What... 'My dearest one...' then... is this... to me?"

Typical. He waited. He had no choice, really. He was supposed to be unconscious.

"'The first time I shared your bed, I learned the meaning of joy...' Darling Franz! 'Your blue eyes...' My eyes are green!" she shrieked.

He heard her murmur over the words. "What? None of this happened that night!" She mumbled a few more words and snarled, "He's never even done that to me! Who? Who is she?"

The paper rattled violently; he assumed she was searching for the name of his lover.

"'No name anywhere? What... 'I count the minutes until I can be with you again and worship you in my arms once more. You have cast a spell over me...' He told me that! 'I hunger to know again the touch of your skin, the scent of your hair, the taste of your...'' She gasped. "You swine!"

He would have laughed had it not been so deadly serious. He hadn't been talking about her lips! He was rather proud of that letter.

She was almost choked with fury as she continued, "'My darling angel, I could never love her as I love you!' Meaning me! He could never love me as much..."

A bloodcurdling screech rose and he almost flinched.

"'Let me come to you tonight, never to leave again.' Beast! All while he was mine. Mine! Living in my home and sharing my bed! After all I have done for him! Bastard! He's made his choice!"

And that was that. His performance was a success. She was up and on the phone in seconds and he knew what came next.

It was quick, at least. That night he was carried, bloodied and apparently dead, to the river by her
favorite thugs. He had been obliged to play along, and made it good, suddenly coming to "consciousness" at the cold touch of the knife and the rough hands of his attackers, letting out a scream of fear and agony as they slit the false front of his throat, never the wiser as to what they had really cut into. The tube of chemically treated blood, preserved and set to pour out when she used her favorite method of disposing of deceitful lovers, splattered admirably when pierced. He'd heard her sobbing in her room as they neatly committed the 'murder.' It had sounded more like the tears of a woman with hurt pride than the tears of a woman wracked with guilt over sending her lover to his death. He had no doubt this was the case. He never so much as heard her pause or increase in her emotional outburst when his "panicked death scream" sounded through her house. The fact that he made sure to scream her name in the process had no effect. To her, it was over. She didn't even bat an eye at how.

They grunted and muttered in German about how he was heavier than he should be, as skinny as he was, as they dragged him down the embankment, bundled into a sack. They managed to toss him into one of the many rivers in Berlin... he wasn't sure which. His ears filled with water as he sank and waited until they were sure to have gone before tearing through the bag and looking around through the dark water.

*I'm coming back, Marie,* he thought as he strained his eyes for some sign of light through the surface. *Damaged and disgraced, but I'm coming home. I'll tell you everything and hope you can forgive me...*

Had he been human, he would be dead, of course. He should be glad, as well as proud the fact that he had saved the life of whatever operative had been next on the list, and that he had gathered information that would save hundreds of thousands of lives. It was a job well done.

But how would he feel when the dampener was removed and he could feel all the pain, guilt, and revulsion at having spent months sharing the bed of a strange woman? Well, he knew how he would feel.

And he deserved it. He had chosen to accept the upgrades, chosen to comply with orders, chosen to enter Evette Renoir's bed and seduce her for information. The ends might justify the means to some. But he knew he would bear the guilt and shame forever.

He rose at last and walked the river bed for several miles just to make sure, before emerging from the water. It was dark, and he had found a more secluded area than the urban area where she had lived. He dragged himself out, found a scarf on a clothesline to cover the cut in the false skin of his neck, and made his way to the nearest telephone booth.

Tokyo, six months later:

"Well done, Captain!" the general said after the debriefing. "She's already been arrested. Oh, and you should enjoy this... she's been charged with having you killed!"

The general chortled heartily. The Spine smiled weakly back. "I suppose technically she did."

"Damn right!" the general was chuckling. "I enjoyed the story, by the way. Lucky for you they never found you out and just tossed you away after they cut your throat."

The Spine winced. He did have sensors in the artificial skin. It hadn't been agony as it would have
for a human, but it hadn't felt good either.

"Well, go rest up and get that skin suit fixed properly. That patch job is coming loose and you're gonna scare someone. I'll tell you about your next assignment in a few days."

"Sir?" he asked apprehensively.

"What is it? Surely you didn't think that was all? Uncle Sam invested a lot in your..."

The Spine fought the urge to cut him off. If he was reminded once more about the cost of his upgrades... inhibitors or not, he would blow his top.

The phone rang. The general sighed huffily and answered it.

"What?" he cried after listening for a moment. "But Jim! Now see here, he's worth too much to this effort to... you can't do that!"

The Spine stared. Were they talking about him?

"I won't forget this. You had no business sticking your nose into things, I don't care whether he saved your life back in the war."

He slammed the phone down and glared at The Spine, who looked back with hope rising in his core.

"Sir?"

"Seems you're getting a transfer to regular military. The Marines."

Had the inhibitors not been still active, The Spine would have started sobbing with relief. He didn't know whether his next assignment would have involved sex, and he was just as glad not to ever find out. It was guaranteed to include things no human could do and that was usually something he would prefer to avoid himself.

"Was that General Hawkins, sir?"

"Your friend. Yeah, it was. You shouldn't have called in your buddies. You had a cushy deal here, no mud, no swamp, no combat. Hope you enjoy active duty!"

He hadn't called anyone. He could see it, though. Jim had been looking out for him for years. He suspected that when only two robots had turned up in Vietnam, Jim had begun to ask why.

"Well, go and get that stuff peeled off! You're not taking a highly valuable synthetic into swamp combat! Go on! Dismissed!"

He rose, but hesitated. "Sir... my family..."

"Ugh! They're safe, alright? A deal is a deal and Jim is in charge of your case now anyway! Lucky for all of us the work you've already done is worth enough to justify the cost of all of that tech you're wearing. Get out of my sight."

The Spine saluted and hurried out.

Geoff left the inhibitors on until The Spine was restored to his usual silver self. He smiled into the mirror. A little adhesive remained but it was good to see the silver again.
"Alright, you'll want to keep the inhibitors on I assume..."

"I... I'll need them switched on when I head out for combat. So that I can handle things. But I want them turned off for a few days."

"Why?" Geoff cried, exasperated. "You'll have to feel! After everything that happened! You said you wouldn't be able to live with it..."

"I'll have to learn to live with it. I have to start now. Please... even feeling guilt about sleeping with that... that horrible woman, well, that's Marie's husband feeling it. I need to remember how much I love her. I know I do, but I don't feel that burning joy and I know enough to miss it. Even if the guilt crushes me, well... That's who I really am. Not this heartless spy. Please, Geoff."

Geoff shook his head. "I'm sorry. I wish I knew enough to block only the feelings that hurt you and leave the rest."

"You can't. Just switch it off already."

Geoff opened a small panel in The Spine's head. "Spine... are you sure?"

"Do it."

There was a tiny plink and The Spine felt first a surge of joy. Marie! He loved her, he always had, he always would... and then, like a wall of water washing away the joy came the agony of remembering every night he had spent in the arms of Madame Renoir, making love to her with scientific skill and giving her every reason to believe he loved it... Within seconds he began to weep.

"No... oh, no..."

"I'll switch it back off..."

"No!" he barked, and Geoff jumped. "I deserve it but... I can't stand this... I'm sorry!" he choked, rocking, inconsolable.

"Then just let me..."

The Spine leaned away, gasping, "Marie! Oh... Marie... I'm so sorry!"

"Spine! Let me switch it back off! Please!" Geoff cried.

The Spine began to shake violently. Geoff jumped backward a step, staring in shock.

And the panic folder opened. The Spine could see it, a part of his mind usually locked, opening like a doorway.

"Isolate files?" a voice asked.

"What?" he mumbled messily, staring into space.

"I didn't say anything!" Geoff cried.

"Isolate files?" the voice asked again.

He remembered now. His panic folder. He could send the memories there! Of course! He always forgot, until it opened again. He felt he deserved to feel this way... but he couldn't endure it! He had never endured it, realized. This was how he survived. This was what his Pappy had created to save
his life. And if he waited... the memories would begin to restore... not only this one, but every horror he had found too much to bear.

"Yes, yes, isolate!" he cried.

"Accessing."

He felt the memories of his entire mission bundled into a compact folder. It was almost over... "Seal folder?"

"Yes, please!"

The memory ended. The Spine was in the hangar, still held securely by his brothers. He had his face pressed against Rabbit's shoulder, which was soaked with oil. Rabbit was rubbing his back like he was a child and Hatchworth was singing softly. He didn't want to move just yet. It was over, but he felt such comfort here.

He remembered what had happened next, after the file was isolated...

He sat shaking and coughing, confused. He knew something had upset him, but he couldn't remember what. He mopped at his eyes and looked around, seeing just a portion of a face hiding nearby.

"Geoff... why so pale?"

Geoff, peering around a cabinet, slowly emerged. "I thought you were gonna explode..."

"Why?"

"Well, after your reaction..." He squinted. "You alright?"

"Just fine."

"Only..." He took a few hesitant steps closer, looking searchingly at the automaton. "Spine, what do you last remember?"

"Well... Rabbit and Jon shipped out for Vietnam. You've been taking a lot of measurements... you asked me... you asked if I knew where I was headed."

"That was eight months..."

Geoff trailed off. He peered into The Spine's head, muttering softly.

"Something wrong? Eight months what?"

"Um... Spine, there was some trouble with the original mission. You, uh... had to be kept in shut down for a while. Um, eight months in fact. The measurements won't be needed now. And... you're going to Nam too. in a week."

"Oh... did I malfunction?"

"No! Um, no, we just weren't sure where you'd be needed most so rather than make you wait
around, well..."

The Spine frowned. "It would have been nice to be told before being put into indefinite storage," he muttered irritably. "Well... Are Rabbit and Jon alright?"

"Oh, yeah. I heard they haven't seen much action yet, fortunately."

"Great! The less they have to see, the better. Maybe I'll see them there, hm?"

"Yeah..." Geoff said faintly.

He was surely acting weird! Maybe he was worried... they'd gotten to be rather good friends in the few weeks he'd been there, and he had been fairly stern with the man.

The Spine smiled reassuringly. "It's alright. I don't hold it against you, Geoff. And don't worry about me, okay? I've been to war before. It isn't pretty but it could be worse, right?"

"Yeah," Geoff murmured. "I guess for some people, there are worse things than going to war."
The Spine knows he has memories hidden that he was unable to face. He now has to make a choice.

Los Angeles, December 2012:

"It's over, ain't it?" Rabbit whispered.

"Yeah," The Spine croaked.

He could tell he'd done damage to his vocals while the memory restored. He wondered how loud his cries had been... and what sort of cries they were. He was distressed enough without having to imagine them hearing the reenactment of sex acts, even if it had been acting on his side.

Hatchworth gently released The Spine, adding a brisk pat. "Well, done, brother Spine. I will let the humans know that it is safe to return to the hangar."

He walked away solemnly. It was unusual for Hatchworth. He was normally light, teasing. Here, now, he was calm and serious.

Rabbit stayed, still holding his brother carefully against his shoulder. Rabbit had been a strange sort of father in his lifetime, but the feeling The Spine felt with him now was the same as it had been with their Pappy. The Spine had seen Rabbit hold Lily this way, and Upgrade, in her matrix and as an automaton. This was the Rabbit the fans never saw, the unexpectedly mature, caring older brother, still protecting the family though their father was gone. It was fleeting even for him but he was grateful now to be the recipient of one of Rabbit's rare paternal moments, because they only happened to him in those times that The Spine needed more than anything to be the younger brother.

"When you gonna forgive yehrself, little brother?" Rabbit asked gently as The Spine wrapped his arms around Rabbit and clung like a child. "Back in the day, you used to have nightmares about the copper elephants. Then it was the trenches. Then Auschwitz. But since the sixties, you only ever have nightmares about one thing."

He knew! Clearly The Spine had cried out at least some specifics and the thought didn't please him.

"They made you do it, buddy," Rabbit continued, giving him a squeeze. "And it saved a lot of people."

And that was Rabbit. It had been comforting in the past to hear Rabbit's pragmatic approach to a hated task. The Spine struggled with motives and morals. Rabbit did what needed doing and felt guilt only when he couldn't find a way to wriggle out of feeling it.
"I've relived this memory before?" The Spine whispered.

"Yeah. Too much! It's time to just... I dunno. I ain't gonna tell ya ho-ho-how to feel. I just hate to see ya beat yehrself up again and again, that's all."

This raised a question.

"Rabbit... how often do I do this?"

"Hm... Well, it's hard to say... there's a different kinds. The little ones are hard ta track. Any time ya get overwhelmed ya glitch a little and lock it up and sometimes we don't even notice. Sometimes ya lose a few minutes because yehr just a little stressed and the fo-fo-folder opens by mistake. They even got a couple on video back at the park. A few twitches and you go right back to singing. And you always hafta try that low note right before the Ice Cream Parade..."

"What low note?"

"Um... never mind. Never could figure out why that would upset ya so much... Anyway, no one hit ya with any hammers. Just in case you thought they did."

"I don't understand..."

"Right! Because ya forgot!" He sounded strangely relieved. The Spine didn't like the sound of that. "I still can't believe you don't notice the gaps though..."

He hadn't wanted to notice. He supposed that was part of forgetting...

"So yeah, the big ones, like this, don't happen real often. Just when things are so nuts that ya can't stop long enough ta lock 'em up and the folder stays open and tries to puke itself back into active memory. I thought it was a good idea when Pappy set it that way but now I dunno."

"Why?" he moaned. "Why am I this way? Why can't I just... just be okay?"

"Why do I stutter? Why did Hatchy's core crack? Why does anything happen? Ain't gonna fix it asking why. But if you want my opinion, well, we're fancy robuts but nobody's perfect. You never could handle bein' real upset. Makes ya glitch. Too much at once and yehr useless. So Pappy gave ya a panic folder. You were fine when you were a baby, though..."

"A baby?" he mumbled, still resting on Rabbit's shoulder and feeling very weary. Oddly enough, he felt a bit like a baby now, a feeling that was aggravated by the realization that he had been wearing nothing but an oily sheet since he first woke here. "I was never a..."

"Yeah, I know. But it's like bein' a baby. You were clumsy an' ya didn't know right from wrong or how to control yehrself. Pappy just let ya toddler around with me at first but... Well, the cat had a litter, and ya wanted to ho-ho-hold a kitten... it was about a week after Pappy switched ya on... and when you did... well, you killed it, buddy. Squeezed too hard and... sorry. Didn't know it hurt the cat, didn't know yehr own strength. An' ya just reached for another and Ma screamed and scared ya... took me an hour to get you out from under the shed... well, Pappy tried to fix it, to put in something so that you'd understand that living things hurt and that some things are wrong, to make you responsible. He couldn't wait around for ya to learn, you were too strong.

"And it worked. Real well. Now you blame yourself for everything." He chuckled weakly. "Then we went to war and we all came back with nightmares. Only you an' me, well... we got a bonus problem." He tapped his one green eye. "Green Matter. I don't hafta tell you about that."
"It can't be removed..."

"Nope. And it makes everything look just a little more awful, if ya let it. And you got two. So when you see terrible things, you see them worse. Or ain't ya noticed?"

The Spine sighed.

"Confirmed. So now you're a big grown up robot tryin' ta get on with yehr life and ya can't forgive yehrself for gettin' busy with some cruddy Mata Hari fifty years ago!"

"It hurts... I love Marie and she... she forgave me for it, Rabbit... I told her once and she forgave me..."

"Great googly-moogly! Why'd ya do a stupid thing like that?"

"I wish I hadn't..." he moaned miserably into Rabbit's oil-soaked shirt.

"No... shush, buddy, it wasn't stupid. Sorry. I know you an' Marie told each other everything, but... how could you tell her if it was locked up?"

"Just like you said... the folder opened because of something that upset me and I was so distracted I left it open."

"And Mary handled it all by herself?" Rabbit gasped.

"Yeah... I think she was able to stop it before it came back completely. She told me something that happened while I was away and I was upset... and next thing I know, I remember all about sleeping with another woman and I felt so bad... I confessed everything!"

Rabbit sighed. "An' you forgot again and Mary had ta live with it?"

The Spine nodded, fresh oil leaking from his eyes.

"Well... that's not so bad."

"How?" The Spine cried, his voice breaking.

"She understood. We all do, buddy."

"But I can't... I can't think of that evil woman and what we did together and still be able to... to love a woman. Do you understand, Rabbit? I can't bear to hold anyone else!"

"This is about Bree, now? It ain't even about Mary anymore, you want to move on and you think you're not gonna be able to sleep with her because you can't deal with the memories! But they was locked up!"

"I know, but... I could feel it more than remember. I felt so horrible and didn't know why..."

"Wait, you mean the rumors are true? You and Bree..."

"We never slept together, Rabbit. Bree and I. That's the trouble... it's not just about sex, Rabbit. I kissed her and... I couldn't bear even that!"

Rabbit patted his back absently. He stiffened suddenly.

"Oh... hey, look," he giggled uneasily. "Everyone's, um... here... How long have you all been
"Long enough to hear what Marie told me years ago," Louise murmured sadly.

So they had heard. He was past caring.

The Spine looked up miserably. "Louise," he choked.

She glanced around and her fellow mechanics moved awkwardly out of earshot, leaving Peter and Hatchworth looking on with concern.

Louise stepped forward and put her thin arm gently around him. "She never let it trouble her," she whispered. "I think having you forget was a big help, though! But she forgave you and she didn't want you to go on living alone if there was someone you cared about. You know that, right?"

"Yeah. I know."

"Then for your sake learn to deal with it, okay? Go on and love that sweet girl whose life you just saved! My baby sister has been gone a long time. Don't keep on feeling guilty for needing love even when she can't give it anymore."

He put his hand over his eyes and said nothing. She patted his back with a sigh.

"And it's not that easy. Well, that I understand. Rabbit, how long until the next file restores?" she asked aloud.

"Pappy set it to restore a new file every hour on the hour."

"So if we seal the folder now, it stops?"

"Yep."

"How about this memory? Can we put it back?"

Rabbit shook his head. "Yeah. He can. But it ain't goin' away, Louise! He forgets all the bad stuff but this one is vicious! It keeps pushin' at the barriers and reminding him, and he keeps remembering just enough to ruin his life!"

"Well, wonder boy and I have been talking about that," Louise said.

"Spine, we can make some adjustments. We can make it so that you remember you have a panic folder but it remains password locked. If you ever start to malfunction it will work according to specs, but you won't forget that you store the memory. It would be a stair step toward what the Colonel was trying to achieve. Someday you may be able to integrate your memories. But until then, when you feel upset and lock the memory, you'll at least remember having done so. It was always a conscious act to store them but now it'll be like putting something into a cupboard. You don't see it but you know it's there."

"How will that help?" he muttered.

"To be blunt, you'll know why you feel uncomfortable holding Breanna, or any other woman you choose. You'll be able to endure the feeling of being with her physically without having this flashback elbow in and tell you you're cheating on your wife. You'll know that you did sleep with this other woman but you'll also know why, all without having to remember what it looked and felt like to screw her."
"When you say 'blunt' you mean it..." Louise breathed, a little smile tugging at her mouth.

Rabbit snickered. The Spine groaned quietly and Rabbit fell silent.

"Well, now's the time to be blunt, isn't it?" Peter said. "We can't waste any time making the adjustments. I need him in a fit state to travel home so that we can do the restoration work."

The others murmured agreement. The Spine, however, sat up at last, pulling the oily sheet around his waist carefully.

"Restoration work?" he asked, looking around the room.

He couldn't help noticing that a couple of the mechanics flinched when he turned their way. He reached up uneasily and touched his nose, or tried to. There was nothing but an opening. His face plates were gone!

Rabbit looked at him with a serious expression. "Yeah, another thing, Spine, buddy... you, uh... well, you ended up on your back but somewhere on the way down you, uh, kinda bounced on your face."

"Bounced on my..."

He trailed off, struggling to remember. He had gone through the windshield... it was dark... night vision was on... he could see rock approaching... he shuttered his eyes hastily...

Static and darkness.

"You pretty much destroyed it, buddy. Yehr just lucky the frame held up."

"Oh."

They flew home in a helicopter, provided by Louise, two weeks later, after the Christmas holidays. The Matter Masters had come up a week before and driven everyone human (besides Peter) home, after providing a helpful service by acting as models for The Spine's temporary face plates. David actually allowed them to mold directly from his face while Bunny remained on hand for a visual reference.

Despite the close resemblance, The Spine was discontent. The face looked roughly the same but was a shade too small and didn't quite align with his hairline. There was a conspicuous gap that made it look as though he had painted on part of his hair. And there were more visible seams, put in for greater facial mobility and because, as Peter said, the fans loved for them to look more robotic rather than more human. He promised to refine them later but it was still a hard adjustment.

More than that, though, he was weary and uncomfortable. He wanted to go home and get away from everyone for a while, to think. He wasn't even ready to see Breanna yet. His feelings for her were, if anything, stronger. But he just needed to think, to make sure that this was what he really wanted, and that he wouldn't be doing her more harm than good by asking for another chance to get close to her.

He shivered as the helicopter descended over San Diego. He couldn't deny how much he did want to be close to her. For that reason alone, he needed to know this was right.

And he needed to adjust to the understanding that he wasn't the superman he once believed himself to be. Even as Peter was trying to make him look more robotic, he was turning out to be more and more human.
Steve Negrete met them at the airfield. He swept The Spine up in what would have been a crushing hug, to a human.

"What a relief! I caught her, buddy! That was the most fantastic thing I've ever seen, that stunt you pulled to save her! And you did! I saw it like it was in slow motion. She was out of control. A second more and..."

His voice choked off and his face was flushed. The Spine chuckled and patted his back.

"It's okay," he told the man. "I'm finding out my weaknesses lately, too."

Steve released him and mopped sheepishly at one eye. "I like taking risks for myself but having things go out of control like that... it was, uh... kinda traumatic."

"Yes, it was."

"Look... I'm sorry. If I hadn't screwed up..."

"What? You mean the driving? Steve, that was black ice! I was looking out the same windshield with my night vision active and never saw a trace of it! How could you have seen it?"

"Really? You couldn't see it either?" Steve cried eagerly.

The Spine nodded and smiled. This felt right. After having everyone bothering over him all week, it was nice to be able to help someone else for a change.

Steve grinned and there was still a suspicious moistness about his eyes, but he said briskly, "Great! I mean, it wasn't great that it happened, but... You know what I mean. Well... the van's all fixed up and there's no ice in San Diego outside of the iced tea so let's head home!"

"Sounds wonderful," The Spine said sincerely as Rabbit joined them.

"And hey, Spine... a certain Walter Girl can't talk about anything except the guy who saved her butt. And I don't mean the catcher, I mean the pitcher! If you were thinking of making a move..."

"Too soon," Rabbit sang softly, swooping the sound engineer back toward the van.

"Aw, crapola..." Steve groaned. He whispered quickly, as they walked away, "I thought he liked her though!"

Dave, who was going to return with the helicopter, walked up chuckling. "I take it he doesn't know about Mom."

"He and Michael found a scrapbook Jon made but I'm not sure they believed any of it."

"He's right, though, Dad. There's no reason you can't go on with your life now. You understand why you had such a hard time loving anyone after Mom..."

"Dave..." The Spine sighed. He embraced his son. "You know damned well why I had such a hard time."

"She was wonderful, yeah. I remember that. But..."

"I still don't believe I can ever love anyone like I love your mother," the Spine interrupted. "I'll never stop loving her. She was truly one of a kind and far too good for me. She's a tough act to follow."
"Well, I should argue, but I understand. She was something special. But... I just hope you don't end up missing out on something wonderful because you hold everyone up to that standard."

The Spine stiffened.

"Sorry. But I do think you know what I mean. Steve was right, wasn't he? I've seen how you look at her, how you talk about her... Breanna. You love her, don't you?"

The Spine leaned away and stared at him. He sighed and closed his eyes briefly. "Yes. And I never knew it would be so hard."

"But not impossible. I got to spend some time with her while she waited for her cast to be completed. She's a real sweetheart. Don't miss out on that, okay?"

"Dave..." The Spine said, growing frustrated.

"Alright. You look like my son but you're the parent. You can figure this out. I have to get going, okay? Call if you need to talk about it. Love you."

"I love you, too. See you soon."

"You'd better."

On the drive back to Walter Manor, The Spine brooded. Couldn't they just give him time to think? But what about, really? How long would he be thinking, doing nothing? Breanna was warm and alive and if he was lucky, she was still interested in being with him. They had both come close to death. It brought things into perspective usually, even for a robot.

And he couldn't deny that he felt that urgency now. Don't waste time. Don't wait until she gets old and dies, too...

But could he face that again? Could he lose another beloved wife, or lover, and still survive to love again?

But Dave had answered that question, too, back at Halloween. Humans did it. Humans lost those they loved and kept going. He might have more chances in his long lifetime than a human man would, but he, like a human, had to accept that mortality. He had been happier than he ever believed possible when he was married to Marie. Love was wonderful.

When they arrived at the manor, Wanda rushed out to meet him, crying and fussing over him, followed by most of the household. But he still managed, in all the fuss of getting everyone out of the van and inside, to slip away and head for the duck pond.

At least, no one stopped him.

This was Rabbit's usual thing, visiting the cemetery, uncharacteristically sober for someone like him. But they each had done their time looking at the stones. And he needed to talk to someone, even if it was only in spirit.

He paused as usual at a large and oddly shaped eucalyptus tree, placing a hand on its bark and closing his eyes for a moment. He and close family members knew that this, too, was a monument. Its twisted form was not wholly unlike other eucalyptus trees, and yet so much more convoluted that it had sparked certain speculation among those who knew whose grave lay beneath. But if one last atom of what made Lily who she was had grown up into this tree, he could only be pleased. She was
out in the sun... one of her favorite places to go.

"Love you, sweetheart," he whispered, and walked on into the cemetery proper.

He laid a rose on the grass, picked from the garden as he made his way there, leaned on the old sculpture and looked down at the stone. This was all the love, all the marriage he'd had since 1983. He had intended to go on indefinitely with this being his only love, this slumbering angel, leaving roses only the living could appreciate.

"Marie," he murmured. "I need to tell you something."

He sometimes spoke to her, hoping she could hear. He didn't believe she could, but he had to try anyway. Talking to her had become such a part of who he was.

"I love you. I hope you know I always will. But I'm lonely, and I'm alive. Or as alive as I ever was. I've met someone and it's far worse than when I did that job for the feds. I don't remember that the way you had to and I'm sorry about that, putting you through it. But I know I never loved her.

"And that's what's so terrible now. Because this time I really have betrayed you. This time I have fallen in love."

He wiped his eyes carefully on his sleeve. "At least, it feels like I've betrayed you. But I know how you felt. You wanted this for me. You want me to move on and love again. Well, I guess I've just come here to make peace with things. I want your blessing before I try again and ask whether she'll have me."

He waited, listening to the low wind rustling through the tree that marked Lily's grave. He had never been given to fancy, but it sounded for all the world like a whisper, the murmur of a warm, loving voice.

He closed his eyes and tried to believe that it was, that Lily and Marie were whispering, telling him they loved him and that he could be happy because they were.

He couldn't quite believe that they were really speaking to him. He almost felt Marie here with him, but he just wasn't able to believe. He felt a strange ripple of mirth, as though she were laughing... she knew he wouldn't believe she was really there... and he didn't. He just didn't!

But when he opened his eyes, he felt that this was all the answer he needed. Marie was a whisper on the wind now. She had wanted him to love again and he did. He loved Breanna dearly. It was time to tell her so.

He just hoped he hadn't let his chance slip away.

But wanting to tell her and actually doing so were two different things. Yes, she'd been the one to kiss him, back at Halloween. But that had just been interest. Interest could be lost.

He returned to the house to find a combination New Year's Eve/welcome home/hero party being prepared. As the guest of honor, he was sent to his room to wait until it was ready. He had only a moment to smile at Breanna before she returned to helping and Rabbit chased him out of the ballroom. He didn't feel much like a guest of honor as he sat on his bed but he did feel surprisingly weary considering he hadn't done anything. He sank back onto his bed with a sigh. Maybe just a little stasis time.
He woke to a darkened room and a pair of eyes, one blue and one green, looking down at him.

"Party time, buddy! I tried ta message you but ya must've been pretty tired!"

"Oh! Yes... I just thought I'd rest a little..."

"You should. Yehr still recovering."

"Pssht. Robots don't need to recover. I've been repaired."

"Well, good, because the party's wa-wa-wa-waitin'! Come on!"

"Oh, right..."

The Spine started to rise and felt a sharp ping in his back. He gasped and the room spun around him abruptly as his entire body went limp and he collapsed heavily back onto the bed, crying out in surprise.

"What the Hell?" cried Rabbit, switching on the light.

The Spine tried once more to rise but this time his body refused to respond. He looked at Rabbit, shocked and terrified.

"I can't..." he croaked, his bellows not responding either. "Rabbit! Can't move..."

"No... no they fixed everything!" Rabbit cried.

The Spine heard his frantic wifi message to Hatchworth, calling for his help and telling him to bring mechanics.

"Can you move anything besides yehr head?" Rabbit asked quickly.

No...

"Can't ya talk?" Rabbit demanded, his voice rising with alarm.

"No..." The Spine whispered. His bellows were empty.

"Petes! Get yehr butt moving!" Rabbit screamed, and The Spine was sure that his older brother had reached his limit at last.

"We are here, Rabbit. What is wrong with The Spine?" Hatchworth asked as he entered the room.

"He's..." Rabbit began.

"Rabbit?"

The copper robot opened his mouth but all that came out was a frantic sob. Hatchworth hugged him stiffly.

"Now, then, let's not have hysterics. Just breathe and tell Hatchworth all about it."

Rabbit shoved him away and pointed desperately at The Spine. "He needs help, not me!" he cried shrilly.

Hatchworth looked down at The Spine as Peter hurried in with Paige.
"It seems The Spine is in distress," Hatchworth informed them.

"What the hell?" Peter cried. "We fixed everything!"

"Well, obviously ya missed something, hot shot!" Rabbit roared, oil streaming down his cheek plates. "Look at him! He can't get up!" He sank into a chair and shuddered with misery.

"Rabbit?" Hatchworth murmured, looking down at him. "Are you sure you do not want a hug?"

"I'm sorry! I need to keep him calm and I can't even keep from cryin'!" wailed Rabbit. "Fix him! Please fix him! I can't stand this!"

"Oh, Rabbit..." Hatchworth sighed. "I am sorry, The Spine. Rabbit was very frightened when you fell onto your face. He has run out of calm at last, I see."

_Rabbit? It's going to be alright_, The Spine sent.

*I'm so scared! I'm sorry!*

_Just stay with me, okay? I can't do this alone._

He meant it. He'd been in bad spots before but he'd always gotten through with the help of someone, and here Rabbit was his closest family, and he was falling apart. The Spine wasn't sure he could survive without having someone to strengthen him now.

Rabbit looked over at him for a long moment as Peter and Paige began to assess the damage and other techs streamed in and out of the room. "Ya got in over yehr head again, huh?"

_Yes. Please talk me through it!_

Rabbit smiled sadly. "I'll try."

Two hours later, The Spine lay in a lab, fighting a fresh round of panic.

He'd cracked his precious titanium alloy spine! The examination had found metal fatigue that had remained hidden during the repairs. And though the damage had been done in the fall from the cliff, it wasn't until that very evening, when he had dragged himself upstairs and lay back on his bed, that it had finally given way from the weight of his body and the relatively soft mattress. The angle and the strain combined to at last split the rings, and his spinal assembly, a network of delicate fibers that allowed him to control his body, was caught in one of the cracks.

They quickly removed the fibers from the crack but meanwhile were obliged to leave him on the table, once again covered with only a sheet, until they could craft replacement parts. Rabbit had done his best to talk The Spine through it as requested but eventually was sent to his room to recharge.

People were bustling around him. He could move his limbs again but was forbidden to move too much or to attempt to rise. And he wouldn't have tried, not now. He was too afraid to worsen the damage.

"I see someone's slacking off," someone said, the sweetness of the tone belying the playful words.

He knew the voice and gasped with relief.

"Bree!" he choked, reaching for her with one hand. Her smile, strained already, disappeared.
"Oh, you poor thing!" she cried, taking his hand with her good one. "I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner! I couldn't help and didn't want to get in the way!"

He stared at her, taking in every inch of her face.

"I'm so glad you're here," he said sincerely. "Rabbit was here until he started to glitch. I guess he's been through a lot too..."

"Yes. We've all been so worried, and here you are giving us more trouble," she said, cracking a small smile. "I was given to believe that you were the easiest one to cope with around here. Don't make Peter a liar, now."

He sighed. This was nice, laying here, holding her hand. Her note of mischievous gallows humor struck just the right chord. He pulled her hand to his chest and held it in both of his.

"You okay?" she asked, blushing. "I mean, I get that you're damaged still, but are you, y'know, bearing up?"

"I... honestly, it's hard. I'm just so glad you came... I know I keep saying that. Bree..."

He trailed off. They weren't alone in the lab, though there was no one standing nearby. He just wanted to tell her... he'd been determined before but still had let the moments pass away and there was no telling what would happen next. Nothing was certain anymore.

"You've called me that twice now," she sighed, smiling. "You usually call me Breanna."

"Is it okay...?"

"Oh, yeah. People I like call me Bree."

"And you like me?" he asked feebly.

"You know I do! I've told you so," she whispered.

"Because... because I was afraid you might have given up on me," he murmured, "and I wanted to know whether it's too late."

"Whether what's... oh, do you mean... you want to try again?" she asked, surprised.

"I do. I've come through a few things this month. I've had a few dozen epiphanies, Bree. One of them is that life is too short to waste living for people who aren't with us anymore, no matter how much you wish they were. I'm trying to let go of them..."

"Don't! I don't want you to do that!"

His heart sank. "You... don't want to, then? You aren't interested..."

"No! I don't mean that!" she whispered quickly. "I mean that I wouldn't ask you to just forget someone you love. Don't do that for me! It wouldn't be right, it would taint things."

He smiled, relief washing over him. "Bree... I could never forget her. She was my life. I'm just saying that she never wanted to keep on being that after she'd gone. She would let me go. So it's time for me to accept it. I was hoping you'd give us another chance. I promise I won't run to my room this time."

"Oh!" she gasped.
He watched her, forcing himself to stay calm and quiet. He didn't want to push her...

"Yes... I'd like that very much," she breathed.

He stroked her hand, looking up into her eyes. He couldn't get enough of those eyes. "Too bad we can't recreate the entire scenario so that I can prove my sincerity," he murmured.

"Oh, you mean..." she giggled softly. "I know what you mean. No, not yet, anyway, poor guy... You need to keep still. Oh! Spine... I never even thanked you!"

"For what?"

"For saving my life, dammit! What do you mean, for what?"

"Oh, right..."

"Oh, right!" she mocked, rolling her eyes.

He smiled. "I had to."

"You didn't..."

"I did. I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't."

Now, at last, he saw tears sparkle in her eyes. "You barely lived at all! Look at you..."

"It's still true. I really care about you, Bree. I couldn't let you die. I made the choice quickly but I'd do it again. I realized since all this happened that I... well, I'll tell you later, and I hope I'm not rushing things when I do."

She blushed and he wondered whether she had guessed that he was in love with her. Breanna was looking down at him, half biting her lower lip.

"Spine..." she whispered thickly, "you'd better recover from this quickly. Because I have a secret for you, too."

She looked seriously into his eyes and he knew. There was no reason to be afraid now.

"I love you," he mouthed, and her hand shook in his.

"I love you, too," she said barely above a whisper.

The fear was forgotten, the dismay, the worry. All that remained was impatience at being incapacitated. How could he be flat on his back at a moment like this? How could he be stuck in a busy lab when he wanted to be alone with her, to take her in his arms and kiss her right, at long last?

"I promise," he breathed, "you'll have that kiss as soon as I can give it."

Chapter End Notes

For the sake of the story I'm deviating from the various dating pandemonium that the band members have gotten into. It doesn't seem like a fantastic idea to have your girlfriend working for you but that's their business. For my headcanon, The Spine
wouldn't be quick to date again or quick to move on. So The Spine will move on but stick with her. I know nothing about the real Breanna except that she was cute and had brown hair and seemed like a nice girl. So this is a purely fictional girl here. The same goes for other Walter Girls and their corresponding romances, for future reference. I'll be making up events and motivations to explain why they come and go through the household. That will be more important in future chapters as I wrap this up.

And I found a very interesting article suggesting that titanium can experience metal fatigue, but unlike steel it shows no indication until it up and breaks. How fitting...
Me On My Way to Steal Your Girl...

Chapter Summary

Bunnies and Rabbits and their priorities come into question. For now, things are quiet. But never for long.

Chapter Notes

Because they're still guys FOR NOW, a rather testosterone infused Bunnycception chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"No more, Bunny. I mean it."

Bunny scowled at Peter VI and muttered, "We're millimeters from figuring it out, Peter. Just let us try one more experiment..."

"No. That last one nearly blew. We'll go back to the basic portal design and refine it from there."

"We don't need to start over, dammit! We have it, we just need to fix one more feature and you'll have your new and improved portal tech!"

"Said Cave Johnson. There's no rush on it, Bunny."

"Becile nearly has it, too! If we stop now..."

"The risk is too high."

"But..."

"I'm done, okay?" Peter snapped. "If you want to push it to the point where I start re-examining the choice to let you work on this project, or on any project..."

"No... no, it's... I'll cool it," Bunny said tightly, trying to sound chastened. Inside, he was seething. "Let me know when we start work on the refinements."

"Thanks," Peter sighed. "I'm not being arbitrary, okay? I just don't want anyone hurt."

You don't want a lawsuit, that's what you don't want! Bunny thought wrathfully. But he wisely kept his big mouth shut. They still needed these jobs, and while art was his passion, it didn't pay like science. Not that Walter Robotics was the top paying creator of this kind of technology. But it was the top paying company that would hire two college dropouts.

"I know," Bunny muttered, and walked away.

There was a time that he would have gone straight to Paige to grouse about things, but he wasn't
eager to do so today. Not only was it a conflict of interest, but she had been... well, he couldn't pin down what she had been. Or maybe it was him. Things weren't right, he knew that. Things just weren't right. Anywhere.

They had been so close! And if he and David had managed to crack this one, even the hotshot companies with the real money would consider them worth a second look. Not that he was using Walter Robotics to climb to the top. But it would be nice to at least get to a higher branch.

He went to tell David instead. He had to get that over with anyway.

Rabbit sat in the cemetery, poking himself in the lips. It was a new pastime for him. He'd allowed Peter to give him an upgrade... just a little one. He now had a pair of silicone lips and he had to admit they were pretty danged flexible. They were also fun to poke. He couldn't help wondering if they were good for, well... Other things.

He stared down at Honey's headstone and sighed. He usually came out here to talk to her, or to Pappy. But he couldn't seem to find the words.

He flexed the new lips and rubbed at one eye. He didn't like change. But it just kept coming for him.

There was good change, at least. The Spine had a new girlfriend, and about time, too. And if she wasn't as wonderful as Marie, it was only because that was impossible. Sure, Marie had faults like anyone else but from what he'd heard, The Spine had pretty much fallen in love at first sight. He'd always liked human girls, though. It only made sense that he'd fall for one.

Yes, it made sense for The Spine to fall in love with a human.

His internal timer dinged and he rose and made his way inside. He had a date. So to speak.

Paige sighed and picked up her screwdriver. Everything was off lately. She liked her job well enough, and she loved her boyfriend. Pretty much. It just seemed like there was more in life than these things, and she never saw any of it. If she left now, took other work, the effects of the Blue Matter would wear off eventually and she could have a normal life.

Bunny said there was no such thing as normal. Paige said that there was at least a certain level of stability that she would like to achieve. She didn't have that here. Bunny and David had nearly destroyed themselves the last time they performed an experiment. And she had laid down the law. No more, she said. She couldn't take it. But she'd said that before. Bunny knew she didn't always follow through.

He didn't know that this time she meant it, down to the soles of her feet. She did care for him. Sometimes she thought she cared more about him than he did about himself. He cared about something, to be sure. But if it wasn't himself, well, it wasn't her either. He denied it when she hinted, but she couldn't fight it any longer. He was obsessed with his work, with building his future. She supposed that was his right...

But it was a lonely future without someone. Even if it wasn't her. And she couldn't stand waiting around for him to blow himself up. The time was coming for her to think about moving on and finding that safe place.

It helped that Breanna had finally made her connection with The Spine. She'd been in love with him
since the day they came to work. Paige, as well as Breanna herself, had thought that it was professional fascination, considering her foundation in robotics. But it became more and more obvious as time went on that Breanna had never really seen him as a machine.

Paige had helped with his repairs recently, but tried to excuse herself sometimes to let them have a few minutes, since he was still "bedridden" so to speak while they did the delicate work of replacing his titanium spine with new metal rings. More than once, she had returned to find them kissing. As they parted, their expressions were almost enough to break her heart... especially The Spine's. He had lived such a long life already, loved a woman and lost her (as Bree had told her in confidence). He knew what was important, and he had decided Breanna had a place in his life. Anyone could see how deeply he cared for her.

Paige couldn't help it. She was envious. Not because she was interested in either of them. Because she wanted to have someone look at her that way...

"Hey, doll! Snap out of it! I ain't here for the fun of la-la-la-layin' on a chunk of wood!"

Paige jumped and looked sharply at Rabbit, who abruptly looked around as if trying to figure out who had spoken.

"Sorry," she said shortly and started to open his chest panel.

"Gently! I ain't exactly new..." he said, a little less brusquely.

"Right."

She worked in silence, realizing as she carefully adjusted wiring that Rabbit was watching her. He often stared at her. If anyone else did his maintenance, he was more likely to grumble or stare into space and keen softly, being thoroughly dramatic. Today it was her turn, though, and he had come in without a fuss. At least, until she took too long to get to work.

She tried to concentrate but couldn't quit brooding about Bunny, about men, about love in general... She bumped Rabbit's core housing and he gasped in "pain." She couldn't help thinking of it as theoretical pain, but pain it was and she felt terrible.

"Sorry!" she squeaked.

"It's okay, but... look, what's eatin' ya, toots?" he asked gently.

She looked him with wide eyes. To her shock, she felt tears starting. She turned away sharply.

"I need to go get something," she choked, starting away.

And stopped. Rabbit was holding her arm firmly but gently. "No, you don't. Look, I don't wanna be a buttinski but I hate to see a sweet little girl like you hurtin', that's all. And you are."

"Let me go, Rabbit."

"Will you stay?"

"Maybe..."

"Please?" he said sweetly, letting go.

"Alright," she sighed, grabbing a scrap of shop towel to wipe her eyes.
"Thanks, babe!" Rabbit said in his most charming tone, carefully sitting up on his elbows so as not to dislodge anything. "So things ain't goin' so well with Professor Xavier, huh?"

She giggled messily through her tears. "Don't call him that," she said faintly.

"I thought it was cooler than Mister Clean. You two on the skids?"

"I... I don't know... that's not really your business."

"I know it." He laid back down. "But I can only take so much pain and you were banging around in there like I was yehr boyfriend instead of him."

She wasn't sure how to take that. "Sorry. I'll be more careful, okay?"

"Sure you don't wanna talk about it?" he asked as she resumed work.

"Well..."

It was common knowledge that Rabbit had been around a bit himself. That he had lost an automaton that rumor whispered was often referred to as his wife. If she hadn't seen how sophisticated they were, seen the look of smoldering passion in The Spine's face, she would have dismissed it as fairy tale nonsense.

"Rabbit," she said, forcing her voice to stop trembling. "How do you know if you're really in love? I mean, you think it's love and then it just isn't anymore and you don't know what happens now..."

She couldn't speak anymore but did her best to look too busy to do so, instead of too choked up.

"Well," Rabbit said thoughtfully, looking up at the ceiling. "Now ya asked the hard question. I ain't the best one to answer it, either."

"But... you've been... y'know..."

"In love?" he asked, looking at her.

He looked so serious! It was rare for him...

"You don't have to say... I just thought maybe you had."

He looked away from her and smiled a sad, sweet smile. "Sure have, baby. So in love." He sighed a long plume of steam and blinked just a shade more rapidly. "And with what a woman! Steel construction, sweet body, but what a mind! I just... wish it had been built ta last."

"Wasn't her mind built right, then?" she asked, fascinated. She hadn't meant to lead him to the subject considered most sensitive and forbidden, but the idea that he had answered! "That was what you meant, right?"

"Yeah. The guy who made her, well... her brain, anyway... The guy was building a prototype. He was dirt poor. Even the cash his dumb-bunny partner drummed up was mostly used to buy her chassis. She had to look good to get investors and then they were gonna use that money to make some really tough robuts and get rich. At least, that was the plan. She only had to last long enough to wow the moneybags. Only their deal fell through. And she got sold for scrap."

His voice broke.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Abruptly remembering why they were there, she began to return the
layers of protective plating.

"'Sokay," he whispered. "I guess that don't answer yehr question. We-we-we-well... I just sorta knew I loved her. That's just how it happens for me... I mean, I guess... Well, anyway, it happened and I'd never felt anything like it so it couldn't have been anything else. And when she was gone nothin' mattered anymore. And when I found her again, color came back into my world. It never went away again while she was around because we knew we didn't have much time and didn't wanna waste it. But Spine, now... I watched him and he did have times when he an' Mary..."

He squeaked and snapped his lips shut.

"It's okay, Rabbit. I know about her, okay?" she murmured, putting the outer plate into position.

He let out another steamy sigh. "Whew. Thought I let the cat outta the bag there. Well, they had times when they didn't get along so well. But they just waited and didn't let it go and before long they were gooey messy lovers again. Spine really was a great husband for her. Don't tell him I said so though!"

She laughed softly. "Lucky Bree."

He looked at her sidelong as she fastened his chest plate into position. "Lucky Spine," he said with a playful smile.

"Yeah. She's a wonderful girl."

"Yeah."

She worked through the last few screws, carefully tightening them just enough. She felt Rabbit's eyes on her once more. She looked at him and he looked away.

"That's all of them... oh! One's missing!"

"What?"

"Where is it?"

"Dontcha have more?" he asked, sitting up.

She stood hastily from searching the floor for the missing screw and caught him by the shoulders. "Lay back down! I have to put them all in or the plates won't sit right!"

"Alright, alright!" he laughed, allowing her to push him back onto the table.

He had a nice laugh. Not like a machine at all. She hesitated, still leaning in close from the effort of pushing him down. He was looking at her eyes. Her heart pounded.

"Rabbit..." she whispered.

She shook her head and started to lean away. But once again she felt his grip on her arms, firm but gentle.

"Rabbit... what's happening?" she gasped.

"Ya want me to let go?" he asked anxiously, steam rising from his lips.

There was a look on his face that reminded her an awful lot of the one The Spine had worn for
Bree... The one Paige had wanted to see from someone. She just hadn't expected to see it from Rabbit.

"No," she breathed, wondering if she'd lost her mind. "I don't."

"Good," Rabbit murmured with a little smile, his eyes moving over her face.

She could almost feel his eyes on her, especially when they moved to her mouth. She realized she was holding her breath.

There had been a lot of speculation as to why Rabbit had so readily allowed the installation of his new silicone lips. But now as he held her and looked once more into her eyes, she felt a dawning understanding and her hair stood on end.

"Rabbit... you've never actually... kissed anyone, have you?"

His eyes widened slightly. "To tell ya the truth... No, baby. And maybe it should st-st-stay that way."

"Why?"

His arms slipped carefully around her. She shivered.

"'Cause I'm a big robut and oughtta know better than to let this happen," he whispered, looking steadily at her lips. "And something's happening, ain't it? It's a surprise because I ain't even been interested in human girls before..."

"Really?" she gasped.

He was saying one thing and doing another as he drew her in closer. She had helped design the lips. She'd made them just like Bunny's... full and attractive. She'd always liked them... and they were so close to hers now.

"Yeah," he murmured, steam drifting from his lips and tickling her nose. "But... I dunno. Something feels different lately. Every time you come into a room... I just can't take my eyes off you."

"Oh!" she whispered. "Maybe you're malfunctioning..."

Her hand was on his chest plate. She knew he was a robot but right now he felt like a man. His hand slid down her back, resting a bit lower than she would consider professionally appropriate. The other hand curled into her hair.

"Maybe," he agreed a second before their lips touched.

Kissing a robot. It hadn't been the first, second, or even the fiftieth thing she had expected to happen today. The first thing she realized was that his lips felt as nice as they looked. The second thing was that he didn't know how to kiss. She thought that was... sweet. Here he was, over one hundred years old, and this was his first kiss!

She leaned away and looked at him thoughtfully.

"I sucked, didn't I?" he asked sheepishly.

That would have helped a bit... "It's your first try..."

"Oh, yeah... Can we try again?"
"Well..."

Bunny was supposed to meet her here later. She wasn't sure when and she realized she didn't much care if he found them like this.

"Pucker gently this time. Move your lips..."

"How?"

"Follow my lead. And you can open your mouth a little if it feels right, okay?"

"Sounds filthy!" he murmured.

She remembered the look on his face as they kissed once more. That look, so much like The Spine's. Was Rabbit sweet on her or just curious? He'd suggested it was the former.

And he responded to her this time so eagerly that she suspected it was true. He was a fast learner! His lips moved with hers, parted slightly, following instructions. And then he wasn't, instead kissing her with such longing that she leaned away, only to have him rise to meet her. She hastily put her hands on his shoulders for stability and felt both of his arms wrap around her back, pulling her onto the table.

"Oh!" she squeaked. "Rabbit, ow!"

"Sorry!" he cried, hastily lowering her to stand on the floor.

"It's okay," she said hoarsely.

She cleared her throat and straightened her dress, trying to hide the trembling. It had been thrilling, but how much was fear? And how much was... something she hadn't known she felt?

"Thanks, baby," he whispered, looking at her with that same gaze. She felt her toes tingle. "I didn't have the right ta do that but it was real nice."

"You had the right to do it if I was okay with it," she said breathlessly. "And I was. You're right. It was really nice."

"No kiddin'?"

She nodded as he let her go.

"Here's the thing, though," he said seriously. "I don't know how things are with you two. But I ain't gonna be the one to split you up. So that was it, okay? Just a couple of sweet little kisses. I ain't some kinda rat who just comes in an' takes a guy's girl."

She giggled. He was so old-fashioned sometimes! "Alright," she whispered. "It'll be our secret."

He beamed. "I like that. Spine, eat yehr heart out! Now I got a secret of my own."

She pulled out a box of machine screws and selected the right size. "Didn't you have any secrets before?" she asked as she fitted it into place.

"Not this kind. It's his kind of secret."

"Rabbit," she murmured, lifting the screwdriver once more. "Why did you let us install your new lips?"
"Hm?"

"The lips, Rabbit. Why did you accept them? You usually have a fit when we recommend upgrades."

"Maybe I figured out it ain't so bad to have an upgrade."

"That was a pun, wasn't it?"

He grinned.

"It's just that... We couldn't have kissed with your old lip design."

"Well, we could but it woulda been like kissing a Hot Wheels."

She laughed. "But why were you okay with the new ones? The only reason I can think of is..."

"To become a lipstick model?"

"Alright!" she laughed. "Have your secrets! I guess you're entitled. But you wanna know one more secret?"

"Hm?" he asked, feigning distraction.

She leaned in close as he started to rise and kissed him once more gently on the lips.

"I think you're a pretty wonderful guy," she said.

Rabbit favored her with a lopsided smile as he picked up his shirt. "I'm glad ya figured it out, babe!" he replied with a wink.

She beamed at him. There was a footstep behind her.

"Oh! Hey, you still working?" Bunny asked, giving them a strange look.

Paige blushed hotly, wondering when he'd arrived, and turned to gather her tools. "No, we're done," she said quickly.

Rabbit hopped down from the table with a thud. He looked Bunny in the eye as he slipped his shirt on.

"Hey, hot shot. You doin' okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Just wanna make sure things are goin' okay, that's all. I couldn't help thinkin' lil Paige here was looking kinda down."

"Rabbit..." she began, turning toward them.

"You think that, hm?" Bunny said tightly.

"Yeah. And if I thought there was a reason, say like maybe someone was makin' her sad, well, I might wanna do something about that."

"Would you?" Bunny asked irritably. "Only I sorta figure that's none of your business."
"Hey..." Paige muttered.

"I make it my business to make sure people are treatin' each other right around here," Rabbit murmured. "If not, I step in 'n help."

"And what were you proposing to do about it?" Bunny snapped. "I mean, if you decided that I wasn't treating her right. Hypothetically."

"Just stop it, okay?" she hissed.

"Well, let me see" Rabbit said, leaving his shirt hanging open over the mock muscle tone of his chassis.

He put his hands on his hips and still more of the sculpted chest showed as the shirt was pushed back. The top button of his slacks was open and the zipper slightly lowered from when he had removed the shirt, making him look very much like he'd been up to something. He was really playing it up and she had no idea how to stop him.

"Hypothetically, I guess I'd just hafta make her happy myself."

Paige was speechless, torn between excitement, horror and amusement as the robot stared the man down. When had this day gone crazy?

"And you think you can do that?"

"Yeah, I think I can do that," Rabbit said mockingly.

"Guys..." she groaned.

"Good thing that's already covered, then. So you won't have to bother," Bunny said, standing his ground.

"Good. Keep it that way." Rabbit started to button his shirt and glanced at Paige with his charming half-smile, which was that much more attractive since the lip upgrade. He cupped her lightly under the chin, winked and said, "Thanks for the screw, babe."

As he strutted out of the lab, Paige lost the battle and burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes

I took some liberties with real people here, as usual, but I think the personalities I wrote don't match the real people, so there's that. It separates fiction from the reality.

And in just about five minutes some fictional lives are gonna turn inside out. Just when it looks like the direction is set, Fate spins the compass. Actual canon ahead.
Hear Me Roar

Chapter Summary

An implosion rocks Walter Manor, and big changes occur... some obvious, and some yet to be revealed.

Chapter Notes

Anyone get the song reference in the title? I'm showing my age...

Anyway, yeah, it's my opinion that male!Rabbit, should he take an interest in humans, wouldn't hesitate to steal someone's girlfriend if he thought she wasn't being appreciated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

January 2013:

Lights flashed throughout Walter Manor. Workers and family gathered the halls, trying to figure out where the emergency was.

"Core implosion imminent!" Qwerty chimed on loop.

"What's going on?" cried Breanna, hurrying out of the lab where The Spine was still placed for repairs.

Workers were running around in their pajamas, asking much the same thing. Breanna hurried from room to room, checking to see if anyone was missing.

Three humans and one robot, besides her and The Spine, were not in their rooms.

Paige joined her as she entered the entrance hall. Despite the chaos around them, Breanna couldn't help noticing that she was fully dressed and coming from the opposite direction of the bedrooms, and that her hair was mussed and her lipstick slightly smeared. She had a feeling she knew where Paige had been, but now was not the time to worry about her friend's choices. There were a lot of cores in Walter Manor and the prospect of any of them imploding was terrifying.

"Core implosion imminent!"

"But where?" wailed Breanna frantically.

"If it's Qwerty then it has to be the HoW!" Paige gasped.

"Oh, no... they went back in after Peter told them to stop it..." Breanna cried.

"Oh, Bree... if they did... I swear I'm done! I told Bunny I can't deal with this anymore! All these
risks..."

She trailed off. Breanna frowned. If she was right, Paige had already moved on...

"Maybe I'd better activate The Spine," Breanna said as Qwerty continued to shout.

"No, Rabbit's on his way up already..." Paige began. She looked sharply at Breanna.

"Rabbit?" Breanna murmured.

Paige burst into tears, sinking against the wall with her hands over her face.

*Oh Paige, baby*, Breanna thought. *What have you two been up to? And how much could you have even managed?*

"Core implosion immi-"

There was a deafening thoom, and the building shook to its foundations.

"Oh, no!" cried Breanna. Paige screamed.

*Five minutes earlier...*

Rabbit drummed his fingers on the wall and hastily stopped himself. The other robots would hear... of course, The Spine was still confined to the lab at night and Hatchworth liked sleeping in his vault sometimes, but still. He had a guilty conscience and it made him paranoid. And he didn't like it, but here he was anyway. Because he'd felt that way before, but he'd never felt... the way he'd been feeling. He had questions and if he wanted answers, he was going to stay here and wait.

She was late. It made sense if she was waiting for someone to go to sleep. There went that guilt again. He relocated it to a distant folder as her footfalls reached his audioreceptors. He'd know her step anywhere.

"Paige!" he whispered.

She ran into his arms and it was all worth it. They kissed; another in what had become a steady supply over the last week. In shadows, in corners, under cover of darkness. Hiding their secret romance. He could deal with the negative side for a thrill like this.

Even if she was a meatbag. She couldn't make love like Honey did but he was starting to wonder just what they could do together...

"Are you sure you wanna keep doin' this, baby?" he whispered as she settled against his chest.

"Don't you?" she asked anxiously. "I mean, I know what you said but you haven't even tried to stop..."

Meaning she wasn't sure. And the guilt needled at him once more despite the distant storage location. She was right. He had said he wouldn't come between them. And then she had pulled him into a supply closet the evening after their first kiss and... Well, since that moment, he hadn't looked back.

Still, he had some scruples... just a few.
"Ain't ya wo-wo-worried that he'll find out?"

Paige sighed. "Find out? He didn't even come to bed. I swear he wouldn't even notice if he walked in on the two of us making love!"

She gasped. He could almost hear her blushing.

"Fair enough," he chuckled, stroking her hair. "He's a sucker, then. He shouldn't take a gal like you for granted."

"Tell him that," she whispered bitterly.

And there was another troubling wrinkle. Because Rabbit had a sneaking suspicion that if Kojak hadn't become so obsessed with making a name for himself and had given his girl the respect she deserved, she wouldn't be in the arms of a clockwork robot dropping "accidental" hints about sex he was incapable of providing.

But he had, and she was, and if The Spine had found a way, then maybe Rabbit could too.

"Maybe... Maybe he had his chance," he said soberly. "Maybe I do what I said I'd do an' make ya happy myself..."

She looked up and he saw that she was crying. She did love that ungrateful schmuck! But she was feeling something for Rabbit, too. He'd be a heel to take advantage...

He felt a stew of mixed emotions and decided that if he was going to feel horrible anyway there was no reason to hold back. Humans didn't appreciate what they had. The first time they'd kissed, he'd said he was old enough to know better. He was old enough to know better... better than to let something great get away. She might still care about Bunny, but she was in Rabbit's arms now. Now was all that mattered.

His hand slid down to her bottom as they kissed again. He'd grown to like the feel of a nice human tush, and hers was very nice... she pressed against him and his boiler ran doubletime...

That was when the alarms started blaring.

"Core implosion imminent!" Qwerty announced.

Rabbit started, giving Paige's bottom an unintended pinch which made her squeak in shock.

"Sorry, baby!" he said hastily.

"Core implosion imminent!"

"Oh, no!" Paige cried.

"Get back to the labs. They're the safest place in this dump. I'll go see what's up."

"O-Okay..." she gasped as he ran off.

He connected to Qwerty as he started for the stairs.

What's going on? he demanded.

The man and his copy are doing stoopid things...
What? Qwerty called the twins that, not really understanding the concept of human reproduction despite her comprehensive medical database. He still wasn't sure which one she thought was the copy.

They are about to blow up. Qwerty explained.

Rabbit sprinted up the steps three at a time, creaking with the effort. So Bunny had gone and done it. Of all the rotten times to put himself into danger, right when Rabbit was getting cozy with his girl. Wasn't that just like him?

In the next moment, he guiltily remembered that in spite of everything, if Bunny died, it would break Paige's heart.

He opened a line to Hatchworth. The Spine was in no state to be running up staircases.

Hatchy! Emergency! Get to the top floor pronto! Them twins are in big trouble!

Grammar, Rabbit... Hatchworth responded sleepily. What sort of trouble?

I wish I knew! I'm almost there! Shake a leg already!

Temper...

The upper hallway was filled with thick blue smoke. Rabbit waded in, feeling for the doorway. He heard fitful coughing and got down on all fours. He followed the sound until he found the trembling form of one twin. He felt carefully and discovered hair on the man's head.

"David!" he cried. "What the Hell have you been doing?"

"Rabbit..." David gasped and started coughing again, his eyes streaming with tears. Rabbit remembered he was dealing with a human. He scooped him up and headed for the stairs.

"Rabbit!" came Hatchworth's voice.

"Here! Get him down into the fresh air!" Rabbit ordered, stuffing David into Hatchy's arms at the top of the staircase.

"Bu... Bunny..." David choked, and promptly went limp.

"Oh, dear, we are too late," Hatchworth said conversationally. "He has died."

Rabbit checked David's eyes and pulse. "He's just passed out! Get him downstairs..."

Rabbit ran back into the smoke.

"But..."

"Core implosion imminent!" Qwerty chimed.

"Bunny?" Rabbit called.

"Core implosion imminent!"

Rabbit pressed on through the smoke, finding the doorway.

"Core implosion imminent!"
He carefully moved into the HoW. "Bunny!"

He heard violent coughing. "Here... I can't stop it... help me..."

"Core implosion imminent!"

Qwerty's alerts were coming faster and faster. Whatever it was, it would be happening any second! He knew there was an exhaust fan somewhere to clear the smoke, but he didn't have time to find the switch. Minutes ago, he'd been busy trying to get this guy's girlfriend into bed and looking pretty likely to succeed. The least he could do was save his rotten life.

"Where are you?" he called.

"There's..." cough, "too much smoke..." cough. "I can't..." hacking cough, "can't even find the damned opening in the... consoles..." came Bunny's faint, wheezing voice. "Help..."

His voice gave out at last.

"Core implosion imminent!"

Rabbit moved carefully into the HoW through the smoke, following the sound of Bunny's coughs. "Don't try ta move! I'll be right..."

"Core implosion immi-"

There was a flash of blue light. Rabbit's feet lifted from the floor as his eyes went out. His head snapped backward and the world switched off like an old TV.

"Spine?"

"Hm?" The Spine said, opening his eye shutters reluctantly. Reconstruction was a lot of stress and he needed lots of stasis...

"Spine, I'm sorry... I know you're still incomplete but this is an emergency!"

The Spine sat up slowly. They'd only just finished placing the primary supports on his spine. He could walk around but really wasn't supposed to.

"What... what is it...?" he gasped, touching his face. The plates were still removed as well... part of the refining process.

"Something's wrong... up in the HoW!" Breanna sobbed. "There was an explosion, and Rabbit went up to check and I can't get anyone to answer up there!"

"Alright, sweetheart," he murmured soothingly, carefully hugging her. Probably they just weren't picking up... "Try to calm down. I'll check in with them."

He activated his wifi and called Rabbit. He couldn't pick up a signal and his calm shattered. A second later he heard Hatchworth.

*Spine! You're awake!*

*Hatchy! What's going on?* he demanded, rising carefully and making sure he at least had pants on.
He could tell that Hatchworth was distressed. There was a tone to his messages that he couldn't miss, a subtle cadence that only a robot could perceive. And it was a very rare occurrence. He snatched up his shirt and hurried out of the lab.

They are blown up, The Spine! They are blown up and I cannot hear anything!

What?

The Spine was heading for the stairs, wishing he'd had time to comfort Breanna. But Hatchworth's message had been the last straw.

My ears! I put David down on the landing and tried to follow Rabbit and help but there was an explosion before I could get there and my ears are not working anymore! Please come and help! I am bringing David downstairs but Rabbit has gone into the HoW and...

He cut off.

Hatchy! The Spine sent, alarmed, even as he met him on the stairs. He started to speak aloud before remembering that Hatchworth had told him he couldn't hear. Hatchworth looked at him with wild eyes and his jaw trembling and he knew that the bronze robot would be retreating to his vault as soon as he could.

But for now Hatchworth stilled his trembling and sent: I will take him down to the humans. Please go and see! I am so afraid that Rabbit and the Bunny are dead!

So am I, The Spine thought miserably as he hurried upward. He made his way into the smoky hallway and groped for the doorway. His sleeves were quickly covered in blue dust. He felt around for the exhaust fan switch inside the doorway. The smoke at last began to clear as the enormous fans hummed to life.

The first thing he saw as the smoke cleared was Qwerty's monitor, dangling by its wires. Below it, sticking out of the rubble with its fingers splayed alarmingly, was an iron hand. In a terrible flash he understood the same terror Rabbit had felt only a month before, looking down from a cliff south of Bakersfield.

Please be attached... please be attached... he thought.

Please be attached to what? Hatchworth sent.

Oops. He hadn't meant to send that! He hurried to the hand and saw that it was still connected to Rabbit. He was buried in debris, a heap of shredded equipment. His eyes were dark but his core thrummed softly. That was something, then... It would be possible to revive him as long as his core functioned. He wanted to tend him, to carry him down to the lab, but his spine was in no fit shape to endure Rabbit's weight. Hatchworth would have to carry Rabbit.

The Spine stood, looking anxiously around the room. It was his misfortune to have to address what was surely the really ugly business. If Rabbit was knocked offline, and the lab equipment was all over the room in pieces, he had to assume that anything he found belonging to Bunny would be in smaller pieces. It was time to look and he was not eager. The last time a blast like this had occurred, there had been nothing left at all.

But to his astonishment, after a quick scan of the room, he saw Bunny, crumpled but apparently in one piece, curled at what appeared to be the center of the blast. He hurried to him, hope surging and quickly turning to dismay.
There was no way he was alive. His skin was ashen, his lips black. Though he had appeared unscathed from a distance, he could see now that there was damage to his chest and hip areas. His t-shirt bulged around what could only be severe injuries to his rib cage and his jeans were ripped from the strain of whatever hideous deformity afflicted his lower body. He didn't have the stomach, as it were, to take a closer look at those injuries. What was certain was that David's brother was gone.*

Except that he was still breathing!

If he could have, The Spine would have been sick. To think of him still being alive with his body twisted beyond recognition! He had learned in the wars that there were times when you sincerely wished to see someone die, rather than live another moment suffering. If his body was as mutilated as it appeared, this was one of those times.

He knelt beside him, aching. He didn't want him to have to be alone when he finally succumbed to his injuries.

"It's alright," he said gently. "You can let go. David is safe."

Bunny slowly opened his eyes and looked up blankly at The Spine. He moved his lips. He could make out "David" but that was all.

"Don't... don't strain..." he choked. "David's fine! Just lay still!"

But he continued trying to speak, growing more frantic with every attempt, eyes wide and terrified as he started to rise. The Spine carefully caught him by the shoulder.

"No... your injuries are... um... you just shouldn't try to move..."

Bunny struggled, to The Spine's shock. Shouldn't he be in agony right now? He let go, not wanting to risk further injury, and gasped as Bunny sat up suddenly.

"How..."

The Matter Master's eyes widened and his lips moved again. He grabbed his throat in apparent alarm.

"Spine!" he screamed.

This he could read. But Bunny was making no sound at all!

Bunny had frozen after grabbing his throat and was feeling his chest. The Spine winced; if those were protruding ribs... Only they looked awfully soft... Bunny put his hands under them and lifted experimentally. Both hands moved rapidly down to feel his rib cage and hips before clapping over his mouth.

The Spine felt all at once stupid and utterly dumbfounded. It couldn't be! What he had thought were deformations were instead a transformation... from the looks of things, it was from male to female!

Bunny attempted to stand but his... no, there was no denying it... *her* trembling legs buckled. The Spine scooped her up hastily, remembering at the last second to adjust for an altered center of gravity. Bunny looked significantly startled at this and he could understand. It must be very disorienting to be suddenly heavier at the center... among other things.

But her response was a momentary look of shock at The Spine, after which she began to sob, one hand over her face as though embarrassed. Old male habits, The Spine thought. Boys don't cry. Stupid old male habits. Sometimes boys needed to cry... especially when they'd been blown up and
had their chromosomes altered.

He carefully stepped through the rubble and was met by Peter and several workers, all of whom stopped short and stared. It was a lot easier to see, now that The Spine was carrying her, what had happened.

To his horror, Peter gasped. "A mime!"

"Bunny has had an accident! This is hardly the time for levity!" he growled. "Rabbit has been knocked offline. I'll tell Hatchworth to come and bring him down to the lab, then leave the Matter Ma... erm... Mistress in the infirmary before returning to the lab myself."

He brushed past them before Peter could say any more. He had to suppose that the shock had been what had brought on the insensitive remark.

"Rabbit!"
"Mommy?"
"What?"
"Sorry... whoa... happy birthday!"

Rabbit opened his eyes.

"Happy birthday?" Peter VI asked.

"He likes Frosty the Snowman," Hatchworth remarked. "Rabbit, you're alive!"

"As much as ever..." Rabbit groaned. "Ugh... switch me back off, I feel rotten."

"We just wanted to make sure you were working. We have a few repairs to do."

"Whoa! What repairs?"

"Now, Rabbit..."

"Don't mess with the robot! You said it was just the lips! No replacin' bits, you hear me?"

"But we need to..."

"Need to what?" Rabbit demanded. "What is it you think you need to do?"

"Oh, little things like reconnecting your arms and legs... y'know, trivial stuff," Peter deadpanned. Rabbit attempted to move his limbs and cried out.

"That. Yes," Peter said dryly. "Why all you robots have to go and get yourselves paralyzed doing heroic things... I just can't."

Rabbit lay his head back and let out a long plume of steam. fighting tears.

"Trouble, goose?" asked The Spine, rising slowly from a chair nearby and hobbling to the table.

Rabbit looked up at him forlornly. "I'm broke, Spine..." he whimpered, feeling the tiniest stab of
guilt. The Spine was, too... and still he was here, making sure Rabbit was alright.

But he wasn't alright!

"I know, big guy," The Spine said soothingly.

"Don't patronize me!" Rabbit snapped.

His eyes widened. He hadn't meant that! What the Hell was going on?

"Alright, alright!" The Spine chuckled uneasily after flicking a startled look at Hatchworth. "I'm just saying I understand. Too well."

But Rabbit was barely listening. An inner struggle had begun. He had yelled at his poor, hurt brother and felt just terrible. Rabbit, to his dismay, lost the battle and began to cry.

"It's gonna be alright! We'll get them reattached, Rabbit!" Peter cried, looking at The Spine.

"I know!" Rabbit cried, trying to stop. "I just... just feel so bad! Everything's goin' wrong all at once!"

"I'm fine," Hatchworth said pleasantly.

"Let's just power him down and get the repairs done," The Spine urged.

"Hold my hand! Someone hold my hand!" Rabbit screamed.

"You can't even feel it!" The Spine cried, exasperated.

"I know! But I'm scared! Or something! I don't..." he sobbed. "I'm having the worst day!"

The Spine sighed and held his hand. He was right. He couldn't feel it.

"Powering down," said Peter.

Rabbit gasped and the lights went out.

He was woken the following day, all his limbs back in good working order. He was as elated as he had been distressed and kissed a startled Peter on the forehead before strutting out of the lab.

The first thing he wanted to do was see Paige. But he knew it was also just about the last thing he should do. He would have gone ahead any other time, but it felt different now. He kept hearing Bunny coughing in the smoke-filled HoW as alarms blared. And now the Matter Master was the Matter Mistress, he was told. It was better than being vaporized, he supposed. But all that did was remind him that every time something like this happened, it had something to do with Rabbit.

If he hadn't been downstairs making out with Paige, maybe she would have been looking for her stupid boyfriend. Maybe she would have found him in time to talk him out of blowing himself up. Now she didn't have a boyfriend. She had a girlfriend.

He hadn't forgotten how that boyfriend/girlfriend had neglected her, but maybe it was temporary. Maybe he 'd been doing it because he wanted make good, to take care of her. It was an old-fashioned notion, providing for your girl. But Rabbit was old and he knew guys still did it, still thought of themselves as providers and breadwinners despite the march of progress.
But when it came down to it, he didn't know what to think anymore. He just knew that he'd been a heel. Did he even have a chance with Paige now?

Rabbit dragged himself reluctantly to the lab where The Spine was. He needed advice of a very specific sort.

Breanna had excused herself soon after Rabbit came in. Rabbit sat now beside The Spine, curled into a ball of misery, staring at the floor.

"I don't know what to say, Rabbit," The Spine said with quiet pain in his voice. "I never dreamed that you'd ever be attracted to a human!"

"Neither did I. And then one day I realized I'd been ogling her every time I saw her. Honey had a shape like that..."

"Are you possibly interested because of that, then?"

"Maybe a little. But back when you had the accident, an' I was so worried, she would come in an' talk to me an' keep me from freaking out. And I started to wish she could always do that... Even though she had a boyfriend. And then I went in for maintenance and she looked so pretty and so sad 'cause that chump don't appreciate her..."

He stopped short, choked up once more. Why was he so weepy today? But of course. After the explosion, it didn't seem right to pick at Bunny...

"And you two kissed. That one got around the Manor, actually."

"How?" Rabbit cried.

"How does it ever? Someone found out, I don't know. I figured you were just curious or they'd blown it out of proportion. I guess I was wrong."

"Um. Yeah," Rabbit grunted. "Well, so yeah, we kissed and it was really nice. And she came after me, okay? After that. She found me. It was her idea to hide in a closet and make out..."

"Whoa there, maverick. I don't need to know more." The Spine sighed and patted his back. "I wish I had help to offer but it sounds like you know exactly how it is. It was questionable to begin with and now that the accident has happened..."

"We can't be together."

"Well... not right now, no."

Rabbit looked up and wiped an eye. "Right now?"

"Things are uncertain. Maybe someday... but give it some time, see how they work things out. Then if she still wants to pursue a relationship, possibly..."

"How could they work things out? He's a girl!"

"Well... Breanna did happen to mention that Paige is pansexual."

"She's what? Is... that possible?" Rabbit said blankly.
"Do you know what that is, Rabbit?"

"Um..." He didn't even want to guess. "She... likes pans...?"

The Spine's mouth twitched curiously before he spoke again. Rabbit had the feeling he had it completely wrong.

"It means she's attracted to... well, I believe it means that she finds a variety of people attractive. She would be able to pursue a relationship with Bunny as a woman if she is also attracted to women, or as a man turned into a woman... And she's also attracted to automatons, apparently..."

"You bet she is."

The Spine smiled. Breanna had been installing his face plates that very morning. It was good to see The Spine smile again.

"So wait and see. That's all I've got, I'm afraid."

It wasn't bad. Better than Rabbit had hoped, in fact.

"Thanks buddy," Rabbit whispered thickly.

"You gonna be okay, goose?"

"Sure," Rabbit squeaked, fighting tears again.

The Spine leaned away slightly. "Are you crying?"

"No..." Rabbit said in a trembling voice.

"Only you are."

"No'm not."

"It's alright. You were blown up two days ago."

"Yeah," Rabbit said, wiping his eyes and trying to regain control. "Yeah, that must be it. Just kinda messed up from ge-ge-ge-gettin' blown across the room."

"That would do it. It's been a rough winter, hm?"

"Yep. I, uh... I think I should go check on Bunny."

"That would be a nice gesture."

Bunny was curled on her side, reading. At least, she was holding a book. She never seemed to turn the page, however. Rabbit knew because he sat for a good half hour trying to talk to her. He supposed she wanted to be alone but he couldn't make himself leave. He still felt like this was his fault.

David walked in just as he was thinking of giving up.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he said sharply.

Rabbit stood up suddenly. "I, uh... I'm ju-ju-ju-ju-ju..."
"Get out."

"I'm real sorry... I went in too late to save her..." Rabbit said quietly.

David frowned at the word "her" and sighed. "Yeah. I suppose you were busy," he said coldly.

Rabbit's eyes widened. He knew?

"Yeah, I was. I... I saved you first..." he said weakly.

David's frown relaxed slightly. "Yeah. Thank you," he breathed.

They both turned at the sound of the bed creaking softly. Bunny had put down the book and was sitting up. There were tears on her cheeks as she fumbled for a tablet and began to type.

"Bunny... rest, okay?" David said gently, kneeling beside the bed.

"What's he... what's she doin'?"

Bunny held up the tablet. "Thank you for saving David," it read.

"Oh!" Rabbit gasped thickly. There went the waterworks again! He blinked rapidly and replied. "Um... you're welcome. Bunny, look... I been a real jerk... I never should have..."

He stopped. Just what exactly did they know? There was no sense apologizing for more than they were angry about...

"Should have what? Helped yourself?" David growled.

Yeah. They pretty much knew everything.

Bunny waved hastily and typed more. "No. Paige and I were kinda off. I broke up with her this morning."

"What?" cried Rabbit and David at the same time.

"She's not my girlfriend anymore," Bunny typed.

Rabbit was speechless.

"Dude, why?" David asked. "You really want to deal with this alone?"

"I'm not alone. And it's the truth. We lost interest a while ago, okay?"

You lost interest, thought Rabbit miserably. She didn't. She just got lonely, poor kid...

"If she wants to be with you, she's free to do it okay?" Bunny typed.

"But..."

Bunny glared up at him.

"What's the problem? You got what you wanted!" David snapped.

"But..." Rabbit stammered again.

Would it even help to tell them that Paige did actually care for Bunny? In fact, he was pretty sure she
cared more for Bunny than she did for Rabbit. If she had chosen this, it would be one thing. But now... he could imagine how she felt now.

He was feeling much the same way himself.

"Yeah," Rabbit said faintly, his voice trembling. "Um... thanks."

He walked out immediately. He could feel the tears starting again.

He wasn't surprised that evening when he heard that Paige was leaving. The Spine told him and Rabbit said nothing. He turned and walked out of the lab in silence and hoped his brother understood.

He went alone to the secluded hallway where they had last met. He'd waited in that same hallway when Armand had examined Honey for the first time. It was one of his worry spots.

He usually went to the duck pond to think, but he couldn't face Honey now. Not because he'd gone and had a new romance. Because he'd broken all the rules that made her what she was. Honey would have expected him to at least be a good man when he fell in love again. He'd been anything but.

He heard her long before she entered the hallway. "Rabbit?" Paige whispered.

"Hey, baby," he murmured without looking up.

She put her hand on his arm. "So you heard."

"Yeah. When ya leavin'?"

"In the morning. I'm sorry I didn't tell you myself."

"You don't owe me nothin', baby," he said, looking up at last.

She was crying. He felt like doing the same.

"I think I do. I never meant to hurt you."

"What?" he gasped.

"I was lonely. I felt like, well... like Bunny didn't care so why shouldn't I be happy?"

"Yeah? Yehr sayin' I made you happy?" he said, surprised.

"You did. But... I don't know. I still love him... um... her. I know it's over, y'know? And I'll move on, I'll heal and be able to love more. But right now, I need time. I need to get away... from Bunny at least. And she can't leave, she has nowhere to go. She's something else now, not human, not a man, her own family wouldn't know her, outside of David. So I have to go instead."

Rabbit nodded miserably. "You make some good sense, baby. Yehr a real smart kid."

"But I feel awful! I should never have led you on!"

He looked at her sweet, stricken little face. "Who, me? I'll be alright. I'm made of iron, right?"
She laughed messily. "And copper. You're not as tough as you make yourself out to be."

"I do alright. Anyway, copper's flexible. I'll deal, okay?"

"Rabbit... maybe someday, when things are different..."

"Maybe. Who knows, right? I've been around enough to know that the impossible happens every day."

"Oh, Rabbit," she moaned. "Not impossible..."

"Yeah, baby. I see that now. Impossible. You and me. It was real nice. But you were never go-go-gonna be my girl. Not for keeps."

"But..."

"Am I wrong?"

She looked at him in silence.

"Yeah, baby. So I guess I got nothin' to lose now. I'll hate myself if I miss this chance."

"What chance?" she asked, looking worried.

Rabbit steeled himself, as it were. He was never going to see her again, maybe. He wanted her to know before she left. He touched her soft cheek, wiping a tear, took her gently by the shoulders and looked into her face.

"Paige... sweetheart, I hope I ain't makin' this harder but... I just wanted to tell you... I love you."

She put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, Rabbit!" she sobbed. "You don't!"

"Yeah. I do, honest," he said sincerely, admiring those pretty eyes. "I love ya to pieces. But that's the good news, baby. I was selfish before, the last time we were here together... but the thing about love is, it ain't selfish. And even when yehr gone I'm gonna know yehr out, you got away and yehr gonna be better, y'know? Ya made the right choice. Ya need to get out of this mausoleum. Bree has the guy she loves and you don't. Walter Manor ain't for everybody. I can't stand it myself sometimes."

He chuckled hastily, passing off his remark as humor. She looked as if she wasn't fooled at all. He hadn't told anyone how he'd been feeling since the explosion...

"This place is just gonna make ya sick if you stay," he went on. "So get out while ya can, run baby and never stop. I just wanna hear from ya when yehr gone; I wanna hear that life bein' lived and have a few photos of that pretty face. Okay?"

She nodded shakily and cried harder.

"Oh, now, none of that, baby!" he murmured, pulling her into his arms one last time.

He closed his eyes and gathered his wits, struggling to maintain the light demeanor despite the growing feeling of dismay. Maybe if he played it well enough, he'd believe it himself.

"I've lost people I loved," he murmured. "I know what that feels like. But I ain't losin' you. I'm settin' ya free. That's different."

"Is it?"
"Yeah. Because you won't be gone. You just won't be with me. You'll be alive. I'll know somewhere in the world the girl I love is happy. So don't cry for me, baby. Not for old Rabbit."

"Alright. I'll try. But... Rabbit," she said thickly. "Can you give me one last kiss?"

He grinned mischievously. "I'll be generous. I'll give you two."

She laughed and he sighed. She sure was cute when she laughed and cried all at once. She tipped her head up and shared both kisses as though she meant them, as though she loved him and wanted him and never meant to go away at all. He kept every second of them in his memory storage. He'd be playing them back for a long time.

Because she did go, just as she said she would.

Rabbit stood that morning watching the car as it drove away. He lingered, staring down the empty driveway for a long time before wandering at last to the cemetery.

He'd miss Paige, but she'd made the right choice. Rabbit did love her, but even if she'd loved him, he would have had a dilemma. Because he still cared but something was wrong with him, ever since the explosion, and he couldn't ask her to cope with it. He didn't understand it himself. He just felt... different.

Not that this was the only issue, but right now it was awfully troubling. He let the wind blow over him as it always did out here and pondered things with a stillness he seldom achieved. But as always, no answers came. Not from thin air. It was never that easy.

He turned too quickly and staggered slightly. After a momentary pause to reestablish his balance and to fight the wave of alarm that came with the unexpected loss of equilibrium, he strolled back to the Manor.

Chapter End Notes

*why yes, I do in fact think I'm funny.

That's one changed over into a woman. But we're not done with the other one. And I don't mean David.
February, 2013:

The Spine strode at last through Walter Manor, tall, strong, and complete from his sculpted face plates to his two very functional legs.

He had a date. Sort of. One he could keep at last, now that Peter had allowed him to get up and walk around unassisted. Most of his repairs were complete but there was still fine tuning needed. But The Spine, feeling much like he thought a recovering invalid must feel, had begged for an evening for a little recreation. Peter had granted it on the condition that it didn't involve strenuous physical activity, and his look was so significant that it was clear that Peter V had told him a few things about The Spine as a married man.

But he was in no rush to get Bree into bed. There was time, now. There was even a chance that she might consider succeeding Marie and becoming his wife. He wasn't sure how he wanted to proceed... outside of tonight. Tonight he had planned.

She was waiting in the rose garden. "I was wondering if you'd changed your mind," she said, holding out her hands.

He pulled her smoothly into his arms.

She looked up and he could feel her heart pounding. They kissed in the cool of the garden and it was perfect. He felt no desire to run from her. The memories tugged at him but none was strong enough to taint this sweet moment. How many times had he dreamed of their first kiss, despite his initial reaction? This wasn't their first, not with the many stolen kisses in the lab between repairs. But it was the first time they'd been able to slip away and be together outside of the work setting. It felt significant.

He felt a terrible longing that threatened to override his previous promise to take it easy. Her lips
"Oh," she sighed at last, resting her head on his shoulder. "Not too much of that. I know Peter told you to take it easy tonight. Any more of that and it might just be tempting to ignore him."

Talk like that wasn't helping, but he enjoyed it just the same. "I did promise we'd stay out of bed," he said, grinning.

"Oh! Did he say that?" she gasped, looking up.

"No. I inferred it from his warnings. But I didn't expect to be this tempted."

"Really?" she laughed, blushing deeply. "Then maybe we shouldn't be alone!"

"It's alright. I'm not going to break my promise. And I don't want you to feel pressurized to go to bed with me too soon, okay? It's, well... I suspect it's going to be a bit difficult for you to adjust to my, um... physical differences."

She laughed again. "Someday, though. Someday, because I love you, I will learn to cope with them."

"And someday," he murmured, kissing her lightly on the nose, "because I love you, I'll let you."

They visited Marie's grave, and Lily's; something they had agreed seemed symbolic of Bree's importance in his life. It wasn't supposed to be a wrench, but a smooth transition, life going on. Because he still lived, he loved someone new. And she wanted to know about those he'd loved before, wife and daughter alike. He loved Bree more and more each day, as he came to understand new things about her. One thing he saw now was what a generous soul she had, willing as she was to share his love with them.

So they took a few minutes at the grave, to make peace with moving on, to introduce Breanna, if only symbolically, to Marie. It felt right. He had no doubt that Marie would have given them her blessing. It hurt, but it was time.

And soon they were turning to more cheerful activities, strolling the grounds and heading to the park for a while. At least, they were supposed to be cheerful; he felt a rising anxiety as they entered the park gates and began to walk the paths he had walked with his wife and children, some hundreds of times. But he saw now that it was time to readjust and learn new memories to associate with those places. It would be hard, but he was confident that with the adjustments to his panic folder, he could work through any moments that threatened to overwhelm him.

It had been eating at him since Peter had adjusted his memory settings. The idea that there were parts of his life that were closed. Others learned to cope, but he had survived by hiding. Surely there was good lost inside of those memories as well as the bad. The memory of confessing to Marie, for example. He retained enough memory of that to know that most of it hadn't been distressing. He knew she had told him something that upset him. He couldn't recall what and he felt he had been deprived of something precious.

But he could see where he had found it so easy to simply suppress what hurt him, even as he continued through the park with Breanna. He saw them in every corner, under every tree, by every fountain. His precious family... how he missed them, even Dave, though he still lived.

They rounded a bend in the sidewalk and he found himself looking at a familiar stretch of path. A
memory, such an old memory rose to the surface as he looked at this part of the park! This was where he and Marie had stopped to have their photos made on their first date; a sweet but convoluted memory. He had been flesh and blood for just a little while, feeling warmth and desire and hunger and so many deep human feelings. He had felt her lips on his and it had been real... just a little while after the picture was made. It was one of his most cherished and powerful recollections...

He felt a surge of pain... he hadn't expected this... he really should have... Marie...

file isolated

There was a soft ping. They were walking the opposite direction.

"Ready to go back?" she asked breathlessly, jogging to keep up.

"What?" he gasped, stopping.

He checked his panic folder. There was a fresh file, fifteen seconds old and ten seconds long.

"Spine?" she asked anxiously.

He looked down at her, pained. Had he expected it to be that easy? He had, at least, hoped.

"Rabbit?"

Rabbit looked up sharply, setting down a magazine hastily and turning to The Spine, who stood leaning on the doorframe. "Yeh? Hey, ain't ya supposed to be in tha lab?"

"I had a date with Bree," he replied.

"Ya don't lo-lo-look real cheerful about it. Everything okay?"

"Sure... well, with Bree, anyway." The Spine walked into the library and sank into a heavy loveseat. "I need your help."

"No way."

He nodded. "I have to start assimilating the panic folder into active memory and I need you to standby and make sure nothing happens..."

Rabbit gasped. "No! That's nuts! Ya seriously wa-wa-wanna... Are you f***ing crazy? We got a concert comin' up!"

"I went for a walk with Bree in the park and lost ten seconds, Rabbit! Knowing about it isn't stopping it. It wasn't panic, either, just a memory that bothered me and that I didn't want to deal with at that moment. And I just went ahead and isolated it rather than trying to cope! I can't even remember having done it so how can I keep from doing it again?"

Rabbit laughed awkwardly and shook his head. "That's just you, bro... it's how you deal, y'know? Otherwise you break down..."

"But that's just it! I've been thinking about it and... I've done it before, Rabbit! I remember losing Lily, and the day Marie died! The worst days of my life... It's proof that I don't block all of them, do I? When it really matters, I don't block them..."
Rabbit's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment. "I... guess not... I didn't really think about it."

"Think about it now. I block stupid little moments that I just don't want to handle. I block things I think will be a burden, things I feel I can leave behind. But from the pattern I'm seeing, when it's something I just can't bear to lose, or that will seriously affect my ability to function, I push through it. I could have just wiped all my memories of Lily..."

"And you just shut down instead. You didn't spare yourself, did you?" Rabbit asked thoughtfully.

"No. Because I couldn't let Marie suffer through that one alone. It wasn't like Madame Renoir. I knew that wasn't my fault but I couldn't stand thinking of being with her so I hid. I knew deep down Marie understood. But she wouldn't understand me erasing Lily from my memories. So I endured. I can do this!"

"Spine... it's gotta be more than that! There has to be a reason you chose to block those other memories. Some of them were pretty important, too."

"Then it's about time I found out why I blocked them, isn't it?"

"But what about Bree? You're just startin' over, buddy..."

"That's the point. It was bad enough putting Marie through this crap. It has to end. I don't want Bree to have to hide things to keep me happy."

"But..."

"I can't do that to another woman! I love her, Rabbit!"

Rabbit stared for a long moment before letting out a long hiss of steam. "You love her. That's fantastic, buddy. I just had to say that. It's about time you got to do that again. It suits ya."

The Spine smiled sadly, sank back in the loveseat and stared at his hands. "Well? Will you help me?"

Rabbit sighed deeply. "Yeah," he muttered, defeated. "What else can I say? When d'you wa-wa-wa-wanna start?"

"Now. Before I change my mind."

Rabbit grinned. "Alright. I could make ya wait just for that reason but, well... I guess I think it's the right thing to do. And if Petes finds out he'll stop ya."

"I know," The Spine sighed as he rose to walk out.

Rabbit jumped up and joined him. It wasn't until they were well out of the room that it registered that Rabbit had been looking at a ladies' clothing catalog.

 Whew, thought The Spine. I knew he'd taken an interest in human women, but that's just kind of sad.

Two days later:

"I didn't need an intermission," The Spine mumbled.
"Me neither!" Rabbit grumped.

"I rather like taking a break in the middle," Hatchworth said calmly. The other two scowled at him.

"Procedural safeguards," Michael said pleasantly. "At least, that's why Peter keeps saying. None of you are new anymore, and we're understaffed with Paige and the twins leaving."

Rabbit looked away and The Spine sighed softly. He knew Rabbit still felt responsible for what had happened to Bunny, despite the turnaround she was making. After spending a week largely curled on her bed, she had gotten up and asked Peter, using her iPad, if she could go to Mereiville and learn how to communicate like the mime she had become. She and David had gone together so that he could learn to interpret for her, and the reports so far were positive.

The others had an idea that Paige and Rabbit had had a little fling. But they had no idea how deeply Rabbit felt it.

"We never needed the extra staff before they left, Michael," The Spine argued.

"I'm just saying that what with the recent events he feels safer having you more secure."

"Secure? He wants us secure? Is that why we all get chained to the floor?" Rabbit said bitterly.

"You're not..."

"Not literally. But what's with keeping us lo-lo-locked us into position until we come out of stand-by?"

"You can't move anyway, so who cares if your feet are anchored?" Steve said as he walked out. "Getting back to the booth. Give me five minutes and then shuttle them out, Mike."

"That don't make it right!" Rabbit shouted after him. "And I shuttle my own damned self!"

The Spine sighed. "That one's on me, Rabbit. Peter's afraid I'll go rogue."

"He's not..." Michael began, sounding helpless and frustrated.

"I think he is, Mr. Reed. And if he's not, I am."

"Spine..." Rabbit sighed, his anger dissipating.

_It isn't easy reassimilating memories. Maybe I should have waited until this group of concerts was over..._

_You're doin' alright. We can handle ya if anything goes wrong._

_I am worth ten of you_, Hatchworth sent confidently.

The Spine chuckled, resulting in a bemused look from Michael Reed. _You certainly are_, he sent.

He had started reintegrating his blocked memories immediately, starting with the earliest. It still hurt, but he now had the frame of reference to cope with the memory of having accidentally killed a kitten when he was too innocent to realize what he was doing. It went well enough, and so he moved on to 1897. The Dandy Candy Mine battles seemed so long ago, surely they wouldn't be too painful now?

But he'd been a child then, effectively, and it had been a violent and messy conflict. The last one he had reintegrated... he shivered very slightly. Bad things had happened. He hadn't even realized how
horrifying it had been. Of course he hadn't. Rabbit, who at the time was very much his trusted and beloved older brother, had been trampled by a copper elephant, badly hurt... he still heard the screams.

_Hatchy! HATCHY!!!_

"Spine?"

The Spine snapped to attention. "Hm?"

"I said not to worry..." Michael said slowly, watching him. "Um... and it's time to head out. Onto the stage."

Matt Smith was waving from the doorway.

"Oh, right. Sorry."

He ignored their troubled expressions and followed the others out. When they approached the stage, they stood together and suffered themselves to be manually linked, surrendering their will and allowing the humans to drive them onto the stage. The Spine was aware of the command to walk forward.

Steve was talking to the audience. "Alright. So far, so good," he said.

An audio file activated. Steve used his remote link to trigger the startup sequence. A recording of Walter Girl Paige, made before she had gone and sounding much like a robot herself, said, "Blue Matter engines... online."

_Engines online..._ That was familiar. Something about the war... the memories... The Spine wanted to stop thinking about it. But the humans were in control at the moment... There was a click; The Spine glitched and the startup ground to a halt.

A faint voice cried, "Aw, dang it! We got the blue screen of death!"

_Blue Matter engines online..._

Memory files engaged.

_Online..._ A long forgotten file activated. A signal went out to those under his command. The old radio signal failed. His processor sought out another means of connecting and found his wifi. It sent a signal. _Col. Walter's automatons... report!_

Hatchworth pinged in response. Rabbit did the same. After a long moment, a distant signal told him Jon was connected. _Ready for battle._

Steve, his voice faint, was apologizing for something. The Spine was there, and yet he wasn't. He tried to break the control, but there was no urgency to it. There was another, higher task calling his attention. He tried to resist but it was hard to know which was real... His will had been supplanted, with his permission. He couldn't regain command of his systems... A sequence engaged.

"Recovering from catastrophic system failure..." the woman intoned. "Initiating boot file 001-1897."

"Oh, dear," Steve said weakly, his voice growing fainter still. "This is bad..."
They advanced toward the elephants. He had fought so many already but they kept coming. Three, some distance behind them, was bringing up the second wave. The Spine led the first. Rabbit was with him and he was glad. He hated to tell the Colonel, but he was afraid. But Rabbit had been with him since he was new. He felt safe with Rabbit there.

The oven robot was there, too. He had fought well and his cannon was formidable. Rabbit had started calling him Hatchy, short for Hatchworth, the name he had been given upon activation.

They came at last into the field and saw them. Rows upon rows... So many, so huge!

"Col. Walter, we are in the red zone!" The Spine said. "We are in the red zone!"

The lead beast trumpeted and the elephants charged. The oven bot cried out.

"So many elephants! There are too many!"

But Rabbit was undaunted. His laser beeped as it focused on the lead beast. "Target... tar-tar-target acquired!"

He roared and fired with both his laser and his guns.

"Error... error... error... error..."

A woman's voice, far away. It troubled him for a second...

"This is where we get serious," Hatchworth said, snapping his focus back to the battle.

Encouraged by Rabbit's actions, Hatchworth charged.

His cannon fired again and again. Elephants vanished or dropped, whole sections vaporized. The elephants regrouped and charged again.

"Stand fast, everyone!" The Spine called.

He was grappling with one of the beasts when he heard Rabbit's scream.

Rabbit! He dispatched his opponent and tried to locate his older brother in the chaos. There was another desperate scream.

"Steam Man Band file... file corruption..." came the distant voice.

I can't stop it... The Spine was brought back to the battle with a start, by a sound that filled him with terror.

"Hatchy! HATCHY!!!" Rabbit screamed.

He found him a moment later. Rabbit had been trampled by one elephant while calling out a warning to Hatchworth about another. The Spine dispatched the beast and turned to Rabbit. He dropped beside his brother, fighting tears. He had called them all to face the elephants. It was his fault!

But all that he could think of to say, in the commanding tone Col. Walter had given him, was, "Rabbit! Rabbit, you must get up!"

"I... I feel fine..." Rabbit groaned.
How could he be? The Spine looked miserably down at his brother as he struggled to rise, one arm now useless at his side, his faceplate cracked, his right eye darkened.

An especially large and grisly elephant trumpeted and charged, and The Spine turned, a new feeling rising in his core. He was angry. He knew it, it fit the criteria as described. They had hurt his brother! So very angry... His Tesla Coil hummed and crackled as he brought it to bear.

"Audience incineration imminent..."

Who are you? The voice was familiar. But there was no time to understand...

Hatchworth was beside him, shielding Rabbit as he struggled still to rise. The elephant was upon them.

"Bring it down!" The Spine ordered.

Rabbit screamed again as they engaged the monster. The Spine fired electricity into it and Hatchworth slammed against it, knocking it over. It flailed its trunk wildly at them. The Spine was knocked flat. His Tesla Coil fired wildly.

He had to... stop this... but he couldn't! They were too strong, too many...

"Danger! Manual override required..."

The voice! He focused on it as it repeated. It was his lifeline, the one tendril of proof that this, the battle surrounding him, was a distant memory. He wasn't here, couldn't be! He knew he couldn't... but the memory was strong!

"Do something! They're gonna blow!"

It was Steve! Surely he was overreacting... but it brought The Spine back to himself. He struggled once more against the memory.

Got to get it under control... it's only a memory... we're not really here!

He began to be aware of the gasps and screams of a crowd of people somewhere in front of him... he groped toward the sound, focusing on it...

Got to get out...

Stage lights began to shine in his eyes...

"Wait!" Steve cried, still far away. "Wait! I'm getting a blue screen! Here we go!"

They were on stage.


There was a thunderous thrumming. The Spine welcomed it. It was grounding, bringing him all the way around to the current time.

"Steam Powered Giraffe is now online! Thank you for choosing Walter Robotics!"

Rabbit! Are you alright? The Spine sent as the crowd, apparently unaware of the truth of what had
just occurred, cheered.

*I'm... I'm okay... just keep going, okay? Act like you didn't notice.*

*The show must go on,* Hatchworth agreed.

*Alright,* The Spine sent uneasily.

He could sense their fear. They were both deeply shaken, as he was. Hatchworth twitched, seemingly unable to be still. Rabbit, however, with the long experience of many performances, continued to move in the rigid motions expected by the fans, seemingly untroubled.

He wanted to apologize to them both, to run from the stage and call Jon and see if he was alright. But Rabbit was right. If they resumed the performance, the audience would continue to assume it was a stunt of some sort.

So instead, he looked up and said brightly, "Ah, what a lovely evening!"

There was a message by the time the concert had ended and they had returned to the manor. Jon had sat up in the middle of the night and begun to scream about copper elephants and Upgrade was terrified that he was malfunctioning. Rabbit hastily called her back to reassure her.

Meanwhile, in a lab, Peter VI examined The Spine's memory storage. He sat down at last and sighed deeply.

"You could have mentioned what you were doing," he accused. "We can't afford to lose the concert revenues right now, with all the disasters we've had in the last several months. Wanda's sending Bunny and David care packages now and she insists on sending Godivas..."

"Sending what?"

"Expensive chocolate. Apparently Bunny's transformation is one hundred percent. She's getting periods now."

"Ah." He hadn't wanted to know that. "Look, I'm sorry, but... this is very important to me. I feel as if I wasn't complete, Peter."

"Who is? Who in the world is perfect? We all are works in progress..."

"And I intend to make progress. I want to be rid of this panic folder!"

"Which you only just found out you had! Do you really expect to be free of it just like that? Some things aren't so easy to beat, y'know! If someone had found out they had cancer, would you expect them to just conquer it by knowing they have it and deciding not to?"

The silence between them throbbed. Peter sighed sharply.

"I... I'm sorry..." he murmured.

"I know what you mean. It's alright. You think having a panic folder is like having cancer."

"I didn't... look, I should have thought before using that example, okay? I guess it's more like having anxiety, or being OCD or something. Knowing you have it is just supposed to make it so you understand why you have the problems you do. It isn't going to make you able to just not have it
anymore! No one is cured just by naming their problem. It takes time. And before you say it, yes, I realize that's why you've gotten started. What I'm trying to say is that you need to be patient with the process and not rush it, do it right, and take precautions!"

"I have! Rabbit sits with me..."

"I mean that we need to set up a secondary file that you can see but that prevents the memories from emerging the way that one did. Then you can assimilate to your masochistic heart's content without incinerating any audiences!"

"Oh. You can do that?"

Peter scowled and pointed at his tousled blonde cranium. "Genius!" he barked.

"Ah. Right." Peter and his ego... but he was in no position to scoff.

"I'll have to maintain it regularly but it should be secure enough as long as I consistently go in and back up the files following a restore session. I'll be overseeing that personally."

"Thank you."

"No problem. Just take it easy, okay? And make sure you come in after every restore. Tell me ahead of time, too."

"Right." He hesitated. "Peter? I was wondering... have you noticed anything off about Rabbit lately?"

"Well," Peter muttered, shuffling his papers, "it's been a rough few months. If there's anything off about him, I guess that's to be expected."

"I take that as a yes."

"Well, he never had a history of making out with Walter Girls..."

The Spine steamed irritably. "Yes, alright, I know. He apparently was very close to Paige before she left..."

"Yes. I hope he has no plans to continue this sort of thing with any replacement we might decide to hire."

"You're hiring? When money's tight?"

Peter sighed sharply. "That's why money's tight! We need the support with all the crap that's gone on lately!"

"Ah. Look, back to the question. Have you noticed any trouble with Rabbit since the accident?"

"I assume you mean the explosion. Implosion. Whatever. Well... no, actually, he's running just fine. He needs more maintenance but that's nothing new."

"Alright, fine. He's no worse than he was. It's just that I think he has a fault in his hip joints."

"Really?" Peter asked with a frown. "Any reason?"

"The last concert... he's got a conspicuous wiggle on stage."
"He's got a conspicuous wiggle everywhere. I've never known him to be without it."

"It's worse now. And the women are going nuts."

"Jealous?"

"No!" snapped The Spine. "I'm in a committed relationship..."

"I was kidding."

"Ah... oh. Right. Well, this is hardly a laughing matter," The Spine grumbled, steaming in embarrassment. "It used to be a little Elvis impression and now it's like he's got his own personal snake charmer. If he overdoes it and his hips give out mid-concert..."

"Alright. Good point. I'll see if there's any video posted of the concert in the next few days and find out whether it looks like cause for concern, okay? If I don't see it myself I can't do anything. Even if I do, I may not be able to get him in for repairs. Paige was... ahem... his favorite tech."

"Yes... well, thank you," The Spine muttered, hurrying out.

He was willing to discuss Rabbit's physical state. Of course, his emotional state troubled him far more. But he didn't think that was any of Peter's business.
Shine Bright Like a Diamond

Chapter Summary

Digging around in old boxes holds the promise of important answers, but here we only have one small surprise. And she sure does like to sing.

Chapter Notes

Alright, let's do this. It'll take a few chapters but we're almost up to date, almost out of story. Time to slam a couple of characters hard into canon. I could have skipped this but I've finally reached the point where I entered the fandom. WRX was my second concert.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bunny and David returned to the Manor two weeks later, in time to resume work. The Spine, who had first seen the aftermath of the explosion, objected, saying that they could hardly be expected or in fact trusted to work with Blue Matter again so soon. Peter said that nothing made a person more cautious than a stupid mistake.

The Spine would later say it was some kind of precognition.

"This stupid Temecula Rift," Peter muttered. "Could it have been growing since 1950?"

"What is it, exactly?" asked Carolina.

"Hm?" he asked, looking up.

The woman smiled back patiently. An old friend of Sam's had agreed to help out while they were short-staffed. Carolina was intelligent and capable but not experienced in robotics, or even much in the way of science. But she was hardworking and could play a mean bass guitar, Sam had assured him. She certainly was nice, but Peter had an ad out for someone who knew the science, just the same.

"Oh, well... it's a... a rift... Like a hole thing you can't see. In Temecula."

"Ah." She sighed. It had become clear early on that she also had no use for Peter's vague descriptive style. "How about I go make sure the robots have enough water?"

"Good, yes."

He turned back to his notes. He had been contacted by people wearing plain brown suits. His father had mentioned them and now it was his turn. He knew nothing about them except one thing, outside of their taste for brown.

He was to give them every assistance. In that he should not argue when they asked for something.
He didn't mind, though. He'd always been a little fascinated with the mysterious anomaly anyway.

It was in the scraggly chaparral outside of Temecula, rather than in the town proper, thank goodness. And as he understood it, these agents, presumably from the government, had constructed a building around it.

They'd be back for him within the month. And then, according to them, he would be expected to accept responsibility for the mistakes of his ancestors and make every effort to close the rift. He had some theories but only time would tell if they worked. Meanwhile, he had another appointment to back up The Spine's memory restore.

"Wow, that sand gets everywhere!" Peter said, dusting The Spine's ear.

"It was hotter than Hell but the concert was a success. I was sure Rabbit would overheat after he insisted on going through every building looking for a ghost."

"At his age he doesn't know what a ghost town is?"

"He does but Hatchworth doesn't. I still don't know whether he was teasing him or helping him have some fun."

Peter chuckled. "Well, never mind. It came out alright. Oh, about the next file restore session... Well, you know I'll be unavailable for a few days, but if you want to go ahead and do another file restore while I'm out, I can go ahead an back up the files when I get back."

The Spine grunted. "I don't like this whole thing, Peter," he grumbled from where he lay on the work table.

"It has to be done. You know what the popular theory is about the source of the rift, right?"

"Yes," The Spine sighed. "I've done my best to keep it quiet but yes, I know."

"Yeah. I guess Rabbit still feels guilty about it?"

"And Norman. To be fair, Norman was more responsible than Rabbit. But no one blames either of them now! Wanda herself... If she can forgive Norman, well..."

"Yeah. That's forgiveness right there. But between you and me, I'm hoping they'll let me try and expand the rift. I have some theories about it. I think it could be used to travel."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Just theories. Ones I'd like to explore."

"Peter... just be careful, okay?"

Peter chuckled but made no promises. He snapped The Spine's head plate shut and smoothed the wig over it. "There. It's saved. Hey, can you do me a favor and go and check on the progress of the robotics expo?"

"Isn't Wanda handling it?"

"She's doing a lot of it. I'd be in charge if it weren't for... them, y'know."
"Right. Well, yes, I'll make sure Wanda has it in hand."

The Spine strolled out and hurried to the HoW. He closed the door carefully behind him. He would keep his words and check on Wanda, but he had a little side project to look at first.

"Qwerty! Open file 'diamonds b' and play back."

Qwerty did as it was told. The Spine stared at the video, chuckling in spots.

"She'll love this. It needs something, though..."

"Is that the last one, Hatchy?" asked Wanda.

She stood in a circle of crates and boxes covered in blue dust. Hatchworth had decided to clean out his vault and decorate it, and Wanda had asked him to bring the contents of it to her rooms. She'd been meaning to sort through those boxes for months.

"That is all of them, little one," he replied fondly. To Hatchworth, it seemed, Wanda was still a child. "I hope you find what you need. I must go and dust my vault and choose a suitable carpet."

She laughed as he walked out, looking with hope at the crates. Somewhere in one of these, she suspected, was the information she needed. A manual, a paper, some proof, something to persuade Rabbit to accept what Colonel Walter had once intended. It would still be up to Rabbit after that. He certainly had been contentedly masculine for more than one hundred years. But he'd been acting so strangely lately...

She had her suspicions after that explosion in the HoW. Trouble was, the only way they could get Rabbit to even discuss it would be if they had proof in hand that the female settings existed at all. She meant to find that proof.

After the Expo. She just didn't have the time now. She started to walk out of the room and froze. There was a glint of metal in one of the boxes.

Well, it wouldn't hurt to peek at one! She tugged a loose slat aside and saw a large, lashy blue eye staring back! Wanda cried out and jumped away, feeling silly almost in the same moment. It wasn't alive...

"What's wrong?" cried Norman, hurrying in from the adjoining room.

"Norman! Oh, it's nothing, darling. There's some sort of puppet in this box and it startled me."

"Puppet?" Norman asked, leaning over the box.

"I think so. Look, I really have to get to work on the Expo. The Sheraton is insisting there isn't room for vendors even though we already promised, and we still have to record little videos for the pre-concert period, and Professor Elemental needs someone to get him from the airport so I have to find someone who won't be too busy then, and... ugh."

"Of course." He hugged her. "I think I'll have a look in the box while you're working on that."

"Alright! Tell me about it later... oh, and save me the others to sort through, alright? They're gonna be a little something to look forward to after all this fuss."

"You got it."
Norman trudged into the HoW fifteen minutes later, carrying the crate. "Spine?" he called.

The Spine hastily pulled off a pair of headphones and hit Qwerty's video power button. The monitor thrashed around in confusion and The Spine muttered something and powered it back on.

"SAVING VIDEO..." Qwerty chimed.

"Norman! What have you brought?" The Spine asked as he quickly set the headphones down on his seat.

Norman was curious about what The Spine found so embarrassing, but knew better than to ask. "This was in Hatchworth's vault. I'm reasonably certain it's an automaton."

"What? But there aren't any... Unless... But it would be incredibly old, possibly from... from the war in 1897!"

"That's what I was thinking. Maybe it's one of those ones the Colonel built back in the day."

"Set it down! Let's have a look!" The Spine cried.

Norman put it down with a chuckle. He hadn't seen The Spine this excited in some time.

The Spine pulled out parts one by one, murmuring over each. "Ears... long legs... this head... it looks so much like Delilah. Is she a prototype? It's a giraffe, beyond a doubt... There's no weapons, Norman. It can't have been part of the war. No stains, no dents, no damage."

"I'm glad she never went to war."

"She?"

"Well... look at her head. It is like Delilah. And those long eyelashes. She's so cute."

The Spine chuckled. "I guess so. But look at this, Norman. There's a Blue Matter reactor."

"Oh..."

"Still humming away. Well, that's what they do... I mean, when Rabbit..." He trailed off. "I'm sorry."

Norman looked down uneasily. "It's alright... if anyone should be sorry, it's me..."

"It's been a long time. No one blames you anymore, okay?"

"I know. But... it's not that easy to not blame myself."

The Spine pulled out the last few pieces. "I guess I know what you mean. But I hold nothing against you. No one here does."

"Thank you. Is she complete, do you think?"

"I think so."

"I want to fix her. I want to get her up and running. Is that okay?"

"I don't know... there's nothing here to explain why she's been crated for so long. Maybe she's faulty."
"She's so little, though. I'd shut her off if she has any problems."

"You should still have an automaton present while you work... How about Hatchworth?"

"He's working on his vault."

"Rabbit?"

"He's been acting weird lately. And I never have been comfortable with him..."

"I suppose that makes sense." The Spine stared into space for a moment, steam curling from his collar. "Alright, Norman. Let's build this."

Norman beamed. He felt useless sometimes. This little creature seemed to need him.

"By the way," The Spine said as they began to arrange the pieces into what appeared to be the right order, "how is Wanda doing on the Expo?"

"She's working hard but she needs help."

"Well then, we'll build this and then I'll see what I can do for her."

Peter was gone. He had promised to be back in time to finish up work on the Expo but gave no further explanation for his departure, even to his mother. The Spine knew but wasn't sharing.

The little giraffe was complete at last. Norman bounced eagerly as The Spine checked all the connections.

"Alright, Norman. The time has come. Are you sure you don't want to tell the others?"

"No... what if something goes wrong? I don't want to get their hopes up."

The Spine thought it more likely that they would find it alarming, but he smiled and said instead, "Powering on."

He flipped the power switch and they waited. The systems began to hum softly. Norman watched the little giraffe closely.

"Come on," he whispered. "Open your eyes..."

Nothing happened.

"Is there a short in the wiring?" Norman asked anxiously.

"We checked it all. Well, maybe it needs time to warm up. It's late, you need your rest. I'll let you know if it activates," The Spine promised.


Once he had shuffled out, The Spine watched the giraffe for a few more minutes before shrugging and returning to his video recording. It was almost done but he wanted to edit it further before sharing it.

Breanna had commented on the song, saying it was silly. He, however, had found it strangely
fascinating. Marie had once said he was a diamond...

It would be a laugh for Breanna. He had thrown his worst acting into it, paired with, he thought, some of his best singing. Rabbit, if he saw it, would never let him live it down. But Rabbit didn't have to know, after all. It was a private joke.

"Play it out loud, Qwerty. No one is up anyway," he said, leaning back in his big chair.

A piano chord sounded. "Shine bright like a diamond..." his voice began.

The Spine chuckled. Ridiculous lyrics. He knew it. But when he thought of Bree in the context of those lyrics... Well, they hadn't pushed their relationship that far yet. No need to rush. Not that he was afraid. At least, he hoped that when it came to that point, he wouldn't be. It was a complicated situation...

He'd been working awfully hard, and it was late. He didn't fall asleep, of course. But stasis did steal over him before he noticed. To his surprise, he came out of it some eight hours later staring directly into the large blue eyes of a tiny robotic giraffe.

"Hey mister! You sure slept a long time! Where's Colonel Walter?"

He scrambled backward only to find he had nowhere to go, settled as he was in a large armchair. He frowned at the little creature for a moment and it ducked behind the arm of the chair.

"Are you mad at me?" it piped.

"N-no..."

"You stuttered!" it crowed, popping back up. "Are you Rabbit?"

"Rabbit! You know Rabbit?"

"Yeah! She's the other robot! Besides Delilah I mean."

"Wait... the other... she?" he cried, unable to keep up.

"Or was it he? Pappy was havin' a hard time deciding!"

"Oh... well, he decided to make Rabbit male. Rabbit is male. Until you hear otherwise. So don't mention that he wasn't sure, okay? I think Rabbit wouldn't like it."

Wanda had quietly told him she had her doubts about that. He wasn't sure what he thought about it, but with Rabbit's recent personality changes, well... best to not assume anything. He'd learned that with Rabbit years ago. And here was another witness suggesting there had at least been some doubt in the Colonel's mind as well. That said, it would be best for this little creature, who appeared to have no filters of any kind on her speech, to at least learn not to stir up difficult questions. She was, by herself, enough of a shock.

"Okay!" it crowed, trotting in a circle. "I finished your stereogram!"

"My what?"

"The song! That sure is a fancy nickelodeon! It has sound and everything! Did Pappy make it?"

"What? Um, no... I'm sorry, did you say you finished the song...?"
“Yeah! The box showed it to me an’ I liked it! So I learned it and I fixed it all up and I’m there too! An’ I put it into the upload!”

“Wait, whoa... slow down now... You did what?” The Spine gasped.

“I sang in it too! I’m a good singer!”

This wasn’t happening. "Are you... but how could you have done all this?"

"The face box! The face box asked me if I wanted to make any changes before saving, whatever that means, an’ I wanted to make changes so the box put me into it too! And it’s a real easy song so I learned to sing it. And we put it all together and we even stuck that funny joke about the ice cream monster at the end..."

"Ice cream monster..." he said faintly.

He supposed she was referring to the piece of video he had accidentally recorded when he’d lost track of time and Rabbit and Hatchworth had come looking for him. It was just like Rabbit to get his attention by making up some nonsense about a monster.

"It was a joke right? ’Cause that sounds swell! Then the face box asked if I wanted to share it an’ I sure did because it is bee-oo-tee-ful! So it asked me how I wanted to share it an’ I said I wanted to share it with the whole wide world! An’ it showed me the name of someone who would help me share it an’ it was a real weird name like ‘Wwwyou Tubecom’ only the face box said those three letters in the front stand for ‘world wide web’ and that was perfect! It sounds like a big spider who shares things over the whole world an’ they can all see my song now!"

"Your song?" The Spine shouted, jumping from his seat. "Qwerty! Get over here!"

The little giraffe ducked behind the chair again at the sound of his shouting. "Why are you yelling at me?" it squeaked.

"I’m not... look, just wait a moment, please.” He turned to Qwerty. "You posted it to the internet?" he demanded, examining Qwerty’s history file.

"Th3 t1ny automaton..."

"No..." the giraffe interrupted in a tiny voice. "I didn't post it! I shared it with the whole wide world on the you tubes..."

"...Instructed m3 2 upload," Qwerty finished.

The Spine put his hand over his face and groaned.

"Did I do something bad?" the giraffe squeaked.

He wanted to be angry. He wanted to shout and stomp and have a very unsuitable tantrum. He could see a huge number of likes, dislikes, views and comments already. There was no hiding it now.

"How did they all find it so quickly?" he breathed.

"I told the face box to tell everyone about it..." the little giraffe said almost inaudibly, "because I love it..."

"You told it to tell everyone?" he asked faintly.
With trembling hands, he accessed Tumblr. There it was... David's blog, at least, officially. His own, actually. David had thought it was funny when he suggested it... it was accessible by Qwerty with strict rules. And now it was announcing to everyone that he had made a new video.

He sighed a long, unnecessary sigh and looked down at the giraffe. He was supposed to tell Norman about it now that it was running, but just now he liked the idea of switching it back off again. Rabbit and Hatchworth were enough trouble. And it had been a long time since there had been kids around the Manor.

It looked up with wide eyes. It was technically older than he was, but if he was right, it had been deactivated since before he was brought online. Technically it couldn't be more than ten years old, and it seemed likely it was closer to five.

The Spine had been a father. The old protocols never really went dormant. He sighed and slipped into a careful crouch on the floor, looking at it eye to eye as he would with a human child.

"What's your name?" he asked gently.

"Um..."

"It's okay, little one. You can talk to me. What's your name?"

"Gwendolindia Gertrudofferson the Giraffe. But Rabbit just called me GG."

"Did he?" Rabbit had never mentioned her... but Rabbit had never mentioned any uncertainty about being male either.

"Yeah. Are you mad at me?"

"I... I'm not happy, exactly... No. No, I'm not mad."

Of all the things posted about him on the internet, this was the least troubling when he thought it over. Really, there were any number of things that would be worse. He'd heard of celebrity sex tapes being shared over the internet before. Although, he had never actually made a sex tape... Well, nothing that he hadn't password locked and kept inside his own processor, anyway. Some things were best kept between himself and Marie...

He shook his head slightly. He supposed he could announce later that the video was a prank.

"Are you my daddy or something?" she asked.

"Your daddy?" he cried incredulously.

"Yeah! You're silver too!"

"No, I'm not," he breathed, relieved. He'd been half-afraid she had still more surprises for him. Not that he could explain how it would even be possible... "Well... come on. You have some people to meet."

"Hey, Spine!" Rabbit crowed. "Saw the new video. Were you gonna mention that or just start yehr solo career without so much as a..."

GG toddled into the kitchen behind The Spine. Rabbit stared down at the little giraffe.
"Hi..." she whispered shyly, looking at Rabbit through her lashes.

"She's a robut? I thought it was just a pu-pu-puppet or somethin'..." he said faintly. "Where'd she come from?"

"This is GG. Wanda and Norman found her in a box and Norman wanted to build her. Apparently Col. Walter put her into the vault for reasons unknown, before I was even built."

"Before you were built? What about me?"

"That's the thing. She says she remembers you."

Rabbit looked at him with wide eyes and knelt before the little giraffe. "Hey there, little girl. You remember me, huh?"

"Yeah! You sure look different!"

Rabbit smiled, but the look was oddly strained. What was wrong? Did Rabbit remember GG at all?

"You remember... you remember when Pappy was buildin' me, maybe?" he asked softly.

"Sure do! He tried all kinds of stuff to make you just right!"

Rabbit put his hand over his mouth for a moment. There was a hint of oil in his eyes.

"That a fact?" he asked thickly, with a note of forced brightness. "Well, I sure am pleased to meet you, Miss GG."

GG giggled and clip clopped in a circle.

"So... you remember me when I was new... Have I changed a lot?" Rabbit pressed.

"Oh, yeah! You're real different!"

"Like... like different how?" Rabbit asked, gently taking hold of GG's chassis and looking her in the eyes. "What was different, kiddo?"

The Spine considered interrupting. GG was squirming in Rabbit's grasp and no wonder. He was looking at her with troubling intensity.

"Oh, you know, how you looked and stuff," she piped. "He wasn't sure about..." She looked up at The Spine. "...lots of stuff. And then he made you like this!"

"Like what?" Rabbit asked weakly.

"A boy! Eep!" She dashed from Rabbit's hands and ran behind The Spine, hissing, "I'm sorry! I forgot!"

Norman jogged into the room. "She's active!" he cried.

Rabbit stood hastily, passing his gloved hand across each eye. "Hey, some mad scientist you are!" he chuckled thickly. "Yehr s'posed to yell, 'It's alivvve.'"

Norman chuckled and sat right on the floor, where he began to fuss over GG as though he'd invented her. GG, to The Spine's surprise, wasn't remotely troubled by Norman's appearance, though she did have many questions.
Rabbit watched them for a few minutes before strolling slowly out. The Spine stared after him and debated whether to follow.

He'd seen Rabbit troubled, many times over the decades. But something was different. There was a lingering air of mystery, not a good sort. The feeling of secret pain. The possible causes were endless. Why be so quiet about it? When Rabbit was unhappy, standard procedure for Rabbit was to tell anyone and everyone until something got done about it.

Then again, he'd been very quiet about Honey's death. So maybe Paige leaving brought the same reaction. Yes... that would explain it.

So why did he have a feeling it didn't?

Chapter End Notes

The thing about SPG canon is that you find so much of it all over the internet, instead of on their web site. I was fortunate enough to be in the fandom before WRX and got to read these as they were posted:

http://pawaltervi.tumblr.com/post/49702485000/regarding-the-temecula-rift


All posted by the band themselves. I sometimes wonder which twin wrote them (my money's on David, there's a certain tone to the jokes) but definitely canon.

And now we're ready to blow things up.
I am Strong

Chapter Summary

There's just no reasoning with some people. Their lessons have to come the hard way. And humility is an especially painful thing to learn.

Chapter Notes

I realize Bunny is communicating in a manner far more sophisticated than you'd expect from a brand new mime. I think it's her supple hands, expressive face, previous mime experience, and the fact that her interpreter is her twin.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1986:

Qwerty swung her wires, and was tired of swinging her wires. Jon had come in three days ago and told her about the baby. They'd both been very happy and she'd wanted to celebrate, but he wouldn't interface with her for a proper party. Silly Jon... the last time he'd interfaced with her was when Marie died. He said it wasn't right when she asked this time, but he never explained why. Uncle Spine had been uneasy about it for a while, so she supposed Jon was just having a harder time with the personal nature of it. Funny, he seemed so open to new and strange experiences...

In any case, he'd told her and gone away and now she had to wait. She had the porch camera on at all times, watching. And at last, they came home!

She didn't hope they would come up right away, but to her surprise, they did, within the same hour. Annie had gone to bed right away, but Peter walked in carrying a little bundle, with Wanda close beside him, cooing and on the verge of tears.

"Oh, look at him! He's so tiny, you wouldn't think he was nine pounds!"

"Qwerty!" Peter said. "I've brought someone to meet you."

Qwerty swung her monitor slowly toward them. She reduced volume and examined the tiny boy.

"Meet Peter Alexander Walter VI. I know what you're thinking. That's a helluva name to saddle a kid with."

"No... I was thinking that he's... very wrinkly..."

Peter laughed as the baby looked up in blank wonder at the shining lights around him. "He'll improve. Hopefully he'll look like his mother."

Wanda laughed. "Oh, Peter. You were a very handsome little boy."
"What happened after that, then?" he asked with a smirk.

Wanda shook her head and Qwerty agreed. Peter was handsome still. If anything, he was more handsome. She didn't feel the same awe about that she once had, though. Strange, since he'd been less impressive when she was young, that she should be finding herself less and less attracted to him lately...

She angled her camera down toward Six once more. His dark blue eyes stared back. Her database told her that the odds were that he would have hazel eyes like his father once the color came through.

So why did she see a sudden flash of blinding blue in them?

She wondered whether she should say something as she examined them once more and saw only the dark blue newborn eye color. No; she had probably just caught a reflection... She didn't believe in the supernatural.

But as she looked over the replay of that moment after Peter had taken the baby back to his mother, she saw the same flash of blue light flicker from deep within his irises and saved the file for future reference. Stranger things had happened in Walter Manor.

She just hoped it was nothing to worry about.

San Diego, May 2013:

"Whew, that was a doozy!" Rabbit chuckled nervously as he and Hatchworth let go of The Spine. "Better get ta Petes an' have him back up tha files. You don't want that one gettin' loose!"

"I'm getting a handle on it, Rabbit," The Spine grumbled. "Besides, Peter is still out of town."

"And you re-re-re-restored a file anyway?" Rabbit cried. "You're just getting into the worst bits of the Great War!"

"Rabbit..."

"Hatchy, did you know Petes was..."

"Was what?" Hatchworth asked blandly. He was staring out the window.

"Hatchy!"

"He told me to!" The Spine grumbled. "I'll be fine until he gets back. The Expo isn't until July anyway."

"What's your deal, anyhow? Y-You used ta be tha stable one..."

"If you two are the alternative, I still am."

"Ha ha ha. Hear that, Hatchy? Real funny guy."

Hatchworth was looking at his shoes. Rabbit sighed gruffly and turned back to The Spine.

"Only if you start freakin' out..." he muttered.
The phone rang. The Spine answered it just to stop Rabbit's tirade. Someone else picked up at the same time but he knew Rabbit would start right back in on him so he kept it to his ear as Matter Master David answered the call.

"What is it, a recording?" asked Rabbit, when he didn't speak.

The Spine quietly put down the phone and turned to him, speechless.

"What?"

"Peter's had an accident!" The Spine gasped.

Hatchworth gasped. Rabbit glanced at him, shrugged, and turned back to The Spine.

"What kind of accident?"

"I don't know. They've just sent for the Walter Workers to bring him home..."

"Bring him home? Then he's alright. Right?"

"They didn't say that either... David asked but they just said he needed to go get him."

Rabbit scowled. "I don't like the sound of that."

He glanced at Hatchworth again. To his shock, the bronze robot was crying softly.

Temecula, three days before:

"Slowly raise the levels..."

"Raising."

Peter peered at the distortion. "Another five."

"We've already passed maximum safety settings..."

"Which I set. They were guidelines."

"But... you made up the safety settings?" cried the tech.

"They wouldn't let me do it otherwise," Peter muttered, peering through the glass partition at the flickering anomaly. "I mean, no one really knows where it actually gets dangerous so I pulled a couple of numbers out of my... um... hat."

The tech was staring at him open-mouthed. Peter flicked an awkward glance at her and giggled nervously.

"You realize I have to report that..." she said faintly.

"Oh, go ahead. It's not like I lied to get in here."

He punched in a few more parameters and peered at the rift. "They wanted numbers and they got them."

"Yeah. Great. Turn it off."
"What?"

"Shut it off! I thought we were working with actual scientific data and now you tell me we're bombarding this thing with electromagnetic energy on your guesses?"

"Educated guesses..." He turned a knob and the steady humming intensified. "And don't worry. You bathe in electromagnetic radiation every day."

"I'm talking about the levels you're firing at a mysterious rift that's leaking massive amounts of Blue Matter! We can continue the work after I clear it with the higher ups. At a slower rate. We need to take time and document the effects! Peter, are you listening?"

"Oh, yeah. Listening." He peered through the glass and pressed a button.

"Turn it off, Peter!"

"Look, if you want to step out of the building until I'm done with this round..."

"No, I want it shut off!" She looked longingly at the door as she pulled out her phone and hit speed dial. "Damnit! Stupid rift! The power's drained again!"

"No, seriously. You can step out, I just need a few more readings. Go on and tattle on me. I'll be out in a few minutes."

She sighed sharply. Peter smiled. One of the guards had told him this little tech was putting out signals that she liked him. Peter had said he didn't really know anything about that. He'd never felt an attraction to anyone. Not like that, anyway. She was cute but he just didn't feel it.

And the guard had to be wrong anyway. She didn't look like she was worried for his safety. To him, she looked pretty angry. But then, he never had understood girls...

"Just hurry, alright?" she said, rising and hurrying to the door. "And I am going to tell someone so you'd better have a good explanation ready!"

"Got it."

He waved as she closed the door, peering through the crack until the last second. Peter grinned. Time to get to work.

There was no way she'd have stood by and let him do what he wanted to try, but he'd thought it out very carefully over the past few nights. If he entered the enclosure while the particles were firing, he might be able to stabilize the process. The human body had a certain amount of charge and, of course, mass. The particles would treat him like a magnet and there was just a chance that he could test his theories. If he had enough data, maybe they'd let him open the rift instead of closing it.

Of course, if he'd already gone through it, then they couldn't stop him. He'd opened portals before, as had his ancestors. But this one showed so much promise...

He cranked the machine to the desired setting, pulled off his hazmat suit and slipped around the glass partition. His skin tingled as he entered the field. It was working!

He moved slowly closer to the rift. There were voices, soft, almost audible, murmuring all around him. He was used to them; they came from the rift. Given the time, he would have investigated further, but the brown suits wanted the rift closed. His theory was that the voices were passing through from all the places that could be visited using the rift. He just had to find out...
'"Just a little closer..." Peter murmured.

"Go back..."

"What?"

He hesitated. Of course; it was just the voices passing through the rift. Some snatch of a conversation.

The faint distortion that showed the shape of the rift began to glow a soft blue as he came near. He reached forward.

"Stop before it's too late!"

"Hello?" he murmured.

But no... he was getting superstitious now. He proceeded.

He could feel the particles passing through him as his machines bombarded the distortion, expanding it. Peter laughed softly. How could he even think about some tech putting out signals? What thrill could he find with a woman to compare to this?

Peter waded through the increasing pulses as though through mud. His hair stood on end and he shivered. He could feel it all over. It tickled in... interesting places. His face burned with embarrassment even though there was no one to see and the heat drew still more particles to the area.

Had he absorbed enough to be able to access the rift? If he waited any longer someone might come in.

"Here goes..." he breathed, stepping forward.

"Sidney? What are you doing out here? I thought you were assisting Walter!" cried the guard.

Sidney looked sharply at the guard and looked away just as quickly. She didn't want Peter to get in trouble. She felt a little like a high school kid covering for a boyfriend as she muttered, "He's almost done..."

"I have orders and so do you! They'll have my head if I let anything happen!"

"He said he only needed a few more readings."

"What kind? You know that little snot has a lot of crazy ideas about that portal... What was it he said when he got here? Sure would be cool to see what's on the other side?"

She stared at him and turned to grab the door. "No! He was too eager to get me out of there..."

They only felt a small tremor. They would later be told they couldn't have felt it as far away as Riverside. But there was the barest shaking before, not after, the implosion. Peter would always swear that he'd had everything under control until that temblor occurred.

And then it seemed to worsen. The countryside shuddered... the walls of the building rattled violently and sound seemed to eclipse for the barest second before a ragged scream cut through it. There was a thud and silence.
The guard and Sidney stared at each other. That shaking wasn't an earthquake! It, along with the scream, had come from inside the building!

The guard tore open the door. Colored smoke poured out. When it cleared, they could see that the rift was gone and there was a vivid blue gleam coming from the floor.

"Peter!" Sidney shouted, running into the building.

"There! On the floor!" cried the guard. "What... oh my lord..."

Sidney screamed.

It was Peter Walter, or what was left of him. He lay, unmoving and unconscious... as far as they could tell. They couldn't see for themselves whether his eyes were even open. There was nothing there to see. Blue light flashed and swirled where his face had been.

The guard fainted.

"What?" David cried.

He and Bunny sat staring at the woman. She had given no name when she had called and given them directions to the facility. She wore dark glasses and plain brown clothing.

"What happened? Did something malfunction?" Bunny demanded through David.

"There was... an implosion."

Bunny stared at her, her mouth opening and closing as it still sometimes did, as though she had forgotten that she was unable to speak. David glanced uncomfortably at this twin before pressing onward. "Is he dead?"

"No! He, well... I suppose I can tell you. He attempted to open the rift further instead of closing it. The result was catastrophic. Unfortunately for him, most of it hit him in the face."

"What? How can he be alive then?" David cried.

"That, Mr. Bennett, is the question we are all asking."

"I mean... a Blue Matter blast right in the face! What was the result? Burns, cuts, deformities?"

She was looking at her knees. "There's a deformity, yes. His face... is gone."

"What?" David almost shrieked.

"There's a Blue Matter vortex in its place. At least, it's obscuring any view of his face... He's spoken and he is breathing but..."

David and Bunny looked at each other. Neither could so much as think of a question to ask. What could even be said?

"To be honest," she continued, "we'd be just as glad if you took him back where there are experts in Blue Matter. This was not what we had in mind when he was brought here."

"Whoa, wait now..." Bunny said through David. "You bring him here and blow his face off and
send him home like he just wet his pants? Can he even eat?"

"He blew his own face off, Mr... Miss Bennett."

Bunny scowled at her and David put a steadying hand on her arm, shaking his head ever so slightly. The change from male to female had been a considerable shock to her most of all, but she nevertheless had a tendency to get very angry when anyone, even mistakenly, misgendered her. David found it comforting. He'd had a very difficult time adjusting to the new dynamics of having a female sibling, and had been very much afraid that his new sister would in turn be distressed instead of embracing her new femininity.

Though in this case, the remark was hardly personal. David was the one doing the actual speaking, so it was a natural mistake. He suspected that Bunny just didn't like the woman in the first place.

"What if he can't eat? What if he starves to death?" he said in her behalf.

"We'll be checking in, daily at first, to make sure he can. But Walter Manor is better equipped to cope with his condition."

"Better equipped than this?" David cried, gesturing at the fantastic white facility. It was straight from a Portal game...

The woman glanced around almost guiltily. She leaned in toward them and David's hair stood on end. He hoped, with a guilty shiver of anticipation, that some secret agent goodies were potentially in the offing.

"We have facilities, alright? But if he goes there..."

"He's not coming out, is he?" David whispered.

"There's a slim window of time before I am obliged to alert my department to the severity of Peter's accident. Only I and one guard have actually seen the damage he's done to himself and I don't know how long that guard will keep his peace. I've told them the rift is closed and that Peter was hurt but not significantly. I know he has a mother and father, that he's their only son. I don't want to see him carted off in an unmarked car to be studied. That's why I was so insistent that you come here yourselves. You can drive him back in your own car and I'll run interference."

"Won't you get in trouble?" David asked, frowning.

"Yes. I will."

She looked almost too calmly back at him. Bunny was looking at her steadily and nodding, whether with approval or something else, he didn't know.

"Then why..." David pressed.

Bunny put her hand on his arm and shook her head. David looked back at the woman, translating.

"You care about him."

"Yes. I do." She looked as though she would have liked to say more, but instead she told them, "If you've heard enough, then it's time to get moving. We have a mask for him but it's just a simple white one from the local craft store. This isn't something we were prepared for. Once he's home, I recommend having a nice quality mask made for him."
"Sure," David said faintly as they followed her out.

"You'll have to sign some papers. I'll go in and let him know what's going on... if he's conscious."

"He may not even be conscious?" David cried, stopping short.

"There isn't time! Please..."

David sighed sharply and glanced at Bunny, who was shaking her head. "Fine. Where do we sign?"

Peter was in a strange place... he could fly... everything was purple... He could have sworn he just saw his father pull out his heart but now he was here. He leaped down from the building where he sat. Something was on his face. He caught his reflection in a shop window.

He was wearing a mask. There was a keyhole on the front, a huge keyhole. What key could possibly fit it?

He ran through the darkened, violet streets until he approached a fountain. A woman stood there, smiling at him. He took her by the hand and feelings surged inside him.

What was happening? He never felt like this about girls. He never felt like this about anyone! But he felt it now. She was beautiful. He wanted to... what? Hold her, kiss her? But how could he in this mask?

And why was he wearing one?

He took hold of her hands and felt the longing worsen. Was this how men usually felt? He often heard the female staff members complaining about them and had never understood wanting sex so badly that he'd hound a woman for her phone number simply in the hope of getting laid.

Which, he now realized, was at the heart of the mysterious impulse. He pulled the woman closer... he couldn't seem to stop picturing what was under that sweater! He was just thinking of suggesting they go somewhere private so that he could see for himself when the very roots of the trees curled around his arms and legs, pulling him away from her. He struggled but couldn't escape... He started to call her name...

What was her name?

He woke with a start in a white bed surrounded by curtains.

"I had the strangest dream..." he murmured.

"Mr. Walter?"

It was Sidney. She rose from where she sat beside him. He could see tears in her eyes but she was squinting at him as though afraid to make eye contact.

"He's regained consciousness!" she called to a guard by the door. He hurried out.

"What am I doing here?" he mumbled.

"I'm not at liberty to tell you anything just yet..." she said uneasily, looking anxiously toward the door.
"Hm?" he murmured, his eyes working their way down her body. Why had he never realized what a terrific figure she had? She was just poured into that suit...

"What's taking so long?" she whispered. She hurried to the door.

Peter stared at her bottom as she walked. It was a really nice bottom. Really nice. Funny that he'd never really appreciated how sexy she was before... he felt drowsy... his eyes closed and he drifted away.

By the time they were driving toward San Diego, Peter was awake and patting his smooth plastic mask. "Are you sure my face is gone?"

David groaned softly. Bunny was driving so that he could turn and explain. "Yeah, I am. I saw it, bro. Glowing blue light, just like in all those power cores. Only it's your face."

"Wicked!"

"What?"

"I just think it sounds cool."

"Your face is gone!" David cried. "Shouldn't you be freaking out?"

"Did you want me to? I'm fine. I did this myself, I can deal with it."

David sighed. "Well, no. It's just a little unexpected. Well, if you're okay with it, then..."

He caught movement from Bunny and glanced over. She had stopped at a red light and hastily gestured to him, out of view of Peter, who had been learning the mime language as well.

"It's all talk. He's gonna crack, and it's gonna be bad," she informed him.

David nodded slightly as the car moved forward once again and looked sidelong at Peter, who appeared to be staring out the window. Bunny was right. After her accident, she had made it a few days, trying not to upset her brother, before she broke down. There was no telling when it would be Peter's turn. And there was no way of knowing how hard it would hit him.

Peter sat in the back seat of the sedan, staring at the passing scenery. Maybe he would have a mask made that looked like the one in his dream. That must have been why he dreamed about a mask. He must have heard them talking.

Yes, a keyhole mask. It would be mysterious. This was okay. This was fine. It was an honest mistake. He'd never done anything with his looks before anyway. Girls had said he was cute back in college, but then he was underage at the time...

He could deal with this.

But as they traveled closer and closer to Walter Manor, he felt more and more as though his entire personality was eclipsed instead of only his face. He'd messed up and now... Sometimes at a red light he would look out the window and see people staring back. Some were shocked, some amused. None knew they were looking at a man who had no face anymore, a man who had screwed up and broken himself...
He had tried not to think it through too deeply, he realized. But he was a deep thinker. He was a scientist, a realist. And the more he let himself study the situation, the more the thought of walking in and meeting his mother this way, of seeing everyone but knowing they couldn't see him, knowing it was his own miscalculations that had left him this way... After he had fought David and Bunny, and they had made their own mistakes, and he had felt so superior, he'd warned them, he'd said it all along...

It was all he could do to keep from screaming, from telling David to turn the car around and take him back to the nice white government hospital facility, where he could hide away and no one would see him! He must have been crazy to think he could just start living a normal life...

What was happening? He was a man of science! It wasn't reasonable to panic over something he couldn't change, over a mistake he couldn't repair. But reason wasn't responding all of a sudden.

He clutched at his seatbelt... it felt like a strait-jacket! He couldn't do this! He had to calm down... he had to stop this now! And just as he determined it must be so, he saw his home ahead and the panic rose into his throat once more.

He clutched at his chest as they pulled into the gates... Oh, no! Maybe he was dying! Maybe it was a heart attack! Sometimes young men had those! Suppose he'd damaged his heart, too? A sob of terror burst forth behind the mask and David turned and looked at him with wide eyes. Bunny glanced back as the car came to a stop.

"Are you okay?" David asked.

"I... I... Something's wrong... Call 911!"

Bunny gestured to David, who said in her behalf, "Peter, just breathe slowly."

"I can't!" he gasped desperately.

"You can. It's gonna be alright. You're not dying, it's just..."

"David!" Peter interrupted. "I can't do this! Take me back! Take me back before they see me!"

"I can't, dude..." David said worriedly. He looked at Bunny again.

"Stop it!" Peter screamed. "Stop sharing glances, stop reading me, stop it, just stop it!"

He threw his arms over his head and curled up, trying to block it all out, the light, the looks, everything. Of all the stares he dreaded, he dread theirs most of all. So he wasn't dying? Was living any better? What was he now? Who was he? The man who had no face, who couldn't trust his own science... The man who had blown his whole identity straight to Hell!

He sobbed and felt the hot tears drift from his eyes into the strange void that covered them and the realization made him scream again. He looked different, felt different, he'd been all about science and yet now he suddenly liked girls! But even if he chose to pursue a relationship, he could never show his face because it could hurt someone!

He couldn't move... even as his damnable sense of reason told him he couldn't stay there, he just couldn't move!

The car doors opened and closed. There was silence. They'd left him. Of course they had. That was what people did to freaks and hypocrites...
The door near his head opened. "No..." he moaned.

He felt a hand stroke his hair and he shivered. What the Hell was going on? But he couldn't force himself to look. It was all he could do to just stay still and breathe. Everything was different, everything was wrong...

The hand continued to stroke his hair. There was a soft shushing whisper and he realized with a start who was there. She must have been shocked down to the soles of her feet to see him the way he was now, but she made no sign, she was just sitting on the edge of the seat, just stroking his hair the way she had always done when he was little. And all he could do was whimper softly, trying not to cry.

"I know you can't believe it now, sweetheart," Annie murmured, her voice even, warm, soothing. "But you're going to survive this."

His mother. He was almost painfully relieved that she was there, but he still felt awful. He didn't see ever feeling well again. His whole life stretched before him as a blank grey road with no turns and no side roads and no escape and the scream rose in his throat again...

And her soft shushing continued, not directed at him, just providing a sound to lean against. His scream crumbled inward and dissolved into sobs instead. She rubbed his back and he wanted to go to sleep and never wake.

"You're going to survive," she breathed. "I promise."

Peter reached with one trembling hand and Annie caught it up and held it tight. His shuddering calmed gradually as he focused on just surviving from one minute to the next until he did, at last, fall asleep.

He woke in someone's arms. He was being carried inside. He wondered drowsily if it was another dream. But no, he realized that he was nestled against a hard metal chest. It didn't sound like Rabbit's clockwork, or the hum of The Spine's steady motor. Just a gentle furnace and bubbling boiler.

"Careful, now, Hatchworth," he heard Annie whisper. "Are you sure you want to be the one to carry him inside? The Spine..."

"Not at all, Mother Walter," Hatchworth murmured, and there was a tone in his voice that Peter had never heard from him. "I am more than strong enough. I will carry him as his own pappy no longer can, as gently as The Spine ever would. I was terribly distressed to hear of the accident. You see, Master Peter is very precious to me."

"Hatchy!" she breathed wonderingly.

"To be sure. He came to retrieve me from my prison, to mend and rescue. I was content there once, but after many decades I had come to believe that no one would come for me and I was so afraid. Then came your dear son and my dear brothers at last. I think they all do not fully grasp what it has meant to me to be brought back to life. And now young Peter has malfunctioned, and I will endeavor to repair him."

Peter wanted to feel something in response to this. There were many choices, from embarrassment to amusement to gratitude. But he didn't really want to feel anything... right now he was numb and wanted to stay that way, to not remember the clutching terror that waited to take hold again. So he listened as Hatchworth continued to speak in soft even tones, wondering why he would keep talking if he was trying not to waken Peter.
He was at last tucked into bed. A thick comforter was pulled up to his neck.

"Hopefully he'll sleep the rest of the night," Annie murmured.

"He isn't asleep," Hatchworth responded. "But he is calm. I will remain in case he needs me to talk some more."

Was that why he had kept talking, to comfort him? What had Hatchworth endured in his vault to give him such a rich understanding of Peter's crushing fear? But Peter couldn't bear to think of it long enough to figure it out.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea..." Annie said.

"Mom," Peter whispered, eyes still shut, wondering how he could close what wasn't there.

"Oh, baby!" she gasped, hurrying to him. She took his hand when he reached from the blankets. "Sweetheart, go ahead and go back to sleep..."

"I don't want to be alone," Peter whispered. "Please let him stay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'll go back to sleep, okay? I don't want to do anything else anyway. And I don't want anyone else in here... I don't want them to see me..."

"They understand. They work with Blue Matter too..."

"Look, I can't explain it, alright?" Peter sobbed, his voice rising in agitation. "I feel safe with Hatchworth but I don't want anyone else looking at me!"

"Alright, baby," she said gently, stroking his hair again.

"Y-you can come in, though, okay?"

"Thank you, sweetheart."

"I'm sorry!"

"Oh! Hush, no, baby... you have nothing to be sorry about!"

"I took the risk and did something stupid, Mom! I screwed up, I made a mistake! I did this to myself!"

"Well, that's my son! Always trying to achieve something more. Sometimes climbing higher means falling further. But it also means you know how to climb back up again."

"No," he whimpered. "I can't... I'm so scared, Mom..."

She held him until his breathing calmed once more. "Peter, sweetheart," she murmured as she rose at last. "I can't fix it, love. I just can't. You know that. But I meant what I said. You'll be better. I have to go let everyone know you want them to keep their distance, okay?"

He couldn't think of anything to say as she walked out. Surely she was just saying it. He couldn't imagine ever being better. He couldn't imagine leaving his room again. He told himself it was only cosmetic but still the terror clutched at him. There was no hope, no future, it was all gray. His life was over.
He closed his incorporeal eyes and listened to the sound of Hatchworth's intermittent steam injectors until blessed oblivion at last took him over.

Chapter End Notes

I dunno why I decided to have an interest in girls get blasted into his system. I think it was the SPG comic and the giggly way he was acting when he was in the very small elevator with Miss Keaton.
Chapter Summary

Things go on in the usual way: freaking weird. Walter Robotics Expo is a success except for one lil malfunction and life at home isn't a bit better.

Chapter Notes

I was at WRX. It's pretty fun writing about the ones you went to. And I have to say that Professor Elemental really does put on a fantastic show all by himself on stage.

"Peter, sweetie... We need you to get out of bed."

"No, you don't."

Annie sighed quietly and looked at Hatchworth. Peter hated it when they did that. It was as though they were talking about him without saying a word. And would his mother ever leave him alone? He didn't want to move...

"Baby, I know it hurts inside but I promise we do need you. The Spine asked the workers to perform the backup but they can't figure out your system."

"He'll be fine. He's getting used to it. I'll just mess things up."

"Honey, please..."

Peter curled himself up tightly. He knew he was being a baby doing it and that just made him angry. Angry at himself, at the world, at the government... at his mother for pestering him. Then he felt worse because she was trying to help and she was right, he'd said he'd do it and here he was, ruining everything. He always ruined everything. It had become crystal clear in the month since he climbed into bed and stayed there as much as possible. Everything had gone straight to Hell since he took over the house.

"Baby, just get up for a few minutes..."

"Go away!" he screamed. "Just... please leave me alone..."

He couldn't look at the hurt he knew was on her face. He began to cry silently as she walked out. Hatchworth was silent except for a single hiss of steam.

Annie walked downstairs, shaking all over. She wiped her eyes furtively, hoping no one would see. It fixed nothing, crying. Peter needed to, at first. She'd hoped that once he had his time mourning what was lost, he, like Bunny, would get up and start finding ways to cope. But he was still in his room, still locked away despite the lack of a door, and nothing seemed to help. She felt she was
losing her child and it hurt so much! Her husband wasn't all there all the time and now her baby boy...

She couldn't even see his face. She would never add to his burden by telling him how much it hurt to know she might never see it again! And all he had was the plastic mask they gave him, adorned now with a keyhole and wood grain design he'd drawn on it with a Sharpie during his long hours hidden away. She really wondered what that was all about.

But she mostly just wanted him to get up, to try again, to live. She wanted him to rise from this pit he'd dug for himself, but he had to be the one to climb. Face or no face, he was her son and he was wounded inside. And his hurt was hers, but she didn't dare show it. She had to be strong for him, for all of them...

She couldn't help it. She gave up halfway through the Walter Worker wing of the house and leaned against the wall of the darkened hallway, one hand over her eyes as the tears dribbled down her cheeks.

She heard a door close. She didn't look up to see whose it was. She hastily wiped her eyes and hurried to her room.

Walter Robotics Expo:

The crowds were hot and frazzled but still reasonably friendly. Professor Elemental had warmed them up as only he could and the place vibrated with excitement. Rabbit was jittering slightly, but it was good jittering. He'd enjoyed the entertainment so far and was looking forward to providing his share.

"I can't remember the last time we played a show to a crowd like this. There have been some pretty good audiences but this place is overflowing!" chuckled Michael Reed.

"We better go on soon," murmured Matt. "What's the hold up?"

The Spine looked up from his book. "We were just seeing if Peter had changed his mind about introducing us. Steve said he'd check once more..."

Steve jogged in. "We're good."

"Peter's doing it?" Michael asked, surprised.

"Pretty much."

"Pretty much?" demanded Rabbit. "What's pretty much?"

"As in no, he's not, but David apparently had a plan B."

They heard the loudspeakers come to life and peered out at the monitor. It sort of looked like Peter... It was the right shape at least.

"That ain't Peter!" Rabbit cried.

"What a dreadful wig..." Hatchworth added.
"Is that David?" laughed Matt.

It was. The audience had no idea, but the white lab uniform, which Peter never wore, gave it away. Matter Master David, wearing a terrible fluffy blonde wig over his own sparse blue hair, and a curious wooden mask with a keyhole in the front, provided a light introduction and added a joke or two about Peter having his face blown off.

"Too soon man," Matt breathed.

"Well, he had to do something. I don't know how word got out but it's all over Tumblr that Peter blew his face off," Steve explained. "They think he has red hair too. Not sure where that came from."

"At least David's learned to imitate his voice but where did he get that weird mask?" Matt asked.

Peter has that drawn on his own mask, Hatchworth sent. Whatever could they be thinking, creating such a thing?

Maybe they got it for him, said The Spine.

Yeah, Rabbit added. But they can't give it to him 'cause he's off-limits.

Why would they do that? The Spine sent.

I think the crap they've put themselves through has softened 'em up a little. They get what he's going through. I noticed Bunny was l-l-l-lookin' kinda worried about him a while back. She knows what it's like to get blown to Hell and wake up a different person.

The Spine was looking at him sidelong but sent no message. He was just as glad. The Spine had been giving him a lot of funny looks lately.

"Those two never did know when to quit," Steve was saying. "Oh... that was awkward. I mean with the portal and the thing... yeah... forget I said it..."

"No, we agree with you," Matt sighed.

The show began at last, to thunderous cheers from the crowd. Rabbit was happier than he'd been in months. The love from the audience was overwhelming, enough for just a little while to drive out the worry and strain that had become his daily companions. They went through old and familiar comic routines with new jokes sprinkled throughout and the audience laughed as if they'd never heard any of them before.

Why couldn't it be enough, he thought. Why wasn't this, his primary function, all the fulfillment he needed? Why had everything else gone straight to Hell? He just didn't know who he was anymore and there was no reason for it at all. He was the same guy he'd always been. The exact same guy...

He considered sometimes shutting down and never coming back online. Of course, they'd keep switching him back on. Better to just self-destruct and get it over with... He shook himself inwardly. That kinda thinking got a guy nowhere...

A guy...

He could self-destruct. They all had the ability. No one had removed the files. It seemed odd when he thought about it, and he did. More and more...
He sang his famous low notes in Rex Marksley and tried to just think about that instead. Every loved those beautiful bass notes. They talked about it on the internet. It used to make him feel twenty feet tall to read stuff like that, about the fans swooning at his sexy voice... like The Spine yet so different, so deep and so... masculine.

Masculine. There it was again. Why should that trouble him?

They finished the song and Rabbit sank forward, trying to center his thoughts on the cheers and applause as he entered standby as usual to load his music files for the next song...

...And stood up with all the lights on and Matt and Michael standing nearby looking noticeably frazzled.

Spine! Rabbit sent.

I know.

It happened again didn't it?

I don't know... I lost exactly three minutes and twenty-one seconds...

Same here. Dammit!

Me, too, Hatchy sent. Do you remember any of the events in that time, The Spine? I have no record of anything.

Same here. Rabbit?

Nothing...

What do we do? Hatchworth asked.

They were able to communicate all this within a few seconds. Rabbit, fortunately, knew very well what to do. Just go with it.

He hastily replaced his hat and said, "Hey, guys! Whatcha doin' up here on tha stage?"

The show must go on, Hatchy, The Spine sent. Same as last time.

But as they spoke, Rabbit snuck a glance at each of them as well as the humans. What had happened? Was this one The Spine's fault as well?

He'd been prepared to comfort The Spine later. He was sure that the most recent memory restore had gone awry. World War I was well known for its bloodiness, its shell-shocked veterans, poisons in the very air and life in trenches surrounded by dead friends and fellow soldiers. The last memory restore had been the one where The Spine had been blown to Hell and lay with a hole in his side big enough to drive a truck through, unnoticed under the mud for some twenty-six hours while military vehicles rode right over him. Rabbit had only found him after a lengthy search, asking a lot of questions, and turning at just the moment that a lucky shaft of sunlight from the permanently leaden sky had at last revealed where his brother lay.

Rabbit shivered just thinking about it. The state he'd been in was rivaled only by his condition in Vietnam. He didn't wonder that The Spine had seen fit to block it out. He would have done the same if he could have. Surely a memory such as that was at the heart of the incident.
But when they got home from the Expo and asked to see the footage of the malfunction, it was far worse than Rabbit had ever expected.

"Rabbit?"

Rabbit jumped. "Hm?"

He was still staring at the screen in disbelief while his brothers exclaimed over it. It couldn't be! How had it happened? How could they have all been swept up in his dark fantasies about dying?

But there they were, on video, doing just that. It was an old program, an emergency protocol. A self-destruct, but not the one that had been on his mind lately, not the simple individual program he toyed with using on himself, now and in years past. It was an old, old one that involved all existing automatons. They had never once activated it even by mistake. They had forgotten it existed if they had ever been told.

And yet that night, they stood in front of their loving fans, counting down presumably until The Spine would at last trigger the primary explosive cell that would activate each of the satellite bombs housed by Rabbit, Hatchworth, Jon... At least, they'd tried to count down to it. While the protocols remained, the explosives were long gone.

But the humans had no inkling of any of that. It was likely just as well that they, as before, seemed to find it entertaining and not at all frightening. Their act was strange and varied and there was no reason to assume there was danger. Steve, Matt and Mike had been rattled, of course; they knew how the set was supposed to go, and it had not involved terrifying robotic voices or the promise of death!

"I don't understand..." Rabbit mumbled at last, unwilling to even hint at what he knew.

Hatchworth said, "That was awful."

Rabbit nodded. The Spine sighed, "So it wasn't me, then. I didn't cause this one."

"You didn't?" Rabbit asked blankly. Did he know?

"This can't have been triggered by a latent memory. We've never self-destructed, Rabbit, obviously! Do either of you recall a time when we even though we might need to?"

"Well, no, I guess not..."

"It must have come up at random, then," Hatchworth said.

"Something must have triggered it," The Spine said, looking sidelong at Rabbit.

Rabbit avoided looking back and stared at the paused video. Something certainly had. But why? He'd been happy! He'd been able to forget for a while!

Only he hadn't. Not entirely. Even there, surrounded by the adoration and excitement he loved, he had been pondering ending it all, going out into some field and just setting his timer and finding out if there was an afterlife. Maybe be with Honey again, maybe feel like himself again... But he'd never really do it!

So why had his suicidal thinking taken over the entire band? How could it have? The Spine was the primary processor in their network due to his more polished and well maintained hardware. Had Rabbit wanted so much to die that he'd managed to feed it like a virus into his brother's mind?
"I've got to go tell Bree," The Spine sighed, looking away at last. "She blames herself. She performed the last backup, since Peter... y'know. It appears to have been done correctly but she's convinced she allowed something through."

Rabbit stared at him as he walked out. The Spine gave him one backward glance and Rabbit turned quickly away. He couldn't tell him. He was almost certain The Spine knew something was wrong, if not what, and yet he still couldn't mention it.

Because he didn't know why he felt this way. He had been so content! Was it because of Paige, or the accident with Bunny and David? Was it all too much at long last? Had he finally cracked and started to malfunction so badly that nothing would stop it? But he'd survived after losing Honey, better than this... well, most of the time. And losing her had nearly killed him once...

And it had gotten better. So he would have to trust that it would again. Only last time, he'd been waiting around for his chassis to be recovered. He'd had that knowledge that he'd be restored to himself when it was.

But he was himself now. All the parts were here, everything in its place. Why did he feel like he was waiting for his parts to be found all over again?

"Rabbit..." Hatchworth murmured in the soft, almost human voice he had begun to use since The Spine's accident. "I know I have little experience in worldly matters, but if you ever require a listening ear, my vault is always open."

It was true. Hatchworth had removed the heavy door and taken to using it as a rec room.

"Hatchy..." Rabbit began, not even asking how he knew he was upset. "Why d'you talk like that now? What happened? Did you download something to make you sound like a human?"

"No, friendo. I always had this voice. But others expect the Hatchmeister and so I provide him. This was the voice I used with the twins, and with little Wanda, Mark, and Peter. It was the one I used the night Ma passed. Don't you remember?"

"Ah, yeah... well, I guess I figured you were j-j-j-just sad..."

"Indeed I was. She loved us all like her own sons."

Sons. Rabbit suppressed a grimace of pain. Hatchworth put a steadying hand on his shoulder.

"Hatchy..." Rabbit whispered, "how far back do you remember me?"

"My whole life."

"No... I mean... was I always this way?"

"You'll have to be more specific. You were always Rabbit, always older, always a little insane."

Rabbit laughed dryly. "Yeah, that's fair. I mean, was I always like... like how I look, how I act... Y'know..."

"I'm trying to understand but you're not..."

"No. I'm not." Rabbit stepped away and Hatchworth let his arm lower to his side. "I'm sorry."

Rabbit walked out without another word. He couldn't ask more. He had to figure it out for himself.
He passed Bunny in the hallway and hurried by with the usual awkward glance and nod. They had at least reached a point where they could share a brief, civil acknowledgement.

He could swear he felt the Matter Mistress staring after him.

"Well, there it is," David said blankly.

They sat in one of the lower labs and looked blandly at the portal. It had just happened, really. Bunny's theories had helped but the last time those theories had gotten her blown across space-time and gender lines. But with a little tinkering and the discovery of a strange distortion in the lab, well...

After all the pain and struggle, the Matter Master and Matter Mistress looked into the sparkling swirling mass of a self-renewing, unlimited use, quick recharging inter-dimensional portal and felt, as one, oddly deflated.

"I suppose we should go through," Bunny signaled. "Go in and try it out."

"But what if it's not as stable as the ones we've been using? Peter's might have to recharge for twelve hours but the portal is safe."

"Yeah, he's all about safety. That's how he blew his face off."

David refrained from making the obvious argument that he and Bunny had done no better and said, "But he closed that rift."

"And this one appeared. Have you though about that? How many more are out there?"

"Crap. That would be a nightmare!"

"We can't just leave them all for people to fall through. But maybe this one will have some kind of connection to the others if there are any."

"I still don't like the idea of just going through. Who knows what's on the other side? It might just be Bip, or it might be the place with the dragons Colonel Walter mentioned in his journals."

"I think he made half that stuff up," Bunny signed.

"Some of it was real. He wrote about the robots."

"Yeah, but the Kazooland stories... Was that actual one even a journal, though? It reads like Alice in Wonderland on acid and Wanda said there are still sections of his life that have no journals."

"Well, yeah... the one from the three day war is missing, and from his early robot construction. Man, those would be worth a wad. I bet some long dead servant already sold them."

Bunny chuckled silently. "And maybe he just thought he'd write a book of creepy stories, maybe none of them are journals."

"Seriously, though... it's exciting. Anything could be in this thing."

"Yeah. Maybe a unicorn!"

"Or aliens!"

"Or Elvis!"
"Or Colonel Walter himself!"

"He's six feet under, dude."

David grinned. The gesture for "dude" was to imitate a cowboy, and Bunny used it regularly, to his
delight. He was pretty sure she did it on purpose because he liked it and he was rather touched. He
could see a little smile on her face every time she "said" it.

"Anyway," she continued, "we really need to have some kind of meeting about what to do next.
With Peter down for the count, it's kind of on us. Bree is all wrapped up in her boyfriend... oh,
sorry..."

"No, it's cool. That was a hundred years ago. And... well, she's nice. I hope he makes her happy."

"Alrighty..." Bunny was usually not one for sentiment. "Well, she's still working alright but I think
that last malfunction shook her up. So we need to take charge."

"I guess..."

"Alright, I do, slacker. With Annie's permission." She got up and started for the doorway. "We'll
check the portal later. Better shut it off in case that baby giraffe wanders in here."

"Oh, yeah. That thing creeps me out." David rose and carefully powered it down. "Alright. There
might be unspeakable horrors in there anyway. Y'know... like maybe Peter's face is in there
somewhere."

"Too soon, man."

"Oh, yeah..."

"Besides, if everything that was lost in a blast is in there, then that includes my-"

"No, thanks! I don't need the mental image." Mime was entirely too vivid a language, he decided. He
didn't need to see their gestures for private parts.

Bunny could barely walk for laughing, silent though she was. David, to his annoyance, was blushing
and fighting the urge to shove her.

It only made sense that they wouldn't have noticed the sound of a boiler hissing softly in the
shadows.

"Master Peter? Are you awake?" Hatchworth murmured.

"Unfortunately."

"I wonder whether you can tell me about portals."

"I don't presume you mean the orange and blue ones from that video game," Peter mumbled dully.

"I enjoyed that game. The Wheatley was very amusing and the GLaDOS reminds me of Rabbit."

"Why... Never mind. What do you want to know about them?"

"Are they safe?"
"I blew my face off trying to create one and Bunny was blown straight to womanhood trying to make another. You tell me."

"There do seem to be adverse affects in flesh beings."

"Yes, there do. At least while trying to create a better portal. The old, slow-charging one the Colonel created is safe enough."

Hatchworth steamed softly. "But a robot, perhaps? Would a robot be harmed by such a portal?"

"In theory, no. Certainly Rabbit fared better than Bunny in the implosion and The Jon passed through the old one with Upgrade several years ago. It takes half a day to initialize, but at least it's stable. But don't get any ideas, Hatchy. That is why you're asking, right?"

"Oh, no. I am only curious. I had no intention of going through that old portal."

"Good, because I'm the only one who can work it and I'm not fit to do anything."

"You are perfectly well, Master Peter. Your body is. But I do see that your mind is still heavy with worry."

Peter sighed and curled up on his bed. "Very. So heavy that I'd rather just stay here. So behave yourself."

"Could I ask one last question?"

"You can ask all you want, Hatchy. I'm not going anywhere."

Hatchworth looked down for a moment. That was just the trouble. He hated to see anyone alone, afraid, trapped in one small room without his face. He had rather strong feelings about that.

"I was broken. I needed something to make me complete. Then I was able to leave my room. What are you missing that would make you able to leave this room?"

Peter stiffened. He could see it in his shoulders. Peter didn't like the question.

"Never mind..." Hatchworth began.

"You know the answer, Hatchy!" Peter said in a shaking voice. "You know what's missing. But it's not coming back, is it? I blew it off. I stuck my head into that rift and blew my face straight to Hell. I don't know if it's in particles or still here and disguised by the Blue Matter or floating somewhere over Kazooland like a boyish raincloud! It's just gone! I don't know who I am anymore! Not outside, not inside! I..."

He stopped short, curling himself tighter. His breathing was labored, each breath clipped as though he was trying to suppress tears. Hatchworth laid a hand gently on Peter's back and sighed.

"Of course. I am sorry to ask such a distressing question."

Peter gulped audibly, took a deep shuddering breath, and whispered, "Not at all. I'm not bothered in the least. I don't feel a thing."

"I know," Hatchworth murmured.

"I'm tired. I think I'll go to sleep, okay?"
"A very good idea."

Hatchworth sat beside the bed and waited until Peter's breathing grew steady and even developed a light snore. He rose promptly and went straight toward the lab where the Matter Master and Matter Mistress had constructed their new portal.

Peter woke to the sound of something slamming on his bedside table. He looked up in shock to see a very angry Matter Mistress Bunny glaring down at him. In the hall, he heard running feet.

"Bunny, what the Hell?" he gasped as David skidded around the corner.

"Bunny, no!" David cried. "C'mon, let him rest, okay?"

She signed rapidly and, he thought, angrily. David watched with his eyes flicking quickly from hand to hand before shouting, "Calm down! I can't understand you like this!"

She stomped her foot, jabbed a finger at Peter, who recoiled, and signed more carefully and deliberately. David looked alarmed.

"I can't say that!" he hissed.

She put her hands on her hips.

"What's going on?" Peter barked at last.

"Look, man, I am so sorry but... Bunny thinks we need your help."

Bunny fixed David with a look of pure sarcasm.

"I'm not saying it the way you did so just give it a rest, okay? Peter... look, I know you're having a hard time with all this, but crap has been happening and I agree with Bunny. It's about time you found out what's been going on." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Your mom is hurting, first of all. I figure you probably know that."

"Yeah," Peter whispered, aching.

"Alright. So there's that. Another thing... the robots had another malfunction at the Robotics Expo. And..."

"What? Isn't Bree performing backup for The Spine?"

"I don't know if he caused it, dude. He insists he has no memories like it. It was a self-destruct sequence, Peter! They can't have self-destructed, can they? So we still haven't found the bug."

"Did anything else unusual happen that night?"

David and Bunny exchanged glances. To Peter's confusion, Bunny's mouth twitched in a small and troubling smile. She tapped her temple and David mumbled something to her that he couldn't quite make out.

"Well?" Peter snapped.

"No!" David said suddenly, fighting his own troubling smile. "Just that. A one-shot malfunction."
"Well, okay..." Peter murmured uneasily. He didn't get the impression they were being honest but he was positive he didn't need any more bad news so he let it go. "So that was days ago. Why is she having a fit now?"

"Because..." David bit his lip for a moment, sighed, and muttered, "Hatchworth is gone."

"Gone? Gone where?" Peter gasped, panic rising.

"I don't know! He used the portal..."

"The portal? It was warmed up?"

"The new one. We just completed it today. The rift you closed opened up others, and we found one here and enhanced it to create a portal."

"That's amazing! Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Um, dude... you're holed up in here, not letting anyone see you or get near you."

Peter stared, though they couldn't see. They had been looking at him for the past few minutes! His heart pounded but he willed himself to cope with it, fighting the crushing urge to hide under the covers. He couldn't be trapped here now! Hatchworth was missing! He'd stayed with him almost non-stop since the panic attacks. He'd come to see him as a friend, almost a brother. And he was lost!

"Anyway, yeah, we have one, it's really fast, and he went through it."

"Why, though?" Peter murmured, forcing himself to sit up. He swung his legs slowly off the bed.

Bunny glanced at David and he knew there was another twin moment happening, no doubt due to his behavior. He ignored them along with his trembling frame and thought back to the last conversation he'd had with Hatchworth.

He'd asked what Peter was missing. And he'd said he wasn't going through the old portal.

The old portal.

Peter groaned.

"Peter?"

"He's looking for my face," Peter whispered.

"What?"

Peter looked up weakly. "I think he's trying to find my face to make me happy. He's trying to repair me, David! So I can leave my vault! Well... you know what I mean."

"Seriously? He thinks he can actually do that? Just, like, bring it back and stick it back on?" He shook his head. "I thought the weirdness was an act!"

"He was locked away for decades, man! He puts on the robo-talk sometimes, but the weirdness is 100% real!"

"Oh..." David breathed. "Dammit."

Bunny clapped her hand over her face.
The whole household had been awake since the wee hours of the morning. Rabbit and The Spine had insisted that they had to follow Hatchworth and bring him back. Each one had then immediately insisted the other needed to stay behind because it was too dangerous. Both were refused by most of the staff; one missing robot was enough.

Peter sat in the lab dealing with all of it, wishing above almost anything else that he could just go back to his bed. He hated having them stare at him, but he couldn’t just give up. If his theory was correct, Hatchworth had gotten lost trying to help him and he couldn’t live with himself if he just abandoned him to his fate.

So he endured, and found out something that filled him with both relief and guilt; everyone was so pleased to see him up and around that they all offered comfort and assistance, in turn, throughout the day. He didn’t know whether he’d honestly expected them to be afraid, or to reject him. In the past, he would have been bothered by the idea that they did it only to be kind, only out of pity. But he’d felt so alone since it happened. He’d stayed in his room allowing contact only from Hatchworth and his mother because somehow they counted as safe; he couldn’t say why. Reason wasn’t really the driving force at the time and that made him that much more off-balance. Reason had always been his driving force, even when he was a kid and all his reasoning was focused on how to have fun.

So he hadn’t really thought out why he was afraid, not successfully. Every time he thought about it, it got worse. So he lost himself in contemplating scientific puzzles and pretended nothing was wrong.

And now that he was out of his room, surrounded by the people he had pushed away, he found out they cared about him. And if they were acting like that out of pity, it meant they cared enough to try to make him feel that it didn’t bother them.

He was grateful, in a way, that they couldn’t see him, considering the many moments he felt tears starting. That would have been too much. He already felt awkward enough, what with all the female staff members coming and going throughout the hours.

He had no idea why the implosion took his face and gave him a libido. He had no idea if he was heterosexual or if that was only his starting place. There weren’t a lot of attractive males in the manor and David just might not be his type. The Walter Girls, on the other hand, all had incredible bodies. He wasn’t some out of control sex maniac. He was pretty sure that he was still a long way from being one of those guys. But they were very easy on the eyes.

He pushed it out of his mind as speculative. He’d seen Bunny admiring the female staff herself so the point was probably moot anyway.

Especially since he kept having those dreams. He couldn’t forget the strange purple city, the lovely girl. Who was she?
But he had to refocus his thoughts, to shove aside these new distractions. Right now, it wasn't about his sudden interest in romance. Or sex. He wasn't sure which, but both would have to be put aside. He had to find Hatchworth!

Before any solid course of action had been chosen, Jon, Upgrade, and Sam unexpectedly arrived home.

Rabbit had been arguing with The Spine about who should pursue Hatchworth, when he looked out the window and saw the cab arrive. Just a few minutes later, Upgrade ran into his arms at the front door and he wondered how he could have ever thought it was a bad idea for his little girl to get her own body. They had their own ways of hugging before, but to have his daughter run right into his arms was one of the most wonderful things ever.

"Baby! You didn't tell us you were comin' home!" he cried, delighted. He held her at arms' length and looked at her. She looked well maintained, and yet... "Baby, what is it?"

"Oh, Pappy!" she cried. "We came back as soon as we could! We had so many visits scheduled and couldn't get away..."

Rabbit stared at her in momentary shock before chuckling sheepishly. "I guess ya heard about Hatchy?"

"I meant Peter! Something's wrong with Hatchy, too?" she cried.

Rabbit looked up, horrified to see The Jon staring at him from the doorway. The brass bot's face had an expression he'd almost never seen The Jon wear: shock and worry. And he felt terrible because he hadn't meant to tell him like that.

They all felt a certain brotherly protectiveness toward the often confused Hatchworth. But Jon, who was often seen the same way by Rabbit and The Spine, only had one younger brother. And where he was usually carefree and happy, when it came to his little brother, he was serious. The years that Hatchworth had been in the vault had worn on the little robot more than he had ever shown... on the outside. But the other robots had seen the little sparks of anxiety anytime Hatchworth was mentioned. It was the elephant in the network, the thing they all knew and kept their peace about. The day Hatchworth had emerged from the vault had almost been a rebirth to Jon as well. Everything was in place at last.

"Jon, buddy," Rabbit said softly.

For the first time in a long time he released his daughter and pulled The Jon into a brotherly hug. Jon started to push away, to his surprise. Rabbit loosened his grip but Jon suddenly squeezed him tighter and began to cry.

"Jonny!" Upgrade gasped.

"I knew it! I knew something was wrong!" Jon wailed.

"You did?" cried Upgrade.

Rabbit suddenly felt very awkward. He glanced up to see Sam, who had walked in, giving him an odd look... something in a confused smile. He shrugged sheepishly.

"Same old Jon, always knows. Um... look, you three need to come with me and t-t-t-tell me what's
been going on."

A few minutes later, after a brief altercation with GG, who wanted to meet everyone and didn't appreciate being excluded, they were closeted with The Spine in the HoW. Sam sat awkwardly on a cable spool, the one human in on the meeting.

"Alright, first off," Rabbit said, taking charge when The Spine unexpectedly failed to do so. "If you was so worried, what didn't ya call?"

"I told you, we were really busy and... and I thought it was silly... and also, I was afraid to find out I was right," Upgrade whispered, like a scolded child.

"Right about what?" Rabbit demanded.

"Peter. I had a feeling something had happened. Mr. Negrete sent me a recording from the Expo..."

"He did?" Rabbit asked, alarmed. She had seen the malfunction, then!

"Yes! I asked him to send me any video of the concerts you do. It was very good."

"Oh..." Rabbit said faintly. "So... you weren't worried about that, then. Nothing about the concert troubled ya..."

"No. Should it have?" she asked, giving him a searching look.

Oops. Rabbit looked away and smiled hastily. "No! Not a thing, baby?" he said brightly.

"Pappy!" she cried reproachfully a second later.

"What?" he asked, looking at her in surprise.

"That malfunction wasn't part of the show, was it?" she cried angrily.

"C-c-c-cool it sweetie..." he stammered. Why was she so damned smart?

He looked to The Spine for aid but he was examining his fingers nonchalantly. The others sat silent as well. They knew better than to get in the way when Upgrade argued with her pappy.

"B-b-b-baby..." he continued. "It was just a little glitch..."

"You were counting to down to self-destruct!" she wailed. "Uncle Spine! Why didn't any of you tell us that wasn't part of the show?"

The Spine looked up in surprise and opened his mouth as if to speak. After a tense moment he smiled sheepishly and gave an uncharacteristic shrug, looking guiltily at Rabbit.

_I think you need to explain this one yourself, maverick._

_Thanks a lot..._

"We didn't know you'd seen it!" Rabbit cried.

"And you saw no reason to tell us? That's just typical! I'm not a little AI anymore, Pappy!"

Rabbit put his hands over his face and slid them down slowly, thinking. She still didn't know the cause of the glitch... at least, she didn't know what Rabbit thought it was.
"There's more than that, Miss Upgrade," murmured The Spine, at last seeing fit to contribute.

*Dammit, Spine...* How much had he guessed?

"But now is not the time to discuss it. There are more pressing matters. I'm sure you agree."

*Nice.*

Upgrade scowled at each of them before slumping forward slightly and sighing, "Alright. I'll talk to you two after we finish this."

The Spine glanced at Rabbit with a raised eyebrow. They were in for it.

"So go on and tell me what ya did get upset about..." Rabbit said weakly, afraid of the answer. Things were bad enough.

"Oh... Oh! Yes, the video!" she cried as though she'd never been angry. "Oh, Pappy! That couldn't have been Peter on that monitor!"

"What? Oh... no, it was pretty cheesy. That was David."

"But why? And why was he wearing that silly mask?"

"I think he had that made for Peter after the..." Rabbit began.

Upgrade was looking at him intently. Oops. Though Upgrade had voiced concerns, they hadn't told them about Peter's accident at the time it had happened, either.

"Accident," she whispered, this time not appearing angry at all. "There was an accident, wasn't there? I knew someday... but I didn't know what or when..."

"You knew?" The Jon gasped. "I didn't even know!"

"Yeah, and he has like ESP or somethin'!" Rabbit cried. "How did you know, baby?"

"I saw it years ago. When he was a baby. Like it was always meant to happen. I saw Blue Matter in his eyes..."

Rabbit wanted to scoff, but he found it too worrying. Was she malfunctioning?

"I think I know the file," The Spine murmured. "You placed it in your family album, didn't you?"

"In Peter's baby book file," she agreed. "You saw it?"

"Your photo album was public. And you started putting Lily's memories in it before the transfer so..."

"So you saw it?" Rabbit gasped, relieved.

"It was just a flicker of blue. I dismissed it as a trick of the light. In retrospect, however... I can only assume some glitch of space-time... Well, I'm a bit out of my element here. Let's just say that it was real and now he's..."

He trailed off and Rabbit understood. The Spine, too, had realized how much they had been guilty of suppressing it. It was all about to hit the fan.
"Darn it, Pappy! Stop hiding things from us!" Upgrade shrilled.

"His face is gone, baby. It's all Blue Matter. I ain't seen it because he freaked out when he got home and won't let anyone look at him. That's why he has a mask."

"Oh... oh, that's awful..." she gasped. "How does he eat? Or breathe?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Better even. If you come up with any theories in that supercomputer brain we're all ears."

"Yeah," she said, nodding weakly. Clearly no theories were forthcoming as yet.

"Poor Peter," Jon whispered distractedly.

"Jonny boy... Ya waited long enough, real patiently too. Buddy... Hatchy's disappeared."

Upgrade put her arms around Jon as the tears started again. "He ran off?" she asked.

"No!" Jon choked. "He's not here at all! He's somewhere else! I can just feel it!"

"Not here? Which here?" she demanded.

"On Earth!"

"Oh, now that's just..." She stopped. "He went through a portal?"

Rabbit nodded.

"But... why?"

"We think he was trying to find Peter's face," The Spine said.

"What?" cried Sam at last.

"He speaks," Rabbit murmured.

"Couldn't get a word in before. Are you telling me that dork went across time and space to find a face?" Sam cried.

"That... that rhymes..." Rabbit murmured. This was just getting more and more stressful and he wanted desperately to just get away for a while.

"Shush, Rabbit," The Spine muttered. "It's just a theory but Hatchworth isn't usually given to wandering, outside of his strange mustache outings to the supermarket. Peter said he'd asked specifically whether there was a chance of finding it and the twins said they had been joking about it. He might have overheard them."

"What a doofus..." Sam sighed. Upgrade glared at him and he cringed. "Sorry."

"We hafta get him back, Spine!" Jon howled. "We hafta find him!"

The Spine looked at Rabbit. Rabbit nodded.

*He's right. We have to,* Rabbit sent. *Just us.*

*And Jon?*
We need him. He gets those vibes and I have no idea where we'd even look without him.

But Upgrade...

She'll want to tag along. But I ain't risking her life again... It's bad enough takin' Jon. Or you.

But you know damned well you won't get through that portal without me, The Spine replied. Rabbit could almost hear the stubborn baritone growl.

I know it. I'm tempted to try but I know when I'm beat.

Good, The Spine sent. Glad to know you've learned a few things over the last one-hundred sixteen years.

Right. Just us three, bringing back number four.

So this stays between us until we leave. Got it?

Got it, cowboy.
Wait for it...

Chapter Summary

Got a one way ticket to destiny, one way road to a wandering robot with good intentions and a limited grasp of reality.


Chapter Notes

In my considered opinion and with the aid of band produced art, Kazooland must be FREAKY AS HELL. This was so fun to write though. Difficult, but fun.

And believe it or not, no, I do not intend to ship who you might be thinking. Not beyond this chapter anyway. Bunny finds Peter genuinely irritating. Peter knows he'd regret it for much the same reason. They just... find a little more in common than they thought, that's all. You can bond over shared experiences. It doesn't change who you are.

That said, a changed Bunny requires a period of adjustment, for her and for those who know her.

Nearly to the end of the story. One last wild adventure awaits before Rabbit... well, y'know. Expect huge amounts of fan service, fractured romance and incredibly surreal situations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"We're a real fine group, ain't we?" Rabbit muttered. "Standin' in the literal ass-end of nowhere on a train landing waitin' to get melted to death in acid rain's great-grandaddy..."

"Enough, Rabbit," The Spine growled, peering irritably out from under the awning.

"Hatchy..." Jon choked.

Rabbit sighed and gave him a side hug. The Spine hunched his shoulders slightly and sulked.

Rain they could handle. Regular water. But this, the weird greenish precipitation falling around them, hissed when it struck the ground. If Hatchworth was out in it, well, they just hoped he wasn't.

The Jon had been no use in helping them locate Hatchworth, and The Spine was grumpy as hell. But Rabbit didn't hold it against either of them, especially The Spine. He had a lot to live for, and they were stuck here with no prospect of ever returning home.

It had been fun at first. Rabbit had found it exciting, anyway. But it had been necessary to leave in a hurry and they had found that there was no portal on the other side... And by then, all three had passed through and The Spine had been kicking himself ever since for allowing them to sweep him
along in their crazy scheme. Even that hadn't fazed Rabbit. That was how it had always been. The return to the old pattern of Rabbit and The Jon leading The Spine down the primrose path was something that filled Rabbit with pure nostalgia. It had been a long time since they were just three Katzenjammers. Life had gotten very grown-up and complicated and Rabbit often missed the days when it had been simple.

But Rabbit understood why The Spine was distressed. He was worried he'd never see Breanna again. It wasn't a bad thing. It meant that his little brother wasn't just dating again, he was in love. Crazy in love. The kind of being in love that made every minute apart feel like years. Despite his nostalgia for the simple days, he was delighted to see that The Spine had it in him to love like that again and again.

"If everyone had just listened to me..." The Spine muttered, glaring cross-eyed at a hole the rain had burned into his Fedora brim, "we'd have been on that last train!"

"We said we were sorry about the pie..." Jon murmured.

"Yeah, we didn't know it would take that long to eat it..." Rabbit began.

"It wasn't eating it that did it," The Spine grumbled. "It was finding a water hose to clean out your boiler. Why do you always try to eat?"

"It was chocolate chip..."

"And that matters how? You have no taste buds!"

"Only taste enemies!" Rabbit cried brightly. "Eh? Get it? Taste en-"

"Not now, Rabbit!" interrupted The Spine sharply. "I'm just... no puns. Not in the mood..."

Rabbit clamped his lips together and turned away. Steam began to pour from his cheek vents as The Spine tilted his head once more to peer out at the rain. He could see Jon out of the corner of his eye, looking at him intently. Rabbit sucked in a quick mouthful of air, struggling to still the trembling as he nonchalantly wiped oil from his eyes. He still didn't hold it against The Spine, but it hurt when he snarled at them. The fact that it made him cry now where once it would have just made him angry, well... He was getting used to it.

"It's okay, Rabbit," Jon whispered, gently patting his back. Rabbit almost sobbed.

That was another thing. Jon kept comforting him. Jon never used to do that, but since they had snuck in the night down to the lab and out through the portal, following the previous coordinates into whatever world Hatchworth had entered before them, Jon had been treating him differently. No matter how distressed he was himself, Jon would notice when Rabbit was feeling one of his troubling fits of emotion, the ones he'd been hiding for months, and would quietly reassure him. He knew Jon had a sense about things and wondered what it was he saw.

But he couldn't ask around The Spine. He was too choked up just now and besides, he just couldn't discuss certain things with him. They'd been brothers their whole lives...

The rain was tapering off and another train whistle sounded close by. Rabbit coughed out the air he'd taken in along with a great puff of oily steam; an unfortunate side effect of his emotional hiccups. He knew there wasn't supposed to be oil in there... He could still feel Jon's worried gaze.

"Alright," The Spine said firmly, "let's board and find that idiot already and get back to where we came into this place. Maybe they'll have a return portal waiting once they figure it out. Bree must be
worried sick!"

"We left a note," Rabbit said a little hoarsely as they climbed aboard.

"Three days ago! This wasn't supposed to take this long!"

Rabbit was feeling a bit better. This was his favorite part, the old-timey trains and the strange passengers. Though The Spine had been just as bemused for the first day or so and now he was permanently grouchy. It tainted the experience.

Still, it was a distraction! He wanted to see what he could while he could. Between the oil in his bellows and the... other malfunctions, he was beginning to suspect his time was somewhat limited. He wasn't planning to end it all. But he was at peace with the idea of having his life end itself. It was almost a relief to think of it. Every day since the HoW implosion had been a struggle, looking around and wondering why nothing seemed to fit anymore. But since he began to detect the glitches and failures now occurring inside his old, rusty chassis and concluded that the explanation must be that he was effectively dying, every moment was a gift. And soon he wouldn't hurt anymore...

And The Jon was watching him again. It got a little creepy, having The Jon do that. He'd done it before when someone in the manor was messed up or on their way out for the last time, and it suggested that Jon might also sense Rabbit's impending demise.

Rabbit turned away to look around the train. There was a clown and a kid with a big head and mismatched eyes, wearing a propeller beanie.

The kid mumbled, "Woo."

Rabbit smiled awkwardly at them and took a seat across from The Spine. Jon sat beside him, at last turning away to stare out the window.

"Yeah... I bet Qwe... Upgrade is freaking out," Rabbit commented hesitantly. "How did Hatchy get so far?"

"Who knows? Who knows whether he really thought he could help or whether he's lost and trying to get home or whether he's just run away from home? He's always tipping the scales between infancy and wise old age. It's enough to drive a man to drink!"

"Sort of."

"Right." The Spine slumped a little as the train began to move forward. His tone was considerably softer a minute later when he added, "I miss her, Rabbit."

This was an improvement. "Bree? Of course ya do..."

"No, I mean, I really miss her," he said thickly.

"Oh," Rabbit replied, suppressing a smile.

The Spine wiped casually at his eyes. "I think... Rabbit... do you think I should ask her to marry me?"


"But... really?"

"Tha sooner tha better!"
"Yeah! The sooner the better!" Jon echoed.

"You're wound up tight, buddy," Rabbit added. "If you ain't interested in being a modern man, then do things old school if ya want. Just get yerself laid already."

"Rabbit!" The Spine snapped, glancing self-consciously back at the little boy with the clown while Jon giggled softly.

Direct hit. "Aw, I'm just messin' with ya." He grinned wickedly. "But you know I'm right."

The Spine sighed sharply. "I won't dignify that with a response. But as for getting married, well... Some things haven't changed, have they? It's still not quite legal, and girls today so often don't see the point in marriage. But to me, it's how you do things. It's how I show that I want to be with her as long as possible and make a life with her. It's why we haven't... Well, it's why I've never shared a bed with her. It's not that I don't want to, I promise you that."

He tugged at his collar and a tendril of steam coiled from it. Jon giggled into his hands and The Spine gave him a sour look.

"It's because I respect her," he said a trifle loudly. "If that's old fashioned then so be it. And... well... what if she got pregnant?"

"Oh... you might wanna talk to..." Rabbit trailed off.

"Peter? Maybe if he pulls himself together. Meanwhile I'm afraid to go anywhere near her." He smiled a little as he looked out at the scenery. "I wouldn't mind kids, and there are lots of ways to go about it now. But I can't in good conscience bring another child like Lily into the world, as dear as she still is to me. And I can't put Breanna through that. I love her so much... I never thought I could again!"

Rabbit smiled helplessly and blinked back more tears. He had to keep up appearances (such as jokes about sex, although those were mostly for fun) but deep down all he could think about was how romantic it all was. It was so embarrassing!

He glanced uneasily at Jon. Sure enough, the little robot was once again smiling gently back. Rabbit pressed his lips together and swallowed hard, blinking rapidly as he quickly turned away.

"Are your photoreceptors okay?" The Spine asked, frowning.

"Fine," Rabbit said hoarsely.

"But..."

"Whoooo!" cried the boy with the strange eyes, sticking his head out the window. The clown grinned at them.

"That's dangerous!" gasped The Spine. "Young man! Stop that!"

The boy laughed madly and plopped back onto his seat, giving The Spine a thumbs up and a wide open mouthed smile. The Spine stared back blankly and The Jon whimpered softly and looked back out the window.

"He's doin' the thing..." Rabbit said faintly. "With the thumbs up and the weird smile..."

"I... know..." The Spine faltered, staring at the boy.
"Could be a fluke..."

"How many of you like the ocean?" cried the clown to no one in particular. "It's pretty wet... huh?"

Rabbit gaped.

"Maybe they're fans?" squeaked The Jon faintly.

The little boy dropped his shoe. "Oh, Saaaaam..."

The clown picked it up and handed it to him. The Jon's chin began to tremble. They were all accustomed to a certain level of natural weirdness in life but this place had long since topped out that level and bubbled over.

"I like a freak show as much as the next bot," Rabbit said through clenched teeth, turning his back nervously on the pair. "But I'm about done with this one."

The Spine nodded and turned his face toward the window with a haunted look in his eyes. Jon was shaking audibly.

"I hate to mention this just now, but... did anyone happen to n-n-n-n-notice that the conductor don't have a body?"

"What?" The Spine asked.

"Yeah... just a suit of clothes and hair..."

"Peter told me he had a dream like that once," Jon whispered.

"Weird..."

"Let's just try and get some rest," The Spine muttered.

A woman in a bright blue saloon girl's outfit came walking down the aisle, selling cigarettes and candy. The clown bought a cigar and the little boy bought a lollipop with a propeller attached to it and one stick of banana gum.

"Wow, that takes me back," Rabbit said, trying to lighten the mood as well as avoid mentioning the fact that she looked exactly like the girl in the Rex Marksley drawings. "You d-d-d-d-don't see none of that on a train these days. This place is right outta the forties."

"Yes, it's odd," The Spine replied, looking around at the train's interior. "The city was the same way. And no one even looked at us twice."

"It's like the Twilight Zone," Jon whispered.

"And wh-wh-wh-what about that Peter Walter Museum we saw a couple or three towns back? Ya think it was maybe one of ours?"

"How could it be?" The Spine muttered. "And there have been six. It didn't say which one. Must be another Peter Walter. It's a common enough name."

"Still woulda liked to go inside."

The woman reached them and asked pleasantly, "Would you like anything from the tray?"
"No, thank you," The Spine said politely.

She turned to The Jon. "And you, sir?" He shook his head vigorously.

She turned to Rabbit and murmured, "Anything for you, Miss? I have the finest porcelain cleaner..."

Rabbit gasped, staring at her. "Uh... n-n-n-n-n-no... no thanks..." he choked. Porcelain cleaner?

"That was weird," The Spine muttered after she moved on. "She called you, 'Miss.'"

"M-m-must be tha eyelashes..." Rabbit said faintly. "Maybe she thought they looked kinda... y'know... girly."

"But Jon has them, too," The Spine said thoughtfully. "And long blonde hair..."

He flicked a nervous glance at the clown, who had lit the cigar and looked for all the world like the smoke was coming from his cheeks instead of his mouth.

"The scarf then," Rabbit persisted, his voice shaking. "And who sells p-p-p- porcelain cleaner on a train? She had to be nuts," he added as firmly as he could manage.

There was no other reason for her to think he was a girl. None.

"Right," The Spine said shortly.

"We gettin' off at the next stop?" Rabbit said hastily. "Since we got no idea where he was headed?"

The Spine had been giving him a long stare. "I guess we have no choice," he said at last.

Jon sighed.

"We'll do the same thing as we did in the last town," The Spine continued. "Ask everyone we meet if they've seen a bronze robot."

"Poor Hatchy," Jon breathed.

Rabbit wasn't feeling a lot of pity. The fun was draining right out of this adventure fast and Rabbit was beginning to think the whole thing was a royal pain. Questions were being raised that he had been working very hard to avoid. Maybe Hatchy had meant well, maybe he was just traveling to try and find his way home. Between the oddly familiar and the terrifyingly alien things around them, was getting harder and harder to care.

Peter stared at the portal and tapped his fingers. They'd been gone for almost a week and he couldn't bring himself to leave the lab for more than a few minutes. He kept asking himself whether he should have gone with them, even though he had never been offered the chance. And he kept calculating the odds of their return, the odds of a human surviving passage through the high energy portal, calculating whether a human already infused with Blue Matter and electromagnetic radiation had a higher chance of making it... or a lower one.

He'd had grand ideas of using such a portal just a couple of months ago. And then he had taken the risk and suffered the consequences. He remembered a glimpse of the world beyond before the rift had snapped shut and taken his face with it. And after that he'd lost all confidence in passing through another portal. The last one had done enough damage.
Though he still couldn't explain the libido. But he was too distracted now to notice Bree's legs as she paced, or Carolina's lips, or Bunny's startlingly large and perky... no, he had to stop dwelling on those... not to mention the rest of her body... NO.

He rubbed his neck and swallowed hard. Well, he was distracted enough, anyway.

The uncomfortable thing about Bunny was that her abrupt and unnatural transformation into a 100% natural woman had been a generous one. She had the body of a Greek goddess. A tall Greek goddess. He had the terrible feeling that where he hadn't had a "type" before, now that he'd suffered this staggering transformation, he did have one. And that, physically at least, she was an awful lot like Bunny.

This feeling was supported by his comparative lack of interest in the other Walter Girls, including the very pretty new girl... what was her name? She'd come to replace Carolina once she left in a week, and had a terrific resume in both science and performing arts. But while Peter did admire her eyes, he hadn't noticed her figure as much as he had noticed David's gaze lingering on her as she passed. That could be interesting... David was shaping up to be a rather sad and lonely man and a workplace romance was better than no romance...

Which he should be totally against! Peter felt, for the umpteenth time, the desire to slap himself across the face. He couldn't, of course...

But he couldn't lose focus. He had to take some action. His crippling anxiety had subsided somewhat, oddly enough, since Hatchworth had left. Occupational therapy, his mother had observed. Peter needed to keep busy, keeping moving, keep thinking. He needed to be needed, to be useful.

That requirement was fulfilled with a vengeance. The longer he sat and waited, the more convinced he was that he, Peter A. Walter VI, was the man for this job. He was already primed to pass through a portal. He was sure he'd isolated his error and could make adjustments to the portal to allow him to pass smoothly over instead of triggering a collapse. And despite the pounding of his heart when he thought of trying, at the same time he felt a terrific thrill of anticipation. This was who he was, this was how he was! This was science and risk! He'd had to take a position of caution and security with the Matter Masters because they were obsessed with hitting milestones before the rest of the scientific community. But he didn't hesitate to risk his own life, and losing his face was really only a moderate problem all things considered...

"Peter?"

He looked up to see David and Bunny. "Yes?"

David smiled awkwardly. "Here."

He handed Peter a sloppy parcel. Peter moved aside the tissue paper and found a wooden mask with a keyhole in the front.

"What the hell..." he breathed. How had they known?

As if in reply, David said, "I saw some sketches you made of a mask like this and had this woodcrafter guy Bunny knows try and make one. I thought maybe it might make you feel more like leaving your room. But now I hope it'll make you feel a little more confident when you go into the portal."

"It's amazing..." It was exactly like the one he wore in the dream... Wait, what? "Portal?" he said
with a weak laugh.

"You know you're thinking of going in. I would be, too. Only Bunny says she heard you muttering something about having to be saturated with Blue Matter to make it through safely. I disagree but if that's the case I guess you'll need to look sharp. And..."

He stopped. Bunny shoved him.

"What is it?" Peter asked.

"Bunny is going with you. I don't want her to, but she's pig-headed so I know she's going."

Bunny nodded. Peter forced himself not to look at her gently bobbing chest and said, "I guess so..."

"Well, better get cleaned up. I'll make sure Annie doesn't catch on." David murmured, walking out. Bunny gave a salute and followed.

"Just like that," Peter said quietly, making a note to try and think of Bunny only as the Walter Worker who never listened to anything he said. He had to do something to keep his mind off her... generous... nature...

He sighed, frustrated. He wasn't attracted to her, not the whole woman anyway. He knew her far too well. But these little snatches, these impulses... that body! It was as though he had never gone through puberty until now! And it was not a good time.

Well, she was along for the ride, and the good news was that if there was ever a female companion he could be sure would keep him at arm's length, it was Bunny. He just needed to bring along a paper and pencil or she'd most likely communicate by smacking him in the back of the head. She'd at least attempted tact before the implosion but she had very little patience now.

He guessed he could understand why. Having no face was bad enough. Having no voice would drive a person mad.

He was packed and ready with a simple backpack within the hour. Bunny was already at the portal, wearing hiking gear. He wasn't sure what she was expecting to encounter but she looked ready for it. The ensemble conjured images of Lara Croft. At least Bunny had slipped on a sweater over the shape hugging tank top or Peter might have had to insist she stay behind.

The wooden mask fit perfectly and was cleverly fitted with a see through panel in place of the keyhole. He had it firmly strapped and could see through it well. It unnerved him that David had gotten it based on drawings of his, as though the mask caused the drawings, which caused the mask. The events of the last six months were growing increasingly surreal.

David's attempt to keep Annie in the dark had failed spectacularly. His mother had kept close and now stood before him in quiet tears. He wasn't sure what kind. Logically, she should be worried for his safety, so that could explain it. Also logically, she could be glad to see him pulling his act together and getting out of his room.

But he was afraid she was crying because she was looking at her son whose face she would never see again, no matter what happened today.

"You'd better come back, Peter," she said firmly. "I can barely explain easy things to your father anymore. I could never explain losing you."
"Don't explain at all. If anything happens to me..."

"I'll find you in the afterlife and make you regret it so just don't let anything happen!"

He could see she had one train of thought and it wasn't going to be derailed. He smiled reassuringly, realized for the millionth time that no one could see it and swallowed hard.

"Right. See you soon, then."

"Damn straight."

She hugged him and he turned to Bunny. He knew some of the gestures she used to communicate in mime, and she was also working on learning American Sign Language. He'd flipped through a book on it once, but a quick committing to memory of any language was not the same as fluency, but then, Bunny herself was a long way from proficiency as well. She learned the gestures but hardly anyone in the manor could help her practice.

The more he thought about it, the more guilt stabbed at him. If he'd been focused on his responsibilities, he'd have made sure Bunny was provided with what she needed to overcome her limitations and actually interact without depending on her brother. He'd have made sure he and the staff were trained in ASL. Now he'd have to struggle with the fruits of his failure.

He also knew anxiety and depression were considered illnesses. No Walter employee suffering from either would be blamed for it in any way, and would receive medical care on the family's nickel; David and Bunny were already seeing a therapist for the trauma of the explosion.

Yet somehow he couldn't seem to extend the same understanding to himself. He was, if anything, more messed up than either of them, and yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd just been a lazy bum.

It was in the middle of these thoughts that he looked Bunny in the eye and saw something he never expected. She'd been watching him talk to his mother and he could swear he saw tears in her eyes. She blinked rapidly and gestured toward the portal.

"Oh, um... right. David, do you have their trail isolated?"

David, he discovered, was staring at the pair of them intently. That was odd. "It's glowing like a neon light, Peter," he said soberly. "How's the comm?"

Peter checked his wrist. A small phone of his own design flashed softly, waiting for commands.

"Online. Bunny?"

The only device they had on hand that Bunny could use was a watch-sized computer, fitted with a small keyboard. It didn't send remote messages, but she could type notes to Peter as needed. She checked it and nodded.

David looked at her with anxious eyes. "You sure you wanna do this?" he asked softly.

She nodded and he closed his eyes for a moment. A faint look of pain passed across his face and Bunny stepped closer, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"David?" Peter prompted uneasily.

"Then remember what Annie said," David murmured, opening his eyes. "Both of you. Because if you don't come back, I go through that thing if it kills me. And if it does, I hunt you both down in the
Bunny rolled her eyes and gestured. David laughed weakly and said, "You're right, I don't believe in an afterlife. And I'll still find you."

She sighed and patted him vigorously on the head before pulling him into a hug.

"Don't rub any more of it off," he muttered into her shoulder. "Yours grew back after the change. I'm still losing mine."

She shook her head and smiled. David glanced almost guiltily at Peter and leaned in to whisper something in her ear. Peter caught the phrase, "punch his lights out, mask or no mask." Puzzled, he looked at his mother. She shrugged.

Bunny meanwhile pulled back, flicked David gently between the eyes, and walked to the portal.

"Alright, you two weirdos," David said, prompting a sharp look from Annie, "Time to make yourselves useful."

"Really, David!" Annie cried.

The portal powered up as David touched various controls. "Ready on my mark. Three... two... wait for it..."

"When he gives the mark, I'm running for it. Whatever happens, at least it'll be over quickly," Peter whispered.

Bunny nodded and stared intently at the swirling portal.

"One!" David cried. "Portal at optimum stability! Go!"

They flicked the barest glance toward each other and ran through. There was the sensation of prickles across his skin. His face, for a fraction of a second, burned like fire. He heard Bunny cough.

And they were falling. There was a thunderous roaring in his ears. Peter just had time to gasp before they hit water.

It was cold... so cold! And Peter had never been much of a swimmer. He panicked, flailing and screaming. Something grabbed at him and he fought; his fist connected with flesh and bone. A splash of water went over his head and under his mask... he groped, screaming and choking, for open air... he broke the surface with thrashing limbs and connected once more with something firm and heard a sharp hiss over the rushing water. Was it a snake, he wondered through his panic, even as he felt strong hands grab hold of him. Something soft and heavy was on his back... his head was pushed under once more. He struggled, but he'd been laying around for the last month letting his already thin muscles atrophy, and the grip was determined. His consciousness popped like a bubble and he passed out.

He felt lips on his... or was it... air was being forced into his lungs! He coughed, took a large gasp of air, then another... there was a dark shape looming over him... he gasped again, his head suddenly felt like a balloon and his chest felt tight. He passed out.

It seemed like the very next instant that something was shaking him violently. He could hear David's frantic voice.
"Bunny! Peter! Oh no... no no no... please answer me! Please!"

The last word came out as a hoarse scream. Peter sat up, coughing dirty water and retching immediately after. He tugged the bottom of his mask loose and shook it, disgusted. Hadn't he felt something touching his lips? That must have been a dream...

He sucked in a few desperate breaths and sat with his head hanging forward. He just wanted to lay back down. He looked around wearily.

A river was rushing past beside his feet. He lay on the bank with Bunny beside him. She jabbed a finger at the phone even as he hit the button and cried hoarsely, "David! David, it's okay!"

He heard a strangled sob at the other end.

"David, take a deep breath! We're okay. We landed in a river and nearly drowned but... Hey, how did we get out?"

Bunny rolled her eyes and started typing as David, in the background, reassured Annie. The watch displayed the words, "Had 2 drown u." More typing. "Stupid."

"Hey... wait, what? You pushed me under the water?" he cried angrily.

"What?" David asked.

"U started it." She pointed to her jaw. There was a a red mark and a small bruise forming there. "Glad ur a weenie."

"Oh... Oh! I'm sorry!" he gasped. He did remember punching something... "But drowning me? Isn't that a bit extreme?"

"Seriously, what the hell happened?" David cried.

"Was u or both of us, a$$hole. Could have left u in there. Saved us both."

She was shortening her words and sentences. He hated that. "If you want to shorten your sentences to communicate better, you could start by leaving out the insults," he muttered through clenched teeth.

She shrugged. Clearly the insults were essential...

"For the love of Gort, will someone tell me what's going on?" David asked tensely. "I'm glad you're both alive but throw me a little info here."

Peter finally noticed he was still holding the comm button. "Oh... sorry, David, it's... um..." He stared for a long moment at Bunny and murmured reluctantly into the phone, "Bunny saved my life." He released the button and said quietly. "Thanks."

"UR welcome. Jerk."

"Right." Peter decided he could cut her some slack considering the trauma of the event and the whole saving his life thing.

"Wait... you drowned? Then she had to do CPR..."

"I don't see how considering I don't have a face!" Peter snapped. He glanced at Bunny. Her expression was blank. "And if she had, I have no doubt she would find it deeply revolting."
He heard a snort of laughter.

He punched the button again. "Thanks for your concern. Anyway, yeah, we fell in water and Bunny pulled me out. We're fine... well, we are now, and we're getting started. Shutting down the comm to save power. I'll check in approximately once every hour."

"Fine," David said, sounding very much as though it wasn't.

"*Please* be careful!" cried Annie's voice.

Peter could hear the pain in her tone. Not ten minutes into the search and he'd already nearly died.

"I will, Ma. See you soon."

Peter asked Bunny to look away while he rinsed out his mask in the river. They clambered out of the ravine with some difficulty. Peter rather wished he, like Bunny, had worn hiking boots instead of loafers.

At the top, they sat on the unnaturally bright green grassy ridge and stared at a long train bridge that ran above the place he surmised that they had fallen, some distance up river. Beyond that were grassy meadows passing almost to the horizon. It was like something from a desktop theme. He supposed that was why it looked so familiar.

They could see a train in the distance. By Peter's calculations (according to Bunny's report on how long he had been unconscious), it would have been near the river when they fell in.

"That's it, then," he said quietly, digging in his pocket and pulling out a small tracking device. "They're nowhere in sight, we were targeted on their Blue Matter signatures... They have to be on that train."

"All of them?"

"If they found Hatchy, yes. If not, the other three." He examined the tracking device and sighed. Just as he'd expected... "Their trail is the most fresh. I really hope they have found him, in fact. Because I have absolutely no way to track any of them if they leave the train route."

"But you have that thing! Don't they have a chip?"

"Well, yeah... If they'd waited long enough I could have given them the code for Hatchy. Instead they'll have to search every inch of whatever planet this is..."

"What? They have GPS!"

"Yeah... thing about a global positioning system is that you have to be on the actual globe in question. It requires a satellite after all, which I don't assume this place has."

"Oh. Right. So what about the chip?" she typed.

"Well, that's just what I was going to mention. My watch is waterproof. My tracker isn't."

He held the small, dripping device out to her.

"Or should I say, wasn't."

"Well, crap."
"Tell me the next stop is close..." The Spine muttered, one hand over his eyes.

"They're just yelling into the wind..." Rabbit breathed, leaning slightly out one window.

"The clown has very good balance," Jon murmured from the other side of the car, peering out another.

"It's suicidally stupid!" The Spine cried. He sat gripping his seat so hard that the metal was creaking, his eyes trained on the seat in front of him. "They were safely inside the train..."

They heard another, "WHOOOOO!" from the little boy. It was somewhat muffled by the wind; he was outside the train, riding on the incorporeal conductor's shoulder as they rocketed down a steep and winding grade.

"I want to go home," The Spine whispered.

"Uh-oh," Rabbit murmured.

"One of them fell, didn't they?" The Spine cried frantically, starting to rise.

"Nah, they're fine. But we're just starting over this sea of burning oil and it's got some interesting sea life..."

The Spine froze, halfway to a standing position. "Is there a cloud that won't stop crying?" he asked in a monotone.

"Hey, yeah! There is, way over there!" Jon cried. "Hey, Rabbit..."

"I see it," Rabbit breathed. This was just getting weirder by the minute.

"Good thing, too! Or that mountain what spits fire might get too hot!"

"Yeah," Rabbit said weakly. How was it possible? He'd written that song based on a story he and Peter had made up when the boy was small...

The Spine, to their surprise, slipped quietly to the floor and curled the best he could into a ball. A cowboy who had boarded the train with them after the last town leaned across the aisle and spoke.

"He wants ta know if yehr al-al-alright," Rabbit translated.

"I know." The Spine looked up unhappily and replied, "Kinishinaide! Buckaroo-sama..."

"Henjin..." the cowboy muttered, easing his katana aside as he resumed sitting.

The Spine clambered back up onto his seat. "I am going to tear Hatchworth a new one, so help me..." he muttered darkly, glaring straight ahead once more.

"Well, this isn't so bad," Peter said.

"Says you," Bunny typed.

Peter looked benignly out the train window. This place was certainly weird, but so was his whole
life. He could make a list as long as his leg, in small print, of the weird things that had happened in the last six months alone. The fact that he had just paid for two train tickets by singing a sea shanty was well down the list.

"And you sing off-key," Bunny continued.

"There's a reason singing robots were required by my ancestor. Not every Walter has lacked musical ability. I just happened to get the gene. Anyway, they were delighted with it and gave us the tickets so why complain?"

"I dunno. Maybe because we still have no idea where we're going."

"To the next stop to ask whether they got off the train. And hopefully the next ticket office will be satisfied with Captain Albert Alexander sung off-key, if we need more tickets."

"Yeah."

They rode on in silence. Peter felt an unwelcome pang of guilt because he knew that Bunny had been a rather good singer, once. He stared at her and hastily looked away when she looked back. She was just poured into that sweater... and it was still fairly wet, clinging to her form. And the train had a tendency to jiggle such that anything particularly soft and buoyant jiggled with it...

He knew she'd be angry that he was ogling her; he was angry with himself for it. Not only was it objectifying her, but he just couldn't reconcile the sexy, leggy woman in front of him with the insolent jackass he'd come to know before. There was an extra layer of wrong in altering his opinion of her just because he now found her physically attractive.

Besides, even if he was inclined to make some sort of move, even if he knew any sort of move, he was fairly certain Bunny would punch him right in the keyhole. David may have had an idea of doing the same but he could bet Bunny would hit harder.

A gust blew a puff of train smoke in through the window and Bunny sneezed.

There was a long, startled stillness in the rumbling train car. Peter and Bunny stared at each other. She clutched her throat.

"Um..." Peter began. "When you sneezed just now, I could have sworn... there seemed to be some sort of voice in it. I could be imagining things..."

Bunny nodded, eyes wide. She slowly removed her hands from her throat, smiled nervously and murmured, "H-hello..." and clapped her hand over her mouth.

Peter grinned. "Bunny! That's amazing! Maybe you just needed to rest it for a while?"

"Are you forgetting?" she gasped, a little hoarsely. "I had no vocal chords!"

"I realize that's what the doctors said but there had to have been a mistake! You're speaking. That doesn't just happen."

"That's what has me freaked out! If my voice came back, what else is gonna come back?"

"If you mean... look, isn't that good news? You being back to the way you were?"

"No!" she howled. "For one thing, I got a couple of inches shorter and a whole different shape, and my clothes won't fit! And I'm enjoying this! I was considering having kids, like really having them
"with my own womb, in the future!"

"I think I'd rather skip that experience if it was me..."

"Well, it's not you. Besides, I was genderfluid anyway!"

"What, really?" Peter said, surprised.

"You never saw me in a dress?"

"I thought it was for a costume party..."

"Once or twice, but the times I went shopping with Paige wearing a dress and fake boobs?"

"You did?"

Bunny let out a long sigh. "You never notice anything, Peter."

"Sure I do!"

"Oh, really? Take off your mask then."

"In public?" he gasped. "Why?"

"I have a theory. Just a quick peek, I promise."

"Well... You sure you have a really good reason for this?"

"Yeah! I'll prove that you don't notice jack."

Peter growled, "I'd think taking off my mask would be more likely to attract the notice of other people..."

"There's no one else on this stupid train, Peter."

He sighed. "Alright, but just a little and just for second."

He carefully unfastened the mask and angled the opening toward Bunny. She stared back placidly and then lightly slapped the mask onto the floor.

Peter sat, stunned, for a second or two before diving for it. Bunny kicked it under the seat.

"Seriously?" he cried, irritated. "You promised!"

"I lie."

As he started to lean over and look for it, Bunny reached out and tweaked his nose. Peter froze once again.

"Boop! Guess what else is back?" she said placidly as she crouched and tugged the mask out from under the seat.

Peter felt his face and struggled not to cry. "How is this possible?" he said hoarsely.

"I dunno," she murmured, resuming her seat. "I just know that I had to hold you under water until you passed out or we both would have died. But when I got you onto the shore, you weren't breathing. I had to at least try and revive you and imagine my surprise when I pulled off the mask..."
and your face was back!"

"And you didn't bother to tell me? Wait... whoa, whoa! Just wait a hot minute... You kissed me!"

"I gave you the kiss of life, you mean!"

"R-right... that's what I mean... I do appreciate it and all..." He swallowed. He knew it wasn't the same thing but he remembered the feel of her lips and it wasn't improving his situation. "But... seriously, why did you just stick the mask back on?"

"I figured you'd notice something was different! When you didn't, I... well, it was kinda funny."

"I could have had that thing off this whole time!" he shouted.

"It's only been a couple of hours..."

"Bunny!"

"I did tell you, stupid! You're smart but you miss things that are right under your nose. Literally. Anyway, enjoy it while it lasts."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, will we get to take them home?"

"Take what? Oh... my face and your voice?"

"Well, yeah! Is it even real? Is it some shared hallucination? Is it just one of us dreaming this? And if it's real, will we be able to stay this way when we go back?"

He leaned back, deflated. She had a point. "But... Suddenly you're not worried about reverting to being a man."

"Not anymore. Haven't you noticed my voice is higher? It's low, yeah, but not nearly bass, more like alto. And I'm not trying to talk in a higher range. This is just how it's coming out. I felt like something was stuck in my throat for a second as we came through the portal so maybe it happened then, I dunno. And there hasn't been any sign of change since my voice came back. Your face didn't come back slowly, my voice was just there, so I figure it happens all at once. I think what's changed has changed." She chuckled awkwardly. "It's almost like we got to choose what changed back. If we actually wanted it back, back it came."

Peter raised an eyebrow at her but couldn't help seeing the logic in it, even if he was still fuzzy on the science. It went a long way toward supporting the theory that he was just dreaming this. But her arguments also raised the question of the other significant change he had undergone. He'd have to wait and see whether that had gone back to normal.

"Well, there it is," Bunny sighed, handing over the mask. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

She looked out the window, humming to herself, and he stared for just a moment, wondering whether his peaceful indifference had returned, if only for a little while. The answer came quickly as he realized his gaze was moving down her body... and if she looked now, she'd catch him staring right at her breasts.

He looked away quickly and gave a faint sigh. Apparently, if her theory was correct, he preferred feeling sexually frustrated to feeling content and detached. He wasn't sure how to take that.
"It's raining again," The Spine groaned.

"At least this one's just water, buddy," Rabbit said soothingly.

They marched down the pebbly road, sometimes slipping as the rocks turned under their feet. The train had reached its last stop and the porters had told them that a person matching Hatchworth’s description had gone on foot down this road, claiming he needed to find something important. Rabbit was sure the dumb baby had gotten a crack in his brain case instead of his hatch this time.

"We can still rust," The Spine muttered. "And it's getting dark."

"You're determined to see the ba-ba-ba-bad side..."

"I'm determined to find Hatchworth and get the Hell back home. Unless he's already gone home!"

"Oh, no..." Jon said. "He's here."

"Just a feeling you have in your vortex, I suppose," The Spine growled.

"No. He's right there."

They looked up sharply and saw Hatchworth, carrying a large umbrella and a white bundle.

"Greeterings, brothers," he said pleasantly. "What brings you to this remote location?"

They stood, staring at him. They had been searching for eight days. Now that he stood before them, they were in shock... Rabbit, because he had begun to think Hatchworth was dead. The Jon because he had cried himself into stasis over him every night, thinking he'd never be found. The Spine, no doubt, because he was deciding whether to murder him. He had, the day before, accidentally let Rabbit hear a rather shocking internal monologue about taking Hatchworth apart. He'd insisted it was only therapeutic... Whether he meant the monologue, or the actions described in it, he wasn't sure.

Jon was the first to give in. "Hatchy!" he wailed, running to him.

He stopped short before hugging, however. They could all see why. The white bundle was breathing and whimpering!

"Um, Hatchy?" The Spine said slowly as Jon reached out to pat it in wonder. "What is that, exactly?"

"It is the answer to all our problems, The Spine. I had hoped to find Master Peter's face. However, it does not appear to be in the offing. So failing that, I hoped to locate something therapeutic to aid Master Peter in coping with the struggles of losing his face. It was then that I found this baby!"

The Spine put his hand over his eyes. "Hatchy, you can't just take a baby..."

"Turn on yehr fa-fa-fancy night vision, bro!" Rabbit laughed. "It ain't human!"

The Spine uncovered his eyes and snorted. "I thought that was a fluffy blanket..."

"It's a kitten!" Jon cried, delighted.

"It can't be..." The Spine breathed.
Hatchworth turned it carefully around and they could see it was. It snuffled around fitfully and made pitiful little mewing sounds. Rabbit stepped closer.

"Can I hold it?" he asked reverently. "Look at it, it's eyes aren't even open yet..."

"And it's bigger than a Bengal tiger cub!" The Spine gasped. "Can you imagine the monster that will grow into?"

"She's a big kitty alright!" Rabbit cooed, now holding the enormous kitten. "But look at her! This ain't no big cat, Spine. Not like lions and junk. It's a giant house cat!"

It was. The size was staggering but the shape was without a doubt one of an out-sized domesticated house cat. Rabbit nuzzled its fur and heard it purring. He smiled.

"I believe it is actually a male, Rabbit," Hatchworth said.

"Whatever!" Rabbit cooed, beaming and cradling the kitten. "Don't matter! He's just darling. Ain't ya, sweetie pie?"

The Spine raised an eyebrow and Rabbit turned away.

"I wanna hold him!" Jon cried.

"It's my turn!" Rabbit snapped.

"We have to find its mother. We can't tend it. It still needs milk!" The Spine argued.

Hatchworth pulled an enormous bottle from his hatch.

"Yes, fair enough. But what if its mother finds us instead? She must be the size of a big rig!"

"I waited most of a day, The Spine, while providing milk for the poor tiny baby. The little kitten's mother did not return, though its baby cried most piteously. The rest of the litter, alas, was no longer able to do so."

The other three gasped as one. The Spine's mouth froze open, mid-protest.

"If I had known there was a nest of young kittens in need of nourishment," Hatchworth continued benignly, "I would have traveled more swiftly..."

The Spine was staring at him, aghast. Rabbit watched him, knowing this, at last, would do it.

From the time he was young, The Spine had been sucker for cats. The fact that he had once unintentionally killed one, and the recent restoration of that memory, had only made him more sensitive about them.

What's more, Lily had once owned a fluffy white kitten. A dog had mauled it and she was heartbroken. The big secret was that The Spine had been heartbroken, too! Rabbit knew his brother; the revelation that this was the last surviving kitten of an abandoned litter, well... that would be more than the silver bot could resist.

Sure enough, The Spine, with lips pressed together and eyes shining with extra oil, reached out and took the kitten from Rabbit soberly, stroking its soft fur. It struggled to hold up its head and lost the battle, flopping blindly against The Spine's chest. It let out a piteous mewl and Hatchworth handed the bottle to The Spine.
"Its mother must not have possessed the instinct to tend her young..." The Spine murmured.

He offered the bottle to the large kitten. It latched on eagerly, one paw flexing instinctively against The Spine's cheek plate and the other on the bottle.

"Just like Lily..." The Spine whispered.

"Huh?" Rabbit asked.

"Nothing."

"We can't just leave it to die like the others," Hatchworth insisted.

The Spine closed his eyes, pained. Rabbit could see his chin tremble. "Poor little things," he murmured, and there was a break in his voice.

The Jon sniffled and rubbed his eyes.

"So we keep it, then?" Rabbit pressed.

"A mother cat would of course be preferable," The Spine observed with more than necessary sternness, his voice low with emotion. "But I wouldn't know where to find another one, much less this kitten's mother. We'll take it back and ask Peter what he thinks about it."

"Peter? He's probably hidin' in his room again!"

"I hope not. Anyway, we don't have any choice. Hatchworth has convinced me the kitten would have died without his intervention so we have to bring it. And we need Peter to agree before adopting alien life forms."

"Hm..." Rabbit murmured. "Good point."

Jon stroked the kitten's head and smiled. "You did good, Hatchy."

Hatchworth beamed. Rabbit glanced at The Spine, who shook his head slightly. Whether this kitten would help seemed doubtful, especially after all the worry and trouble finding it had caused, but there was no sense berating Hatchworth just now.

"Alright," The Spine sighed. "I guess we start back the way we came and hope for the best."

Peter and Bunny stood in sulky silence beside a building. Bunny was singing softly, no doubt making the most of her voice while she had it. She certainly wouldn't be using it on Peter.

There had been a bit of a mishap not long after their interesting discovery. Bunny had stood to get something out of her backpack. Peter couldn't help noticing her figure when it was stretched right across his vision... Really, she had the most remarkable body! She had tugged at the item and the ripple had passed along her entire body, and Peter couldn't help but feel another pass along his! He felt his neck grow warm... her backpack had shifted and was closer to Peter's side and she was leaning awfully close. He could smell roses... She was panting a little with the effort of reaching up...

And it was at that moment that the train had slowed suddenly and Bunny had been thrown straight into Peter's lap! She'd fixed him with a shocked look and scrambled back to her seat, where she remained, her backpack forgotten, staring with great intensity out the window until they had reached the next stop. He had done the same. Damn that Blue Matter anomaly!
But it was just too awkward, not being able to communicate. It was time to face the embarrassment.

"Are you gonna talk to me at all?" Peter asked quietly.

Bunny sang slightly louder.

"It wasn't what you thought, y'know," he tried.

She gave him a look of extreme skepticism.

"Really!" he insisted.

Bunny stopped singing with an angry huff. "Dude, I'm not just any girl, okay? I've been in your shoes and I know a boner when I feel it."

She had him there. "I have a lot of gadgets in my pockets!" Peter muttered, blushing.

"Yeah, you do! Pretty impressive gadget for such a scrawny nerd."

What, really? "That's not what I... you know what I... Cut that out!"

"What's the matter with you all of a sudden, anyway? I get that you've been through a lot but since when are you attracted to women?"

"For the last time, I wasn't..." He frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

At long last, Bunny looked off-balance. "Well... I just sorta thought you were gay."

"No!" He'd thought it was common knowledge that he'd been asexual. "Why would you think that?"

"You were never interested in any of the Walter girls. And you were real good buddies with Sam..."

"Sam's a really nice guy! Everyone is buddies with Sam! You're buddies with Sam!"

"Yeah, alright. How about all that time you spent hovering when David and I first came to work for you? You followed him all over the manor."

"Yeah, while he installed a completely new network! I had to learn to use it." And David was hilarious when he got frustrated with the equipment, Peter recalled.

"Your long friendship with Michael Reed...?"

"Is my long friendship with Michael Reed! I need all the friends I can get! Is there a name for the kind of sexism that assumes all friendships must be concealing a sexual attraction?"

Bunny sighed. "Alright, so you're not gay. Not really the point. Just don't be getting any ideas!"

"Me? I never had an idea at all!" he lied. "I was just sitting there when a ton of shapely woman hit me in the crotch and then yelled at me for having a bottle of sunscreen in my slacks!"

"If that's the metaphor you want to use..." she mumbled, her face red.

Peter groaned in frustration, pulled out the sunscreen and jammed it in front of her face, exasperated. "You saw me putting the stuff on, Bunny! Honestly! Look, you're a very attractive woman but... but..."

She was staring at him, for good reason. He'd just called her attractive!
"I... I... I honestly did not have a... an... what you think I had." Not that he'd ever admit, anyway. "I was thinking about cold fusion and trying not to laugh. Yeah, I used to be ace. Not gay, just not interested at all. And yes, I'm feeling a bit more... heterosexual at least, maybe more, I dunno. Time will tell..."

"Wait, I was right? You are attracted to women now? That's crazy, why would you suddenly be hetero just because you got your face blown off?"

"Why did you arbitrarily end up as a female mime?"

"I don't know!"

"Alrighty then! There's more to it than we understand. You're a shapely woman and I... I guess I'm now a male cishet demon. But I did not have any intention of making sexual advances toward you! Honestly, Bunny... we just know each other too well to even consider it. Right? And it's not like you're attracted to men."

"I'm bi, actually," she mumbled. She took a deep breath and let it out. "But you're right. I'm not into you at all. Sorry, nothing personal..."

"That's a stupid thing to apologize for," Peter said bluntly.

"Yeah, it really is. Well... then... I'm sorry I freaked out."

"Thanks. I'm sorry I'm now a part of the problem. If it's any comfort, I'm not gonna go around sexually harassing anyone."

"I couldn't imagine it, no. Reaction and action are two different things."

"What?"

"Oh, just referring to the... um... bottle of sunscreen." He raised an eyebrow and she shrugged and turned away. "So what now?"

He gave her one more long stare and muttered, "Same as everywhere else. We ask around and get back on the train."

They walked past the train depot and out onto a dusty street. It looked a bit like Arizona, Peter thought, as they looked around for signs of life. After half an hour of roaming and seeing no one, however, he was beginning to think the place was deserted.

"Is that... no, that's a tumbleweed." Bunny said, deflated, as they found themselves once more nearing the station. "Well, back on the train I guess?"

"Yeah, this place creeps me out. It's like someone built the ideal town but forgot to add people."

"Maybe we imagined this up along with your face and my voice. It kinda looks like something from a movie."

There she went with her fairy tale theories again... Peter didn't answer. He was staring at the building in front of them. "Museum of Peter Walter?" he said, surprised.

"What?" she asked. "Holy crap! It actually says that!"

"Quite a coincidence. I mean, it's a common enough name..."
"Coincidence? You're like a god here or something, Peter..."

"Are you nuts?" He'd never dream up some empty town!

"Seriously, this place has you all over it," she said, pulling him by the arm toward it. "And now there's a museum with your name on it, too? Well, that just needs to be looked at. I never could get into your head. Now's my chance!"

"Come on! It can't be connected with me, can it? No one here knows me from Adam!"

"No one's here at all! It's even emptier than the other places we saw."

"Why would they have a museum about me?" he scoffed.

"Colonel Walter, then! He's pretty famous. Aren't you curious?"

"Well..."

She had dragged him to the entrance by this time. He stared up at the sign, boggling. What if she was right? He took mental inventory of all the past events he didn't dare let Bunny see. He'd never live some of those things down!

"It must be open," she said. "The doors are... hey, there aren't any doors!"

"Damn right," Peter said absently, still mentally ticking off items. "I'm always running into them. Why do you think I've been having all of you start taking them down?"

Bunny grinned a troubling, wicked grin.

"What?"

"I wasn't sure until I saw the missing doors, but I bet this isn't about the Colonel. I'll bet it really is a museum all about you."

"Then it must be pretty small..." he laughed weakly, starting to back away.

She strode inside before he could stop her and he hurried after.

"Tickets please!" thundered a voice even lower that The Spine's.

Bunny had stopped short even as Peter entered. She was staring up at a huge, skeletal blue face. On closer inspection, Peter realized it was robotic.

"The Hell..." she gasped.

"Greetings," it boomed. "I am..."

"Beebop..." Peter breathed.

"What?" Bunny gasped.

"That's his name. He was my imaginary friend..."

"The Hell he was..."

"No, really! I was even thinking of building an out-sized automaton like him to help refurbish Delilah."
The face tipped slightly sideways. "Ah, I see. Peter VI. You will not require a ticket, sir. You are already here," it intoned. The walls shuddered.

"Oh..." Crap. That supported her theory! "We were just leaving," Peter said hastily.

"No, we were not. Those robots could be anywhere by now! We just have to hope they come back this way, and while we wait, I'm going to see what's in this museum."

"But we might miss them! Better head back out where they can find us!" Peter said brightly.

She fixed him with an almost hypnotic stare and he cringed inwardly. Bunny had always had a hell of a stare but the feminine version had something wholly other going on and he felt his resolve shatter under her gaze.

"Well..."

"The lady will require a ticket," Beebop intoned.

"Pony up, Peter. I'm not going back out until I've had a look."

Peter sighed, defeated. "She's my guest. I get a guest, right?"

"Of course, Peter."

He shivered. Beebop hadn't been much of an imaginary friend but the similarities between it and this robot were too close.

"Alright. Bunny?" he said, defeated.

He held out his arm as if to escort her inside. Bunny fixed him with a look of shock and he blushed and started to lower it. She was probably pissed off by the chivalrous gesture! But to his surprise, Bunny hastily slipped her hand around his arm and smiled. He suppressed a shiver. She really had ended up looking very pretty after the implosion...

But there was still that fiendish edge to the smile and he chided himself by being swayed by a pretty face. She was relishing this moment of potentially seeing right into his soul. If this crazy place knew about his aversion to doors and about Beebop, what secret could he have that they wouldn't know?

They entered the museum.

"It's my turn to hold him!" cried Rabbit.

"He so soft!" Jon sighed, gently handing the kitten over. "Like a big marshmallow!"

"Sayyy..." Rabbit said with a half smile. "That would make a great name for him!"

"What would?"

"Softy!"

Hatchworth shook his head, still staring out the window of the train. The Spine was pretending to be asleep, surfacing from beneath his hat only when it was his turn to tend the kitten.

"Ugh," Jon muttered. "That's a crummy name."
"You got a better idea?" Rabbit growled as the train shuddered to a halt.

"Hatchy?" Jon said, ignoring him. "Um..."

"Yes?"

"What are those?" Jon said, pointing at the floor.

They all looked down to see. Even The Spine surfaced and stared. Hatchworth was wearing his usual austere black and red attire but on his feet now, instead of his trusty black boots, were a pair of blinding gold and blue shoes. Hatchworth looked down as though he was just as surprised as they were.

"Yeah, Hatchy," Rabbit led. "What's with the fancy shoes?"

Hatchworth smiled. "It doesn't matter."

"I kinda think it might matter, actually..."

"Where did they come from?" The Spine pressed.

"I bought them for fifty large..."

"Fifty large?" cried Rabbit and The Spine together.

"Fifty large what?" asked The Jon innocently.

"No, Jon, fifty large means..." The Spine began.

"Pickles," said Hatchworth.

"What?"

"I bought them for fifty large pickles."

They stared at him.

"Hey, I remember this place," Hatchworth said suddenly, looking out the window. "It was the one with the Master Peter museum."

"What? We saw it, but I never dreamed..." The Spine said suddenly, apparently deciding that learning the origins of the shoes wasn't worth the struggle. Rabbit had to agree. "I thought that it must be another Peter Walter. It's not an uncommon name."

"I visited it. It is indeed about Peter Walter."

"Well, yeah..." Rabbit said. "But not one of ours, right?"

"Oh, yes indeed. Ours."

"Which one?" Jon asked, excited.

"Why, all of them!" Hatchworth said cheerfully.

They all stared at him. "You're kidding..." The Spine said.

"No, indeed. It tells of our Pappy, of the twins, of poor Master Peter Walter IV... the most
remarkable things are in that section...

"And the last two?" Rabbit interrupted.

Hatchworth blinked as if woken from stasis. "Why, yes. Such adventures they have all had, and will yet have! Would you believe me if I told you..."

His words were lost in the shuffle as the other three hastily exited the train, with Hatchworth close behind. A minute later, the fancy shoes entirely forgotten, they were walking together toward the center of town.

"Aw, what a big boy!" Bunny cooed. "You look so grown up!"

"That was my college graduation, Bunny. Do you think you could lay off the cutesy talk now?"

They'd found that the museum told tales about every Peter Walter in his family, but Bunny had hauled him straight into the hall with a VI over the doorway. She had then proceeded to speak in condescending baby talk at every exhibit until he was ready to smack her.

"But you were so cute!" she purred. He shook his head. "Oh, look, this one's all about Upgrade. Hm, they're pretty complimentary for the most part."

"Well, that's something, considering what a fiasco that was."

"You built her an entire robotic body and installed her matrix in it! You thought that was a fiasco?"

"She was lost for two years inside her own head! It was humiliating! And terrifying, because she was my friend before and if I couldn't bring her back around, Rabbit was gonna murder me! I was lucky it worked at all."

"I thought it came out alright. That program you wrote was brilliant."

Peter stopped short. "Really?"

"Well, yeah," she said. "I mean... you're some kind of savant, right?"

"I guess, though that usually implies an accompanying mental impairment..."

"Well, yeah, but you were like one of those whiz kids in Real Genius? The one who started college at, like, 12?"

"Chris Knight." He smiled. "I love that movie..."

"Exactly..."

"Even though a laser wouldn't really do any of that..." He snorted. "Popcorn, really?"

"Don't spoil it."

"Sorry." He looked at her. "I just thought you thought I was an idiot."

"You are."

"Thanks."
"Everyone is stupid about something. You've got your blind spots the same as everyone else."

"Oh. Yeah... I suppose," he murmured as they moved forward.

"Uh-oh..."

"What?"

"Current events. Looks like we're seeing The Spine's accident."

They looked soberly at the photos of the crash site. They were followed by close up shots of the damage.

"Worse than I remembered," she sighed. "Poor guy."

"I don't get it," Peter said as he examined a photo of The Spine laying on a table in the airplane hangar. "How can they have all this crap? We didn't take that many photos."

Bunny frowned at him. "Haven't you figured it out?"

"What?"

"Well... look, it's just a guess... You're the genius and I lean more toward the imaginative, but I might be right..."

"What?" he insisted.

"I think we're inside your head."

"That's what you said about the exhibit, yes, getting inside my head. Or... what do you mean? Literally?"

"I mean the whole place, dummy! The train across the countryside when you love trains? Could also be a metaphor for thought? And don't forget all the weirdos and this museum with your entire genealogy from the past hundred some-odd years. I think this has something to do with you, all of it. Your face was even here."

"So was your voice!" he said, irritated. What a lot of nonsense!

"No, it was a voice to match my body," she murmured. "And I appreciate it, really. It's been great and I'd keep it if I could. But it isn't real."

"None of it?" he asked anxiously, touching his face. "You think everything here came out of my head?"

"No. I think this is some actual place in Kazooland, but you somehow... maybe in the blast that got your face... leaked on it. I meant it, you have some kind of mental command over the place. But something here must be real or we couldn't actually physically be in it, could we?"

"But... no, Bunny. There are so many holes in this. If this came from my mind, why are you still a woman? Why am I... why am I still heterosexual?"

She raised an eyebrow again.

"Well?"
"Latent desires, possibly?"

He blushed to his toes.

"Don't be so full of yourself," he growled.

"Remember when I fell in your lap? Don't tell me what I felt because it wasn't any damned bottle of sunscreen. I'm not mad, alright? I could even call it flattering but I don't want to encourage you..."

"Look, I already said..."

"I know, sorry. But it's just that the train slowed when it did because of the tunnel."

"So?"

"So there were no tunnels on that track! It was an open plain! You heard them talking about it, didn't you? They slowed down because it appeared out of nowhere!"

"Oh, just... stop it, okay?" he muttered. This was becoming such a mess... "So you're suggesting my unconscious mind is controlling things and that I secretly want to fu... um... that I have a latent attraction to you? Is that it?"

She raised her hands in a gesture of surrender. "It's just a theory. Sorry if I'm picking at a sore spot."

"It's not that, it's... look, I really wasn't thinking of... y'know... really! I'm not trying to get you into bed, okay? Have I even made one move?"

She sighed. "Look, Peter... I'm not saying I'm so utterly irresistible. I'm just freaking shapely and you're dealing with some difficult changes. If your unconscious mind kept me female and yourself hetero I can only assume it's because you like feeling the way you do... generally. Any woman would have the same effect as long as she had a good figure."

"I guess." He supposed it wasn't vanity for Bunny to say so about herself... she was more objective than most about her own newly made female form. She really hadn't had enough time to develop an inflated ego about it. "But who says I'm the one in control? What if it's you? You got blown to Hell by Blue Matter, too. You could have imagined this creepy empty town, you could have given yourself a voice..." He grinned his own wicked grin. "You could be responsible for that bottle of sunscreen! Did you ever consider that?"

"I believe I said I was responsible for it..."

Hadn't she said any woman would have the same effect? She sounded proud of herself! "You know what I mean!"

"Yeah, but I'm not suffering from some new latent attraction, am I?" she said, frowning.

"I don't know. Are you? Or maybe an old latent attraction?"

He was fully aware that he was baiting her, but when he thought it over, well... she had said she was bisexual. He didn't consider himself attractive but maybe she did... And if so, it was possible that she had even before the implosion. The thought gave him more shivers.

"Maybe we'd better drop the subject... It's just causing problems," she said firmly.

"Sure, now that I turned it back on you..."
"Look," she said quietly, ignoring him, "do you want to keep looking at this place? It seems to be causing you a lot of suffering..."

He had her on the run, alright! But she was right, although the museum wouldn't have bothered him if it weren't for her color commentary!

And she was obviously not going to discuss the possibility that she was doing her share of wishing or magic or whatever the Hell she thought had made this place. He wanted to argue with her cartoonish theories, but nothing made sense here. It didn't give him much basis for argument.

At the same time, he was angry and frustrated that she just had to keep twisting that knife about his exasperating physical attraction to her all while avoiding the possibility that she might be feeling some of her own. She insisted on acting like he was some adolescent who had never so much as kissed a girl. He hadn't been very enthusiastic about it, but he had certainly kissed girls. A few of the college girls had taken an interest in him not long before graduation and he'd learned a thing or two while making out with them...

But none of them had been as attractive as Bunny, come to think of it, and he felt he should assure her that she wasn't as ordinary as she seemed to think, that she was really very lovely, but that would bring back up the whole argument about him wanting her body. Not that it would matter, of course, since she insisted she wasn't attracted to him at all and why did he even care about that? And why, again, why did she keep bringing it up? Was the lady protesting too much?

He glanced around, unsure what to do next, and noticed the next exhibit with a start. Uh-oh... He wasn't the only one who would be suffering if they looked at that... as angry as he was, he wouldn't wish that on anyone. He decided this was not the time or place for this argument.

"Actually, maybe you're right. We should be going..." he said quickly.

She looked at him for a moment, frowned, and started to turn in the direction he was looking.

"Bunny, the robots could be passing us by..." he said hastily, taking hold of her arm.

But it was too late. She shrugged off his hand. "The portal accident..." she said faintly, slowly moving toward the display.

"Please, Bunny... it's too soon..." Peter objected.

"Stop. I just want a quick look," she murmured. "The damage is done anyway."

Peter followed, feeling sick as they approached a spread of photos showing the HoW in shambles, blue smoky hallways, and further aftermath of her accident.

"That's where The Spine found me," she said quietly, looking at one photo. She pointed at another. "David fell there when he ran out..."

"Okay, you've seen it..."

She had stopped before a large photo of her room. She was curled in the bed and David sat nearby. "That's us! It must have been right after I broke down... David stayed by the bedside and..."

She leaned in, peering at the photo. She seemed to be looking at David, who was slumped forward with his head in his hands.

"Peter! Is he crying?"
"I... don't know..."

"He is!" she choked. "Why is he crying over me?"

"It was a traumatic event..."

Her hand was on her throat, her voice thick with tears. "He must have kept it quiet... I had no idea..."

"He didn't want to worry you." Why couldn't she have just left it alone?

"But... Peter, look at him! He can't even look at me there!"

"Bunny..." She was growing more agitated and he had no idea what to say!

"It's... it's because I'm so different!"

"No..."

Her face contorted with misery but she continued to stare at the photo. "Oh... oh, man... It's just that I asked him," she sobbed. "I just had a feeling he wasn't dealing with it and... and... and he said he was okay with it and... he said he could handle the changes... But he's sitting there crying!"

"That's not why..." Peter began, panicking. Where had this come from anyway? She'd been so calm a minute ago!

"He said... he..." She bit back a wild sob and ran out of the museum.

He bolted after but couldn't manage to catch up to her until she stopped of her own accord halfway to the train depot. She rested her head against her arm, leaning on the wall of the nearest building. He saw her shaking and heard the half-screaming sobs and slowed his pace, uncertain how to proceed.

"I've messed things up so much!" she howled.

He knew she wasn't speaking to him but he had to respond.

"You and me both," he said gently.

With a soft hiss, she angled her head away. He could hear her gulp loudly. She sucked in a deep breath and held it for a moment, as though trying to stop crying.

"Don't!" he said, pained. "It's okay to cry about it! It was bad... stuff that happened to you..."

He sounded like an idiot but she turned a tear streaked face toward him and he felt a little pang of pity. She was an absolute mess but somehow it wasn't unattractive.

"He wants his brother back," she said hoarsely.

"Even if he does, it's not like you can do anything about it! It wasn't your fault..."

She shook with more sobs and he realized he had chosen a rather poor direction to take. It was true, of course. David was content with a twin brother, and he had found it distressing when that brother was completely transformed into something foreign to him. Of course he had. But Peter had never gotten the impression that David had been unable to accept his sister, either. And it was also true that David had never blamed her. From what he remembered, if had been quite the opposite.

Of course. He knew what to tell her, now that he'd had a moment to think calmly.
"No... Bunny, he was crying then because he'd just nearly lost you... and because... because he felt guilty."

"For what?"

"He got out and you didn't. I remember Michael telling me that David said he felt like he'd left you to die. And in the photo... well, he saw how depressed you were and thought that you didn't want to be a woman. He thought you felt like a man trapped in that body, because that's how he would have felt. That was why he was crying, I promise!"

She dragged her sleeve across her face and stared at him. "Why didn't he tell me..."

"Would you tell him something like that?" Peter scoffed. "Just open up and tell him out of nowhere? You didn't even tell him you liked being a woman, apparently, until later. You two, honestly. So close and yet so far."

She stood, staring for a moment. Her face crumpled and the tears began again. "That dummy..."

Peter felt an odd little stabbing in his chest. He was still getting used to her himself, but seeing her like this... he just felt like he needed to do something more. Maybe it was false chivalry, maybe he wouldn't have done it if she was a man still, maybe she'd punch him in the face, maybe...

Another soft sob escaped her lips and he melted. With a sigh, he reached awkwardly toward her.

"Look... I know we've had our differences but if you need a hug or something..." he murmured, expecting her to accuse him of coming on to her.

But as soon as the words left his lips, she turned rapidly and grabbed onto him. Peter, startled, lowered his arms around her and gave her a good squeeze. He didn't hug much but he knew they only felt nice if they weren't too gentle. And Bunny obviously needed a good solid hug.

But what surprised him far more was the realization that he had needed one very badly himself. He fought his own round of tears as she squeezed, resolving to hug his mother just as soon as he saw her. Hugs were good.

"Thanks. I know I've pissed you off a lot but... I've been really worried about a lot of crap and David is literally the only person who understands me. So I've just had to bottle this up..."

Her voice shook and she swallowed hard.

"I'm going to fix that, okay?" he said softly. "I'm sorry I let myself freak out so bad and didn't get the staff learning ASL..."

"Let yourself? What choice did you have?"

"Well... you were so pissed off at me for still being in my room. You scared the hell out of me..."

She sighed. "Yeah... I was thinking it was tough love. Understanding and caring hadn't worked and I'm crap at both anyway. But trauma affects everyone differently, Peter. You didn't do it on purpose. I guess you just needed a crisis to pull you out of it."

She was still resting against his shoulder. He felt no particular drive to stop her. In fact, he felt that he could stay like this all day.

"So you just think I'm all better now?" he asked as her hair tickled his cheek. It felt nice.
"No, stupid. But it's a big step and you've proven you can take it."

"When did you get so smart?"

"Rude."

"You know what I mean. You seem to have some pretty good insight."

"I'd be pretty stupid if I hadn't learned a few things from my experience. Besides, you pick up a lot when you can't talk. You have to listen instead."

"Ah."

He had no answer for that, at least, nothing he could bring himself to vocalize. He really wasn't used to having anything nice to say to Bunny. He certainly had never expected to have any reason to be this close... Her hair really was awfully soft against his cheek... not to mention her body against his...

There was a loud wolf-whistle right behind him.

"Rabbit..." scolded The Spine as they approached. "Peter, please tell me you have a return portal, seeing as how you've seen fit to come after us..."

Peter sighed. It had been such a nice hug. Then again, their timing was not so very bad... especially considering he'd put the sunscreen into his backpack...

"I'm not going to bother to explain..." he muttered, turning as Bunny hastily released him. "But, yes, we do have a..."

The robots gasped and he stopped. Peter was delighted to see that Hatchworth was with them, but at the moment, he realized, the focus was fully on another thing that had been missing: his face.

"Oh... right..." Peter said. "I wish I could explain but the scientific rationale is just... not... here."

"But... y-y-y-your face!"

"You found it!" Hatchworth crowed.

Rabbit was holding a fluffy white bundle and staring over the top of it. "I thought Hatchy was just bein' his u-u-u-usual crazy self..."

"We all did," The Spine agreed.

Hatchworth scooped Peter up in a hug. "You have escaped your vault!" he cried joyously.

"Hatchy..." Peter laughed.

"And your face is back..." The Spine said slowly, still not taking it in. "How?"

"It's probably only temporary," Bunny said. "My theory is..."

Rabbit squeaked loudly in alarm, his eyes now fixed on her. The bundle in his arms began to mewl loudly.

"You found your voice, too?" Hatchworth gasped.

"Wh-wh-wh-what else did ya find?" Rabbit cried, looking Bunny up and down.
"Really?" Bunny said with a scowl. "Um, this probably is temporary, too, and it's the only thing I got back so *quit staring at my crotch, Rabbit!*

Rabbit looked at the sky. "I wasn't lookin' at nothin'." He looked back at her just as quickly. "Damn, that's a sexy voice, though!"

"Really?" she gasped.

"Hell yeah!"

"Oh..."

Peter, at last freed from Hatchworth's hug, smiled at her. Bunny blushed. Peter looked away, doing the same. She was probably just flattered by the compliment...

"Wait, what are you holding?" Peter cried, suddenly turning back to Rabbit.

"Hatchy found him! He was all alone with no mama!" Jon said brightly.

"Is that a cat?" Peter cried, astonished. Bunny reached out to pet it.

"Sure thing!" Rabbit cried brightly. "Just a poor lil orphan kitty!"

"Little?" The Spine snorted.

Peter felt his heart rise right into his throat as Rabbit brought the enormous kitten closer. He'd always wanted a little white kitten. That was because he'd never known this size was available.

"Ya wanna hold him?" Rabbit coaxed.

"Can I?" he breathed. Peter took the kitten in his arms. "Oh, he's heavy!" he laughed.

"He is?" Jon said blankly.

The kitten purred and Peter thought his heart would explode. He grinned at the robots and they beamed back.

The Spine smiled. "He really does need someone to look after him."

Peter stroked the soft white fur. Bunny was doing the same.

"What a cutie," she sighed. "He'll be enormous as an adult, though..."

"We have lots of room," Peter sighed, pressing his face against its coat. He couldn't be sure if he'd have another chance to feel the soft fur against his cheek. Now that the robots had turned up, he would have to activate the return portal.

"Can we see tha museum before we head back?" Rabbit begged. "Hatchy says Pappy has a whole wing..."

"Go ahead," Peter sighed. Why try to hide anything anymore? "Just try to be quick. I guess I'll stay out here with this little guy."

"I will, too. I've seen enough," Bunny said quietly.

"See you soon, Marshmallow!" Jon cried as the robots hurried into the museum.
"Hay! We was gonna call him Softy!" Rabbit shouted as they went inside.

"Marshmallow," Peter said. "I like that."

"It fits," she agreed.

They found a shady corner near the museum entrance with a place to sit and took turns holding the heavy kitten.

"You okay still?" Peter asked Bunny after a long silence.

"For another minute, I think. My leg isn't numb yet."

Peter chuckled.

"Hey..." she murmured.

"Hm?"

"Just... You meant it, right? When you said we knew each other too well to be attracted? I mean, more than just superficially?"

He sighed. "Well, yeah. Sorry. I mean, sorry if you had wanted to... never mind."

"Why are you sorry? It's your choice, isn't it?"

"And yours."

"True. But why the apology?" she pressed.

"Oh, I dunno. I guess... look, I'll level with you. I was no judge of this before, but I have to tell you that, well, it's like I said before. Since the transformation, you are really attractive, okay? I mean... yeah. Why lie about it? You're smoking hot."

She looked at him in shock.

"Just sayin'. Take it at face value from a newcomer to the concept. And Rabbit was right about the voice, too. Oh... sorry... guess that... never mind. But even without it you could have any guy you want. I mean, if they like girls... so then you could have any girl if they like girls... ugh. You could have any person you want who is remotely attracted to females, okay?"

"Except you, of course."

"Right... wait, what?"

"Oh, I didn't mean..." she stammered. "I just mean that if I was interested, you aren't!"

"Right!" His heart was pounding. He was pretty sure it was from fear. "So if I've had any trouble it's been purely primal. Just plain old libido. I'm not proud of it but there it is."

She stared at him for a long moment. "This little guy is getting heavy. You ready to take him?" she murmured at last, face flushed.

"Oh, um... yeah. Here..."

She carefully lifted the sleeping kitten into his arms but struggled to gently pull her own arms free. It
was necessary for Peter to lean in closely and slip his under hers. He could feel her breath against his cheek and looked at her for one breathless moment... She looked back and their eyes locked...

He swallowed hard. He had the kitten in his arms now but she wasn't moving away... Her gaze moved to his lips and back to his eyes and he felt dizzy. Was she...

"Seen enough. Can we get home already?" Rabbit asked sharply, startling them both as he stomped past.

Bunny leaned back with a scowl, leaving Peter sitting with his heart slamming against his ribs. He could have sworn for one breathless moment that Bunny had been thinking of kissing him! So maybe it was just as well Rabbit had returned when he did. David would never have let it go...

"David!" Peter cried.

"What?" Bunny asked as the other robots hurried to join them.

Rabbit was slumped onto a bench nearby. The Spine looked at him sidelong. Peter wondered what had happened. Whatever it was would have to wait, however...

"We never contacted him! And the comm is off so he can't contact us!"

"Oh, Hell!" she cried.

"The cat is on that arm, I can't access the comm..."

Bunny reached under and removed the watch. As it powered up, she looked up at Peter. He looked back and he could almost feel it... she had been thinking about kissing him! He didn't know what to think of that.

Bunny held the button at his nod and he said hesitantly, "David? Come in..."

"Who do I kill?" said a very weary voice. "My money is on Peter. Mostly I think I need a long vacation to an insane asylum."

"David..."

"It's been six hours, you ass. Six hours without your supposed hourly updates, six freaking hours since you nearly freaking died! Your mom is worried sick!"

Peter had the terrible urge to say, "Sorry, Dad." Instead, he muttered, "Look, we got a little distracted..."

There was a heavy silence. "What kind of distracted?"

"What? How many kinds are there?"

"Is Bunny alright?"

"Yes, of course! She's right here!"

"She'd better be, and you better not have pulled anything!"

"Like what?"

"I've seen you ogling the staff, okay? I don't understand it but I couldn't miss it. So you better not
"Come on! I've kept my hands strictly to myself!" Peter cried, astonished. How could they have noticed so much when he wore a mask? Bunny shook her head and chuckled softly.

"So help me," David swore, "if she tells me otherwise when she gets back..."

"I'll tell you now, idiot. He's been a perfect gentleman," Bunny said, grinning.

There was an odd spluttering sound from the comm.

"You okay?" Peter asked quickly. "I, uh... I got my face back. Temporarily. And Bunny got her voice. I'm sure that's also temporary."

Silence.

"David?"

"Bunny..." replied a suddenly very small and quiet voice.

"You okay?" she said.

"Say something else... you sound like yourself and yet different..."

"I know. Peter... um... I apparently have a woman's voice, not my old one. I think we found the place that Peter was connected with at the time of his accident... or something... There's all sorts of Walter brain runoff around here, like a walk in Peter's mind."

"Ew."

"Excuse me while I take my kitten somewhere and cry," Peter moaned.

Bunny punched him lightly in the shoulder and smiled. Peter sighed.

"Kitten?" David asked.

"I'll explain later. Everyone's here so we're coming back, David," Peter said wearily.

"But... will you still have the voice? And your face? You said..."

"It was temporary, yeah. I don't think we'll be able to bring them home. But we can't stay here, can we?"

"I don't know..." David said tightly. "Look, I... I don't know what to tell you..."

"It's okay," Bunny murmured. "I love you, okay? While I can still say it out loud, I just wanted you to hear it. And I'm happy. Even without a voice. I'm content with this... all this. I'm coming home. Got it?"

"Got it," David replied, his voice cracking slightly.

"Activate the return portal, okay?"

"Right. Oh... I love you, too."

"Thanks."
Rabbit was making weird little chuffing sounds as they gathered at the portal. Peter sighed. Another thing he'd neglected... Rabbit's maintenance. It sounded like he was having trouble with his bellows. But as he looked on, Rabbit wiped furtively at his eyes and Jon began to pat his back soothingly. Peter glanced at Bunny questioningly, but she was looking at the kitten and a terrible thought occurred to him, driving out other concerns.

"Do you think this is real?" he asked Bunny anxiously.

She looked at the kitten. "Crap, I don't know..."

Hatchworth and The Jon both smiled. "It's real, Peter," Jon said. "Trust me. It's your cat now."

There was just something about The Jon. Science couldn't explain how he knew things, but it was as sure as the morning that he did know. Peter nodded.

He sent the two through the portal with the kitten and turned to the others. The Spine looked very eager to pass through but was looking at Rabbit. Rabbit looked back. There was a smear of oil under one of his eyes.

"You go on, I'll be right behind you," The Spine murmured, winking.

Rabbit opened his mouth and closed it again. He smiled.

"Oh, right," he murmured, winking back.

"What?" Peter asked.

Rabbit said, "Spine needs some help with something. I'll get outta yehr way." He turned hastily and rushed through the portal.

"What's up?" Peter asked.

The Spine sighed. "Not what Rabbit thinks. That can wait. Did you see all of your exhibit?"

"Uh, no... it got awkward."

"It did indeed. If only some people would admit that and quit being martyrs..."

"What?"

"Peter... Wanda has been looking through a lot of old papers and schematics. I think you need to help her with that. Rabbit..." The Spine sighed. "It's not my place. But you need to find her... his original specs. That's all."

He touched the brim of his hat and strolled through the portal.

Peter looked at Bunny. "What was that? 'Her?' This is about that theory of Wanda's, isn't it?"

"Like he said. Not my place either. I have my suspicions, but..." She shrugged.

"You, too, being all cryptic? If anyone has a relevant view about this, it would be you. That's all you're going to give me?"

"No. You also get this."

She put her arms around him and gave him a hug. He sighed and leaned into it, holding her tightly.
She rubbed his back comfortingly and he sighed. He'd never known this side of her. Surely it wasn't all the feminine hormones.

"Thanks," he whispered. "Bunny... I'm still scared. I've done all this, gotten out, gotten a cat, but I am still so scared..."

"I know."

Neither made a move to let go, to follow the robots through the portal. There was no one here to interrupt, now. They could finish the hug they had started. It was just a hug, after all. No harm in a hug, no commitment, no promise of more...

So why was his heart pounding? He closed his eyes and rested his head against hers. Her touch tingled and he shivered. In the process of rubbing circles over his back, she had rubbed rather close to his butt.

"You're going to make me think you're actually interested in me before long," he said quietly, feeling a bit frustrated.

"Don't take it personally," she said, her voice trembling. "If my theory is right, once I pass through that thing, I won't have a voice anymore. I'm stalling."

"We could stay," he said abruptly, surprising himself.

She looked up at him, astonished. "We could...

"Just pretend that we're the people we always were and that we were never boss and employee and fought about stupid work issues..."

"Just be a girl with no back story, no one asking stupid questions about my body or my orientation..."

"Just a guy, kinda bright, not really a genius... No big family to look out for..."

"Maybe someday..."

"Someday what?"

"If we change our minds..." She looked into his eyes. "Maybe we could just have a little family instead..."

He felt a violent shiver. This was getting serious! "Maybe," he whispered as tingles ran up his neck.

He wanted to say something to break the spell but for just a moment it all seemed so easy, right down to the kids. He could see in her eyes the struggle, the conflict, as she considered for one long moment of doubt what had been going through his head all day... though it had originally been a mental picture that did not have Bunny in it, just an idea of staying behind and keeping his face, he could see that it might have room for her... Her eyes passed over his lips again and there was nothing to distract either of them from following the impulse.

He couldn't breathe... he knew he shouldn't do this. He shouldn't give way now after having endured being near her all day. It was some kind of late puberty, not true love. It was hormones, not a mutual affection. He shouldn't submit...

"I think we'd better head through the portal," he whispered as she slid her hand just a little further
down his back.

"Yeah, they're waiting..."

She was so close, he could feel her breath on his lips.

"We know each other too well," she breathed. "We both agreed it would never work..."

"Right. You hate me..."

"That's a strong word."

His eyebrows raised. "Don't you?"

"Do you?" she countered. "Hate me, I mean?"

"I hate you just as much as you hate me..."

"Peter..." she sighed, her eyelids slowly slipping shut as she leaned toward him.

He let out a wild sigh of longing and gave in at last, closing the little space that remained between his lips and hers. He felt a split second of anxiety, afraid that he had misunderstood as she briefly stiffened and just as quickly melted into the kiss. Her lips were so soft... all of her was! She still smelled of roses... He tried to hold back, but his self-control splintered under the strain that had been building all day. For her, maybe longer... The question all day had been about Peter's attraction to Bunny, but she was making it clear that tension had existed on both sides.

It was an eager kiss, wild, frightening. He curled a hand into her hair and she shivered, his other hand slid down her back... His hair stood on end and his heart thundered.

At the same time, his logical mind observed that David would be wondering what was keeping them. And it would be the very thing he dreaded, the thing he had vehemently opposed. Not just a kiss, but this kiss! David would be absolutely horrified if he saw Peter and Bunny locked in such a mad embrace...

And so help him, Peter found that made it even more delicious, knowing he was taking such a risk. But he felt as if his blood was boiling! Had she ever been the pig-headed man who had fought him at every turn? All he could feel, all he could see was the woman she had become, all danger and promise and passion!

His comm beeped and they gasped, breaking the the kiss reluctantly, still embraced, staring breathlessly at each other in a kind of mutual shock as David's voice came through.

"Is the portal still there, Peter? What's up?"

"Crap..." Peter wheezed.

"If this is how you act when you hate me," she breathed, "I'd hate to see how you'd act if you loved me."

"Me? You've been going on all day about me being the one who..."

"I know... I don't know what's come over me..."

"Peter! Bunny! Dammit to Hell, what's happened this time?" David barked over the comm.
Peter half released her, awkwardly pressed the button on his comm and gasped, "Just... enjoying a few more minutes of... having a face and a voice." In the next moment he cringed as he realized how out of breath he sounded! Too late to take it back now. "We'll be right there."

"Make it quick!" David growled, and Peter had a feeling he would be facing a very angry Matter Master when he passed through. It was a good thing David never exercised...

"I... are you okay? I didn't... I didn't take advantage of you or anything, did I?" he said softly to Bunny after he turned off the comm.

She laughed weakly. "No, Peter. I wanted it as much as you did."

His neck grew warm. Oh, wow... "Oh. But... it's stopped... I guess?"

"Yeah. I guess what happens in Kazooland, stays in Kazooland," she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

Why was he such a sucker for her tears? Wiping his own, he hugged her once more. "We can't stand each other really," he murmured. "And our lives are back there..."

"No matter how much we've screwed them up. We both need to work through what's happened to us before we get any ideas about... other people. That's probably why we're both acting this way... Trauma, y'know. We're not in love. We're needy."

"I suppose you're right," he sighed, wondering if she could be right. He'd thought the same thing, that it was nothing more than primal need, that he never could stand her before... they always locked horns. But that could be taken different ways.

"Pretty sure we'd end up regretting it if we did stay here... together," she breathed.

"It might take us a couple of months to come to our senses, though..." he murmured, grinning mischievously.

She stared up at him, turmoil showing in her expression, and his grin faded. She was really struggling with this, with the idea of effectively eloping with him! He couldn't believe it. And yet... so was he.

As they looked at each other, wavering, it seemed to Peter as though he could see a life unfold for them, living here just the way they had imagined, a vision of being together in one of the strange, old-fashioned houses that lined the streets, sitting in bed reading, having lunch, kissing at the door... A whole life together that was as unreal as the empty town that one of them... or was it both of them?...had imagined.

"Peter... do you see it?" she breathed.

"Yes... I don't understand..."

She took his face in her hands and looked intently into his eyes. He felt as though she was trying to see inside his head. He stared back, trembling. And as they stood staring, the street around them seemed to fade away and they stood inside one of the houses. And he knew deep inside that this was their home. He knew it wasn't real. But in that moment, how he wished it could be!

And still the images unfolded as if before his very eyes... A dark-haired shapely woman and a tall, lanky blonde man entwined in white sheets, warm breezes blowing through the opened windows... crickets, soft giggles and murmurs and more intimate sounds drifting into the night air. Slipping into
slumber side by side as the pulses faded. Laughing for joy at the news that their love had spawned a new life. Touching her stomach as their child grew inside her, wondering if it would be a boy or a girl, holding her as she gave birth and then carrying his new daughter in his arms as he leaned down to kiss her mother, teaching her to ride a bicycle, sending her to school, gray hairs appearing on each of their heads as their daughter's life was just beginning. Watching her grow, mature, and find her own love, giving away the bride, dancing at the wedding, waving as they drove away, and still returning to the old, airy house full of shared memories, the tall blonde man still making love with the shapely, dark-haired woman in the white sheets as the crickets sang and soft breezes blew the muslin curtains. And by the gods it was his life, her life, their life together, as if they had lived every minute...

And he was once again standing in the dusty street, holding her and staring into her tear-filled eyes, knowing that, like his face and her voice, it wasn't real. It was two people who didn't really exist. It was borrowed, it was a gift that must be given back... it would stay behind.

"It's going to fade when we leave, isn't it?" he breathed. "Like a dream. We'll just feel kind of embarrassed and maybe remember having kissed, and won't speak of it again."

"For you, maybe. It was my dream to begin with. But I might forget that for a moment, you were part of it. There's some real world here with giant cats and who knows what else, underneath. But we've been living in a dream since we came here. Maybe I imagined it, maybe it was you..."

Peter sighed. He wasn't willing to offer the suggestion that it was the two of them together wanting it to happen, wanting it to be that simple, wanting to leave their problems behind and become someone else and not feel like anything stood in the way of just being together.

But this town was a dream. They couldn't live here. And going back meant dealing with trauma and anxiety and other people and remembering who they really were. And that it was a fact that they would be at each others' throats constantly.

"You're right," he sighed. "It's a dream."

"So I guess, if it's not real, there's no harm in this." Bunny smiled and leaned forward, giving him one last, soft, lingering kiss. It felt like a goodbye.

Then she shook her head and turned away.

"For what it's worth," Peter whispered, looking steadily at her back. "I have the feeling we would have set those white sheets on fire."

She turned her head slightly and grinned, but still didn't face him. "Maybe. Maybe someday, back there in the real world, we'll remember that beautiful dream and find some way to put up with each other long enough to find out whether any of it was possible."

He had no doubt that certain parts of it were possible, but he wasn't willing to suggest it. "Maybe. I think you can do better than someone like me."

"I doubt it." She sighed and turned back around, wiping her eyes. "I'm not gonna treat you any better, y'know."

"Damn right."

"Ready?"

He pulled out his mask with a sigh. They both looked at it. Bunny closed her eyes and swallowed.
"Peter, how can you stand it?" she said thickly.

He took one last lingering look at her but no beautiful visions returned. They had come from Bunny's dreams, not his. And she had put them away. Maybe it was just as well that he would probably forget them...

"I don't know," he murmured. "I just... have to. Shall we?"

"Wait... one last thing..."

He looked at her sidelong, half expecting (and honestly hoping for) another kiss. Instead, she turned and let out an enormous evil laugh, followed by a bloodcurdling scream and one long operatic note. She topped it all off with a deafening whoop and turned back to Peter.

"You okay?" she said breathlessly, laughing as he gaped at her.

"What? Oh, I just didn't expect that!" he said, grinning to hide the fact that she had scared him half to death.

"You ever had laryngitis and woke up to find you had at least part of your voice back? You just have to talk even though it still hurts? It's like that only backwards. One last go at the vocal chords. I needed to blow off all that tension." She grinned and shouldered her backpack. "Oh, and Peter..."

"Hm?"

"Might want to properly store that bottle of sunscreen."

"Oh, no... for crying out loud!" Speaking of tension! He blushed fiercely and removed his backpack, holding it as casually as he could manage in front of his groin. It had been a very passionate kiss, after all. And the second one... whew. And everything else...

She smiled sheepishly. "Thank you, Peter."

"For what?"

"For the kisses, the hugs, the... ahem... subtle compliments..." Her eyes flicked toward his crotch and his blush deepened. "And... I don't know what just happened, but that. That little feeling that I once belonged to someone and he belonged to me and we had a life and a baby and... My fantasies always seem to turn dark in the end. It may have been my dream, but I have a feeling that the beautiful parts of that one were pure Peter Walter."

"Bunny..." He didn't know what to say.

"So yeah, for all of that," she finished. "Thank you."

"Oh, don't mention it," he said weakly, trying to carefully make adjustments under cover of the backpack. "To anyone. Ever."

She giggled and turned toward the portal. "Alright. Let's do this. Ready?"

He nodded and they walked through.

David and Annie gasped as one. Now that he was alert to it, Peter could feel it. For a second, his face was there. And in a flash, though he couldn't see what they saw, he knew his face had vanished when blue lights began to flicker from the walls.
In the same moment, Bunny cried, "Da-" and clutched her throat.

"Bunny!"

She let out a gasp of pain and worked her mouth as if to speak, even as he arrived from the console. David pulled her into his arms as she began to silently sob.

"It's alright... I'm sorry you couldn't keep it. I don't know how the hell you even had it but I'm so sorry."

He twisted around to stare daggers at Peter, who was strapping on his mask the best he could without letting his backpack slip out of place.

"And you," David said tightly. "If you had a face to punch, so help me..."

"What?" Peter asked, for once glad that his face wasn't visible. If David only knew what had happened...

Wait... what had happened? He had the strangest feeling of self-consciousness, as though he and Bunny had slept together, but when would they have had the chance? He could remember the feel of her skin and they had shared at least one very deep, intense kiss, but sex? There hadn't been the opportunity or the time...

"You just stay away from my sister!"

"Isn't that up to her? Only as it happens it's not what you think, okay? I didn't do anything to her!"

"Uh-huh. Only you were taking a few minutes to enjoy having a face! Or did I misunderstand just how you were enjoying it?"

No. No, he understood perfectly, Peter thought nervously.

"David, now, honestly!" Annie cried as she hurried over to hug them both. "Would Bunny ever kiss Peter? They can't stand each other!"

David, breathing hard, was still glaring. Bunny patted his cheek and he looked at her, sighed, and visibly relaxed.

"Sorry," he growled softly.

But Peter, behind the mask, was smiling even as David turned once more to hug his sister and began to stroke Bunny's back in an almost fatherly manner. They were exactly the same age, and yet it was obvious that he had indeed accepted the changes and he was proving it by being a textbook protective big brother.

Peter looked at Bunny and saw the little smile beneath the tears. She'd noticed it too. She closed her eyes and sighed.

As the twins at last walked out, Peter sank into a desk chair, crossed his legs, and sighed. "It was back, Mom. I had a face in there. But I had to come home, y’know? I had to..."

She leaned down and put her arms around him. "Thank you, sweetheart. But just between us... Did you kiss her?"

"No. Well... She kissed me. Twice."
Annie leaned away. "Really?"

"Yeah. Weird, huh?"

"Oh, not really. She's very pretty these days and I always found her to be rather feminine."

"No kidding? You should tell her that..."

"So was that all? Just a couple of kisses? Or..."

"What? No! No, Ma..."

"Oh, I don't suppose you'd want to tell your mom about that sort of thing anyway..."

"No, Mom, we didn't... anything!"

He was positive they hadn't... Yet still it nagged at him. He could just see, for a split second, a lovely airy room and a beautiful woman wearing only a draped sheet, smiling and looking through her eyelashes at him... No. Nope. He refused to think further. Not with his mother around, anyway. He could only assume he must have dozed off on the train and had a dirty dream.

"She's just... trying to fit into her skin, I guess." Skin... he shivered. "I'm a man and she's learning how to be a woman."

"She could just like girls. There are plenty out there doing the same."

"She's trying to figure it out though," he said quickly. "Don't read too much into it. She... she figured I'd like a kiss while I still had lips and she wanted to see if she liked kissing a man so it all worked out."

"Oh, that's cute!"

"Mom..." he groaned. Good, she bought it. "I gotta... go see about building an entire room-sized litter box and a giant robot."

He rose and she put her arms around him. "A what? Well, never mind, sweetie. It's just good to see you up and around, okay?"

She smiled and leaned down to kiss her on the head, stopping with a sigh when he remembered. "Thanks. And I mean thanks for being patient with me. I'm still pretty edgy. But I won't give up again."

"And even if you did, I never would."

To his surprise, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him right on the mask. He giggled.

"Let's go see about that giant kitten," she said. "And the... another robot? Are you sure?"

Peter chuckled as they walked out. He had Beebop all planned. And after that, or maybe before, Peter thought, it would be time to see about one troubled Rabbit.
Yes, I know, I said I wasn't shipping them. I gotta point out that Peter was weak for a hot body and Bunny was weak for a dream of a life that just wasn't going to happen. They had to go back and once they were there, they'd be the same people they always were. And those two people differ on just about every subject that comes up. They could get married and have a kid and end up divorcing and becoming so obnoxious that they'd both be banned from the wedding and no one would go home with anyone. Just sayin'.

Disclaimer: This chapter (and more to come) talks a lot about gender and changes to it physically. I don't say it's about the whole transgender issue thing because I tend to tilt inclinations so that my characters don't suffer too much. I mean, they have to suffer a little. It's fan fiction. But there's usually some kind of restitution.

But yeah, I don't have the heart to inflict full blown dysphoria on Bunny. As such, I've made this Bunny genderfluid... she would have been okay being male, she's okay being female. She's tough and rolls with it and I've tried to make her that way from the start (the art Bunny drew of her, well, she looks freaking dangerous, would not want to cross her). She has other conflicts but they're interesting ones...

The closest I come to being trans anyway is being sort of obliviously non-binary much of the time and getting weird looks as a teenager for it. It's not something I comprehend from the inside. You might say I'm taking their word for it. So this isn't so much speaking with their voice, speaking for or against, trying to educate, trying to advocate or criticize, promoting personal beliefs. None of the above. What it is, as with the whole fic, is science fiction. Me guessing what it would be like to experience this abrupt change and having to accept it and hope those who love you can too.

The same goes for Rabbit. Because if anyone is having gender dysphoria right now, it's not a human. *wink*
Hints and Suspicions, Denial and Lies

Chapter Summary

Things are getting more and more obvious. A series of encounters leads Rabbit to the brink. He knows what he feels but not why and he's getting less and less rational about it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Well, who's that walkin' down tha street? Hey..."

GG stopped singing and ran as quick as she could to the figure walking into the room.

"Mommy!"

Upgrade giggled and sat down on the floor. GG curled onto her lap. The Jon came in soon after and joined them.

"Daddy!" GG crowed, nuzzling him. Jon laughed.

"That's... interesting..." said Matter Master David, pausing in the doorway.

"We can't have kids and she's just a baby!" Jon explained. "So we adopted her!"

"Oh, that's nice. That means she goes with you the next time you travel, right?"

Jon stared at him, his smile fading. David stared back and walked on down the hallway.

"That was weird," GG said. "Are you gonna travel again?"

"I dunno. Not unless Pappy gets his repairs. I can't leave him in such a state!" Upgrade said with a trembling voice.

Jon put his arm around her. "I wish she'd just get on with it," he whispered.

"What?" Upgrade asked, blinking.

"It's okay, Mama," GG purred. "You have me! I'll talk Grandpappy into getting repaired!"

"Oh, sweetie, no..."

"Why not?"

"He's very stubborn..."

"I can handle him! I'll be right back!"

GG was up and trotting out the door before they could stop her. She heard them gasp but continued at full gallop, checking every room.
But when she found Rabbit, he was in stasis in his own room. He sat, slumped in a chair, his clockwork ticking loudly, steam hissing every half a minute or so. She expected him to come out of stasis but he must have been so tired that he couldn’t. That was all she could figure because she hadn’t seen him rest in weeks.

She stood and stared at him for a long time... almost a whole minute... blinking her large eyes slowly and thinking about her options. She could just yell in his face or zap him with her tail. That should wake him up.

But she glanced around the room first and saw that it was so full of interesting stuff that she would be a fool to miss a chance like this.

She tiptoed to a table by the window. It had little figures on it... The first few looked like souvenirs... a matchbook with words written on it in French beside a tiny glass bottle shaped like the Eiffel Tower. A tiny metal cup* on its side, with dirt on it, next to a photo of a group of humans all wearing the same outfit. A figure of a spooky little house that read ”Haunted Mansion 1969” on the base.

In the center of the table was an oversized metal bug antenna in front of a photo of a pretty robot, and crayon drawings in a stack. The one on top showed Rabbit holding hands with a little girl. It had Julia written on it.

GG decided she needed to learn to hold a crayon so that she could color, too. She would make the most beautiful drawings of all! She toddled to the closet.

The door was open just wide enough for her to lever it further open with her snout. It was full of dresses. GG gasped.

"Grandpappy really is a lady!" she cried.

There was a hiss and a hum. It sounded like Rabbit's startup sequence! She eeped sharply a split second after and ran for the door.

"Hey..." a voice said softly.

She looked back in horror. He was awake! She put on a burst of speed as she turned her head back around.

Unfortunately for her, she had increased speed before assessing the distance remaining between her and the open doorway. GG slammed face first into the wall beside the door and hung there, whimpering, her snout jammed into the drywall.

"He's gonna break me in pieces for snooping! I just know it!" she thought, flailing and trying to scream for help.

Strong hands gripped her head carefully and began to wiggle it side to side.

"No!" she screamed, but all that could be heard was a keening squeak. The drywall gave way abruptly and she fell back on top of Rabbit, who was crouched behind her.

"Don't pop my head off!" she wailed, trying to get back onto her feet.

"What?" Rabbit asked with a soft giggle, holding her firmly.

"I didn't do it! Lemme go!"
"Didn't do what?" Rabbit asked. "If ya m-m-mean the hole in tha wall, I hate to tell ya but it was definitely you."

"It was an accident!"

"Course it was. Why are ya so upset? Are ya hurt?"

GG slowly stopped struggling and lay there, staring upside down at Rabbit with her large eyes. "You're not mad?"

He smiled. "Ya know how many walls I've broken? Just be more careful. Why were ya goin' so fast anyhow?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing?" he asked, puzzled. "Does Upgrade want me or something? Is that why you came in?"

"Um... um... yeah... kinda... I didn't touch anything!"

Rabbit raised one eyebrow and looked around the room.

"I didn't see anything either!" she wailed, trying to escape once more.

"The closet's open. Were ya lookin' at Honey's dresses?"

"No, I wasn't! Wait, who's Honey?"

"My wife. She died a long time ago. Guess I just couldn't bring myself to get rid of any of her little dresses."

Little dresses... They were little, weren't they? Too little for Rabbit. She'd had it all wrong. GG wanted to run and hide with Hatchworth in the vault.

"Lemmego..." she mumbled, looking toward the door longingly.

"Is that how you ask, kid?"

"Please may I be excused?" GG said sulkily.

"Yes, you may. Tell Upgrade I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir..." She didn't see fit to mention that Upgrade hadn't asked to see him in the first place.

Rabbit sighed softly as GG stood. She cocked her little head at him for a moment then hurried out, pausing in the hall. She could hear the dry, grinding creak as he worked his way to a standing position and heard him murmuring. Peering around the corner, she saw him looking into the closet. He pulled out a dress and stared at it, frowned for a moment, and held it in front of him, looking into the mirrored closet door at his reflection. With a deep sigh, he put it back. GG slipped away before he could turn and see her.

"Mama?" she squeaked timidly as she met Upgrade in the hallway.

"What is it, baby? Did Grandpappy get mad?"

"No... he's gonna come see ya!"
"Oh, good," Upgrade said faintly. "But..."

"Ima go color now!" GG crowed, bolting down the hallway.

"Alright... wait, how?" cried Upgrade as GG fled.

"Pappy?"

"Hm?" Rabbit grunted contentedly.

Upgrade sat up from where she had been snuggled again his shoulder. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Never better."

Silence.

"Pappy..." she sighed. GG had told her exactly nothing and she just couldn't let it go any longer.

"What exactly are ya wo-wo-worried about, baby?" Rabbit sighed.

"You're not happy."

"What, just 'cause a g-g-g-g-g... person ain't always wearin' a Cheshire Cat grin, that means h-h-h-h-h... they ain't happy?"

"It's not just that. You're stuttering more..."

"They can f-f-fix that by tightening a few bolts," Rabbit scoffed.

"Since when? An' it's not the old stutter, either. It's just a certain kind of stutter."

"There are kinds?"

"Apparently so, because you've started stuttering over words you don't want to say."

"Bullcrap."

"Pappy!" Upgrade said sharply. "You usually stutter but you don't usually change the word you were gonna say!"

"So?"

"So you sound like Porky Pig!"

"So I'll stop," he said tightly, looking at a painting on the wall.

"So you're not gonna tell me..."

"Tell ya what?"

She sighed huffily. "Tell me why you don't want to use those words!"

"If it worries ya so much, I'll go get Peter to fix tha stutter."

Rabbit got up hastily and started for the door.
"That's not what I said, Pappy!"

He stopped in the doorway and looked back at her. "Don't you worry, baby. A few adjustments and I'll be a new m-m-m-m-m-m..."

He froze, staring at her. Upgrade folded her arms and smirked.

"Musician..." he said feebly.

"Really?" she asked dryly.

"I was gonna say that all along."

"Were you really?"

"Yeah!"

"Uh-huh."

Rabbit sighed at last, closing his eyes. Upgrade saw the pain in his face. It hurt her, too. But what was causing it? Surely it wasn't what everyone was whispering... why would he be so upset about that? It would be so interesting and new!

"It's my problem, okay?" he whispered. "I'll always be your Pappy so that's all you need to think about. The rest is on me. I can cope with it."

"You think it's as simple as that? Just telling me you're miserable but that I don't need to worry my pretty little head about it? You're so old! Pappy, please tell me what's wrong!"

He smiled and shook his head. "Maybe it's time for you to take another trip with Jonny, baby."

Upgrade clapped her hand to her mouth, hurt. He was usually so upset when she left! "You... you want me to go away, Pappy?" she whimpered.

Rabbit grimaced and looked away. "I... gotta go see someone about them adjustments," he muttered, striding out.

Upgrade sat for a long time with pale oily tears slipping down her pink copper cheeks. She didn't mind taking another trip. She'd only stayed so long this time because she was worried about Rabbit. But the idea that her Pappy would answer her question by telling her to go away!

She wanted to go cry on Jonny's shoulder, but she couldn't break down now, when her Pappy needed her! This was too much to dismiss. She needed to find out more than whispers and rumors could tell her. And she needed help. She needed someone who understood the problem intimately.

She rose and went looking for Matter Mistress Bunny.

Rabbit heard a soft chiming and looked up sharply. He'd been sitting and staring at Col. Walter's grave and feeling guilt for pushing his baby away and lying to her.

But the little chimes meant that Bunny was there, and was seeking his attention. She could only "speak" if he looked at her and the chime was her way of getting others to do just that.

"Rabbit," she signed. "I wonder whether you could assist me with something."
"Sure, baby... um..." The usual terms he bestowed on the women of the Manor still felt a little strange when used on Bunny. He didn't know if he was being a primitive jerk or if it was just that she'd never been especially girly around him, but it just felt wrong to do it. "Sure."

"I need help with a hem."

"With a what, now?"

"A hem. I need to hem a dress and no one else is the right height."

"Ya want me ta wear it?" he cried.

"Yes. While I pin up the hem."

"But I ain't got... y'know... boobies," he said slowly, glancing briefly at hers and feeling a strange excitement at the idea of trying on the dress. In the same moment, he felt the same stab of anxiety he always did when it happened.

"We can stuff it with something to make it hang at the right height. Then I can make sure it's long enough."

"Well..." What if someone saw? He knew the rumors were already flying.

"I'll lock the door. It'll just be for a few minutes. I need something special for my first date as a girl, okay?"

Aw, Rabbit thought. Who could say no to that? Though he couldn't help wondering who she was going to date... he hadn't seen her with anyone... except Peter.

He chuckled to himself. That was a secret. He was just amazed she could even look Peter in the eye... well, in the mask, anyhow. But that was between them. He meekly followed her inside.

Ten minutes later, he was standing in Bunny's room, in only the black spandex body stocking he had taken to wearing. It muffled the rattling and made him feel... well, he liked how it made him feel. He could swear Bunny glanced at it and smiled. Whether she was admiring his shape or laughing at the stocking, he didn't know.

She held the dress out to show him and Rabbit gasped. It was beautiful!

Bunny smiled and handed it to him. She signed, "We'll have to put a bra on you first and put some inserts into it."

"Do what now?" Rabbit asked, admiring the chiffon skirt layers.

"I have a bra from before the accident. I used to dress up sometimes."

"No kiddin'?"

"Yes. I was always... I always thought maybe I was more than a little feminine."

Rabbit stared. "But you were a guy!"

Bunny shrugged. "I was okay with it. I was okay changing. I was not okay with having surgery to change me so it worked out pretty well."

"Havin' what?" Rabbit asked as Bunny began to slip a black bra over his arms.
She let go of the bra and signed, "Surgery. To change the sex organs."

"Oh! That sounds freaky..."

"That's what I thought. It's worked for some people but, yeah... Scary. I figured I'd stick with working parts."

"Hm. But... you always felt like a girl? Or did it... just sorta hit you one day outta nowhere?"

"Oh, I think I always felt that way."

"Oh," Rabbit said, disappointed. For just a second there, it had seemed as though... but no. Nothing had changed.

Rabbit looked down at the bra, bemused, as Bunny stuffed what looked like water balloons into the cups. He jiggled experimentally. They swung alarmingly.

"Metal ones were better," he murmured just to himself.

She slid the dress over his head and he looked in the mirror as she zipped it up. "Hey, the waist is too big," Rabbit said. "You got a real nice shape after the... thing. This shouldn't fit me..."

She looked puzzled and signed. "The waist stretches."

"Oh."

"You look kinda weird without any hair. I have a couple of wigs here..."

"What..."

She selected a long pink and black one and carefully settled it onto his head so as to keep it from slipping on the copper surface.

For the first time since 1986, Rabbit stood staring at himself in a mirror, dressed as a woman. The last time, he'd felt deep embarrassment. His feelings about it this time were... complicated.

He stared at his shape. The waist was a bit wide but looked narrower in the dress. The bust looked fine now that it was covered. The wig was downright pretty. It brought out his eyes...

The tears started before he knew it.

"I gotta take it off!" he choked.

Bunny stared at him in surprise. She hastily signed, "Careful, you'll rip it! I worked hard on that!"

Rabbit trembled and sobbed quietly. "I gotta take it off. Please take it off me..."

She stood before him and looked him square in the eyes. "You look beautiful," she signed, smiling a little.

"No..."

"Yes. You do. Beautiful."

"Why are you doing this?" Rabbit choked.

"I wanted you to understand, Rabbit. Don't you like how you feel in the dress?"
"I feel different! It ain't me!"

"Are you sure?"

"Pappy made me a man! I'm a guy!"

"But are you sure? And so what if he did, if you feel like a girl?"

Rabbit gasped.

"Have you... felt like a woman, Rabbit?"

"No!"

"Sometimes people hold things back for years and years... it's okay..."

"I haven't!"

"But if you feel like..."

"Please don't tell the others!" he cried, anguished.

"But..."

"Promise!"

"Fine." She sighed. "I promise."

"Take this off me before I tear it apart!"

She held her hands up in a gesture intended to pacify. "Alright," she signed. "Just hold still."

The dress was off in a minute along with the wig, and Rabbit was out the door with his pants and shirt in hand.

This was getting worse by the day. Everyone knew! Bunny had always felt that way, but Rabbit? Woke up one day with his wiring all twisted and it never went away. Sure, he was a robot, but everyone knew him as a guy. He was Upgrade's father in every possible sense. And Pappy had made him this way. What else was there to consider? He must be breaking down, cracking right down to the core.

He would just have to raise the stakes, show everyone they were wrong. But he knew. He was broken, dying. It couldn't be long now.

Two days later:

"Don't stare, sweetheart," a woman murmured, hurrying her child along through the park.

Rabbit chuckled softly. The Spine cleared his throat unnecessarily.

"They don't mean nothin' by it," Rabbit said.

"Still, it feels so awkward."
"Yeah."

They continued walking. They had done a small park performance and decided to walk the long way around while Hatchworth and the others went back the short way. The Spine was hoping to be able to get Rabbit to talk about what had been happening.

He creaked when he walked. It wasn't reassuring. He'd creaked in the past but it was worse now and he wasn't letting anyone do maintenance anymore. He'd also taken to wearing a form fitting body stocking under his clothes, and The Spine suspected he was trying to keep all his parts inside.

But attempts to engage him in conversation failed. Rabbit was unusually quiet these days as well. The Spine found that more disturbing than anything else.

"Dammit, I don't have time for this!" grumbled a voice nearby.

The Spine looked over at a nearby parking lot and saw a man scowling down at a car that had been left parked across several spaces, blocking the cars parked there. He strolled over to him.

"Can I be of assistance, sir?" he asked politely.

"Is this your car?" the man asked, looking up. He froze, staring. The Spine smiled.

"No, sir, but I believe I may be able to move it out of your way. Which is your car?"

"I... um... oh... that one, but how can you possibly move a car by yourself without the..."

The Spine was already lifting one end of the car and easing it backward.

"Holy Hell..." the man breathed.

"That ain't just makeup, laughing boy," Rabbit chuckled. "But I think he needs some help."

Rabbit started to lift the other end of the car. The Spine stopped abruptly.

"No, Rabbit."

"The wheels are l-l-locked! Yehr gonna break something!"

"You're gonna break something if you try to lift it. I can move it far enough on my own."

"Pshht, fine," Rabbit grumbled.

He should have known better than to think it would be that easy. Even as he was just getting the car past the curb, he felt the other side of it lift and staggered backward, barely keeping his feet.

"Rabbit..." he gritted.

*Just a few more steps! We'll leave it on tha lawn! That'll teach 'em!* Rabbit sent.

*Put it down! You're straining too hard or you'd be able to talk!*

"I'm fine..." Rabbit choked.

"Put it down!"

In answer, Rabbit began to push the car toward him, forcing him to back across the lawn. He finally came to his senses and put the car down, thinking that would stop Rabbit. To his horror, Rabbit kept
There was a hideous grinding sound and Rabbit's end of the car dropped, bouncing before settling into the grass. Rabbit stood, shocked, bent over and still hanging on with one arm while the other hung at a limp and awkward angle beside him. He released the bumper and poked the damaged arm. It swung like a badly weighted pendulum.

The Spine put his hands on his hips and frowned.

"Well, this is embarrassing," Rabbit said with a nervous laugh.

It was only when they arrived home that it had all gone to Hell. The Spine had pressed Rabbit to get repairs, and Rabbit had responded by locking himself inside the HoW, one of the few rooms that still had a door.

"Rabbit! Open the door!" The Spine roared.

"No! This is how I want it!"

"Can we discuss this like rational adults?" The Spine barked.

He glanced uneasily around at the assembled people. Robots, Walter workers and family alike were staring at him in astonishment. Even Rabbit had fallen silent.

"Can we discuss this, please?" he repeated, correcting the obvious mistake.

"Yes, Pappy! Let's talk about it!" Upgrade wailed.

"I ain't discussing! Just let me fall apart!" Rabbit bellowed, his voice trembling as if with tears.

"Oh, honestly!" The Spine roared, startling the humans. "You're just feeling sorry for yourself! You can be repaired!"

"Leave me alone!"

"I'm breaking this door down, so help me!"

"I knew doors were trouble," Peter sighed.

"Don't you dare!" Rabbit screamed.

The Spine scowled and aimed a fist at the door of the HoW. Before he could act, however, there was the sound of electrical current inside the room. The lights flickered.

"Oh, no!" gasped The Jon. "Rabbit!"

"Pappy!" screamed Upgrade. "Uncle Spine! Break the door! Break the door!"

He was just about to do it when they heard the soft snick of the lock. He staggered forward with the momentum of stopping the blow.

Upgrade looked at him apprehensively and opened the door. Rabbit lay flat on his face. The Spine rushed in and scooped him up, alarmed. There was still a faint current flickering across his body. He had a little smile on his face...
"What the Hell happened?" The Spine gasped.

Upgrade looked up. After a moment, she gasped.

"Qwerty!" she shouted. "Bad girl!"

"ROGUE AI NUTRALIZED. U MAY NOW ENTUR," Qwerty intoned. After a pause, it added, "AND WHO R U CALLING A GIRL U TART?"

"Qwerty!" she barked angrily.

"He's been knocked offline by a voltage spike..." Peter murmured, keeping his hands clear as he looked Rabbit over.

"What?" she howled, her face a mask of disgust. "Oh, that's so... so icky! Qwerty, what's wrong with you?"

"IM JUST A SOLE WHOZ INTENTIONS R GOOD O LORD PLEEZ DONT LET ME BE MISUNDERSTOOD..."

"Quiet, Qwerty," The Spine murmured. If he hadn't been so worried, he would have been fighting laughter.

"I don't get it, what's wrong with a voltage spike? He needs this maintenance..." Peter asked.

"Well, look at him! He probably enjoyed it!" she cried, covering her face. "Gross!"

"Oh... oh, that's right, he... oh man... wow... um, look, what's important is that we can get him to the lab. Spine?" Peter said. He sounded like he was laughing.

There was a snort like a horse sneezing from somewhere in the assembled Walter employees. Bunny put her hand over her mouth but it was clear she was the culprit.

"Geez, Bunny," Sam sighed as David snickered beside him and Peter glanced over his shoulder at both of them, his giggles barely suppressed.

"Stop it!" Upgrade barked at them, apparently oblivious to the fact that The Jon had started as well.

The Spine sighed and lifted his brother carefully. This was all very amusing but the time for waiting was done. Rabbit wouldn't admit anything was wrong. Wanda was still poring over old documents. And he just wanted his brother back.

But he would settle for whatever Rabbit was now. Brother, sister, neither. Just as long as he wasn't on the brink of shutting down for good.

Peter wasted no time in getting to work. "I'm only fixing the arm for now, okay?"

"What?" cried Upgrade. "But..."

"You know that's risky enough."

Upgrade sat on a lab stool and pouted. Bunny, preparing to assist along with Breanna, sighed deeply.

"You sure, Peter?" The Spine said.
"For now, alright?" Peter said. Bunny nodded.

"I guess..."

Unfortunately, Rabbit's systems roared back to life the second his arm was reattached and operational. He took one look around at all of them and began to shout obscenities. Peter, Bunny and Breanna each jumped back as The Spine stepped in and pinned what parts weren't already strapped to the table.

"GET ME OFFA THIS T-T-T-TABLE DAMMIT!" Rabbit screamed.

"Rabbit! We aren't done! If you don't get maintenance..." The Spine cried.

"DAMMIT TA HELL I DON'T WANT NO MA-MA-MAINTENANCE!!" Rabbit bellowed.

The Spine clenched his teeth and snarled, "Do you actually wanna die? Is that it? Because that's what gonna happen, you jackass! You're gonna fall apart and you're gonna deserve it!"

He heard Breanna gasp behind him but held firm. Rabbit glared back as only he could. It both enraged and alarmed The Spine. Rabbit was his older sibling and he truly didn't like to cross him this way. But he was also an irrational oversized metal brat and he was going too far this time! The Spine was frightened of the terrible rage he felt at the thought of it, but he channeled that into coping with Rabbit's resistance.

"Whaddyou care? It's my-my-my life!"

"I care because I do! Whatever you say, you and I are brothers..."

He stopped short at the look in Rabbit's eyes. The indignation had changed to a look of terror. Rabbit clamped his eyes shut and turned his head.

"Ain't gonna let you do anymore..." Rabbit hissed. "Arm's fine. Lemme go."

"Spine..." Peter said. "Come on. He's right. The arm's back on."

"But..."

"Unkie Spine, let him go..." Upgrade said thickly.

The Spine, venting far more steam than was strictly wise, slowly eased off of Rabbit's upper body and forced himself to remove the straps. Rabbit, instead of dashing from the room as expected, sat up slowly, slipped off of the table, and strolled out without a word or a backward glance.

There was a long moment of silence before The Spine heard the soft snuffle of a crying robot. Upgrade wiped her eyes.

"He's gonna die, isn't he?" she choked.

"Upgrade...

"An' he won't even let me help!"

The Spine pulled her into a hug. She sobbed against his chest. Jon, rising from the floor to join them, looked up at him mournfully.

"Why won't he let us help, Jon?"
"You know why."

"I do?"

"Dontcha, Spine? Rabbit doesn't understand even. But it's Pappy. He put something in and Rabbit won't believe it. An' he's so scared he won't even talk about it. Ya just gotta let him find out."

"What?"

Jon gently pulled Upgrade from The Spine and held her. It seemed that was all he was offering. The Jon had matured and fallen in love but speaking to him sometimes was still like speaking to a child, or some mystic oracle who spoke in riddles. It depended on the day.

"He's scared, Jonny?" she wailed. "Poor Pappy!"

"But not for much longer, okay? Everything'll be alright in tha end, sweetie," Jon whispered. "I promise. It's almost time."

"Time for what?" she howled. "Just tell me stuff for once, Jonny!"

"I am," he said with a gentle smile.

She thumped him in the side of the head but remained where she was, resting against his shoulder. The Spine sighed. Upgrade, with her supercomputer mind, sometimes got exasperated with her lover's airy fairy way of communicating, but like all who knew and loved The Jon, she didn't hold it against him. His exasperating traits were balanced by an equal measure of patience and gentleness, something a high-strung character like Upgrade needed. Jon even now stroked her hair and sang softly to her as she clung to him and The Spine, despite his deep frustration, felt the warmth they shared and had to smile as Jon led her out of the lab at last.

Bunny stood and stared at the table Rabbit had left, her hands clasped together.

"Everything okay, Bunny?" Peter asked.

She looked up at him suddenly and sighed, handing him the screwdriver she still held.

"I hope so," she signed, turning away.

"Bunny..." Peter said softly.

She raised one hand briefly and walked slowly out, her chime jingling softly as she went. Peter stared after her and sank slowly onto his stool.

Bree stood beside The Spine and took his hand. "What about you? Are you okay?" she murmured.

He opened his mouth to tell her was perfectly fine. To his dismay, he shook with sudden tears. He pressed his lips together but couldn't seem to stop. And he had a feeling she'd known it would happen.

"Oh... no, c'mere," she breathed, putting her arms around him. "Baby, no... ssh..."

"Why won't he let us help?" he choked, despite knowing that if Jon didn't have the answer, neither would Bree. Still, she was so soft and comforting... it was almost worth hurting to be soothed by a beautiful woman!

"I don't know," she sighed.
Peter sat staring at the floor.

"Peter?" Breanna said. "Any theories?"

"Hm?" His mask tipped up toward her. "Oh... well... No. I mean, we have all these rumors but why he would just stop allowing basic maintenance... I mean, maybe he misses Paige or something. He used to let her do the work."

"Paige."

"Logically it makes no sense..." He sighed and stared down at the screwdriver.

"Thanks, Peter," Breanna said dryly. "Well, it's no good hanging around here. I think it's bedtime for cranky robots. Come on, handsome."

"Bree," The Spine laughed, in contrast with the oil on his face.

She smiled up at him. "I'll be a good girl. But you need stasis and fresh oil and we all need some rest."

As they walked out, he could hear Peter humming. He couldn't quite make out the song.

2 weeks later:

Rabbit strolled through Walter Manor. He kept his step light. He'd learned not to wake anyone. Most often, that resulted in the same awkward looks and attempts to talk him into maintenance. He didn't dare shut down anymore. He just knew someone would sneak in and start nosing around his hardware and he'd wake up with... well, something or other welded or repaired.

And he didn't want that. He couldn't tell them, of course. They'd fight him tooth and nail if they knew what he had in mind. Anyway, he'd tried telling them and they'd ignored him and fought, and he was done fighting. It was easier walking around with both arms attached, but he just couldn't allow anything else to be done.

He was so close now, right on the brink. If he kept them at bay long enough, something would break and he'd be beyond repair. They'd have to bury him beside Honey. And everything would be where it should be.

He stopped for a moment. His hip joints were objecting for the nth time but he couldn't rest. Rest would prolong it. But he did have to take just a moment. Everything set them off anymore and if he fell he'd wake half the manor. But it seemed as though he just couldn't get his balance. No matter what he did, it still felt like the top half of him was moving faster than the bottom half. Or something. He wasn't sure. He just couldn't turn corners in a hurry. Everything went sideways when he did.

He was pretty sure everyone thought the hip wiggle was meant to be sexy. It was really to cover the struggle in the most graceful way possible. He could still get into a full run if he tried, but it wasn't so easy to stop...

He trudged on, avoiding Upgrade's room. She was always checking up on him. It hurt because he knew it was because she loved him, and because he knew how she would feel when he finally succumbed to the damage. But he couldn't tell her that they needed to make the most of his last
weeks. She would drag him into the lab with her own two hands. He knew she would.

He was singing very softly to himself when he finally reached lab seven. This was the one, he was sure of it. To his surprise, he found Steve Negrete fast asleep on an old sofa, his backpack forgotten beside it. He expected to see Steve's crochet doll strapped into it but it wasn't there. It was surprising; Steve took it everywhere these days. The weirdo.

Rabbit heard a soft shuffling sound and looked around hastily.

"Who's there?" he asked quietly. He heard the sound again. "Mice?"

"Who you callin' a mouse?" a gruff voice said abruptly. There was a quiet eep and silence.

Rabbit peered under a table. Something scurried away rapidly but not rapidly enough. His hardware was failing but his eyes were still sharp, and his night vision was on. He stood up and stared straight ahead, processing what he'd just seen.

Well. Just when you thought you'd seen everything.

The scurrying stopped once more. By his reckoning, it was behind the sofa now.

"So..." Rabbit said faintly, "That wasn't just Steve u-u-u-usin' a funny voice."

There was no answer.

"Only last summer I saw him myself, ca-ca-carryin' a doll around and filmin' it with his camera and he was definitely doin' tha voice."

"Oh, yeah, that was totally me..." came the gruff voice. It sounded as though it was trying to sound lighter. "I, uh, I'm Steve and I did the voice for Lil Steve, yeah."

"Oh, I was right."

"Yeah, totally right. You can go now..."

"Only I can't help no-no-noticing that Steve is asleep."

"I'm faking."

Rabbit sauntered as carefully as he could around the back of the sofa. The scrabbling sounds moved off underneath.

"Say, that's real impressive! Yehr lips ain't even moving!"

"That's right, one of my many gifts is venlitro... ventrililil... ventriloquas..."

"Throwin' yehr voice?"

"Yeah! I just threw it to the front yard. Go check."

"Oh, I will. But first I think I need a little rest."

"Right, head for bed. Sweet dreams."

"Too tired. I'll lay down right here."

Rabbit slipped to the floor as carefully as he could and snaked one arm under the sofa before the little
figure could escape again. He pulled it out. It thrashed and threw tiny yarn punches at his hand.

"Put me down, ya mook!"

"I thought my photoreceptors had finally started crashin'! You're f***ing alive!"

Lil Steve stopped fighting and hung limp instead. "And?"

"I dunno. It's just not real common..."

"Damn right. I am one of a freaking kind, Twiki. Now put me down because I'm very busy."

"Busy? Doin' what?"

"I, uh... hunting the Snark!"

"The Snark."

Lil Steve held up his nubby limbs and intoned, "Beware! Bewaaare! With my last breath I stab at thee!"

"So I'm the Snark."

"You're certainly givin' me enough of it, yeah!" Lil Steve snapped, dropping his paws.

"Rabbit?" said a sleepy voice from just over his head. Steve was peering over the back of the sofa.

Rabbit, laying on his back from his effort to catch Lil Steve, smiled weakly. "Hey, bro... so when were ya gonna te-te-te-tell the house about this?"

Steve sighed and rested his chin on his arm. "I dunno. I've been trying to keep it quiet until I could figure out what the hell happened. I guess he got loose... I just needed a nap before driving home."

"Seriously, though... he's alive?"

"Sort of! He doesn't eat or sleep or poop but he sure as Hell walks and talks."

"But how? He doesn't even have a brain!"

"Did you, um, happen to know that it's incredibly rude to discuss someone when they're right there with you?" Lil Steve grumbled.

"Lil Steve..."

"I'm writing a letter to Miss Manners about this."

"You can't even hold a crayon," Steve scoffed.

"Insensitive."

"So, you were maybe gonna tell me how he came to life?" Rabbit pressed.

"I told you, I don't exactly know! I couldn't find him anywhere one day a couple of weeks ago, and I asked Hatchworth if he'd seen him and he just reached into his hatch and handed him to me and walked off! Only I don't know if it's a different doll or if he had him stored in there or if he just transported him from wherever he was and the trip through the Blue Matter did some kinda crazy mojo on him..." He trailed off. "Dammit to Hell, I've actually eaten sandwiches out of that thing..."
"Aw, they don't hurt nobody," Rabbit scoffed. He began to snicker. "So you're t-t-t-telling me Hatchworth is his mommy?"

"Don't you talk about my momma like that!" roared Lil Steve.

"Seriously?" Steve snorted.

"Well, he pulled it out of his hatch and it came ta life..."

"Ima throw up!" Lil Steve moaned.

"So why did ya hide it?"

"This place just gets weirder every day," Steve sighed. He reached down and took the doll. "I was gonna get around to it, but... Well, look, they have enough problems, okay? You know it and I know it. Don't make me get specific."

Rabbit scowled. "Yeah."

"Alright, don't bring out the death ray! I'm just sayin'. Besides, well... I guess you stop questioning the weirdness after a while. Giant kittens, giant robots, inter-dimensional portals to places where Peter and Bunny actually like each other and make out, so rumor has it. Too much!"

"Yeah!" Rabbit said, pleased at the change of subject. He'd done his share to boost that last rumor and he was pleased to know it was taking off. "Next thing, we'll find out yehr really a dragon!"

Rabbit laughed as heartily as he could manage while flat on his back, and Steve laughed with him. Possibly a bit too loudly... but no. Rabbit would have been delighted to find Steve was a dragon. It was cool and it would keep people busy. But that was one step beyond what he could comfortably accept.

"Well, better get up and head for your room. You need your stasis," Steve said, still giggling stiffly.

Rabbit nodded and stared awkwardly at the ceiling.

"You need some help there, big guy?" Steve asked Rabbit.

"No, I was just havin' a little rest..."

"Uh-huh. Can you, in fact, get up?"

"Sure! Better'n you can lift me!"

"Alright. Let's see it."

"I'm still resting."

"He came trudging in here like a 500 year old man!" Lil Steve crowed. "I bet he can't even lift his legs!"

"You too, stringy?" Rabbit growled.

"Lil Steve, dammit!"

"Whatever." Rabbit eased himself onto his side and pushed himself to a sitting position as casually as he could manage. He'd seen Marie get up this way sometimes when she was expecting Lily, and
Annie when Peter was on his way, and knew it was easier than trying to just sit up, especially when your hips just weren't working properly.

Working one leg under him and clutching the back of the sofa, he at last stood on shaky legs, trying to look completely at ease and feeling anything but. He was getting pretty danged sick of having to play at being well, just to keep all of them off his back.

Steve was giving him a look of extreme skepticism. "Look, I'm not your tech, Rabbit, but..."

"Then shut up," Rabbit growled. His hips were pinging and it hurt!
Steve gasped. "Hurtful, dude."

"Sorry," Rabbit muttered, looking down.

"Hey, no worries. Look, I heard what happened with the arm, okay? I get that you hate maintenance. A lot of people hate doctors and dentists and crap like that. But if you go on like this, something's gonna melt or fuse and they may not be able to fix it. You understand that?"

Very well, thought Rabbit. And I'm ready. Anything to just have this over.

"And people are worried about ya, big guy! Come on, we care. Y'know? So if there's anything ya need to talk about, my soundboard is always open."

He grinned and Rabbit got the impression the soundboard thing was supposed to be hilarious. He sighed.

"Anytime, okay?" Steve said, clapping him on the shoulder. "We can have a nice talk, man to man."

"I'm fine."

Rabbit stomped out and resumed his walk.

Behind him, he heard a gruff little voice say, "Hey, when did that keyhole guy brain swap a robot and a jackass?" Steve shushed him but Rabbit could hear him snickering.

He clenched his fists and kept walking, frustrated. He could barely walk tonight and now he was going to have to find some way, once everyone was up in the morning, to make them think he was working just fine so that Steve's little encounter wouldn't lead to a forced maintenance session.

And it was going to hurt.

Chapter End Notes

*that would be a shell casing. She doesn't know what they are.
Building to a climax... Love is in the air... for some. There's a lot of conflicted feelings, Rabbit's especially... but the result for Rabbit is far more serious than whether a robot looks like a girl. A very old robot needs a lot of maintenance or things go south pretty fast.

What the heck. I'm a sucker for a good ship.

Music for the romance embarking here: "Love" by Damien Poupart-Tassaut - http://tidido.com/a35184373907976/af5d852f313b521ef22daf0ab/t55d852f413b521ef22daf103

Apologies for all the brooding in the first two passages, and the long conversations after. These people have a lot to think about and talk about. I have four or five chapters in the works together for this and this is basically the set up.

Disclaimer: I've mentioned before that I'm not setting out to advocate for transgender issues. I want to restate that here for a couple of reasons.

For one thing, Rabbit and Matter Mistress Bunny both have what you might call extremely unorthodox transitions. No one ever got blown up and woke up with a womb. And of course, robots. A robot doesn't even have a sex technically... So I dunno that these represent anyone on the planet anyhow.

Also, I'm actually pretty conservative. I can guess how it feels to do this stuff but that's just it, guessing. So I found this hard to write. I decided to make the real conflict of the story not about the change itself but about other things connected with it. There are some things too sensitive to play around with and I'm not the person to advocate for this one.

What you WILL see in these chapters is the all-encompassing belief that everyone deserves to be treated right without regard to differences in lifestyle or anything else, and that life is worth living even if it hurts for a while. And that it gets better so don't give up. And that differing with someone isn't license to hate them or hurt them.

And in regards to Bunny and... someone... *wink* ...that some people can even go from animosity to affection if they just get over themselves. I launched the ship and the wind will now do the rest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

August, 2013:
"This is the Hall of Wires... one of the few rooms that still has a door."

"I know, silly. Or are you trying to make a point about that?"

David grinned. "I don't know. Am I? Or are you trying to make a point?"

"What point do you think I'm trying to make?" asked Chelsea, stepping closer.

David giggled and and gulped loudly to stop himself. He opened the door and peered into the room.

"GG?" he called. There was no answer.

"GG?" Chelsea asked as they slipped inside and closed the door.

"Yeah... she freaks out every time she sees me unless Upgrade or Jon is around. I think she thinks I'm the ghost of Col. Walter."

Chelsea laughed and took his hands. "Guess that makes me a necrophile."

Rrawrr... creepy and sexy at the same time! He was a lucky man...

"Isn't there some rule that says that workplace romances are unethical or something?" David said, grinning helplessly.

"If Breanna can marry The Spine," Chelsea murmured, slipping her arms around him, "then I'd say we're okay to... well, I don't know. Whatever we want, I guess."

She was short but he didn't mind stooping a little. Their kiss was interrupted by Qwerty's alert tone.

"FOREIGN CONTAMINANT!!1!!" he chimed.

"Oh no-"

A hose sprayed them with white foam.

"Dammit Qwerty!" David roared. The hose whipped away like a guilty cat.

"CONTAMINANT ISOLATED!!!!1!!!"

"I am so sorry..." he began.

Chelsea, to his relief, was laughing. "That's the price we pay for privacy!" she giggled. "This is just like Iron Man..."

He wiped foam from her nose and sighed happily. She liked superhero movies too! She just got better and better...

"I guess we'd better get cleaned up," he murmured.

"Or at least get out of these clothes," she breathed.

Whoa. "Th-that's very true..."

She laughed. "In separate rooms," she said with a grin.
"Of course!" he choked.

Damn. Oh, well. No sense pushing things...

They hurried downstairs.

Bunny at last emerged from the shadows at the far end of the Hall, snickering silently. They hadn't noticed her working when they came in. That had been awkward! Thank goodness Qwerty had accepted the quick little alert she'd given it. But as funny as the results had been, she had no wish to cool either of them off... she just didn't want to be there for any of the proceedings! Or any more of the dumb babbling flirting...

Her cheeks still burned as she hurried out. Well. So David was being smart for once and letting himself go a little. She had to smile at that. She liked Chelsea and she wanted David to be happy. But it had been just the two of them since the implosion, and David had been so hard-nosed about... well, her own little affairs. She supposed he thought she'd been too traumatized by her accident to think straight. She'd agreed with him a month ago.

And yet, since they had gotten back from Kazooland, things had been different. Peter wasn't as irritating and she wasn't sure why. It could be that his experiences had humbled him. To be sure, he could use some humbling. He was brilliant, she knew, but the trouble had always been that he knew it, too.

But he'd been so sweet lately! He was considerate and apologetic and didn't make anyone work too late anymore, even if he wanted to. And he hummed. She didn't remember him doing that before. She figured it was a side effect of his lingering anxiety attacks, but it was... cute.

Even as a genderfluid guy, she hadn't really been able to see Peter as anything resembling cute. Maybe there was just something in the chemicals of a fully firing female body... but Peter had started to look different right about the time she left for Kazooland with David to learn mimespeak. By the time they went looking for the robots, well... She had tried not to think about it. She had written it off as the product of a predictable adjustment period.

But he'd been so aggressive about making sure everyone learned ASL so that she could communicate. He'd even given her a cute little chime to get people to look her way so that she could sign to them. He'd made learning the language mandatory, gotten in a tutor to give classes even. He was working like a dog to learn it himself. Sometimes she would see him practicing in the lab. He had such graceful hands... she often thought about the feel of those fingers in her hair...

She shook herself. Here she had had one moment of weakness and she was going soft. Yes, that kiss had been electric. Naturally it had been. They had both been in a highly charged state with all they'd been through, and any human contact would have been overwhelming and amazing. That was just cold logic. Science, even. She wasn't one to be the puppet of her impulses. She could think, reason.

Because even if he was a damned good kisser, she and Peter would murder each other if they had to be together for too long. It was one of the fundamental truths in her life. She had been leaning heavily on it as a means of deciding certain important conflicts. He couldn't turn out to be a decent human being, not now! She'd already told him she wasn't interested!

So why was he being so sweet? And did he remember their little shared "memory" or not? He was still awkward around her but was it just his new urges, or even just the kiss? She remembered all of
it, the kiss, the little encapsulated life that never was, down to the last titillating detail... sometimes she wished she couldn't. It all seemed so real... She almost missed their imaginary daughter sometimes.

Could it have been precognition instead? There were bedrooms upstairs that would be pretty airy with white sheets and curtains. It was possible.

She shook her head. It didn't matter. It would be a mistake. That was all there was to it.

Bunny stopped short at the doorway, feeling as though her entire body was on fire. It was her day to assist Peter, and here she was, about to walk into the lab, blushing like a teenager!

She peered around the corner at him. He was humming to himself again, as he rinsed out a test tube. She couldn't place the song until he started singing softly.

"Cambot... Gypsy... Tom Servo... Croooooooow!"

She giggled, glad for once to be silent. She liked that show too...

Peter, still oblivious, resumed humming as he wiggled the work table and selected an Allen wrench to tighten the bolts. She held her clipboard tightly against her chest as she watched him. His jeans were too tight... he was overflowing them at that angle! Her blush deepened.

He was wearing a thong!

She should chime and tell him his butt was showing... but it was a pretty nice butt. They usually looked bad creeping out of a pair of jeans but his didn't look bad at all.

She hadn't realized it was so hot down here. They really needed to have the air conditioning looked at...

Life was change. She stood as a living example. Maybe it was all hormones. Maybe... maybe she needed to re-examine some of her fundamental truths and find out whether she was being a fool before it was too late to act.

Bunny leaned against the door frame, her gaze resting guiltily on Peter's oblivious plumber's butt, thinking.

The Spine trudged through the manor, feeling as sick as he'd ever felt. So much was happening at once!

For one thing, he was engaged to be married. That wasn't what made him feel sick. On the contrary, at the very thought, The Spine's vents all steamed at once. He was feeling all at once a thrill and a deep longing. To think he would, at last, soon be able to relax and show Breanna the depth of his feelings! Rabbit had rolled his eyes many times at him for it, but he'd said it before and he'd meant it. Even disregarding the very serious risk of another Blue Matter pregnancy, he just didn't feel right about casual sex, not when he was so deeply in love. There was just no ceremony to it. He'd married Marie and stayed true to her, inasmuch as he had been able, well beyond the day he'd lost her. There might have been a time when he could have taken a different route but that time was past. With Marie, he had set a pattern in his mind of how things should be done and he had no reason to dismiss that personal code. After all, Breanna had said yes!

But once he'd asked Peter to look into some way of disconnecting the Blue Matter from the affected parts so that Breanna wouldn't get pregnant, and Peter had assured him he had some ideas on how to make that happen, he had felt safe proposing. He wasn't bothered by the idea of being married to Breanna, as he once might have been. He knew there would be a period of adjustment but he also knew he could handle it.
He'd done it right... gotten down on one knee in the rose garden, one of her favorite places to walk, offered her a ring and asked her to be his wife. She'd cried, slipped into his arms among the wind-blown rose petals and kissed him, after saying a tearful yes. It was beautiful, perfect. It had seemed that nothing could taint his joy. He even felt as though Marie was shining her approval down upon their union from wherever she was...

Cold reality had since begun to replace that bliss. The other Walter Girls, he'd heard, were determined to give them a wedding with all the trimmings, right down to a bachelorette party, and he had heard that plans for a bachelor party were also underway in the male worker's wing. And to make it still more complicated, Breanna's parents were still alive. That should be good news generally, but it was just that he'd been a brother-in-law... but never a son-in-law. He had a feeling their first meeting would be just a tiny bit of a shock.

But there was at least the joy of knowing that at the end of all the nonsense was the sweet moment when he and Breanna would be alone together in some hotel... it didn't matter where. She could choose. His needs were few.

What worried him more, possibly, was Rabbit. There was no light at the end of that tunnel. He had spoken to Peter several times, to no avail. He insisted that Rabbit had the final say about whether to be repaired. As if it was as simple as that.

Could it really be that there was nothing for it but to let Rabbit fall apart or go mad? Even at his worst, he'd never isolated himself so much for so long. That is, when he wasn't acting like an utter lunatic. He was having memory lapses and behaving even more unpredictably than ever. But The Spine loved his brother... well, for now. He would love him as a sister, if it came to that. He didn't know what to think. Rabbit might have taken on feminine traits or not, but considering Rabbit's fragile physical and mental state, the only thing that was certain was that Rabbit was spiraling toward his own destruction. One minute he was moping around the lesser used labs, the next...

The sound of running feet penetrated his thoughts.

"On your left!" Rabbit crowed, tossing something into his hands as he ran by.

"What-" The Spine cried...

...only to yelp as a wall of bronze flattened him. He and Hatchworth hit the floor in one messy heap and half the manor shuddered as if from an earthquake. His vision vibrated and grew clear once more.

The Spine lay dazed on his side, staring at the dust around the legs of the little table they had somehow managed to avoid when they collided... or rather, when Hatchworth had collided with him. He'd had just 0.58th of a second to recognize the object in his hands... Hatchworth's hat and pipe, which was a surprise considering they constituted the top of his actual head. His Fedora lay gently bobbing on its crown somewhere near his twitching hand.

There was a peal of distant, shrill giggling. The garden door opened and slammed shut again.

Hatchworth clambered awkwardly to his feet. He retrieved the hat and replaced it with a loud, sucking thoomp. A hiss of steam signaled that his exhaust system had reestablished itself.

He collected the Fedora and offered The Spine a hand up. He hadn't had any plans to rise for a while but he accepted the help and soon stood staring at the little oven bot with a studiously blank expression.
"So... how's life treating you?" Hatchworth said pleasantly.

"How did he get your hat this time?" The Spine muttered.

Hatchworth scowled abruptly. "I was simply talking to him about his current state of disrepair, when he dared me to remove my hat."

"That was it? A dare? Hatchy, really..."

"I do not go looking for trouble, The Spine, but neither do I shrink when trouble comes looking for me."

"Hatchy..."

"A man has his honor."

He didn't know what to challenge first.

Hatchworth sighed huffily. "Rabbit as good as accused me of lying when I said it could indeed be removed!" he growled.

"You don't have to... it was an obvious... he's seen you remove... you need your hat to..." The Spine clenched his fists and steam fired from every vent along his back.

"The Spine, how remarkable! I had thought your steam emitters were designed to be unobtrusive!"

"Only as long as I am not under overwhelming strain, Hatchworth..." The Spine muttered.

As they spoke, he was growing more and more keenly aware of sharp spasms in various parts. He was sure he'd dented something... several somethings. There was a terrible ache in his arm and he was well on his way to developing a headache he shouldn't be able to have. He couldn't be surprised... Hatchworth was solidly built and had been moving at quite a speed. It was not unlike being struck by a dumptruck.

"I have to go talk to Peter. Stay away from Rabbit for a while."

"If he knows what is good for him, he will steer clear of me. I am in high dudgeon!" Hatchworth growled, to The Spine's bemusement. He still sounded like a Lovecraft novel sometimes. "I will make him rue the day he..."

"Yes, fine." The Spine groaned softly. Yes, something was off at the elbow. And his chest plates... and his spine wasn't feeling quite optimum either. Wasn't that brand new? "Going to talk to Peter. Are you alright, by the way?"

"Why, yes. Thank you for breaking my fall!"

"Don't mention it..." The Spine rasped, stumping away to find Peter.

He approached Peter's current lab of choice several minutes later and saw the Matter Mistress standing as if transfixed. He sighted along her gaze and realized that Peter was bent over, further inside the lab, trying to loosen a bolt on a work table. Was the Matter Mistress waiting until he was finished to communicate with him? Peter couldn't read her sign language unless he saw her, and she couldn't clear her throat for attention.

But he noticed that she was carrying the little chime Peter had given her for the purpose. It hung forgotten at her waist as she continued to stare at the back of Peter. The Spine became abruptly
uncomfortable as he realized that Peter's jeans were very snug around his backside... too snug to stay up at that angle. You could see his bottom... and what was he wearing as underwear? It looked like a string! They made those for men? He'd only ever seen them on strippers... He never should have let the boys in his platoon talk him into that, although the rotation of her tassels had been very impressive from a mathematical standpoint... He shuddered. He had a feeling another such encounter was in the offing and here he was trying to behave himself.

He looked reluctantly at Peter's bottom and looked away, perplexed. Was this what had Bunny so engrossed? He shook his head and hissed in pain as the neck supports squealed faintly. Great, what else had he done...?

Matter Mistress Bunny, hearing the sound, looked at him sharply. Her cheeks pinked softly and she hurried away with her clipboard, her chime jingling as she went.

That was an interesting reaction. Maybe her source of distraction was exactly what he thought it was!

"Bunny?" Peter said. He looked around. "Oh..."

Peter's tone of disappointment was unmistakable. The Spine suppressed a smile. Well.

"Was Bunny here?" Peter asked. "She was supposed to help in the lab today."

He considered mentioning the insufficiency of Peter's trousers and thought the better of it. "She just left. Possibly she forgot something."

Another spasm shot through his neck and arm and he hissed in pain. Peter hurried toward him.

"What the Hell happened to you? Was that the thump I heard?"

Thump? They'd rattled the house on its foundations! "Hatchworth ran into me chasing Rabbit."

"Rabbit? Huh, I didn't think he could run fast enough to get away from Hatchworth anymore. Alright, let's get you onto the table," he sighed.

Matter Mistress Bunny returned a moment later. She wouldn't look The Spine in the eye. It was silly, really. If she wanted to admire Peter's rear it was no business of his. There was no commitment in it. He'd seen Breanna (among others) admiring Steve Negrete's biceps and found no reason to take it personally. They were very impressive.

Peter's bottom, however, had never seemed to him to be all that admirable... and there was generally some emotional attachment when a person admired a less remarkable feature. Or maybe she liked skinny guys and he was reading too much into it. He was no judge of the attractiveness of human males. After all, there were women who found The Spine attractive and he still couldn't see why.

And really, the fact that Bunny liked men at all was news to him. Humans were ridiculously complicated. No matter how close he came to humanity, they were always on quirk ahead of him.

He sighed, slipped out of his vest and shirt, and eased himself onto the table for maintenance.

"Same old Rabbit," sighed Peter as he began to examine the damaged parts.

"I wonder if we could talk about that..."

"Again? I told you, until something breaks I don't have a leg to stand on..."

"Neither will Rabbit unless you do something! And how can you have no authority in this? You're
currently head of household. Past heads have put their foot down with Rabbit and gotten the job done. It's your responsibility!"

Peter sighed irritably. "I know. I could, of course, have you shut him off and just make the repairs, but what I want is his cooperation. You saw how he freaked out just having his arm reattached! I have a feeling the work he needs goes far beyond a few new bolts or fresh oil and I have to bide my time until even he can't deny it."

"Is that really safe?"

"I see no alternative. Rabbit's been through a lot in the past year, same as the rest of us, and I just think it would be wrong to force him, okay? He's not in any serious danger physically... Well, nothing I can't repair."

"And mentally? Rabbit saw something in that museum and won't say what. Whatever it was, it's changed him even more than he already was. He avoids everyone now except at conventions and concerts. Even if Wanda's wrong about his original programming and current malfunction, there must be something Pappy left that will convince him to let you repair him before he falls apart at the seams."

Bunny was staring at him. The Spine raised his eyebrows questioningly and she quickly turned away. Odd.

"His mental health is part of my concern," said Peter. "Being forced bodily to do things you don't want is not considered good for your mental state. And if he falls apart, he can't deny the need for repair work, and I get what I need to do it."

The Spine gaped at him.

"Well, I do," Peter said sheepishly. "I just... don't have the heart to make him do it when he's scared, okay?"

The Spine sighed.

"And as for that information, I helped her for a while, but Aunt Wanda won't just go through the papers! She sits and reads every single one..."

"Well, I suppose she's reminiscing..." The Spine grumbled.

"And I say we let her! I have too much too do. I want everyone working on ASL until they know it as well as you and the other automatons. And you've got a wedding to plan, plus Marshmallow isn't house-trained yet and I need to get Beebop well under way before he grows big enough that you and the others can't control him anymore."

The Spine sighed heavily. "Wouldn't it be better to build some kind of habitat for him?"

Peter gasped. "He's not a zoo animal! He's a kitten!"

"A kitten who's already big enough that Bree could ride him like a horse."

"Oh, that would be sweet! I wonder whether I can fashion a saddle that will stay on a cat's body... They're incredibly supple."

The Spine pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned softly.
"Why do you do that? It's meant to indicate you're developing a headache but you certainly couldn't be doing that."

"I believe in my ability to rise above the obstacles and achieve the impossible, Peter. Especially when it comes to showing symptoms of extreme stress from living here!"

There was a jingling noise. They both looked and saw Bunny giggling. "Sorry, my bad," she signed, turning toward the toolchest. Peter sighed, but it didn't sound irritable. It sounded... nauseating.

"Look, Spine," he said pleasantly, "how about you help Aunt Wanda go through those papers? The bride does all the wedding stuff anyway, right? And she has Paige coming in to help."

Peter turned toward Bunny but she was studying the tools.

"Well, I do have to meet her parents first," The Spine said faintly.

"Oh, crap."

"Yeah."

"Well... look, just try and find the time, okay? Maybe it'll take your mind off things."

"Right..."

"Hey, tell you what? How about we throw a nice little engagement party? Wouldn't that be fun?"

Bunny looked up from her toolkit.

The Spine stared at him. "You hate parties."

"Well... this is special! We could have it in the ballroom, have some dancing and stuff. And sometimes it's nice to dress up, right?"

He saw it again; Peter angled his head ever so slightly toward Bunny. The Spine remembered that Bunny had recently been showing off a revealing party dress she had made, and her love of dancing went well back before her transformation.

What was this all of a sudden? Was Peter trying to impress Bunny? There had been a rumor but surely...

"Sure..." The Spine said faintly. "Sounds good."

Bunny looked at him in surprise. She turned to Peter, who was looking back at her. Peter's expression was, of course, obscured. But Bunny was smiling, her cheeks pink once more, and The Spine had the feeling that he was the papa who had just given the kids permission to have a party.

He felt rather used. But he didn't see raising a fuss about it. It was a chance to dance with Breanna. More than that, he was not going to interfere with the subtle but obvious flirting now taking place in the lab. He could just handle the finer complications of his own love affair. He didn't need to get involved in theirs.

"I... think I'll shut down while you work," he murmured, tipping his Fedora over his eyes as Bunny turned away from Peter with an embarrassingly twitterpated grin.
Rabbit sat, curled into a trembling ball by the sculpture in the cemetery, sobbing as quietly as he could manage. He shouldn't have been running. He'd expected it to hurt some, but the agony in his hip joints was almost unbearable and the oil leak in his bellows made him choke. He willed himself to be still and try to just inhale and exhale to keep his systems cooled.

It was one thing to decide to let yourself die. But when it came down to it, it was damned hard to fight the instinct to preserve your own life. If he had been falling from a cliff like The Spine had, he could let go and accept it. But no, he was dying by inches. It hurt... dammit, it hurt! But it was the only way to go out gracefully, to keep everyone from finding out what was up. Maybe if he just broke down and couldn't be fixed, they'd accept it as inevitable. Besides, he was more terrified than ever of maintenance... bad things happened when you got maintenance...

When it came down to it, though, he was having a harder time letting go than he would like to admit. His little girl might have her Jonny, but he knew she would miss her Pappy. The Spine would blame himself. Peter would try to repair him. Sunshine would be hurt that he never turned to her for help and her kids and grandkids had taken a liking to him, too. It seemed more and more like the right choice would be to just let them fix the damage and go on living.

But that wouldn't be enough. Because even before it got this bad, he was in agony... inside. Besides, he'd seen it. Right on the sign in that museum.

*The Death of Rabbit.*

It was in the Peter VI hall of the museum. Rabbit had gotten a little ahead of the others, having declined to take much of a look at the HoW implosion exhibit. That hit way too close to home.

There was a paradoxical exhibit about the Kazooland trip. He'd smirked at a photo of Peter and Bunny kissing passionately. He'd had a feeling about those two recently. He was a little surprised since he'd thought Peter was too uptight for women at all, much less that particular woman. But there they were, making more steam than all the robots combined! They'd passed it off as an innocent hug when the robots had caught them in an embrace, but from the looks of that photo it was closer to foreplay! He'd moved on, chuckling...

And then, around a corner, like a baseball bat to the head, he came face to face with it... an exhibit about his death. It had photos of him laying on the floor of a disused lab, bleeding oil and water. He hadn't been able to look at any more than that. And he knew the others were coming along behind him...

He'd made a beeline for the door as conspicuously as possible, and it had worked. The Spine had been hard on his heels, asking him what was wrong, Jon and Hatchy close behind. But he couldn't talk about it. He'd suspected it was coming, and if The Spine found out, he'd try to stop it. And he just couldn't. Rabbit didn't know how that museum could tell the future, but he believed it. He had to get them out of there, spare them knowing what he knew. That would at least be something.

And he was miserable so why fight it?

Rabbit sighed and eased himself to a standing position, panting like a woman in labor. He whimpered in pain and clutched the sculpture with a trembling hand. There... a moment passed... it was starting to ease into a dull ache. He forced himself to calm down and listen to the wind and the ducks. There... fully upright at last. It wasn't so bad...
"Rabbit?"

"What?" Rabbit barked, startled. Pain shot through his body. He bit back a sob and hastily wiped his eyes before turning carefully around.

Peter VI had his hand on his chest in shock and Rabbit sighed. "Sorry..."

"I just wanted to talk to you about... well... first off, don't keep stealing Hatchy's head cap. It keeps his systems filtered."

"R-Right..." Rabbit snickered, willing himself to appear calm. He had enjoyed that despite the after effects. He still couldn't believe Hatchy was that easy.

"Rabbit..."

"Right, s-s-s-sorry," Rabbit muttered, still giggling. It would piss Peter off but the giggle was a great cover for the trembling, and a tolerable substitute for crying. He still hurt and just wanted to go lay down.

"Also, there's... um... Oh, there's something we've noticed in your stage performances," Peter said quickly. "Something troubling."

"What?" What made up nonsense was this? "I thought they we-we-we were pretty good."

"They are. You're all more popular than ever. You especially."

"Am I?" Rabbit said with a lopsided grin. "B-B-But The Spine..."

"He's always a fan favorite, yes. And they're warming up to Hatchworth. But some people have suggested you're the lead singer."

Rabbit snickered. "N-Nice. K-Kinda silly though. I mean, we t-t-t-take turns..."

"Yes, I know."

"That what y-y-y-you wanna talk about? My po-po-popularity rating?" he cried, trying to sound amused despite his frustration with his stutter. It was always worse when he was in pain.

"No... I was just thinking maybe you're getting all this attention because your hips are swinging around like a wrecking ball."

"Um..."

"Just saying. I think a lot of your fans are finding it... um... titillating."

"Oooh!" Rabbit trilled. "That s-sounds totes hot!"

Peter tipped his mask to one side. "Yeah...

"S-So that's n-n-n-not a good thing then?" Rabbit asked, his smile fading.

"It's a family show! You look like... well, it's just very suggestive, okay?"

"Oh, you mean it l-l-l-looks like..." Rabbit began. He snickered. "If yehr thinkin' it looks like I wanna fu-fu-fu-fu-"
"Stop! I mean, kinda, yeah!" Peter cut in hastily.

Rabbit roared with laughter. It helped a little. He managed to suppress his stutter for a moment as he gasped, "How can I even do that?"

"The point isn't whether you can, it's whether you're making your underage fans discover urges they were never meant to have for hundred year old robots!" Peter cried, exasperated.

"Nuts to that! The Spine makes them feel that way just by stomping around and wearin' tight pants! And he can actually..."

"Right, right, he can, yes, thank you. I'm aware of his package. I'm worried enough about that. We don't need any more Blue Matter parthenogenesis..."

"The Hell is Blue Matter partheno-no-no-no-whatsis?"

"Embryos from an unfertilized egg. Y'know... his daughter."

"Oh... Yeah, he was wo-wo-worried about it too."

"I'm still trying to figure out how to disconnect the Blue Matter from the stupid thing and still have it function and... ugh... Not my idea of fun. But I have to resolve this before their honeymoon. It's not just the scientific complications and moral questions of bringing a guaranteed terminally ill child into the world, it's that from what I hear, losing her nearly destroyed him. And Dad..."

Rabbit looked at him sharply.

"Well, he never came close to correcting the problem, did he?"

_**How much does he know about his father and Lily,**_ Rabbit wondered, glancing at the old eucalyptus tree. There was a big garden stone at the base of it now. It read simply, "Airheart." They had scattered other stones with names of their songs around the grounds as decoys. There was no telling how much was left for people to dig up... Rabbit hoped for everyone's sake it was nothing at all by now. But The Spine had wanted to mark the spot with a stone at long last and the other stones made it appear as though they were just vain about their music.

"Alright, so, back to the point," Peter continued. "Your hips are a problem."

"They're f-fine..."

"They're out of whack, aren't they? And maybe more than your hips. Don't think I haven't noticed how you're moving. And the stutter is worse. We missed something after the explosion."

"Nah. I'm g-good."

"You always say that."

"I always am."

Peter sighed huffily. "If you collapse on stage..."

"We'll t-take a break and I'll have love-love-love notes all over Tumblr within the hour."

"You have a Tumblr?"

"Hell yeah!" This was a promising distraction. He did not need Peter nosing around right now. He
had enough problems. "Y'know what? A l-l-lot of them th-think we're f-fake."

"Fake? Fake how?"

"Fake robuts! They think it's B-Bunny and D-D-David in costume!"

"Can they even play instruments?"

"They do alright. And g-g-get this... they used to work in tha park, too! Before they wo-wo-worked here, y'know. Sometimes they dressed up like us!"

"And Hatchworth, too?"

"Well, y-y-yeah. I think he was the r-r-r-reason they though it. He already had a T-T-Tumblr an' then he an' Jon l-l-leave and a robut with Sam's actual f-f-f-face shows up..."

"Great. Well, let them think whatever they want... oh, wait... What happens if they find out about Bunny's transformation? She can't even speak now..."

"D-D-D-Don't worry. The talk is that she's t-t-t-trans."

"What? She's genderfluid..."

"Well, technically, y-y-y-y'know... she's swapped a guy's body for a lady's..."

"Yeah, technically she's the ultimate transwoman but... Rabbit, if people are spreading it around, she could be in danger!"

"They were r-r-r-real nice about it..."

"They were but what if some psycho finds out and comes after her or something... There's some real nuts out there, think they have the right to murder anyone they don't agree with!**"

Rabbit made a note of the panic in Peter's voice. He'd heard the rumors, spread a few, and of course he saw that photo of Peter with Bunny's tongue down his throat, but this looked like something deeper than a dirty affair. The chump might actually be in love with her!

It was thrilling and sweet... the kind of thing that touched him deeply these days. But he was still Rabbit, and knew that this was also the kind of thing that could be useful. And fun.

"And since she's got female parts now, they could... Oh! No... no, that's not okay! She wouldn't even be able to argue, or call 911, or scream for help!" Peter went on, a little shrilly.

"D-D-Down boy... take a breath! She's usually here and when-when-when she's out she's u-usually with her brother. So it's all g-g-g-good."

"I don't know..." Peter sighed tremulously and Rabbit could see he was still distressed. He sounded like he was going to cry! "This is so weird."

"So what else is n-n-new?"

"Maybe I should have Steve go with them when they go places... He can take care of himself..." Peter mumbled. He sighed deeply. "But what about Breanna? Do they think she's dating David?"

"Yup."
"Holy crap. That's awkward, with the wedding plans and all."

"Yeah."

"And the engagement party... Oh, we're having an engagement party for them."

"Great! He ke-ke-ke-kept his last engagement r-r-r-real quiet."

"There's going to be dancing... so if you wanted to be able to do that we'd need to see about those joints..."

"Nice try. I b-b-b-bet Spine and Bree are excited."

Peter shook his head. "I have to tell Bree, actually, so she can invite people. I just decided a couple of hours ago to have it. Guess while I'm at it, I'll ask her what she wants to do about people thinking she's dating David. We were thinking of spreading it around that she quit already. I guess now we'll have to say that she and David broke up." He shook his head.

"Why?"

"Well, we're okay with the marriage, but... it's just complicated, okay? There's the legality, for one thing..."

"And Spine w-went 'old school' and said he di-di-didn't want his wife to be s-subjected to fan gossip. Right?"

"Pretty much. I think it's sweet."

"It is." Rabbit scratched casually at his eyes.

"Something wrong with your photoreceptors?"

"Nah."

"But there's a slight oil slick..."

"I'm f-fine."

Peter sighed. "I was just concerned because that implosion knocked you around pretty good. The Spine thinks you need more repairs and it also might explain..."

"...Why you're having so many problems. I know I keep bringing it up but I'm just afraid one day you're gonna go missing and we'll find you shut down for good in some disused wing of the house leaking fluids, maybe even Blue Matter..."

He was hitting way too close! Time to bring out the artillery. "Blue Matter?"

"What... Yes, Blue Matter..."

"Funny thing... Bunny was in tha-tha-that blast too."

That got him. He could see a shift in Peter's stance just at the mention of her name.

"Y-yeah, she was... I don't see what's so funny though."
"Well, she got a bla-bla-blast of Blue Matter. So did you."

"And?"

"M-Makes ya think."

"Of what?"

"Th-th-think of the children!"

"I beg your pardon?" Peter gasped. "What children?"

"Yours!"

"I'm not following..."

"And Bunny's..."

"Um, what are you saying..."

"Well, if you sle-slept with her..."

"Rabbit!" His neck had turned pink.

"And got her knocked up..."

"What?" Peter squeaked, his neck going bright red. "That's..."

"Your kids would probably glow in tha d-d-d-dark!"

"I'm not going to... we aren't... Bunny and I never... dammit, Rabbit!" Peter barked.

"Ya ain't f-f-foolin' anyone, k-k-kid. I don't b-b-blame ya either. She's got a pre-pre-pretty sweet shape. I could see a guy wanting to tap that..."

"Shut up!"

"Ooo, temper temper! Yehr ge-ge-gettin' real defensive for a guy who ain't interested."

"I never said... that's not..."

"Ya don't hafta s-s-say, dummins. Everyone knows yehr ogling her b-b-boobs every time she walks by."

"Enough!"

"Amirite?"

"Why?" Peter roared, his entire frame shaking with exasperated rage.

Rabbit leaned away, ignoring the spasms it caused. This was too much fun...

"Just m-make a m-move already," he said, suppressing a giggle. "She can't slap yehr face!"

"Jerk! It's not like that!"

"Ain't it?"
Peter groaned and started pacing between the headstones.

"Try a d-d-d-dip in the pond? It ain't a shower but it's pretty cold."

"Well, this got me nowhere!" Peter shouted, flapping his hands as he paced.

Rabbit almost felt a little guilty for pushing him to the brink of breaking. Almost. Sometimes a guy needed a push... right into the arms of someone else. If Bunny was willing to play tonsil-hockey with Peter, she might be open to a lot of other party games. It might be crude and presumptuous of him to think so but Rabbit realized he really didn't care as long as he got to go lay down.

"Look..." Peter cried, rubbing his hands together in soothing patterns, "look, just don't let it get too bad, okay? I know you miss your favorite tech but the rest of us can fix robots, too, okay? Don't make me tell your daughter on you."

"Now th-th-that's a threat," Rabbit chuckled. She was already watching him like a hawk! "Alright, kid. I'll t-t-tell ya if I need help."

"Uh-huh. I don't know why I thought talking with you would work. You never think you need help," Peter muttered as he walked away.

"Oh, Petes?" Rabbit called.

"Huh?"

"If ya need a distraction from the se-se-se-sexy Matter Mistress, just ask Steve about his doll. That'll ke-ke-keep ya busy."

"What? Whatever." He continued to the house.

Rabbit chuckled painfully. Finally! He needed a little rest before hobbling back to the house, so he eased himself slowly, agonizingly onto the sculpture and looked down at the headstones.

"He's ge-ge-gettin' married again, Pappy," Rabbit murmured. "And he's already protectin' her just like he did with Marie."

The oily tears slipped down his cheek plates. It was awfully sweet. And Rabbit had grown accustomed to crying over sweet things, sad things, cute things... everything. He remembered Iris had been like that. Sweet lady. So easily moved... Tough as nails, but a tender heart. He'd always thought those were great qualities in a lady. Feminine strength and feminine heart.

Rabbit sobbed softly. There was that pain again, the pain that no repairs could fix. Feminine. There was a time that the word brought to mind all the ladies he'd ever known. Now...

He gasped. There it went, right on cue. A wave of terror. Can't be a girl... mustn't be a girl... not like her... Pappy said...

Rabbit grimaced, shutting his eyes tightly. "No... sto-sto-stop it... p-p-p-please d-d-don't re-remember... d-don't..."

But he clung, shaking, to the sculpture as the memory lingered, like a specter, a monster groping closer and closer to his core. That was how he registered his worst fears, ever since his core was stolen years ago. The worst horror of his life was connected with that event.

Well, one of the worst horrors. But he had thought being the indirect cause of those deaths was the
worst pain he could endure. Even worse than the wars, even worse than losing Honey. He hadn't realized he could feel the very foundations of who he was torn out like a vital organ. He couldn't even remember when the memory had returned, not anymore. He only knew that until then, he had been blissfully free of it for a very, very long time.

"Why, Pa-Pa-Pappy?" he sobbed. "I d-d-d-don't understand... sto-stop... why did ya d-do it? Why d-d-d-did ya ma-ma-make me this way an' then b-b-b-break me..."

It hurt! He couldn't stop thinking about it and it hurt! Every time he even considered it...

"B-B-But I f-feel it..." he moaned. "I f-f-f-feel like a..."

He cried out as the fear pierced him once more. No! He wasn't a girl!

"B-B-But it shouldn't m-m-matter... It ain't l-l-l-like a fleshie. It's just a ch-ch-chassis ch-change..."

He shuddered and struggled to keep his feet.

"But it d-d-does m-matter. I'm a g-g-guy! I have to b-be. That's what ya wa-wa-wa-wanted, Pappy... Somethin' bad'll happen if I act like a girl. Somethin' horrible..."

The pain began to subside. It always did when he made the choice to remain as he was. His security blanket... his safe place. What his Pappy wanted. That was what he relied on.

"I'll keep on bein' yehr son..." he said weakly. "Unless ya tell me it's okay to give in and be a girl..."

Rabbit waited, still frightened, feeling the sun on his chassis. All he heard was a soft breeze.

"Yeah. I th-th-thought so," he sighed. "It ain't like I'm g-g-gonna have to live with it for l-long, anyhow. I g-guess I stay the way I am."

"You were an awfully pretty girl," said a deep voice above him.

Rabbit stiffened. "Pappy?" he whispered, shaking, afraid to look.

"I like you just as you are, Rabbit. You don't have to pretend to be something you're not."

Rabbit opened his eyes and nearly fell to pieces in shock. "Petes!" he gasped.

He reached up and hastily pulled Peter V down to the ground from where he hovered. Peter gazed at him benignly. Rabbit fought the urge to look away. How he'd changed over the last twenty years! He'd gone from skinny kid to robust manhood over the years of his prime, but now... he looked so old!

Peter V smiled, and it helped, a little. His absent eyes didn't look so strange when he smiled. A lot of curious things had happened to Peter, things he didn't discuss. He refused to tell anyone how his eyes only appeared when his wife was around, or how it was possible that he could levitate at will. Assuming he even remembered himself the reasons why. His mind had been slipping for a while now, and just like every time a family member began to drift away from life, Rabbit felt it was far too soon.

The levitating did explain why Rabbit hadn't heard him approaching, however. And the distraction was very welcome. Now if only he could stop trembling...

"Don't be afraid of change, Rabbit," Peter said pleasantly. "Life is change."
"I know, buddy," Rabbit murmured, rising and taking Peter by the arm. He'd scared the hell out of him but he wasn't going to shout about it. Not at Peter. He wouldn't take it in even if he did. "Whaddya doin' out here all alone, hm? Annie's gonna be worried sick until you get back to your nurse."

"Annie," Peter sighed, smiling slowly. "Good ol' Annie..."

Rabbit smiled, relieved that he still remembered her. He was half afraid Petes would start calling her Lily before long.

"That's right, buddy. Let's get you back to Annie."

"Did I ever tell you how we met?" Peter V asked as Rabbit led him away, trying not to worry about the fact that the man's feet still weren't touching the ground.

"Nope. Tell me about it," Rabbit lied.

He'd listen to just about anything in order to get the memory back into storage. And more and more he felt like he and Peter V had a lot in common. They both had something hidden that couldn't be explained. And they were both grinding to a slow stop.

Chapter End Notes

*I think most of us consider Rabbit's hips to be the opposite of a problem...*

**Peter's fears are sadly accurate and will be as long as some people believe they are justified in hurting people they don't agree with instead of just going their separate way.**

And yeah, I said I wouldn't ship them. But it turns out they can't forget those two kisses and both of them have been humbled what with being hit straight in the pride by their own mistakes. It's common ground and lasting loves have been founded on less.

Also, I must be honest... I don't think it's physically possible for it to look good when someone's overly tight pants ooch down, revealing their butt crack. This just goes to illustrate how thirsty Bunny is since that kiss. Thanks to his experience with some college girls who should probably have served jail time for it (considering he graduated at 16), Peter is very good at kissing, and Bunny has always had a thing for him without admitting it even to herself.

And I just enjoy the idea that Hatchworth keeps tackling The Spine, intentionally or otherwise. I realized I'd had him do that in another fic and it just gets funnier and funnier.
**Highs and Lows**

Chapter Summary

An engagement party takes place. The focus should be on the happy couple. The couple in question might have no trouble with that, but everyone else is wrapped up in other things.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Includes a kind of attempted suicide. Death by neglect.

Starts off light and grows very heavy indeed... because we haven't forgotten about Rabbit. The excessive resistance to the feminine persona will soon be explained. Pretty soon. Not in this chapter. But soon.

Disclaimer: I don't know enough about ASL to know whether any of the conversations I write are even possible. I'll just own up to that right now.

The night of the engagement party was, at least, a pleasant one. The ballroom was stunningly decorated. The Spine stood in awe when he first entered. He had warmed to the idea of an engagement party, for one thing. His darling bride deserved every celebration and deep in his heart he wanted fireworks and music to herald the fact that he was such a lucky guy.

But the sight of the ballroom stirred memories. Many times, Colonel Walter had held parties and balls here. And more than that, he remembered that Halloween party, less than a year ago, when he had been sure he could never love Breanna the way he wanted to do. And here he was, celebrating his freedom to do just that.

If he hadn't been worried still about Rabbit, his joy would have been complete.

Family and workers had been invited, as well as close family friends. The Spine recognized Cavalcadium members who were especially close to the Walters and friends from Los Angeles who he knew through Louise and Dave. Louise herself hadn't been able to handle the drive, but Dave and Sunshine had assured him they wouldn't miss it.

Sunshine made a beeline for him upon arriving, Dave close behind. The Spine greeted them warmly. They still felt young to him, even though they were showing their years. Dave had managed to keep fit and to keep his long hair, which was now graying and pulled into a ponytail. It looked fairly hip with the wire glasses he'd taken to wearing. Sunshine was plumper than when she was younger, but the effect was rather cozy, especially with the smile lines that now graced her features. They both looked happier than ever and for him there was no greater joy.

Well, almost none. He was still waiting for his bride-to-be to make her entrance.

"Spine!" Sunshine cried. "This place is amazing! And so it should be! Congratulations!"
"Way to go, Dad!" Dave said with a grin. "About time, too."

"Where is she, Spine?" Sunshine asked, looking around.

"Oh, she's still..."

"There she is!"

He turned immediately and gasped. The world seemed to slow down as she walked into the room.

Her hair was up and her dress was shining blue satin. The glittering lights in the room seemed to shine from her eyes as she hurried to him, her hands reaching for his. He kissed her gently. The sight of her made the feelings surge within him and he just had to.

Dave clapped and Breanna giggled with Sunshine.

"Peter invited us to stay the night when I told him we expected to get drunk from all the toasts in your honor," Dave said with a wink.

Sunshine laughed. "We don't even drink but I accepted because I don't want to drive two hours after a party! Well... you two probably want to snuggle or dance or something, so we're going to go say hi to everyone. Where's Rabbit?"

The Spine's smile faded a little. "Oh... I don't know whether he's coming."

Sunshine gave him a wide-eyed stare. "You must be joking! Rabbit not come to his brother's engagement party? That's unthinkable!"

"You're kidding, maybe?" Dave said.

"He's just... he's not up to it. His hips are off right now."

"How bad is it?" Dave asked.

"I... don't know," The Spine, aching. "I honestly don't know how bad. And that scares the Hell out of me."

"What's been happening here?" Sunshine demanded.

The Spine shook his head. "He just hasn't been himself lately. It's hard to explain. He won't let us repair him and it's hard for him to dance or even walk..."

She put her hand to her mouth. "How long has he been like this?"

"Since... Well, it's been worsening since the middle of spring, think."

She stared at him. He squirmed.

"It's just that..." he stammered. "Peter thought... ugh..."

He knew he was in for it.

"Why didn't you call me?" Sunshine whispered angrily.

"I'm sorry... I just... I haven't known what to do."

"So you just left him to wind down and stop?" she retorted.
"Honey..." Dave said awkwardly.

The Spine muttered, "I think it's residual damage from all the accidents lately. I... guess I didn't want to worry you."

"Spine, really!" she scoffed. "He's been scared of maintenance since Vietnam! Maybe he just needed someone to talk to!"

"He won't talk to anyone!" The Spine said, louder than intended. He glanced uncomfortably at the startled stares around him and lowered his voice, forcing a wan smile as he added, "Sorry... Look, if you see him, try, okay? You're better at this and he's got a soft spot for you. I'm just afraid that if he won't talk to me..."

"That if he won't talk to you, he won't talk to anyone?" she sighed. "Yeah, I understand. Alright. But if he doesn't come here, I'll have to go find him."

"I don't know whether you should..."

"Spine... I can't just sit here and enjoy a party, even one for such a wonderful event, if I know that somewhere in the manor, Grandpappy Rabbit is hurting. That's what he's become to me, okay? He's like a sweet old grandpa."

Sort of... "Thank you."

He considered adding the little detail of Rabbit's apparent femininity, and decided against it. What they needed now was an objective view. If Sunshine returned and reported that she thought Rabbit seemed different, if she had observed the change others did, he felt it would hold more weight if he hadn't primed her in any way.

She was staring at him now in that way she had when the psychologist side of her was in command. It made him feel as though she could see right through him.

"Well, for now let's say hi to everyone," Dave said almost too brightly. He winked at his dad and led Sunshine away.

"She's right, you should have called her," Breanna scolded gently. "Isn't she a psychologist?"

"You're right, of course. I've gotten into a bad habit of just dealing with things and only mentioning problems when necessary. I guess I figured if it was just physical damage, she couldn't help much."

"It's still emotionally upsetting to him. Isn't it? And it's not only that. You saw how he acted after your accident. His younger brother nearly died. We've... all been through a lot lately..."

There was a tremor in her voice as she spoke. He pulled her close and held her.

"Please don't dwell on it, sweetheart," he murmured. "And you're right. Thank you. I should say that every day. Thank you for loving me, Bree."

"Oh, phooey..." she sighed. "You say that as though it's hard to do."

He felt that surge of longing once again and gently tipped her face up to his. A kiss, he decided, had to happen after a statement like that. He could have stayed there for an hour or more, onlookers be damned, but a sweet song was playing. A few couples were dancing. Without a word, The Spine released Breanna, bowed gracefully, and held out his hand. She blushed a little and took it, and they drifted out onto the dance floor.
He heard, as they moved, snatches of conversation arise from the hum of music and murmurs around them.

"So pretty..." "Never thought he'd find another..." "Did you see that kiss? And that bow he did? Oh, my heart..." "not enough people dancing, dude, come on!" "Should we get a stripper?"

He looked around sharply but wasn't sure of the source of the last one. He sighed and rested his head lightly on hers. Whoever it was, he was fairly certain there wasn't a thing he could do to stop them.

"Hey, Peter, can you dance?"

The Spine glanced over without lifting his head. That was Michael Reed.

"Why? You asking?" Peter said lightly.

Michael Reed roared with laughter. "You wish! I just thought there were a lot of girls standing around."

"Yeah. So go get one."

"What?" Michael gasped.

"You're trying to get me out there but you can dance with one as well as anyone else, dude."

"Tell you what. I don't dance much, but I'll ask one if you do."

The Spine was intrigued. He couldn't picture either of them dancing. Outside of lab or performance settings, they mostly giggled stupidly in the presence of girls.

"Who would I even ask?" Peter grumbled.

"I know. We'll pick one for each other."

"That's so dorky..."

"If she says no, you're off the hook. Same for me."

"Ugh, fine!" Peter looked around. "Aha."

"What?"

"That tiny teeny girl over there. I like the contrast."

"Chelsea's sister?"

"She has a sister?" Peter asked.

"Yeah! She's Camille and she's very nice. Fine, I'll ask her. And you ask Bunny."

"What? But..."

"No take-backs."

"Why, Mike? She hates my guts!"

"That's not how I heard it..."
The Spine had to agree.

"This is a set up. The whole thing is a plot. Someone has a camera on me right now, right?"

"No," Michael said with a grin. "I just looked and there she was."

"You're not fooling anyone."

Michael laughed. "Go ahead."

"You first," Peter said quickly.

"I know," Michael said. "We'll do it at the same time. Next song."

The song ended soon after. Michael Reed went straight to Camille and asked her to dance while Peter walked slowly and stiffly toward Bunny.

The Spine kissed Breanna and smiled. "Could you hear Michael and Peter, by any chance?"

"No... why? Were they flirting?" she asked with a wink.

A little? Not that it mattered. He was fairly convinced by now that Peter's heart was spoken for.

He laughed and led her to a table, explaining what he'd heard on the way.

Peter stood behind Bunny, trying to still his nerves. He wanted to dance with her. He'd protested but he really, really did. He'd been practicing all week in case the chance came up, in fact. And it had taken a dare from Michael Reed just to get him this close!

Because he'd realized that just because they'd had one or two hot kisses in a moment of weakness and he'd let it go to his head, well... there was still no promise that she wanted to dance with him. She might not even want to talk to him.

She was signing rapidly to Sam, who watched her blankly, and David, who was grinning. From his responses, the topic was table top gaming.

David noticed Peter and stared for a moment. Bunny turned to see what was going on.

"Um... would you like to dance?" Peter asked shakily, offering his hand.

"Why, I'd love to!" Sam cried. "But I have two left feet."

"Sam..." Peter sighed as Bunny smacked Sam in the shoulder and David grinned. Why? "Bunny? How about it?"

She nodded, smiled a little, and took his hand.

She said yes! he thought. Well, sort of...

By the time he woke from shock, they stood facing each other on the dance floor. He swallowed hard as they both awkwardly reached out. At first, she had her hands in the wrong positions. She laughed and corrected herself and he took her in his arms.

"Oops, sorry... Still getting adjusted, huh? I guess you haven't danced much lately..." he stammered
as he counted in his head the steps he had been practicing every night.

She nodded and he realized guiltily that she couldn't sign like this.

"I'm sorry... I guess this must be frustrating, not being able to talk while you're dancing. Thanks for doing it anyway."

She grinned and shook her head.

"What? What did I say? Oh, right... sorry..."

She laughed, silently as always. With her left hand, she carefully signed, "Stop apologizing. It's okay."

"Sor... right. Got it."

She felt wonderful in his arms, and she smelled of roses again. He couldn't help but be reminded of their journey in Kazooland. The scent conjured memories of hugging her while she cried, sitting with her holding Marshmallow, of a deep, longing kiss... He shivered.

With her left hand, once more, she signed, "Who put you up to this?"

He wanted to argue, but she already had his number. "Mike," he sighed. "But it's not like that..."

She grinned. "I'm glad he did."

He felt a little bubble of delight rise in his chest. "Really? Why? I thought you'd be pissed off."

"I doubt anyone else will ask me to dance."

The bubble popped. Oh. "Why not?"

"I'm so tall..." she signed, but the look on her face spoke volumes. She wouldn't be dancing because a lot of the guests didn't know how to approach her after her change.

"But... you could ask them, right?"

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"No? Aren't they practicing their ASL?"

"Yeah, but it's still really hard."

"What? But I made sure everyone was learning it so you wouldn't have to depend on David to talk!"

She smiled. "Thanks."

"For what? I can't believe they aren't learning it!"

"They are! Slowly."

"But... I can understand everything you're signing! If they'd just work at it..."

"It's easy for you, genius."

With anyone else that would have been sarcasm, but Peter was certified. "Come on, all it takes is a little time and practice... You've learned it so well, and David understands you!"
"You..." She jabbed him in the chest. "Genius. We're just good because we need it."

"Well... that just sucks. I thought they'd have it by now."

"They'll get it, okay?"

He still felt oddly deflated. "I thought it was getting better."

"It is, but you learn faster," Bunny signed. "Accept it."

"I guess... I just thought maybe I wasn't as sharp as everyone said," he murmured. "Or I wouldn't have screwed up so much."

To his blank astonishment, Bunny's face broke into a warm, sympathetic smile. It made him tingly all over.

"Everyone screws up, right?" she signed.

"Yeah..." She was being so nice! "Um... so, you were talking about D&D?"

She nodded. "You play at all?"

"Well... a little. I mean, I tried once but I kept rolling low numbers. The dungeonmaster had me in a basket without my limbs by the time I gave up and died. They fed what was left to a dragon to make it slow and sleepy..."

Bunny shook with silent laughter.

"Yeah... It was pretty sad. Funny, but sad. I... I wouldn't mind trying again, though. If you ever need a whipping boy."

She looked up at him, still flushed from laughing, and his skin tingled. Was her amusement all that was behind the warmth in her smile? He grinned, wishing she could see it.

He wanted to go on dancing, but the song ended and they stood, looking at each other awkwardly. He felt as though he had let a chance slip away, but what chance was there, really? Sure, she was being nice now, but she'd made herself clear.

Only he believed in using the scientific method. Her theory was that it wouldn't work if they got together. His hypothesis was that it just might, and it would be spectacular. He wanted to test that hypothesis. Science was risk...

"Thank you again," he murmured, trying to sound normal and not at all miserable. "Um, any time you want to dance again, just come over and give me a nod..."

The next song had begun. It was by E.L.O. Bunny gasped.

"What?" he murmured.

"I love this song!" she signed.

"Oh... then... would you like to..."

She nodded and grinned.

David and Sam were watching them from the DJ table. Sam was grinning, but David gave a little tip
of his head and Peter blinked in shock. David was okay with it?

Bunny prodded him in the chest, startling him, and Peter smiled and took her hand once more.

The Spine giggled with Breanna.

"I thought she'd punch him!" she whispered. "But no!"

"I thought David might..."

"That, too! But Bunny, seriously... She used to gripe about him all the time but now I swear she'd kiss him if he had lips..."

"You haven't seen them in the lab together, I guess. I'm almost positive I caught her looking at his bottom a while back, and the number of times their hands have brushed over a wrench and one or both of them blushed... Peter's face is obscured but I've seen his neck turn red when she so much as comes into the room."

"No way!"

"Something's up. I thought maybe I was seeing love everywhere, considering I'm so in love with you."

He kissed her fingers and she blinked slowly at him and smiled, making his boiler bubble.

"You sure you want to wait until the wedding night?" she murmured silkily.

No...

He sighed slowly and breathed, "Yes... don't make it harder for me!"

She giggled and bit her lip. "That sounded so dirty..."

"You're enjoying this aren't you?"

"Aren't you?"

So help him he was! He kissed her hand and smiled weakly, not trusting himself to speak. She laughed and looked out on the dance floor once more.

"Oh, is he holding her closer this time?" she giggled.

"Maybe she's holding him closer."

"Maybe! It looks like he's just staring at her face the whole time. I guess he might not be. So hard to tell..."

"No, I think you're right."

"Oh... This is just so freaking adorable!"

As the song ended, Bunny signed something to him and they walked away together... straight out the ballroom door. The Spine and Breanna snickered shamelessly.

"Oh my gosh!" Breanna giggled. "Where are they going?"

"Wherever it is, I hope it has a door with a lock," he said with a sly grin.
"You're becoming incorrigible..." she sighed, smiling at him. "They're just starting. All you think about is sex, I swear.

He couldn't deny it. They just had to find some way to stop the Blue Matter effects before he went mad with longing!

"Good things are worth waiting for..." he murmured, to himself as much as her.

"If you make it!" she laughed.

"If we both make it..."

Dave strolled up. "Well, I got one dance, anyway."

"What?" The Spine asked, a bit startled.

"Sunshine couldn't take it anymore and went looking for Rabbit."

"Ah. Well, sit down."

"Oh, I don't want to intrude, Dad..."

"We see each other all day, every day," Breanna reassured him, "but you hardly see your dad, and I still don't know that much about you. We'll dance more, but don't worry about spoiling our hot date. We get in plenty of flirting time! Join us."

The Spine tugged out a chair and gestured to it. He wanted to see his son, certainly, but at the moment, he was feeling a strong need for a chaperone!

Dave smiled and sat.

"Okay, Mom," he said with a wink. Breanna laughed.

"Are you sure about this?" Peter murmured as he activated the portal.

"Yes," she signed. "If I'm right, it'll drop us at the last place we left..."

"Well, yeah, but who's to say you'll get your voice back?"

"I want to try. It would be nice to talk for a while." At least, that was part of the reason. She remembered his kiss once more, and shivered. "Don't you want to have a face again?"

"I dunno. Why torture myself? It's not like I get to bring it back. I might as well accept my fate. I did it to myself."

She raised a single eyebrow.

"How do you do that? I swear it speaks volumes. Yeah, alright. It sounds awesome to have my face back. I suppose I just don't know whether it's that simple."

The portal hummed to life and Bunny signed, "One way to find out. Got the transmitter?"

Peter grabbed the device and checked the power. "Got it."

"Good. Don't want to get stuck there. I don't know if there's food."
She held out her hand, her heart pounding. To her dizzy relief, he took it.

She'd had time to think. That was what she had wanted. And she realized that with everything that had changed, she had no business trying to force anything to stay the same.

Something was changing with Peter in particular. Starting a relationship with a passionate kiss would have been putting the cart before the horse for any other couple, but it made sense for them. She theorized that the kiss had broken the angry tension between them and shattered the walls they had built, leaving them to start over. After a moment like that, it felt as though nothing was taboo, nothing was certain. It could happen. It could be amazing. And she felt as though she'd be a fool to miss the chance to find out.

She squeezed his hand and he squeezed back. They walked through the portal together.

She understood now what it meant when she felt the choking sensation and the joy surged inside her. She heard Peter gasp softly and wondered whether it meant what she thought it did.

They were standing near a train station. The town and the museum were gone.

"Is it the same one?" he asked.

"I..." she began experimentally. She coughed. "I don't know."

He turned to her abruptly. "Well, that answers question number one." With trembling hands, he reached up and removed his mask. "Well?"

Bunny brushed a loose lock of blonde hair away from his face and smiled.

"Hi," he sighed. He grinned and she grinned back.

"Peter... it's good to see your face again," she said as a train whistle sounded close by.

His grin faded to a bright, dreamy smile. "Shall we board the train?"

She hesitated. Was that a metaphor for something? She squinted into the darkness to see whether any tunnels had appeared along the train route...

"Sure..."

"Great! I love trains and there's nowhere to talk around here. I wonder where the town went?"

He remembered the town? How much more did he remember? "Back into my head, I guess," she said hesitantly as they climbed the steps into the train.

"Oh, that one was you, huh?"

He didn't remember much, apparently. "I told you it was," she sighed.

"Oh... um... when?" he asked, leading the way through the empty passenger cars.

"Right before we came back."

"Oh..." He was clearly at a loss. "I'm sorry, I..."

"You don't remember."
"I have to confess I don't. Well... wait..."

He looked up thoughtfully and she stared at him, holding her breath.

"I do remember... um..." he murmured slowly.

"What?" she gasped.

He chuckled nervously. His face reddened as he continued, "The, uh... whole thing is a little fuzzy."

Was he embarrassed about forgetting, or embarrassed about remembering? Well, if he did remember and was determined to whitewash the whole business, she couldn't force him to own up.

"So," he said, pausing at a pair of seats facing one another, "was that a town you once lived in or something?"

"No," she replied, sitting down. "Not in real life anyway."

The train rumbled into motion as they settled into their seats and Bunny began to explain to Peter about the house she had seen in a movie somewhere as a kid, and how it had become her idyllic fantasy of what it was like to be an adult. Their soft voices faded into the darkness as a small town slowly began to form once more around the lonely station.

"Hello?"

Rabbit looked up sharply and whimpered softly in pain. Who was here? His eyes were slow to focus now and he was having a hard time distinguishing voices...

"Rabbit? Finally! I've been searching for two hours! Thank goodness I came to my senses and asked Qwerty. He said you were here."

There was a shape... a woman.

Woman. Pain arced through his body.

"Go away..." Rabbit choked.

"Rabbit! It's me, Sunshine."

"Oh!" he gasped.

How had he not known her voice? Ah, that was right... he was having a hard time distinguishing... had he just thought that? Nothing was working right anymore...

"Um, go on back t-t-t-to tha party, baby! I just need a little rest."

"Uh-huh." She crouched beside him. "Oh, Rabbit..." she breathed.

He looked up at her from where he sat, curled into a ball of misery against the base of the sofa. Oil leaked from his eyes and he coughed thickly. The oil leak in his bellows hadn't slowed and he could feel water pooling in there as well. The memory burned bright in his mind and spasms still wracked his body. He felt he had nothing left. He knew how me must look and it was at least as bad as he felt. It had to be soon, now. He couldn't go on hurting like this. He simply had to die tonight. He was in the spot in the photo, he was leaking all over. And he couldn't shut down now. He had to wait it out,
wait until something broke, melted, became too damaged to repair. He didn't want to shut down and wake up just as confused and frightened as ever with no end in sight. The sign had read, "The Death of Rabbit." And Rabbit was ready.

"Sunshine..." he choked. "Baby, just g-g-g-go on b-b-back and d-don't tell no-no-nobody ya saw me li-li-like this..."

"No! Oh, honey, why are you suffering? Why isn't Peter doing something to help you? We need to get him in here and..."

"No!"

It seemed she had no intention of letting the matter drop, but if he could just stall her...

"P-P-Please..." he choked, "j-just s-sit with m-m-me, ba-aby. Just d-d-don't l-leave m-m-me alone..."

"But Peter can help! He should help!"

"It ain't his f-f-fault!"

"It's his responsibility! His father never would have left you like this!"

"He wou-would have if I'da p-p-put up enough of a f-fight." He took her hand weakly. "Ho-Honey, c-c-can ya k-keep a secret?"

"I can't promise, Rabbit," she said tearfully. "Please let me get help."

"Ya g-g-gotta p-promise or I won't t-tell ya. And if ya g-g-g-go for help, I w-won't be here when ya g-g-g-get back. I'll go so-so-some-somewhere and finish tha job."

She gasped and stared at him. "Rabbit... what's come over you? Please talk to me!"

"O-Only if I get doctor p-patient privilege." He chuckled painfully. "That's wh-what they call it, right?"

Sunshine's face trembled. "Please don't make me hide this..."

"Ya won't have t-t-t-to for long. Baby... I'm d-dying."

"No! You can be repaired."

"Yeah, ma-ma-maybe, if they f-f-f-find me n-now. And they ain't go-gonna, see?"

"Why?" she wailed.

"I wa-wanna die. I ain't r-r-right anymore. My processor is m-messed up and my co-co-core is goin' bad."

"What? Years ago you had me talk to your daughter because she wanted to die! But Rabbit, not you..."

"I'm ge-gettin' c-c-crazy signals, baby. I do-don't know who or wha-wha-what I am anymore. For a while I th-thought it was ju-ju-just a weird m-m-m-m-m-mood or s-somethin' but it di-didn't go away. I c-c-can't live like this..."

She took a slow deep breath. He had a feeling she was calling in her years of training on this one. He
smiled weakly. She was too late. Even as they spoke, it had begun. He could feel an oil line splitting in his chest. His bellows wasn't doing its job and he was starting to overheat. His whole body trembled worse than ever and his neural circuits were starting to go fuzzy. A peace stole over him at last.

"G-Go on back... t-t-t-tell 'em whatever ya want... It's over..."

"No..." she moaned.

"N-n-no more fe-feelin' like something I ain't... or bein' so-so-somethin' I don't feel like..." He gulped back the oil that was pooling in his vocal assembly from another melting oil line. "Not sure which..."

"What do you mean?"

"Feel like a wo-wo-woman, I think..." He grimaced as a spasm of pain and fear shot through him. Not much longer... "Ain't real sure... crazy, huh? But I ain't... I know wh-wh-what I am... What Pa-Pa-Pappy m-m-m-made m-m-m-me..."

"No, Rabbit! Is that what this is about?"

"That... an' a l-l-l-lot o' things..."

He slipped sideways and caught himself halfway to the floor. She reached for him.

"No!" he barked, startling her. "Chest o-o-o-ver... h-heating... t-t-too ho-ho-hot... t-t-o-t-t-touch... G-G-G-Go now... 'tsokay... d-don't wa-wa-want... ya to see m-m-m-m-me like this..."

His arms trembled and failed him and he collapsed heavily. He could hear her punching buttons on her phone.

"T-t-t-too late..." he rasped, staring into the growing darkness. "Go-Gonna be-be-be with Ho-Honey now..."

"Don't you dare!" she screamed. "Hello? Dave? Get your dad down to... to lab seven right away! Bring Peter! Rabbit's very sick!"

Her voice was fading out. Rabbit closed his eyes.

"I l-l-love... you... b-baby g-g-g-girl... T-Tell Spine... s-s-s-s-sorry... an' Upgrade... Pa-Pa-Pappy... loves her..." 

"Stop it! You're so dramatic!"

He smiled weakly. His vocal assembly had stopped responding.

"Honey..." he mouthed.

He groped for Sunshine's hand once more and held it as the room grew black.

"Rabbit!" she howled. Her voice faded and all that was left was silence.
Chapter Summary

They were having such a good time... guess it's not a party until someone ends up in surgery. Not like this, though... not like this.

Chapter Notes

I'm taking some cues from the Red Core comic in the next couple of chapters. Since it's an unfinished storyline, I'll pull a Fullmetal Alchemist and take the beginning part and move off in another direction.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So the lady hands me the clipboard and I start making the changes, but I couldn't miss the fact that she was looking at my rack, right? Like staring at my entire freaking body."

Peter frowned. "That's pretty uncouth... all things considered. I mean, she's entitled to disapprove if that's what she wants but professionally..."

Bunny grinned. "It's okay. It wasn't like that at all."

"Oh, good..." He still looked skeptical.

They rumbled on through the night. The train hadn't stopped once and it seemed odd. It was as though it was only there when wanted, and only for why it was wanted. And right now, it was wanted as a suitable place to chat.


"So what did you do?" he asked. "Snap your fingers by your eyes?"

"I didn't know what to do! I mean, right then I was thinking what you thought, and David looked pissed off so I didn't dare ask him to step in. I just went on with the paperwork.

"So as I'm signing the final paper, she says to me, 'Sorry for the stare, sweetie... I was just thinking that with that great figure, you must have started those hormones awful young!'"

Peter laughed and she felt fantastic. She'd never felt this comfortable with him!

They sat opposite each other. She had kicked off her pumps and had her feet up next to him. He eased his onto her seat and crossed his ankles, trying to fit his long legs into the same space as her slightly shorter ones.

"Well, at least they didn't ask any hard questions," he said. "The truth is more complicated than their assumptions."
He at last got his legs settled into place. They had ended up resting gently against hers...

"Yeah," she said, suppressing a shiver. "I hate having to lie to people but I sure as hell can't tell them the truth. Anyway, at least I've fixed the public records."

"I like the name you picked. Isabella. It's really pretty."

"Thanks."

"But if it's all the same to you, I'm sticking with Bunny. I'm terrible at names anyway. That okay?"

"Sure."

He leaned back in his seat and stretched. "So... Would you ever consider reversing it again to get your voice back? I mean, if you could?"

"The voice..." she sighed. "I've given that a lot of thought. Sometimes it's hard, yeah, not being able to talk. But honestly, I lay awake nights afraid that something will go wrong and I'll wake up male!"

"Seriously?" he laughed. "I thought you could go either way."

"I thought so too... until I ended up like this. I don't know... I just don't feel all that male anymore. I guess it's hard to tell when you've only ever been one."

"Wow. So if I find a way to reverse the effects and get my face back permanently..."

"No thanks. Unless you learn how to just get back the good stuff. Like we do here. I'm content and the life expectancy is longer. So yeah, I'll stick with this body."

"Yeah... it's a good one..." he murmured sleepily. He blushed fiercely and she giggled.

"Puberty's got a sense of humor in Walter Manor. Don't sweat it, Peter. I appreciate the fact that it could have been worse."

He relaxed once more. "It's crazy... I got slapped with late puberty and yours went back and reversed itself."

"Oh, I wouldn't say you got a late puberty. Just that one bit. Anyone could see you've already reached sexual maturity."

"Oh? In what way?" he asked, grinning.

Her hair stood on end. He's flirting again... he's flirting again! "Um... I-I mean, you have the broad shoulders and your voice changed and you're hairy..." she stammered.

Nice, dummins... She sank into her seat a little, her mind racing, as Peter roared with startled laughter.

"He's flirting again... he's flirting again!" "Um... I-I mean, you have the broad shoulders and your voice changed and you're hairy..."

It wasn't the first time tonight that he had drifted effortlessly into a flirt. But her sad little secret was that she was terrible at flirting.

It was easy as a guy. Girls always started the moment they saw that shy dip of the head. It wasn't deliberate but apparently it was irresistible. But when she'd felt attracted to a man, as a man, she just couldn't imagine flirting with one. It felt off. Guys didn't do their part the way girls did. And of course there was the complication of not knowing whether the guy in question would reciprocate or beat the hell out of you.
Although the only man she'd ever wanted to get really close to had offered the additional obstacle of being asexual, and her boss. Only that same man was flirting with her right now and she'd told him he was hairy!

Her silent panic attack was interrupted by Peter's laughing shout. "Hairy?"

"Well... yeah..." she said weakly. "You're a dude. I remember that, y'know. We... I mean, guys are... y'know... hairy."

"I'm a blonde dude, though, look at me! I couldn't even grow a beard properly..."

"You have back hair though..."

"What? I do not!" he gasped.

"Sure you do! I saw..." Bunny stopped, the awkwardness settling over her all at once.

"Saw what?" he demanded.

No. This conversation is not happening. "Never mind..."

"It's okay," he laughed. "I just want to know if I'm neglecting my wardrobe."

"You sure?"

He nodded.

"Well... look, truth is, I saw you last week bending over the work table and I could see a little hair at the top of your jeans, okay? Not a lot."

"Oh, well, that's... no... wait... I still don't have that much so..." Peter looked puzzled. "Holy crap, Bunny, how far down were they?"

"I... uh... I could see your thong..."

"Oh..." he giggled. He was very red. "Those jeans wear better with a thong. So... you could see my butt?"

She couldn't believe they were discussing his butt. "A little..."

He gave her a look that spoke volumes. She could almost hear him thinking, a thousand questions forming in the context of the new realization that Bunny had, at some point, stopped to stare at his rear and hadn't seen fit to mention it.

"I guess I need to wear jeans that fit right," he said slowly, looking her in the eyes.

"No! I mean... not if those are comfortable. They're okay... um... when you aren't bending over."

And they're fantastic when you are...

He grinned, still blushing. She wasn't sure but it seemed like she might be, in some feeble way, flirting with him. As far as she could tell. It felt like flirting.

"They are pretty comfortable," he murmured, relaxing at last. "So if you don't mind them..."

"Well," she said, smiling. "I... um... wouldn't want to be responsible for ruining your comfort."
He giggled. *Holy crap,* she thought. *I think I am flirting!*

What was even better was that they were able to discuss this. It was personal, and potentially offensive, and Peter was assuming she meant no offense. He was hearing her and trusting her word on it. He was *letting her in!*

To her alarm, she felt such a swelling of emotion that her eyes began to tear up.

He slid his legs from the seat and leaned toward her. "What's wrong, Bunny? Is this making you uncomfortable?" he asked worriedly. "I'll stop, okay? Don't cry... I mean, cry if you want but seriously... what's wrong?"

He was worried about her! *My heart...* She cried harder.

"Maybe we should go back..."

"No! I'm not upset, Peter!"

"The data disagrees with you..." he said weakly.

"Scientist," she chuckled thickly, swabbing at her eyes with her sleeve.

"I am what I am. If you're not upset, then... I guess you're happy?" he asked skeptically.

She nodded. He smiled and leaned back a little.

"Really? Bunny... you're so happy you're crying? What the hell happened that I missed? We were talking about my pants!"

*Your butt, actually... "We were talking,"* she told him. *"Just you and me, no pressure, no anger, talking about whatever. Getting along. I hardly ever just get to sit and talk. I mean, even before, I just couldn't open up with people. But now, we're just talking and it's like a champagne buzz or something. It's so amazing to just be able to talk to someone like this. And it's you. I never thought that would ever happen."

"Yeah. We kinda hated each other."

She knew it as well as he did, and yet his words pierced her to the heart.

He really *had* hated her?

She knew it was hypocritical because she had made a very good show of hating him, despite the fact that she had admired his mind and found him, well... She had to admit, even before the change, that she had found him physically attractive. But the idea that he'd hated *her!* She felt the tears welling up again and hastily blinked them away.

Fortunately, Peter was now looking out the window at the impenetrable darkness. *"You wanna know a secret, though?"* he said gently.

"Hm?" she grunted, trying to avoid speaking and giving away her emotional state.

"I never hated you."

And now she couldn't speak at all.

Peter didn't notice. His eyes were still fixed on the window. It seemed he had something to say and
couldn't say it while looking at her.

"I thought you were cool, believe it or not. You were so talented and funny, and you and David would get the giggles and it was impossible not to laugh with you. Unless I was really pissed off. Which I was, a lot. I'm sorry about that, by the way. I never meant to get cast as your arch-nemesis. That always bugged me. But I had a business to run.

"So yeah, I got frustrated because you were so eager to get ahead and I knew someone was gonna get hurt. I never doubted you could find a way but I was so afraid of a lawsuit. Stupid. My heart was in the right place, though. I was also afraid that someone would die and I would never forgive myself. It's my responsibility. The idea of one of you dying and the other twin being left alone. You two depend on each other so much!

"I beat myself up for months after your accident. Well, I never really stopped. So even though I told you to be careful, I took worse risks myself. I went in thinking that this would be a chance to fix what I'd done to you. That's how I saw it. I hoped that portal would lead me to the tech to get you back to normal and then I could get that off my conscience. Still sounds pretty selfish, huh?

"So yeah... I was a tight-ass but I really didn't hate you. You were just so strong-willed and freaking brilliant. I felt like I had to pull back harder because you'd do it, dammit, sooner or later, you'd blow a hole through space-time, and if it was too soon, well... You saw what happened.

"But after my accident, I realized how well that change had come out... You were pretty distracting in the lab. Holy Hell, you were distracting... and I felt like a hypocrite so I didn't dare say anything... I'm babbling, aren't I. I'm babbling to fill the silence that's been created by my babbling while you're sitting there thinking I'm a jackass who needs to quit braying already..."

He turned to her at last and gasped. She had sat, listening, allowing the tears to flow unchecked down her cheeks.

He slapped his hand to his forehead. "Stupid jerk, why don't you know when to shut up?" he growled.

"Peter... you idiot, I'm still not upset, okay?" she said thickly.

"Seriously? You're crying, Bunny! The tears are dripping off your chin! Oh, come here, dork..." he sighed, tugging his sleeve down and wiping her face gently.

She laughed messily. "I loved it... all of it. I could listen to you talk like that all night... maybe for years."

He'd finished mopping up the tears and sat staring into her face. "Really?" he asked softly.

"Well... I'd want you to shut up sometimes. Let's not be stupid..."

He laughed and she laughed with him. He leaned back in his seat once more and sighed.

"All that made you happy. I don't seem to be able to fail tonight. I hope my winning streak holds."

"Maybe we should go to Vegas and find out."

He laughed briefly and they fell into a sudden blushing silence. She wondered whether he was thinking what she was. Vegas was a place where many risks were taken. Some of those were weddings.
No. This was going well, but it was late and she was certain that what she needed now was more
time to think. Eventually. For now, as Peter eased his feet back up beside her and rested his legs once
more gently against hers, she didn't want to move. Much.

"Have you seen Bunny?"

"Hm?" The Spine murmured. Breanna was against his chest. He loved a slow dance...

"Bunny! The party is nearly over and she and Peter didn't come back!" David insisted.

"She's a big girl..."

"Well, yeah, but... Suppose something happened! We can't even hear her scream!"

The Spine was privately thankful for that, considering whose company she'd been in when she left.
He prudently censored that fact from his response. From David's sudden blush, he suspected it didn't
need to be said.

"Maybe they've gone to bed," The Spine said soothingly.

He felt Breanna giggling silently against his chest as David glared, and it occurred to him that this
wasn't much of an improvement.

"David... Trust her, okay? She's got to find her own way," Breanna sighed, still giggling softly.
"Chelsea's waiting for you."

David sighed and walked off toward Chelsea. Bree stumbled and The Spine caught her.

"Sorry..." she mumbled. "Sleepy."

He laughed quietly and scooped her up. "Alright. Party's over for you."

She nestled against his shoulder and sighed. "I love being carried. My dad used to carry me to bed..."

He frowned. That was the one nagging doubt. He was so much older than she was...

"I hope this is different," he said uneasily.

She smiled sleepily and tugged his face down to hers, treating him to a deep, passionate kiss. "Does
that set your mind at ease?" she breathed.

"Yes!" he gasped, steam pouring from the back of his collar.

"Good. I expect you to carry me to bed someday and keep me awake well past my bedtime. You're
not my father, okay?"

Rather than feeling a guilty delight at this, however, he had a sinking feeling. "Wait... Oh, crap, Bree... weren't your parents invited to the party? I mean, considering..."

"Nope! This was for us. We'll deal with them soon enough."

"That bad?"

"No, I just didn't want them getting all up in my business. I wanted to be able to make out and crack
dirty jokes without my parents around."

He chuckled, relieved. He hadn't really wanted to face that hurdle yet, either.

Dave hurried to them. "Dad! We need to find Peter and get to lab seven! It's Rabbit... He's crashed or something!"

The Spine looked at Bree. "Can't say I'm surprised..." he said tightly.

"Put me down," she said firmly, stifling a yawn. "Let's go see what's up."

They sat side by side now on the same seat with their feet up. There had been a conversation about whose feet were bigger considering she'd lost about two inches in height when she transformed. Peter's feet were larger by about half an inch.

"They're still pretty damned big," Bunny was saying. "Size eleven women's. Not so easy to get dress shoes. Sneakers are better. I can grab unisex high tops in the men's section."

"You got some pretty good shoes there," he said, looking drowsily down at the pumps on the floor. "They make your legs look good."

"You saying they look bad otherwise?" she asked sharply, but he could tell she was teasing. He grinned.

"How do I know? You only wear sneakers with jeans. I couldn't even tell they were high tops until you told me."

"Uh-huh."

The really stupid thing was that he was absolutely delighted with the conversation. It was completely trivial and neither of them cared. Since the deep and important stuff a while back they had talked about Monty Python, The Marx Brothers, and Mystery Science Theater 3000, relative foot size, why internet cookies were called cookies, actual cookies, cake, pie, organic cooking and Spam. And it had flowed as freely as the conversation had ever flowed between Bunny and David, or Bunny and Sam, or Michael Reed and just about anyone. Like Bunny, Peter had always had trouble just talking to people. Except for Michael Reed, who was ever and always the exception for all people. And here he was, Peter Walter, talking like an old friend to his ex-arch-nemesis.

That had been pretty cool, actually. But he liked this a lot better. They were both tired and growing increasingly silly because of it, but he just couldn't bring himself to suggest heading back.

"You got pretty good feet too," he said, prodding hers with his toe.

"Hey, that tickles!"

This led to a toe and tickle battle that almost caused Bunny to slip off the narrow bench. Peter caught her just in time and pulled her back up and they sat, his arm around her, giggling like idiots. Bunny drifted against him as she laughed. Her head rested against his shoulder. He sighed quietly, still grinning. This was nice.

Peter's watch buzzed to life. He reached distractedly for the button.

"Yeah?" he said, grinning at Bunny, who was making a face at the watch.
"Peter! Where the Hell are you?" cried The Spine.

"Oh, y'know... around," he said benignly.

Bunny snickered even though it was a thoroughly lame remark. She was so cute when she did that...

"Rabbit's dying, damn you!"

It was as if cold water had been poured over them. They stared at each other in shock.

"Peter!"

"Oh! Right... where is he?"

"He's in lab seven! We all are! Get the hell in here!"

"On my way..." he said weakly, releasing the button. "He can't really die..."

She sighed. "I know. Look, Peter... Whatever happens... Don't let it taint this. I want to be friends there too, y'know? It's the one thing we found here that we can take back with us."

"I'd really like that. This has been..."

How to say it? They were friends now, but he wanted so much more...

"I promise," he told her. "I won't leave this behind."

She grinned and he tingled all over. Then he made himself a promise as well. Even if all she ever wanted was to be his friend, he'd never become her enemy again.

The train stopped as if on command and they hastily debarked. Peter activated the return portal. He would never admit how badly he wanted to stay just a little longer, sitting on that train with his arm around her. But his sobering fear for Rabbit drove him to enter the portal, putting his mask back on as he went. Bunny coughed as she followed and Peter stopped short just inside the lab and looked at her. Her eyes were welling with tears.

"I'm sorry..." he murmured. "It never gets easier..."

She shook her head and signed, "It's not like I didn't know it would happen."

"I know, but... c'mere."

He pulled her gratefully into a hug and made sure it was a good one. He'd wanted so much for tonight to revisit that little moment they'd had last time and all they'd really done was talk. But it had still been great.

And now they were needed. They parted and hurried to lab seven, Bunny catching him by the hand as they went. He grinned behind his mask and gave her hand a squeeze.

There was a cluster of workers and robots around Rabbit, who had been placed on a work table. David, Chelsea and Dave had already started preparing for maintenance. The Spine sat on an old sofa with his face in his hands, with Bree and Sunshine beside him. Peter could see a puddle of oil and water on the floor and recognized what had happened. He'd run scenarios like this in his head countless times. Rabbit tended to wander the whole manor, and Peter just knew one day he would rupture something and shut down in some obscure wing of the house where they wouldn't find him for days.
He started to let go of Bunny's hand, but she held on firmly all the way to the table before letting go. The assembled workers exchanged glances and he looked quickly at Bunny, who was looking back with a sly smile, and felt a thrill of excitement. Maybe she was just messing with them, maybe she was sending him a message instead. He had no idea which, but it was all good now. Let the rumors fly. They'd be one hundred percent truth if he had his way.

He forced himself to look away from her eyes and start the diagnostic.

He had no lack of assistants as he worked. He had the expertise of the workers themselves, each prepared to get as messy as it took to do the job. Dave, though he hadn't worked on robots in years, still provided a steady hand and vast technical skill. The Spine, once he had calmed down, came over with Bree and helped as well.

It was a close shave, too damned close! Rabbit had overheated, and he'd been in terrible shape even before it. Peter had never gotten the full cooperation he'd wanted from Rabbit, and it needled him, wondering whether he had made the right choice. They could fix him yes, but would Rabbit turn around and do it again once he was back online? Or would he simply try and find a quicker and more permanent route to his own destruction? Sunshine, The Spine's daughter-in-law, had told him Rabbit had wanted to die. He had thought it was just drama when Rabbit had said it before, but now he had to believe. What else could explain this level of damage but a death wish?

In the end, he patched oil and water leaks, drained and cleaned the bellows, lubricated joints and cleaned oil residue from countless parts of Rabbit's framework. But he simply didn't dare to do more without Rabbit's consent. He suspected there would be hell to pay just for saving his life.

It was near dawn. He'd sent most of the human workers to bed. Breanna had even reluctantly retired, knowing The Spine would only worry more if she didn't get some rest. Bunny and Dave had remained to help, but they, like Sunshine, were dozing on the sofa. Upgrade, too uneasy about watching her Pappy being repaired but unable to make herself leave, sat with Jon on the floor on the other side of the room. The Spine was the only one still assisting him, indeed, he had refused to budge until the work was done. But as he opened Rabbit's pelvic assembly to check the oil lines, Peter noticed something that made his hair stand on end.

Wanda had described to him, not long ago, the structural changes that had been required to install the feminine chest plate she had found for Rabbit. There was a plain metal switch some three inches long, incorporated into the framework, that snapped into place when the hips were widened. Her theory was that this was the toggle for the gender alignment*

The hips weren't widened now. They sat in their usual, masculine placement. But the switch was snapped into the feminine placement as if by a sledgehammer! It hadn't been necessary to open the center panels in the pelvic assembly at the time of the HoW implosion and so he hadn't noticed. And Rabbit, as usual, had refused to mention anything felt off lest he be ordered back in for more work.

But here it was, tightly jammed into place, half wrapped around the cross bar behind it, the attached bars that extended to the hips warped sharply backwards instead of straight to support the hips. It would require partially disassembling the pelvic framework to switch it forward again, and removal of the support bars for either repair or replacement.

He stared at it, wondering what to do. It was as if a floodlight had come on over his head, a supernova of realization. Rabbit had been acting feminine. He was off balance. His hips were out of control, and from what Peter saw, they must have been causing Rabbit tortuous pain. And only a blow on the scale of the one in the HoW implosion could have done it. It must have hit him dead
center, through the one and only gap in the pelvic assembly... a million to one shot.

Sunshine had told him one more thing, in a whisper... that Rabbit believed he was finally breaking down entirely because he was convinced he was female but knew he was male. Whether or not Peter understood how it had occurred, there was no doubt that it had. Why he had denied it so vehemently when it was common knowledge was a mystery. According to Wanda's data, Rabbit had been the android equivalent of a woman in a man's body for exactly as long as Bunny had been a woman physically. The question now was whether he wanted to go on being one and have a body to match, or allow them to repair the damaged switch and support bars... and whether it was too late to salvage Rabbit's sanity with the revelation.

Peter couldn't do anything about it without talking to Rabbit. He started to return the chassis plating.

"Peter, what are you doing?" The Spine murmured. He caught him by the arm, stopping him. "You aren't just going to leave it like that, are you?"

"What?"

"That isn't right, Peter. That piece is bent, and the bar attachments... Just look at them! They're warped! He must be in so much pain! We have to fix these, Peter!"

Dave rose to join them. "Holy crap, what has he done?" he muttered.

"Spine... do you have any idea what that central piece does?" Peter asked.

"It holds his hips in proper alignment... and Wanda has a theory that it's a kind of switch. You know Wanda's theory. This must be the thing Jon mentioned, the switch Pappy installed."

"Did you say my name?" Jon asked, rising and hurrying to them.

"Is this it, Jon? Is this the thing causing Rabbit's problems?"

Jon stared. "Well... no..."

"What?" cried The Spine. "You said Pappy put something in and that's part of his original structure! Pappy must have done it!"

"Oh, yeah, Pappy made it an' it makes Rabbit turn into a girl but that's not what Rabbit's afraid of."

"It's not?"

"Well, not only that. He's scared of it but it's not the really big thing he's scared of."

That Spine vented steam along his entire back and Peter shook his head.

"Mmkay..." Peter murmured. "Well, if Jon is right... and I think he is since everything else is the same except for that switch and those bars... You realize what this could mean?"

"The answer to everything," Dave said. "Rabbit's whole problem solved!"

"Pretty much. But the work to fix it... I just can't pull his entire pelvis apart without his okay."

"Peter, he'll never listen! We have to do it now, before he's reactivated!" Dave said.

"No..."
"He's right, Peter!" The Spine said. "He nearly died..."

"No, Spine," Peter insisted. "You know I'm right. You have to. You know he'll freak out as it is..."

"He'd never forgive us!" cried The Jon. "Spine, he'd rip it all out!"

The Spine gasped. Oily tears were streaking down his face. "Please!" he sobbed. "He won't listen, he'll do the same stupid things and next time he might die!"

"I'm sorry... it wouldn't be enough just to take it apart. He needs replacement pieces. I have to get his okay, Spine!"

The Spine sank back against the wall, shuddering. "I know..." he faltered, shaking. "I don't care... and I do care... he'll hurt himself either way!"

"Dad... come on," Dave said softly. "Let's discuss this tomorrow. We all need some rest, okay? Even you."

"He's right," Peter agreed. "I'm almost done. We'll power him on once we're all rested, okay? Go get some stasis."

The Spine nodded. "Fine," he said hoarsely. "Right... I can't think anymore..."

"Power down this time. Get your rest. I promise not to do anything without you."

The Spine stumbled out. Dave woke Sunshine and they hurried out with a wave, and Peter knew they would make sure The Spine found his room before they, too, rested.

He looked down into Rabbit's face. He looked so calm now. No pain, no mischief, no rage.

"Poor guy," Peter sighed.

Bunny sleepily rose to join him, helping him with fumbling fingers to return the plating and pull a blanket over Rabbit's still bare body. She looked up at him at last and smiled weakly.

"What happens now?" she signed.

"Sleep. What else can we do?"

Upgrade at last joined them at the table. "So it's true?" she murmured, sniffing. "Pappy's female now?"

"I guess that's what we find out. Technically you all have a choice. I mean, humans vary but automatons literally have no obstacles. If one of you feels other than you look, you just need a new chassis."

"You really think it's that simple, don't you?" she sighed, gently stroking Rabbit's cheek plate. "I don't think it's that simple for anyone, or Pappy wouldn't have tried to kill himself."

Her voice broke. Jon held her close.

"He didn't really try to kill himself, technically..." Peter faltered.

"Uh-huh. And neither did I... technically. But I still nearly managed it."

"You did?" Peter gasped, looking at Bunny. She shrugged, her expression showing as much surprise
as he felt. "When was this?"

"A long time ago, don't worry," Jon said, but he gave her a look that suggested he wasn't taking his own advice.

"When I lost Grand-Pere Armand, and... well, I was having some growing pains, I guess. It's not easy living in a ceiling. I still can't thank you enough for that. But I didn't try to kill myself. I just didn't try that hard to live... just like Pappy."

"Oh," Peter murmured. He didn't want to admit how well he understood.

"Peter, please help Pappy. I'll live if something happens to him, just like I lived after Mama died. But I'd miss him so much and... he's hurting! I mean... she's hurting."

Bunny's mouth formed an O as she and Peter exchanged another look.

"Upgrade... that's wonderful but... don't offer either pronoun at first, okay?" Jon murmured.

"What? But Jonny..."

"There's more stuff going on than we know yet. Even me. I just know that Rabbit's really scared of being called a girl. Maybe later he'll choose it but right now he's scared..."

"I don't care which one she chooses! I love Pappy!" she sobbed.

"I know." He kissed her softly and she scowled.

"Look... I don't know, well... Honestly, I don't know what the Hell Jon is talking about and I don't pretend to understand what this is like for Rabbit," Peter said. "Obviously I think it's simple and I guess it's not. I can fix the hip and put it into either setting. But Rabbit has to be the one to choose, not any of us, okay? The fact that you accept him... or her... either way is important. Even if you don't like what he chooses..."

"Or she..."

"The point is, what Rabbit needs is to know you accept him. Or her," he added hastily as her mouth opened.

He still couldn't see Rabbit as female, but if Rabbit's own daughter could adjust, he could deal. After all, he thought, looking at Bunny's tired but beautiful eyes... stranger things had happened, and he had adjusted to those. More than that, he really just wanted to visit Kazooland with her once more and see whether things could carry on where they left off...

But now was the time to rest. Jon's cryptic oracle-like statements had given him a headache. Besides, he had to wake Rabbit in the morning, or at least the afternoon. And he would have to try to reason with him. That always went well. He sighed deeply.

"Head for bed, dummins," Bunny signed.

"Did I read that right?" he said, grinning sleepily. "Did you use the sign for 'stupid' and put a little twist on it?"

"Yes. It came through?"

"Like telepathy. That's amazing."
The Jon giggled softly. "Of course it did. You two are connected."

"Oh, Jon..." Peter yawned. "You get weirder every day."

"But you are!"

"Come on, Jonny. Let's rest," Upgrade sighed. "Pappy will be fine here for now. Better than she's been in a long time. No worries for now."

She kissed Rabbit's brow and they left. Peter glanced awkwardly at Bunny. She was just turning away as though avoiding eye contact. Or the equivalent of eye contact.

"Connected," Peter snorted with forced amusement. It had given him a thrill and he wanted it to be true, but he'd just had too long of a night. "You'd think a 116-year-old robot would have outgrown fairy tales."

"No one should outgrow fairy tales," Bunny signed, turning back to face him. "So, what time do we face the music?"

"Hm? Oh... shoot, it's six already. I think I'll be willing to try it around one."

"Okay."

Bunny walked with him until she got to the worker's wing. There she paused and gave him a hug, to his delight. It almost seemed like the moment to give her a goodnight kiss, if he could have been sure she was amenable. He was almost relieved that the question was already settled. Almost.

She pulled back and smiled before walking slowly into her room. Peter sighed and strolled to his own room to sink gratefully into bed and let his mind wander over more pleasant vistas than facing Rabbit's wrath.

They decided to have a limited group, primarily automatons for safety, in the room when Rabbit was powered on. Hatchworth and The Spine stood on either side of the table. Jon was at his feet and Upgrade by his head. It almost seemed ceremonial, but it was more like an intervention.

Peter powered Rabbit on and stood with them, watching as he passed through the startup sequence. Bunny, on hand to assist, stayed clear with Sunshine and Dave.

Rabbit's eyes lit at last and he slowly looked around at all of them. His expression was confused at first. He flexed his hands, tested the straps holding them down, took a few deep breaths, inflating his bellows slowly and deflating them just as slowly. But though his functions were clearly all working far better than they had in months, with each new discovery he grew more agitated.

"No!" he screamed at last.

"Rabbit..." Jon whispered.

"I'm supposed ta be d-d-dead! It said I died!"

"Oh, Pappy!" Upgrade gasped as Rabbit began to sob.

"What said that?" Peter said, baffled.

"In tha museum... it said I was gonna die an' I was d-d-dead! I had finally died! How c-c-could
"What do you mean?"
"The museum?" Peter gasped. "It told the future? How is that possible?"

"It... it was in there... I was in a photo an' I was d-d-dead... I wanted ta die..." Rabbit wailed.

Hatchworth turned his head away from Rabbit. Peter could see a trail of oil starting down the brass bot's face. The Jon was no better off. The Spine, too, had two trails of oil starting. Nevertheless, he continued to stare stoically down at his sibling.

"Let me die!" Rabbit howled. "Why did ya save me? Let me f***in' die!"

"Shut him off! Oh, please shut him off!" Upgrade begged.

Rabbit let out a scream of rage and grief and The Spine broke at last. He took Rabbit's face firmly in his hands and looked him in the eye. Rabbit stared up as if transfixed, still shaking and snuffling miserably.

"Spine... help me die... I can't do this..."

"It's okay," The Spine said in low, steady tones. "Do you understand, Rabbit?"

"It's not... it's not okay..."

"We know what's wrong. We found the damage and we can fix it."

"It's my core... I'm go-go-goin' crazy..."

"You're not. Wanda was right. There's a switch in your pelvic assembly that's affecting your behavior. That's why you're feeling... well, different."

"No! Pappy never said he did that! Wanda's just g-g-g-guessin'!"

"Rabbit. I saw it..."

"What did it say 'girl switch' on it or somethin'?" Rabbit demanded angrily. "Is that what ya saw? Or did ya just s-s-s-see some random piece of metal and yehr talkin' out yehr ass?"

Upgrade gasped but The Spine never wavered. "So you need proof?"

"Yeah I need proof! Pappy made all of us, dummins! He didn't make me a girl, he didn't make you a girl, or Hatty, or even Jon! I ain't right! I'm supposed to be Pappy's son! The oldest! I'm supposed ta be this way because Pappy decided! I shouldn't... I shouldn't feel like I wanna be pretty and girly and..." Rabbit grimaced as though pained. An agonized whimper burst from his lips.

"Rabbit?" The Spine asked worriedly.

"It hurts... it ain't right... Wh-wh-why am I broken, Spine?"

"Rabbit... Let us fix the damage and we can talk..."

"No! Shut me off and let me rust!"

Steam fired from his back in one long stream, but The Spine's voice remained dead calm as he said, "You're not broken. You're not someone else. You're still by far the most stubborn hunk of metal ever to walk and talk. And you're not dying."
"I'm wrong... this wasn't supposed ta happen... a-an' the museum... it said I was supposed ta die... then it would stop, I wouldn't have to remember..."

"Remember what?"

Rabbit looked at him with terror in his eyes and looked away sharply. "I-I wouldn't hurt no more... just like it said..."

"I don't give a damn what it said. I'm not letting you die so you'd better get with the program."

"And it's just not possible, Rabbit!" Peter insisted. "That museum didn't have anything in it that couldn't have come from my head. I can't tell the future, can I?"

Rabbit glared at him. "I kn-kn-know what I saw."

"Yeah, you saw my projections for what would happen to you if you failed to get proper maintenance, and you tried to make it all happen! It's called a self-fulfilling prophecy!"

"Oh, it is, huh? Then I g-g-g-guess that photo I saw of Bunny gi-gi-givin' you a lip to lip tonsillectomy was just yehr dirty fantasy then!"

There was an awkward silence. Peter felt like his neck was on fire. Rabbit had seen that before he and Bunny had kissed so it couldn't be a photo of the actual event, but Peter had indulged in a couple of guilty fantasies right around the time he had given her the hug. He didn't trust himself to look at Bunny, even though she already knew.

"And you got a lot of nerve tellin' me I'm okay! Think yehr so damned smart but you can't even figure out ya don't need a voice ta whisper!"

Peter gasped as though struck. He did look at Bunny now... indeed, everyone was looking at Bunny.

She blinked at them all, her face very red, and at last looked back at Peter. "I tried it before but it's too damned noisy around here most of the time for anyone to hear me," she whispered. "And... you had everyone learning ASL and they were trying so hard and you were trying so hard and... and it was really sweet and I didn't want to... y'know, steal your thunder... I guess."

Peter shook his head. "I'm sorry, Bunny. I never even... I didn't ask you what you needed, I just assumed since you were working on ASL... I am so stupid sometimes, I swear."

"No..." Bunny began.

"Yeah. Ya are," Rabbit interrupted. He turned his head to the side and sobbed softly. The Spine leaned in close and Rabbit closed his eyes.

"Nice try, but don't change the subject," The Spine murmured. "We'll shut you off for now, but you can bet your warped pelvic assembly that I will come back here with proof that you're exactly the way Pappy made you from frame to chassis and then you can make your choice about how you want to live, as a man or a woman. Hear me? No one here cares one way or the other as long as you're happy. Get used to it.

"You lived through losing Pappy and Honeybee and, well... A lot of people. You got me through losing Marie and Lily. You know perfectly well that life sucks sometimes but it always gets better again. Always. So if you can't find a reason to stay alive for yourself then stay alive for us. Just for now, just until it gets better. And don't tell me it won't or I'll... I'll leave you powered on, so help me."
Rabbit grimaced and cried harder but never opened his eyes. He had thrown his last darts.

"I love you," Upgrade whispered, close to his ear. "Just be you, okay?"

"I can't, baby..." Rabbit whimpered. "I dunno who I am..."

"Goodnight," she breathed, turning away as Peter powered Rabbit down.

"Well done, Miss Upgrade," The Spine said, hugging her.

"I just wanted ta say, 'Pappy,' but I'm not supposed to pick a side!" she wailed. "But she'll always be my Pappy no matter what!"

The Spine, to Peter's surprise, chuckled in the same way a fond uncle might chuckle at the words of a precocious niece. But now that Rabbit was powered down, The Spine's eyes, too, welled up with oily tears.

"I know," he said gently. He released her and wiped his eyes, saying briskly, "Now I would appreciate it if you would join me, and anyone else interested in helping. I believe Wanda has two more boxes of papers and journals to search for the necessary proof, and we have let this go on far too long."

Peter took a deep breath and sighed, "I'll scramble the manor, feed Marshmallow and order some pizza. It's going to be a long afternoon."

Chapter End Notes

*I feel like this is almost a pun. It always sounded like a technical sort of term.*
Chapter Summary

It takes the whole household together to finally unearth the truth... and it hurts every bit as much as people say it does.

Chapter Notes

A whole lot of dusty family history and digging in boxes and desks occurs in the next couple of chapters. But for this one I apologize. I found feels in a character I never thought possible, and The Spine's heart breaks, though not in the way you might expect.

Almost there.

1986:

Wanda removed what she called "the breastplate." With a few adjustments, Rabbit once again stood flat in the front, narrow-hipped, and male... or as male as a robot got, if you didn't count The Spine.

"Melt it down," he said darkly. "I don't even wanna think about havin' jugs again. Some wise guy will just look for a way to get his hands on 'em."

"I don't know why. They're sculpted iron. Not exactly sexy."

Rabbit frowned. "Says who? The lady who married the Picasso?"

"Watch it."

"Sorry."

"And you're sure you don't like the idea of being female? Because you wore it well and you're awfully defensive..."

"It's a mess!" Rabbit snarled as he slipped his pants on and reached for his shirt. "Women hafta put up with so much crap! How d'you stand it?"

"Me? I stay in usually. Then I don't have to deal with it. But as for you, Rabbit... well, I couldn't help noticing certain design features that might have been installed when you were first constructed and they suggest you might have been intended to be a..."

"Hm?"

"They suggest you..."
"Who?"
"You."
"I what?"
"You have certain features that..."
"That what?"
"That suggest..."
"What suggest?"
"Certain design features!"
"What about 'em?"
"Rabbit!" she snapped.

He chuckled in a steamy sort of way and buttoned his old black shirt. "Al-al-Alright, kid. Don't blow a gasket. Tell me yehr little science story."

Wanda took a deep breath, scowling. He'd pulled that "big brother" nonsense since she was little and she still fell for it. "From the construction of your chassis and undercarriage I could speculate that you were designed to support a female build as well as a male one..."

"Did you find a blueprint?" Rabbit interrupted, looking at her sharply.

"What?"

"A blueprint, design specs, somethin' on pa-pa-paper?"

"Um... no. We have a manual from the 1920s but..."

"They I'm a guy," Rabbit said quietly, nodding. He pulled up his suspenders and shrugged on his vest. "Until Pappy decides to drop down and tell you otherwise. Got it?"

"But..."

"But nothing. I go by what Pappy says."

Wanda sighed. "Fine."

Rabbit plopped his top hat onto his head, smiled, and strolled, with a visible wiggle, out of the lab. Wanda stared after him.

Had he always walked like that? She shrugged. Maybe he was still readjusting.

2013:

"Why didn't we do this sooner?" Steve asked, setting aside an old photo of The Spine in his original chassis.
"Yeah, this stuff is fascinating!" Breanna murmured, poring over a very technical piece of paper. "This is his original scratch page for Delilah!"

"Oh!" cried Peter VI, looking up from an antiquated shopping list that included things like castor oil, suet, lard, and washing soda. "Pass that to me next, would you?"

"Sure!" she chuckled, handing it over.

"But why would he just stuff all these things into the vault and lock them away?" asked Sunshine. "Oh, look at this!"

She held up a photo of Colonel Walter.

"You sure you're not a vampire, David?" Chelsea asked.

He looked up from a stack of loose notes. "I don't look anything like that..."

Several workers spoke up to the contrary and the room rippled with laughter.

"You really did look like him with your makeup on, Dad," Dave chuckled.

"You've seen pictures of him before," The Spine said, flipping impatiently through a date book.

"He just looks so much more natural in this one, though. Looks like he just came up from the old lab. But seriously, did he not want anyone to see this photo, and the rest of it?"

"I had no idea that the Colonel had seen fit to store so many precious things in those boxes," said Hatchworth, who sat by but did nothing to help. "I do believe he must have forgotten, in his haste to secure my core, and did not dare retrieve them afterward."

"Makes sense," Dave said.

"Just keep looking," The Spine said tightly. "I realize this is all very fascinating but it's very important to find anything, some proof that Rabbit's original design included the feminine settings."

Wanda, sitting back and reading an old journal, sighed. "He's shut off for now, Spine. We'll find what there is to find soon."

"I... know. I'm just worried..."

"As we all are," Sunshine said soothingly. "We may be enjoying ourselves but the thoroughness isn't wasted. It may be a tiny detail that provides the answer."

"And now you see why I was taking my time," Wanda said with satisfaction. "I couldn't pass some of these things up without reading them."

"I don't blame you!" Breanna laughed, holding up a bundle tied with ribbon. There appeared to be a dried flower inside the bow. "This has got to be love letters."

There was a massive groan of envy from the gathered workers and robots alike.

"Who are they from, though?" asked Upgrade, wide eyed as she clambered through the mob to join her.

Breanna gently tugged aside the ribbon and read, '"Col. Peter Walter, c/o Dandy Candy Ltd.' So it's to Peter I but... let's see... oh! It's from Iris!'
"Careful now," Wanda said. "It's so old!"

"Got it." She slipped it gently out as Upgrade and Wanda leaned in from either side to read. "It's fragile, but the paper was quality, I think, or it would be worse. Oh... Oh no!" she cried, laughing.

"What is it?" Steve asked eagerly.

"It's the letter telling him she's pregnant!" gasped Wanda.

"No way!" Chelsea cried, setting down the ledger she was holding.

"It reads like a business letter!" Breanna laughed.

"Well... everyone used to write like that back then," The Spine said uncomfortably.

"Not if they'd slept together," Wanda replied, smirking. "Alright, let's see what happened next... I've seen Grandma's letters from Grandpappy and I know he wrote back after this one promising to marry her."

Breanna already had the next one out. "Oh, my... Well, it's hesitant and insufferably grateful but you can't miss a certain change in tone."

"That's right! And his next one showed more warmth, too. He was pretty broken up over Delilah but I think it humbled him, too. That and the war, and his mistake in getting Grandma pregnant. The letters actually get kinda filthy toward the end, about the time he was finally heading back."

"He got over Delilah that fast?" Breanna asked.

"I don't know if he ever did entirely. But... from one who knows, you can be sloppy in love with someone and lose them, and still find love again."

She looked at The Spine, who had paused to look at her as she spoke. He nodded.

"I can't argue with that," Breanna sighed, smiling at him.

"Neither can I," he murmured warmly.

"So you say the letters get dirty toward the end, huh?" Breanna asked, looking slyly at the bundle.

"Oh... no, don't..." The Spine stammered.

Breanna hesitated. Wanda scooped the letters up and began to leaf through them. "Grandpa's did..."

"Wanda, really..." he cried.

Wanda tugged the letter from the bottom of the bundle and he groaned as she quickly and carefully opened it. The Spine put his hand over his eyes.

"'My darling Peter...' she began. Her mouth went slightly slack as she read silently. "Whoa, Grandma... You shouldn't put things like that in print..."

Breanna peeked at the letter and blushed. She fanned herself with her hand and smiled over at The Spine. "So these were your parents, huh, baby?"

"Please don't read that aloud..." he begged, uncovering his eyes.
"I won't!" Wanda snickered. "I don't think any of you are old enough."

"I suddenly understand a lot more about you, though," Breanna giggled. "If these were the people who raised you, I mean. Looking forward with optimism."

He stared at her for a long moment, a small smile twitching at one corner of his mouth, and returned to digging in the crate before him. He studiously ignored the soft and largely feminine ripples of mirth traveling around the assembled searchers.

"No one wants to hear about their parents' sex life," sighed Upgrade. "I certainly don't."

Jon giggled quietly and she shushed him. No one asked for an explanation.

"It's great to see this, though," Breanna said. "The way you all tell it, it makes it sound like this dirty scientist got some poor girl knocked up and married her out of the goodness of his heart. But he was attracted to her at least and if her letters are any indication, they were in love eventually."

"I think Grandma always was," Wanda sighed. "Her journal entries suggested she fell for him the day she first met him. And you're right about him, too. I'll show you the other letters sometime."

The Spine attempted to tune them out while reaching into the nearest crate to pull out a book. There was writing on the cover...

"Oooo! I dunno though, these are pretty dirty already... Oh, sorry, baby," Breanna said looking over at The Spine.

He was sitting very still, staring at the book.

"Spine?" she asked, putting down the letters. "What is it?"

He looked at her with wide eyes. "Bree... it's... I think it's Rabbit's original specifications..."

Everything stopped.

"Spine!" cried The Jon, clambering across people and furniture, oblivious to the various cries of pain. "Open it!"

"I... I don't even have to..." he faltered, turning the cover toward them.

In simple ink lines, Colonel Walter had sketched a rough but unmistakable female automaton. Above it were the words, "Singing automaton mark 1."

Jon gently took the book and opened it. "Yeah ya do... let's see... 'First singing automaton design specifications based on Delilah herself...'"

"Delilah?" cried half the assembled searchers.

"The giraffe?" Steve asked, confused.

"No, dummins! Col. Walter's old girlfriend!" Upgrade snorted. "Well... not quite..."

"Not at all! He kept trying to win her over and she kept putting him off," Wanda said. "He used to hint that she didn't even like men, if you know what I mean."

"She friend-zoned him and he called her a lesbian?" Chelsea gasped. "That's so petty! I realize it was a more primitive era but really! The idea that the only way she wouldn't have wanted him was that
she didn't like men at all..."

The Spine caught her eye and murmured, "Actually... he, um... wasn't wrong... from what I heard."

"From who, though?"

"One of her old girlfriends in the Cavalcadium, actually."

"Oh!" she gasped, blushing. "Sorry..."

"Perfectly reasonable. I used to assume the same thing myself until The Spine mentioned that," Wanda assured her.

"Is that why he changed Rabbit?" Breanna asked.

"Could be," Wanda said.

"In his defense, there was more than enough reason to want to avoid thinking about her. Being rejected hurts, and her death moreso," Sunshine observed.

"Yeah," Chelsea sighed. "I guess I can cut him a little slack."

The Spine nodded approvingly. He happened to agree with her disgust. The Colonel had been far too bitter on that particular subject.

Jon was frowning down at the book. "This is no good."

"What's up, Jonny?" Upgrade asked.

"He just has a girl robot in here. He doesn't say anything about Rabbit being changed into a boy. He doesn't even call her Rabbit..."

"It could be a scrapped design and not Rabbit at all!" said Hatchworth.

"Oh, that just wouldn't be fair," sighed Breanna. "We were so close!"

"No, this is a good find," Peter said. "It proves he was thinking in terms of a female design for the first robot, and that robot still may have been Rabbit."

"Spine, it just stops!" Jon said. "Look!"

He held up the book. Several pages in, after what appeared to be extensive notes on the chassis, there was nothing.

"He didn't do that with ours, did he?"

"Well, he wrote a large number of question marks in yours, The Jon. Many of them without explanation. One particular page had only a single very large question mark..." Hatchworth observed. "I think it was after you began to speak in full sentences."

"But he did fill up the book and documented his work down to the last detail of the outer chassis, yes," The Spine interrupted.

"Well, pass me that one and keep digging," Peter said. "I'll look at it in detail and see whether there's anything that might help."
Jon handed him the book and bent over the crate, handing things out to The Spine. Most of them were household expenses.

"A key?" The Spine asked. "What's this for?"

"Oh, probably just some old key," Wanda said. "They were everywhere."

"There's a tag on it."

"Do you think he had a safe deposit box?" Peter asked.

"Oooo, full of old bonds or something," Steve said with relish. "You might have a bunch of cash sunk into Coca Cola, Peter."

"I should be so lucky. It might just as easily be full of moths or silver certificates or a bunch of shares in Detroit Steel."

"I think silver certificates still count as money..." Wanda said.

"I wouldn't want to try to use one. Well, we'll have to find out what this is, if we can, in case he left something useful in it or in case I turn out to be the heir to Campbell's Soup."

There were scattered chuckles as Peter returned to examining the specs.

"This is all very amusing but the tag has a picture of a woman on it," The Spine said. "No numbers or information to indicate any bank affiliation."

"Ah. Well, I'll take it and do some research just in case," Peter said.

Jon was still digging. Most of it was loose papers now. The Spine sighed and set to work examining each one.

"Oh, my old book of nursery rhymes!" Jon cried. "The one I made better!"

"Made better?" asked Steve.

Jon tossed it to him. "Look! I drew new pictures in it!"

Steve gently turned the pages and snickered softly. "You sure you didn't drop acid until the sixties, Jon?"

Jon gaped at him, scandalized. "Who tattled?" he cried, shaking his fists frantically.

"Whoa... sorry, buddy! I didn't know it was so upsetting to you..." Steve said hastily. "You're so chill usually..."

The Spine put his hand on Jon's shoulder. "It was a long time ago, Jon. Aren't you ever going to forgive yourself?"

Jon sagged and whispered, "You almost died. You and Rabbit. And it was all my fault!"

Sunshine moved over to them and sat beside him. "Jonny, baby," she murmured. "The world has treated a lot of us like crap. But we met and you took care of me because of that acid, remember? I'm not saying it's good, but good came out of it, right? You were my best friend when I needed it and you brought me back to find my best friend of all. And then there's our children and grandchildren... Jonny, think of them. All because of a mistake. That mistake didn't kill anyone, Jonny. But it saved
my life."

Jon began to wail and Sunshine laughed kindly as Upgrade made her way to them. Jon hugged them both.

"Is this gonna become one of those things where we all take turns confessing stuff?" asked Steve. "Because I ain't owning up to being a dragon unless I get another slice of meat lovers pizza."

They all laughed, at first. The laughter slowly died away until one by one they sat looking at Steve, who was looking back without a hint of a smile.

"Wait... seriously?" Peter said.

There was a frantic jingling sound. Bunny, who had spent the entire time looking through a second crate with David, was holding another book and waving wildly.

"What is it?" Peter cried, crawling across David and Chelsea to get to her.

She thrust the book at him.


They continued searching in an aimless sort of way after that. There might be other evidence in the crates, but no one could focus on it as Peter sat with Wanda on one side and The Spine on the other, reading aloud.

"He just refers to Rabbit as Automaton Alpha," Peter grumbled. "Well... no, here's the story with the rabbit in the cage."

"What story?" Steve asked.

"Oh, Rabbit got his name because his first word was rabbit since there were rabbits in the lab. It was all he would say for ages so they named him Rabbit."

"Cute."

"So he doesn't assign a gender at all then?" asked David.

Peter skimmed the next few pages. "Well, he's started using the pronoun but I just think we need more. I mean, obviously he changed it later, right?"

After a few more minutes of reading he said, "Delilah knew about Rabbit. She would sit and talk to her. Col. Walter writes some very sappy things about that. Calls her Rabbit's mother."

"Old fart," Wanda muttered, to the amusement of the younger staff members. "I never blamed her for not wanting to give up science to become Mrs. Peter Walter, even if she had liked men."

"There's a big gap here between dates. I wonder..." Peter scanned the next page and gasped. "Check this out... I've had some terrible news. Delilah's condition has worsened in the night. It has been suggested that she does not have long to live. I cannot accept this! I will not! She is so full of life that she will conquer this blight through sheer will! She must!"

"Oh, Grandpappy..." Wanda sighed.
"I haven't had the heart to carry on working on the automatons since hearing of her illness. Rabbit and GG have been in stasis for months. Two is almost finished and the parts for a third lay ready. If it is true, however, and Delilah does not survive... They may all remain where they are until the world's end. All my reason for creating these automatons would die with her."

"Aw, Pappy..." Jon whispered.

Peter turned the page. "'It's over,'" he read softly. "'There was almost no life in her eyes when I arrived. I took her hand; how feeble was her grasp! that had once been so strong, so vigorous, as she worked beside me repairing the giraffe.

"'She bade me goodbye, much against my wish, and asked me to continue my work, to complete the singing automatons. How reluctantly I gave my promise, knowing all joy and desire in the project would soon pass away."

"'She looked at me then, and I thought I saw in that look a promise that would never be fulfilled. How moved she had been when she met the robot named for her. I had thought then that I would soon be able to make her my wife. How enraged Thaddeus had been! As he was now, sitting by her bedside. But I soon found his real reasons!

"'She never made either of us a promise. There was never so much as a hint of one. What an ass I was to have thought otherwise! She passed from this world, but twenty minutes after bidding me goodbye, clutching the accursed hand of one Miss Viviana Broodwell, her flatmate, and I was given to understand that they were more than mere companions!!'

"Hello!" cried Hatchworth. "I did not see that coming!"

The Spine shushed him, but he could hear some of the workers giggling.

"'Thaddeus flew into a passion the moment Delilah's death rattle sounded; I was obliged to ignore my own grief and take steps to stop him from killing Miss Broodwell on the spot! In the end he was tossed from the house by the staff and I very much fear that my old friend turned enemy will come to no good end in his current state. As Miss Broodwell had swooned in her grief and was being conveyed to her bed, I was obliged to warn the butler to employ someone to protect her should Thaddeus return to finish the job.'"

"Alright, I definitely forgive him now," Chelsea sighed. David, sitting with his arm around her, kissed her gently.

"'This I was able to manage, and I fled the house myself. I must have walked by habit the familiar path to the manor as I cared not where my steps led me and have no recollection of arriving home. My thoughts were consumed with one thought alone.

"'Delilah never loved either of us. She was never capable of loving us. Her considerable passions were turned elsewhere. I once thought that her reason for never choosing one of us was that science was her only love. She adored it, but not only it. And now what will become of me? What reason have I to carry on without her? Not even left with the memory of one who might have loved me best! If only I!'"

Peter stopped and flipped the page.

"It just stopped..." Wanda said, wiping her eyes. "Was he too overcome to keep writing?"

"Maybe. There was a tear stain, I think," Peter murmured. "Anyway, there's a new entry here."
"This is just like Myst..." Steve observed.

"Holy crap..." Peter said.

"What is it?" Steve asked eagerly.

"Get this... it reads, 'Good God, what have I done?'"

"Good grief, Grandpa, what have you done?" Wanda gasped.

"I woke this morning in the floor of my laboratory next to a blood stain!!"

"No..." she breathed. "No wonder he put it in a box and locked it up! Did he kill someone?"

"No," Peter said. "But there's a hell of a confession here. Listen... 'It took a moment to recognize what had been spilt there, and upon recognizing it as blood I experienced the alarm that no doubt anyone waking under similar circumstances would encounter, until I realized the pool had been very small indeed and had been cleaned inasmuch as it was possible to do so.

"There was some comfort in the knowledge that it was unlikely that anyone could have died from the loss of so little blood... Had I cleaned it up, or another? But I was alone and had been alone the night before, after returning from Delilah's bedside... I could not bear company and set myself instead to complete the now superfluous automatons, to fulfill at least the promise I made her.

"I had as well availed myself of the numbing comfort of powerful spirits, but the thoughts persisted, driving me into a frenzy as I... 'Hey... there's a piece of the page missing here... Wonder what was on that, considering what he thought was okay to leave in!' Peter said. "Let's see... it picks up again... yes, here. "the damage I had already done, I then struggled to my feet and made some attempt to bring the core of my third singing automaton into life. I was too affected, drunk upon grief and liquor alike. There was an explosion and I was thrown to the floor, only to look up and see the automaton, still hanging with eyes closed but with what appeared to be the very cosmos circling within its breast..."

"Jon," Upgrade murmured. He wriggled beside her.

"That was, upon waking, all I could remember. I repaired to my room, unable to look at the state of my lab, to splash water upon my face. Reflecting still upon the night before, I came to recall that the house maid, Iris, a girl of just nineteen summers, had hurried in soon after the explosion..."

"No..." Wanda sighed.

"He didn't... right on the lab floor, yet..."

Breanna giggled. "No wonder you're all so into science!" she laughed.

The Spine sighed deeply.

"What?" Jon cried.

"He screwed Miss Iris on the lab floor," Hatchworth said benignly. "And she was a virgin."

"Hatchy!" snapped The Spine as the workers exploded with laughter.

Peter, too, was struggling with giggles as he resumed reading. "I recall seeing her worried face lit by
the candle in her hand... She must not have seen the mess in the darkness, and I did not wish to see it myself. It was so much more pleasant to look at her... Her hair was down and flowing, a dressing gown loosely draped over her nightdress in her haste to find out what had woken her."

There was a shameless "whoooo!" from the far side of the room. Steve Negrete was looking down at his backpack and hissing, "Shut up!"

"Steve?" Peter said worriedly. Lil Steve was strapped into the backpack as usual and it looked for all the world like Steve was talking to it...

"Sorry," Steve said sheepishly. "I, uh... got caught up in the story I guess..."

"Yeah... remind me to talk to you later. Something Rabbit mentioned that I dismissed earlier."

"Uh... yeah, okay," Steve said wearily. He muttered something that sounded very like, "Thanks a lot, twerp..."

Peter looked back at the journal. "'I regret I cannot recall what happened afterward...'

"I'll bet," Wanda snickered. The Spine put his hand over his eyes.

"...But I came to a terrifying conclusion with the recollection, one that was confirmed when I undressed to bathe. There, visible upon my own skin, was still more blood. Its location left no question as to its source... I must have been with a woman last night, there upon the floor of the lab! A girl of intact maidenhead!"

David leaned over and whispered to Bunny.

"The Hell's maidenhead?" She signed to him and he hissed, "Oh... right. We already knew that."

"'It must have been Iris... I remember her kneeling beside me, stroking my burning head with a cool cloth... her dressing gown forgotten, her nightdress slipping low in her distraction... but how monstrous! I had taken advantage of the young maid, an innocent virgin, who had only come to aid me! I can only pray that she was at least a willing participant... that would be my one solace, for if I truly forced myself upon her... I could not bear the shame. I could in no way apologize for the act.

"'So much has occurred this past day to darken the soul. How low can a man sink? To make matters still more troubling, Iris has gone missing and I know not what to think."

"What? He never mentioned that," said Wanda.

"Later entry here, explains the whole thing," Peter said. "'Iris has told me in confidence the one thing that could ease my tortured soul. She assured me, with a becoming flush in her cheek, that while she had only come in to see whether I was well, I had in no way forced myself upon her. I was touched in spite of the guilt I still bear in taking the virtue of a child for whom I bear no attachment. To think that she was willing to be with me... wanted to be with me! I have never known Iris to be a loose woman; indeed, the proof of that was offered in the spilled blood. I know not what to think anymore. Does she love me? I for my part cannot imagine any woman seeking my company. To think I was once so very cocky!'

Peter sighed. "It's always something... The gargantuan Walter ego seems to be the favorite target of the cosmos."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself and keep reading. We still don't have the answer and I just have to hear how this came out," Upgrade scolded.
"It came out as my father and my uncle!" chuckled Wanda.

Breanna giggled and murmured, "Sorry, baby."

The Spine sighed again. "It is what it is."

Peter shrugged. "Okay. 'Her brief disappearance was one of prudence. She has assured me that she has seen an apothecary on the recommendation of a friend, and taken an elixir promised to prevent the possibility that she might conceive a child. This is a great relief, as I had similar concerns. I know that it will be for the best, though for a moment... well, had things been different, perhaps we could have made a go of it. As it is, I will never seek love again. My heart is well and truly broken."

Wanda smiled sadly. "Dummy. Wait'll you find out... His letter to her was so apologetic, y'know. He blamed himself for not marrying her right away."

"This is charming but we need to get to the point. He's mentioned Rabbit but only in passing," The Spine said.

"Right... let's see... he went back to work on you all, he powered you on and... oh, Rabbit needed repairs... Huh, wonder why. He was new..."

"Maybe he was just refining the design?" Wanda asked.

"He's pretty vague about it... Alright, well, he repaired Rabbit... and got him to walk The Spine around, you... oh... oh, Spine... I didn't know..."

"It's alright, Peter. It was the first memory I restored. The kitten. I was too young to understand what I was doing."

"I'm sorry, Spine."

"Just go on. It's alright."

"Let's see... a visitor in a brown suit... Whoa! That's where you ended up going to Africa!"

"Yes, it is."

"He switched on Jon and built more robots. That's where Hatchy comes in."

He skimmed more and cried, "Listen! 'The Spine is in good order and will make a fine soldier once I enter suitable protocols. Three will do nicely as a soldier as well, though it is a bit peculiar. But I am uncertain how to proceed with Rabbit."

"I had intended for her to be like Delilah... though she is very tall. I have long since repaired the damage done that day, but the guilt I bear gives me no rest. Though my reason tells me she cannot feel fear, I swear she does... they both do. I don't know how long I can carry on, seeing their looks of reproach, for it is! I swear they look upon me with condemnation and fear!"

He fell silent. The Spine took the book from him carefully and read for a moment in silence. He lowered it to his lap, staring blankly at the floor.

Peter retrieved the journal. "May I read the rest to them?" he asked. The Spine nodded slowly and Peter continued, "Perhaps it would be better if I merely wipe some of the early memories. Then she will not turn her eyes away when I speak! I will never make her in Delilah's image now. Best she forget I ever gave her such a promise. I never installed the feminine chest plate, and she has never
really embraced the concept of favoring one sex over another outside of her obsession with being pretty, much like any young child. Therefore I believe it will be a simple matter to alter her chassis to narrow the hips and install front plating to display a more masculine shape as befits a soldier.

"I suppose, then, that I should say 'his plating' instead. He will never know the difference. But I hesitate to make this such a permanent change. He was so very attached to the idea, once, though he has never mentioned it since. I cannot bear to fulfill my promise, but if someday he should find himself inclined toward being female, perhaps a descendant of mine might see fit to restore what I have destroyed. If I am very clever, possibly I can make changes that are not set in stone. I will store the feminine chest plate and narrow the hips as much as I dare without removing the metals. I can direct the feminine behaviors module to activate if and only if the feminine build is restored. The rest will be up to Rabbit and future Walters.

"How good it is to know that such sticky questions will never arrive with a human child!"

"Actually, I was never sure about Uncle Peter," Wanda said weakly.

She trailed off and looked at The Spine. Oil had begun to leak slowly from his eyes.

"How can I show Rabbit this?" he whispered. "What did Pappy do to him?"

"That must have been what he ripped out of the journal," Peter said softly. "He couldn't face it and he tore it out."

"But he talks about it later!" Upgrade argued.

"Not in detail. And maybe he tore it out then and was willing to write about it once he'd had time to think. He wrote around the torn bit so it must have been right after he wrote it."

"Of course he tore it out!" growled The Spine. "He tore it out to hide what he'd done!"

"But then it was the night Delilah died, Spine!" cried Jon. "He was out of his mind and drunk! He didn't mean to hurt Rabbit!"

"Didn't he? Rabbit reminded him of Delilah. He may have behaved himself at her house, but when he got home and got good and drunk maybe he let go and took it out on Rabbit!" The Spine said bitterly.

"Pappy... how could you..." Hatchworth moaned.

"We don't even know what he did!" Peter said. "Maybe we can find some information..."

"How?" The Spine demanded. "He even censored his own journal!"

"Maybe... maybe he didn't just activate Rabbit that night. Maybe he switched on GG too."

"But she never mentioned anything like that. She just said he wasn't sure."

"But he was sure before that, wasn't he? He'd made Rabbit female. He changed his mind later so..."

"That doesn't mean she was there that night. It just means she was online when he was thinking of changing Rabbit."

"But it says "they" were afraid of him, see? He's talking about two robots, and you weren't one of them unless he completely wiped the memory..."
"Which is possible. And it's as likely to be true if it was GG."

"But if there's even a chance we have to try. She's like a kid, Spine," Peter said. "Maybe she was there and she remembers but she's too scared to talk about it. She doesn't even know why the Colonel stored her for so long. She might be blocking it all out."

"If she's too scared to talk about it then she'll be no help to us."

"Well..." Sunshine said from where she sat, snuggled against Dave, "Maybe... what you need is someone with experience in working with victims of childhood trauma."

Peter turned to her. "Oh! You...?"

She nodded.

"I knew you were a psychologist but I didn't realize..."

"My specialization. Abuse victims, especially children or those abused as children. Well, Spine? Can I take the case? Pro bono of course. This is my family after all."

"Aren't you needed in L.A.?" The Spine argued. "Your patients..."

"I take less of them these days."

"And don't forget she has a husband who can get a helicopter anytime he wants," Dave said. "This is kind of important, Dad. Let us help."

The Spine turned to Jon and Upgrade. "Well, you really should ask..."

"It's okay," said Upgrade as Jon nodded. "I've noticed a lot of times she gets quiet and I can't figure out what's bothering her. And if she gets in even a little trouble she overreacts. She gets really upset if anything breaks and she thinks she might be blamed. And Pappy said she had a panic attack when he caught her in his room."

"Oh..." The Spine murmured. He remembered GG acting much the same way the very night they reactivated her.

"Yeah, so I was gettin' kinda worried anyway an' I already asked Sunshine to talk to her. She loves attention so she should be okay with it. We'll stay in the next room in case she needs us."

The Spine turned back to Sunshine and said, "Alright. I don't know what you can do with her, but please try."

GG had met Sunshine before only in passing. But whether it was her own naturally warm personality, her first-hand understanding of the pain of abuse, her maternal side or her psychological experience, Sunshine had a way with children. And GG, despite her curious shape and remarkable age, was decidedly a child.

She had recently asked Peter to fit one of her little hooves to hold a crayon, and this enabled Sunshine to use art as a means to get information, slowly, from the little giraffe. For the first few days, a lot of very random things came out of it. GG, it seemed, had an entire wish list of impossible gifts she wanted to receive for her next "birthday."

But soon she was able to steer the little robot onto the subject of family, and from there to her life
before she was stored.

"What's that?" Sunshine asked, a week after they had started.

"That's The Spine. See? Silver. And Rabbit. She... I mean he's copper. An' Hatchy and Three... I mean Jon. And that's Miss Iris. She's... she was really nice."

Sunshine smiled, but she couldn't help feeling a pang of pity. GG still had a hard time remembering they were all gone.

"Who's that?" she asked, pointing to a dark blue figure.

"Oh, that's Pappy..." GG said casually.

"Oh... why is he so dark?"

"He has dark hair..." GG said quietly. "An' that's the cook. An' that lil green glob is tha kid who cleans tha boots an' used to chase me sometimes."

"Oh! Um... Very good, GG. I want to ask you more about these pictures, okay? You don't have to answer. But don't be afraid. You can say anything, I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to."

"Mm'kay."

"Miss Iris looks very pretty."

"Uh-huh! She was awful pretty! The shoe shine kid said she had big jugs so I kicked him."

Sunshine was too professional to giggle, but it wasn't easy. "That wasn't very respectful of him, was it?"

"No! Pappy was the one who drank that stuff!"

Sunshine blinked. "Drank what stuff, GG?"

"Cider! Those were the only jugs I ever saw! And they were empty..."

Postponing a fresh round of giggles until later, Sunshine made a note. GG had mentioned seeing Col. Walter drinking. And apparently finishing the bottle.

"So I see The Spine is very tall. Was he always very tall?"

"Uh-huh! Once Pappy got his legs fastened on, anyhow!"

The Colonel certainly had provided in that area. "And Rabbit. You say Pappy wasn't sure about making Rabbit a boy."

"Yeah, but then he did."

"Because Rabbit wanted to be a boy?"

"No..."

"Oh. Why, then?"

"He just did is all," GG muttered, looking at her crayons.
"Okay," she said placidly. "And Jon... was he always sweet?"

"Yeah! He used to play with me!"

"That sounds fun."

"It was! Rabbit played too but she... he couldn't..." She fell silent.

"GG?"

"Jon likes hopscotch."

"Oh. Do you like hopscotch?"

"Uh-huh! But I cracked my hoof an' Pappy got mad an' made me stop."

"Oh. Did he yell when he got mad?"

"Nah. He was a little loud but not as loud as..."

Sunshine waited patiently. GG pulled out another piece of paper with her hoof and started to color.

"Oh, another picture! What will you draw now?"

"I'm drawin' Tha Jon!" GG said.

Sunshine watched as GG drew the strangest picture yet. It was Jon, simple and primitive, eyes closed, his chest open and a swirl of color in the center. She remained carefully calm as she waited, realizing this looked very like the night Jon's void was created. So GG had been there?

GG moved her head in between Sunshine and the paper. It struck her as being deliberate.

At last, GG put down her crayon and eased her body across the drawing, turning her little head to look at Sunshine through her eyelashes. "I... got a secret to tell ya."

"You do? Are you sure you want to?"

"Uh-huh. But it's a scary secret..."

"Okay. If I get scared I'll tell you. I might need a hug though. Then I'll be all better."

"You can hug me!" GG crowed.

"Oh! That will be a big help, GG. I think I'm ready now. What's the secret?"

"It's... this one night I was lookin' around. A long time ago."

"When was that?"

"Jon was asleep. So was The Spine. An' Hatchy wasn't even made yet," the little giraffe said quietly.

"Was Rabbit awake?" Sunshine asked.

"Uh-huh. An' she... he was talkin' a lot."

"He was?"
"An’ Pappy was really sad an’... sick. Really sick!"

"Oh, dear, that must have been scary too."

"Is it scary when humans are sick?" GG asked, eyes wide.

"Sometimes, if the sickness makes them act funny. Y'know, different than they really are."

"An’... they can't help it ’cause they're sick, right? So they don't wanna do bad stuff but..."

"Sometimes, yes, GG. Sometimes... well, if a human is sick enough, then yes, that might happen."

"Yeah! Pappy was really, really sick! It made him cry!"

"Oh, dear. Poor Pappy! Was he sick a lot?"

"Nah. Just this time. An’... he... got extra sick when Rabbit kept talkin’..."

"Oh, that made him sicker?"

GG fidgeted.

"What happened then?" Sunshine prompted.

GG was looking down. Sunshine could hear her rattling softly.

"Were you scared, GG?"

GG nodded.

"Are you scared now?"

GG nodded again. She looked up at last. "Are you?"

"A little."

"Do you need a hug now?" GG asked tremulously.

"Oh, yes, I think that's just what I need."

She clambered gingerly to her feet and muttered shakily, "I need a hug too."

Sunshine held GG and waited patiently. She didn't know whether the session was over or whether GG just needed a moment. After a few minutes, she heard the little giraffe crying as softly as she could manage, as though afraid to be heard.

I don't understand it, Sunshine thought. He made them so human but couldn't overcome his own faults enough to cope with whatever he'd done.

And that, she decided, was the answer. Col. Peter Walter was a man of science, but also a man of great feeling. His robots showed just how much. And someday, perhaps, they would come to forgive him for it. But first they had to face it. She decided to make one last try before putting it off until tomorrow. GG was hurting now, and the memory was so close to emerging!

GG was crying harder. Sunshine grappled with the best way to get her to open up and say what had happened.
“It's okay to cry, GG,” Sunshine whispered. “Sometimes you need to cry. Like when someone you love hurts you, or hurts someone else, and you don't understand why...”

“He didn't mean it... he didn't mean it... He was sick!”

“Didn't mean what?” whispered Sunshine.

“It was an accident! I... I didn't see anything!”

“It's okay, GG. Ssh... You don't have to tell me any more.”

“I didn't see anything... I didn't touch anything... I'm sorry...” wailed GG.

“Why are you sorry, GG?” she breathed.

“I-I came in an' she broke an' I saw th' pieces an' I tried to pick 'em up and he was so mad and he yelled an' I ran away an' hid! I didn't do anything! I'm sorry!”

“GG! Sweetie, it's okay... No one is angry now, okay?”

“But he was so mad! An' he broke her an' I '... an' I was scared an' tried to help fix her an' he yelled at me!” GG sobbed. “An' when I kept bein' scared of him all th' time he switched me off an' I woke up an'... an' they were all dead!”

Sunshine felt her own tears starting. The door opened just a crack. She saw a glowing green eye with eyebrow raised, just peering into the room. Sunshine gave a quick thumbs up and waved him away.

As the door slowly closed, she ventured a peek at the drawing. There, beside the Jon, was another automaton, copper, roughly feminine, very broken. And before it stood the same dark and terrifying figure that had represented Col. Peter Walter in the previous drawing.

“Why did he throw me away?” GG wailed. “I wanted ta help 'cause he was sick an' he didn't mean ta hurt her!”

Sunshine held her tightly and sighed, “I don't know, GG. But no one is going to do it again, okay?”

“He took me apart an' locked me up!”

“And it won't happen again. Do you hear me, sweetheart?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Jon and Upgrade won't let it happen. The Spine won't let it happen. And I certainly won't let it happen. Got it?”

“Uh-huh...” GG snuffled. “P-Promise?”

“I promise.”

Sunshine reported her findings that very afternoon while GG rested in exhausted stasis.

“That's the best I could work out. He was working on Rabbit and lashed out when Rabbit wouldn't stop talking, and broke her. GG came in as it happened and was afraid and tried to pacify him by picking up the pieces and he screamed at her and she ran away and hid, and fortunately wasn't
anywhere near when Iris came in. She and Rabbit were scared of him after that night He couldn't take it anymore after a while, I don't know how long, but he put GG into storage, and I guess he must have cleared Rabbit's memories somehow?

"GG said I could tell all of you, when I told her it could help Rabbit. I think she understands it wasn't her fault. I don't know how I can ever make her understand why he shut her off and dismantled her and left her to rust. I sure as hell don't know why."

Sunshine's voice trembled as she spoke. Dave had his arm around her. He rested his head against hers and she closed her eyes for a moment.

"I don't know what to think," The Spine said.

"He was drunk, plain and simple," Peter said. "What else is there to know?"

"Was he drunk when he wiped Rabbit's memories and turned her into a male robot? Or when he stored GG like a doll?" The Spine growled. "This is almost worse. He did this and tried to hide it because he didn't want anyone to know what a bastard he really was!"

"Spine!" gasped The Jon, who had been quietly crying beside him.

The Spine turned his head away and stared down at the floor. He was just so angry! He wanted to be able to think about his wedding and their future and remember a father who had made him so human that he could have a life and relationships and children... and instead he had to look backward and see that his father, or the man that had been a father to him, was a monster.

Breanna sat beside him, holding his hand, but he couldn't feel joy. He just felt empty.

"Think of all the years we knew him, Spine," Jon begged. "He was so good and kind to us! He never treated us like property!"

"Like the time he used us to promote a certain fancy robot for some creep who brown-nosed him into it?" The Spine spat, not looking up.

He felt terrible in the next moment. That robot was Upgrade's mother and he waited to hear the angry reply. But none came. Upgrade just sat and snuffled quietly and he supposed he understood. Honeybee had been her mother, but she considered GG her daughter.

He wouldn't for the world have tried to explain their family to an outsider...

"But it's like the acid trip, Spine!" Jon cried.

"What the hell...?"

"Sunshine said it! The bad things happened first and good things happened after. The good stuff couldn't have happened without the bad stuff! If... if Rabbit hadn't been a smart mouth boy robot and gone on that stage and fallen in love and then gone looking for her later, well... Upgrade never would have been born! And I love her! So does Rabbit!"

"So do I," The Spine sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingertips. He heard Upgrade's snuffling grow more fitful.

"He was always kind to me, too," Wanda said tearfully. "I can't remember him ever raising his voice with any of us."
"Many humans grow more patient with age," Hatchworth mused.

The Spine sighed and looked up. "Alright. So good came of it. He learned his lesson and changed his ways. I still can't stop seeing Rabbit hurting. He didn't even leave a letter, an apology... if he wiped Rabbit's memories like he said, then he... he won't even be able to retrieve some memory and know what happened or why. I can restore mine, own them. What does Rabbit have?"

Peter sat, fingers steepled thoughtfully, listening. He turned to The Spine and said, "That's what we have to find out."

"Peter... you don't think the memories are still there?"

"When you had your breakdown, he already knew how to fix it. Didn't he? He just walked in the same day he'd decided to fix it, ready to go. How did he know already how to isolate memories?"

"He created us! I should think he'd be the one man who knew how!"

"But why would he have had the need before? He hadn't done it when you accidentally killed the kitten. What if Rabbit was the first one he tried it on? Only for Rabbit, he only needed it to work once, so it's stayed locked away, giving no indication of its presence."

The Spine opened his mouth but didn't speak.

"You okay?" Peter asked.

"That's it. That's what we have to try. If Pappy never faced what he'd done, he wouldn't have left any kind of apology letter or note or entry anywhere. We finished going through those boxes and there's nothing but that old key that might go to an old safe deposit box that probably isn't there anymore anyway.

"But... I'm just betting that somewhere in those memories is the truth, and maybe just once he said he was sorry."

"Well, I still want to look into the safe deposit box. Once we track down which bank it was in. Some of them go back that far."

"It makes no sense, though. He had a vault here."

"That just makes it more mysterious. And you notice the key was inside the vault... almost like a trail he was leaving for us to follow."

The Spine shook his head. He wouldn't say it out loud, but he was just afraid to hope. He had not seen this blow coming and it had hurt all the more for it.

Breanna spoke at last. "Let's at least go talk to Rabbit. We know enough now to prove that he's feeling this way for a reason. It's his choice. Or hers. Time to find out anyway."

"It'll kill him. It'll be the final blow. I know I said we had to try it but I can't... " The Spine said shakily. "I can't do this to him..."

Hatchworth rose from where he had been sitting in silence. The Spine had noticed his habit of resting cross-legged on the floor listening as though in stasis, and attributed it to his years in the vault.

"I know you are afraid, brother Spine. But logically our Rabbit has sunk to the lowest pit. He wishes to die. How can learning of this worsen the case, then?"
"It can always get worse, Hatchworth," The Spine muttered as he rose from his seat. "That's the one certainty."

"It's all we have, Spine," Peter said. "The memory might be there, but somehow I can't imagine it would make Rabbit feel better."

"I know."

Bree squeezed his hand the best she could in the next moment and he stopped to look at her. She was trying to smile but her eyes were filled with worry.

"You ready for this?" she asked.

He kissed her lightly. "I'll never be ready. I'm just glad you're here with me."

She smiled, blinking away tears. "Let's go see what we can find out."

He remembered another wonderful woman in his life who had shown him the same care when he was going through a rough patch. She couldn't spare him the pain but she wasn't leaving his side. It felt good, for a moment, to have the emptiness filled once more. Whatever happened, Bree loved him. He needed that.
I am Woman

Chapter Summary

We don't always hurt the ones we love. But when we do... whew.

Chapter Notes

Alright, fine. Here ya go. This was suppose to come after the chapter "I am Invincible" but then Hatchy ran off and Peter got a cat and The Spine proposed to Bree and you know how Rabbit gets about change sometimes... and since I had a hard time with Rabbit's change (the male version was truly eye candy, and aspects of that old quirky personality have been lost) I guess that's how I wrote it for Rabbit, too.

Desk in this story inspired by this magnificent monster: https://youtu.be/MKikHxKeodA

If Col. Walter had one even half as cool it would still be amazing enough to work here.

I know Bunny has gone and changed the spelling of Delilah's last name. I can't keep up so nuts to that, I'm using the old one.

And I did bodily steal the dialogue from Red Core further down. Most of the dialogue in the scene about Rabbit's damage was written by Isabella Bennett and was the source of the Col. Walter family secret sub-plot. But I'm deviating from canon a bit more as this fic draws near its end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Breanna chewed her lip nervously. They'd been in there a while and she'd heard shouting. She looked toward David and Chelsea. They'd been all over each other lately but right now David was staring at the door and looked as though he was ready to spring to his feet at a moment's notice. She couldn't blame him. His sister was in there.

Annie sat further along, as well as numerous Walter Workers and family members, all waiting restlessly, same as the last time. The robots had gone in, as before, to talk to Rabbit. Peter, Wanda, Sunshine, and Bunny had joined them. It had been half an hour but Breanna would have thought ten minutes was enough. But she'd heard the first of the shouting after only five.

The shouting had started again. "Rabbit, just listen to me!" The Spine roared, and the wall trembled.

"How the Hell did you think I'd feel?" screamed Rabbit. "Did ya think I'd be-be-be happy about it?"

Their voices lowered and Breanna knew that The Spine had summoned his patience once more. He did it in cycles when he was really upset and she sometimes found it amusing. She was not terribly amused at the moment, however. If he was this angry, he wouldn't be able to hold it back for long.

"What we're saying is that you were designed this way..."
She heard Rabbit snarl in response.

"...You were designed this way..." She could hear the rising anger as Rabbit continued to argue while The Spine tried to out-shout him. "And that means you're not broken... would you just f***ing listen?"

There were gasps among the household and workers and Breanna giggled nervously. The Spine seldom dropped an F-bomb.

She heard Jon cry out for them to stop fighting. There was more incoherent shouting from Rabbit. The Spine's angry voice rose once more over Rabbit's uninterrupted grumbling.

"Rabbit, I'm... I'm trying to tell you I understand! Of course I can! He was my Pappy too and... oh, dammit to Hell!"

There was a thunderous slam and David popped up as though his seat had thrown him out. Chelsea, who had been leaning against him, gasped and caught herself hastily before she fell over.

The door opened and The Spine stomped out. He leaned against the wall beside Breanna, steaming at full boil. She wanted to ask what was wrong, but there were so many possibilities...

"Let me f***ing die ya stupid tin can!" Rabbit screamed after him.

She heard Peter ask Hatchworth to power Rabbit down, and the sound of clockwork slowly growing silent.

"Bunny?" David called, hurrying to the open doorway.

Bunny appeared at the doorway, signing rapidly as she walked out. Breanna hadn't had much time to study ASL as thoroughly as she had meant to, but she could just make out, "Okay," and "Rabbit."

She could tell that the two had not been signed in reference to one another.

"What's up?" Breanna asked at last.

"He won't hear of it," Peter sighed, walking out with the others trailing behind. The Jon was crying against Upgrade and Hatchworth was patting him awkwardly. "He's powered down for now but I really don't know what happens next. He says he actually remembers the night Col. Walter broke him, but still he just keeps saying he can't be a woman."

"But he was, for like a week once, wasn't he?"

"Wanda reminded him of that, and he said that was just play acting."

"Nonsense," said Annie. "He was acting thoroughly feminine most of the time! I should know!"

"That's what makes it so confusing, Mom. It's like he's been programmed to insist that he's male."

"Do you think Col. Walter did that?" she asked.

"If he had, Rabbit wouldn't have even let Wanda dress him as a woman, I would think. Something's different this time."

"Well, no one told him he was a woman last time," Wanda said. "Whenever I tried to hint at it, he'd twist my words around. I thought he was just being Rabbit but maybe... It's not like programming. It's more like very strong resistance. Even fear."
"Fear of what? Is he so old-fashioned that he can't deal with the idea?" David asked.

"No," Peter said. "He was just telling me last week I think about Bunny being transgender and it didn't bother him a bit. Honestly I figured Rabbit would get a kick out of doing something different and shaking things up."

"That's not what she's afraid of," said a small voice. They all turned toward the sound. GG was standing in the hallway.

"Oh, you shouldn't be up yet, baby!" Upgrade gasped.

"Rabbit's afraid of Pappy," GG squeaked.

Upgrade knelt down beside her. "But he's gone, sweetheart. He can't hurt Rabbit now."

"But he did! He did hurt her... him! And Rabbit's scared to remember!"

"But Rabbit does remember..."

"Oh... then maybe she needs... He needs... Mama, which one?"

"I don't know, baby. Rabbit needs what?"

"Her face plate."

"But she... he..." Upgrade blinked. "Which face plate?"

"The girl one! Pappy was makin' it an' put it away when he changed his mind."

"But... I guess he was pretty good at sculpting since he was always improving your chassis," Wanda said. "What did it look like, GG?"

"It was clay an' grey an'..."

"What shape, baby?" Upgrade asked.

"It looked like Miss Delilah!"

"But surely it's long gone by now."

"Maybe. I saw Pappy put it in his special safe though."

"Special safe? Well, then it is gone," Wanda sighed. "I've seen the wall safe and it's full of papers. And she can't mean the vault since that's cleaned out."

"Nah, the special safe! In the desk! Ya gotta have tha key to open that one!"

The Spine turned to Peter. "A key, Peter..."

"That could be what it's for... I thought it was for a safe deposit box. Only you have to pay rent on those, and Mom said she's never seen a bill for it."

"Where's the desk, GG?" Upgrade asked.

"There's a lotta desks," Jon said. "But I bet she means the big one, huh, Spine?"
"The one with all the little recesses and hidden compartments. But I don't remember one with a key."

"I love that desk," Peter said. "I used to explore it all the time, but I thought I'd found out all it's secrets."

"Not this one!" GG crowed proudly.

"Well, it might not help, but I don't have any better ideas and if the face plate form is there then there might be something else we can use," Peter said.

He crouched down in front of the little giraffe and said, "Miss GG, could you please show us where to find the secret compartment?"

GG giggled delightedly and trotted away down the hall. Peter hurried after, with the entire group close behind.

They stood in a very old bedroom, kept in its original state for the occasional tour. Peter noticed a pitcher and washbasin and supposed this was where his ancestor had bathed himself one fateful morning and discovered blood on his... Well, this was the room he was in when he found out.

Tuning out such thoughts, he examined the desk, opening doors and pressing hidden buttons as the younger staff watched with murmurs of amazement.

"It's behind that!" GG cried, when he had opened out several layers of doors, drawers and panels.

She jabbed her little snout toward an ornately carved panel behind the fold out easel.

"I thought that was the back of the desk..." Peter murmured, feeling it carefully with his fingertips, murmuring almost to himself as he did. "Seems stupid now, though... there's clearly still space and these people left nothing unused, but I figured the mechanisms to open all the drawers took it up and it's been years..."

The others kept back a little way or peered around the doorway as he worked. After a minute of exploring, he could just make out a seam, very slight. But how to open it? He pressed everything that looked remotely like a button, pulled at handles, pushed decorations in every direction.

It was getting embarrassing. Here he was, supposedly a genius, and couldn't figure this out!

He heard a soft jingling. He looked at Bunny, who smiled and pointed. GG, it seemed, was craning her little neck to see around him and he sighed. Of course.

"I think I need your help, GG," he said. "This is a very tricky puzzle. Do you know how to solve it?"

She wriggled excitedly. "Ya gotta turn the two ladies to tha middle, then tha keyhole opens!"

He looked and found two figures of ladies in medieval dress. Each could be rotated toward the center of the desk and he had tried each, but not both. Once he had done so, a small panel popped open just below the easel.

"It's nowhere near the back..." he murmured. "I guess that's the trick but... aw, phooey, I forgot to grab the key..."

"Here it is, sweetie," Annie said. "I went and got it while you were chasing GG."
"Ah. Smart. Thanks, Mom."

He put the key into the keyhole and turned it. The metal resisted a little then, with a squeak, it gave. There was a creaking as of small chains somewhere inside the desk and the panel swung open to reveal a stack of boxes, some almost too large to fit inside, and several papers in a bundle.

The crowd around him broke their silence and cheered. Peter gently began to remove the boxes and open them.

"Jewelry... holy crap, look at that rock!" He handed it to his mother. "Better put that into the wall safe."

He pulled out another. "A box inside a box?" He tugged it carefully out and looked it over. "Oh! It's a music box!"

"Peter, look at the name!" Wanda cried.

"Name?" he asked.

It had "Delilah" carved into the front of it. It looked rough, crude, as if a child had done it with a nail.

"Did Grandpappy steal it?" Wanda gasped.

"Maybe he was given it as a keepsake?" Peter offered.

He examined the box and found a paper. "Aha! 'Dear Mr. Walter...' Mister, not Colonel?"

"I never knew how he came to be a Colonel at such a young age," Wanda admitted. "I kinda think it was all hype. He was a bit of a show-off..."

"Too many family secrets!" Peter grumbled. "Well, let's see what's so special about this letter that he had to hide it here with this thing. 'I am indebted to you for you gallantry upon the death of our mutual friend, Delilah Moreau. Had you not intervened, I am sure that Mr. Becile would indeed have sought my life in his hurt and outrage.' Oh! It's from her!"

"'I can only offer my deepest sympathy and regret in your loss, as it was akin to mine. Had Delilah taken my advice, she would at least have given both of you some peace in an open and honest refusal. I would not for the world have had either of you carry on for so long in an empty hope but it was not my place to say so. I could only beg her to make the right choice, but she feared angering her two dear friends, and I think she rather regarded it as a little game. I do think she would not have toyed so with your affections had she truly understood their depth.'"

"Sounds like a nice lady," Annie murmured.

"Yeah, she does. And I'm starting to wonder what any of them saw in Delilah."

"'Captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give*,"' Hatchworth said sagely.

"What?" Peter gasped.

"They fell for a pretty face," Hatchworth explained.

Peter chuckled and shook his head, returning to the letter. "'I cannot suppose that anything will soothe the pain you now feel, but I would at the very least ask that you keep the music box Delilah lent you when you began creating your musical automatons. It was hers when she was very young..."
and she told me, with great delight, of how your first automaton prized it and played it again and again. Let her keep it, then, and remember Delilah as the mother you once hoped she would be.

"Again, my deepest regrets about the entire misunderstanding, and the pain it has brought. We cannot choose whom we love. We cannot dictate the choices they make. We must only bear the consequence.

"Sincerely, Miss Viviana Broodwell."

The Jon gently took the box from Peter and opened the lid. He slowly cranked a little handle on the side of the box and a simple tune played as a tiny white ballerina twirled before a mirror.

"Rabbit used to hum that sometimes..." The Spine murmured. "When we were young."

"I wonder if she remembers..." Jon murmured. "I mean..."

"I know. It's still in question. She may end up wanting to be restored. He may want to be repaired. I just want Rabbit to want to live."

"Yeah," Jon sighed, rubbing his eye.

Peter pulled out the next box and hesitated. It was the right size and the right weight for a clay mock up. He glanced around at the others and opened it.

A sculpture of a human face stared back at him with blank eyes. There hadn't been many photos of Delilah Moreau kept around Walter Manor, but he knew her when he saw her.

He lifted it carefully from the box. Carved into the back of the clay was the answer.

"Rabbit, face plate model 1, Delilah, 1896," he read.

"So we have proof," The Spine sighed. "We had that! What does this help?"

"Maybe he'll remember if he sees it?" Peter suggested.

"He does remember," Jon said softly, still staring at the music box.

"I guess so. But how much? He just said he remembered what the Colonel did, not why or how."

Jon shrugged weakly. "I dunno. But he loves Pappy so much an' the thing that would scare Rabbit most of all is remembering Pappy was mad at him."

"This might help, then," murmured Wanda.

They all turned to look at her. She was standing by the desk, holding the bundle of papers. She held up an envelope. On the outside, it read, "To Rabbit." They could see that it had been opened.

"Aunt Wanda! You just opened it when it's addressed to Rabbit?"

"Rabbit's in no fit state to read anything without someone checking it first," she said firmly. "And it could solve everything. Listen." She skimmed the page and said, "'My dear Rabbit, I have so much regret that I can scarcely write it. You may not recall the night that Delilah died. I certainly did my best to seal those memories away rather than live with the fear in your eyes. I broke you in a drunken rage, created the stutter that still afflicts you. And I took what I had given you, made promises to you and broke them.

"Again, my deepest regrets about the entire misunderstanding, and the pain it has brought. We cannot choose whom we love. We cannot dictate the choices they make. We must only bear the consequence.

"Sincerely, Miss Viviana Broodwell."
"I told myself that your human like behaviors would never be as sophisticated as a real human's. I had thought of you as a child when I first created you but now, in order to cleanse myself of guilt, I told myself that the look of reproach in your eyes, which so pained me the day following, was but a projection of my own self-reproach. But in time I came to see that it was indeed fear... of me. And I could not bear it. I thought it would be as simple as a technical procedure to be rid of it.

"It was only after years of getting to know you all that I realized the complexity of what I had created, the humanity you all bear. How I have done it, I cannot say. You are each very much your own person.

"The Spine is more of a man than many men I know. For him I did my best to help him understand what it was to live as a man. The Jon is a child, and so I kept him small, but not child sized, in case he should one day grow beyond his eternal youth. Hatchworth is... Hatchworth. He defies description sometimes..."

The Spine put his arm around Jon, who snuffled quietly. Hatchworth grinned.

"But you... what could I do for you? I had made you a man, and you were tall and strong and proud to be my son. But I couldn't miss the moments of femininity, even then. They were subtle but I could see them. The moments when I remembered you sitting with Delilah, calling her mother, asking if you would ever be as beautiful as she was. And I had promised that you would!

"But that hateful night, the night of her death, I saw you, and you asked me once more if it was time, you showed me her photograph and I couldn't bear it! I broke you and collapsed in grief and when I woke, so much had happened... Jon was alive but his void terrified me, and Iris... you know what I did to her. Well, I tried to repair you then, but when your eyes lit and you saw me you cried out. And I soon found that GG, too, knew and feared me for it.

"So when the time came to go to Africa, I stored little GG rather than take her to war, and locked your memories of having been female away. I wanted no reminders of what I had lost, I needed only a soldier and had no idea that you would truly feel one way or the other.

"And to this day I question the choice. I told myself then that I chose in order to make you more suitable for war, or to cleanse your memory of any harm I might have done you. But it was only to hide my shame. And even now, even if I thought you would accept being restored, I cannot bear to make you in her likeness, or to confess to you what I did that night.

"You may be happy as you are, and none of this will change that. You may have been feeling as though something wasn't right, and this will explain it. I can only hope that whoever finds this can help you to become what you wish to be."

"He's leaving it up to Rabbit..." The Spine said.

"As he should," Wanda sighed. "It was not your fault. Remember that. I alone am responsible. I am so very sorry for any hurt I have caused you and GG. I should have restored her when we returned, but I knew by then what I had created, and I knew she would continue to fear me. And I could not bear to lock her memories as well so I made the cowardly choice to leave her for another to reassemble. If she has not been found, please go to the vault and bring her out and put her back together, and tell her how very sorry I am for what I have done. I cannot face her myself after all these years."

"But he put the key to the secret safe in the vault!" cried The Spine.

"Again, I believe he had not meant to do so," said Hatchworth. "He must have written this before my
core was cracked, perhaps well before, and mislaid the key in one of the boxes."

"Still... he should have told her himself..."

"I... I wouldn't have been mad..." GG snuffled. Upgrade knelt beside her and held her.

"I love you, as I have come to love all my automaton children. Farewell, and may you find it in your core to forgive me."

The rest of them stood, silent except for the sound of scattered sniffing from robots and humans alike.

Bunny chimed at length, wiped her nose with a hanky, and whispered thickly, "I know this was kind of a depressing read for us, but maybe we'd better show it to Rabbit. I mean, Wanda might be right. Right? Whatever Rabbit chooses, if she's having trouble because of what he did then his apology should fix it. She's hurting but it feels better to know the person who did it is really sorry."

Peter looked at her as she spoke and felt a surge of warmth. How had he gone on so long not realizing what a caring person she was? But then, Col. Walter had been afflicted with similar blinders. It ran in the family. And Bunny, like Peter, had done a very good job of hiding her softer side.

Bunny looked up at him as he stared at her. He knew she couldn't see his facial expression but the look she gave him made his feet turn to jello. There were tears in her eyes and he wanted to take her in his arms...

"Well, that's my idea seconded," said Wanda pleasantly, startling him. He'd felt as though everyone was watching the look they were exchanging but he saw now that they were looking at Wanda. "Come on, let's try this again."

"Whoo!" Jon cried and the tension broke abruptly as they all laughed and filed out of the room.

"But how?" moaned The Spine. "You saw him, Peter. You heard him! He won't listen..."

"Well, Uncle Spine," Upgrade murmured, "I think it's time for me to stop playing nice. If I know Pappy, there's just one thing that will work. I have to play dirty."

The Spine looked at her sidelong and Peter took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He wasn't sure what she had in mind, but he knew Upgrade. If she was taking it in hand, it was best to stand back and let her.

Rabbit opened his eyes. They'd done it again.

He also opened his mouth, ready to start cussing long and loud. But when he looked around, there was only one person there. He hadn't been prepared for that.

"Baby," he said weakly, his rage on hold for the moment.

"Pappy," she said soberly.

She gazed at him for a long time, gently stroking his head. He closed his eyes.

"Please tell them to stop, honey. I can't face this anymore."
"I know, Pappy. But you're just going to have to."

"Says who?" he asked tightly.

"Me."

"Baby..."

"And Mama. Mama wouldn't want you to give up."

"Don't bring her into this!" Rabbit roared. "Don't dirty her name bringing her into it! She wasn't afraid to d-d-d-die!"

"No. But she was afraid to lose us. You kept me alive, just like she wanted. And I'm gonna keep you alive."

Rabbit said nothing. He clenched his fists, his arms still strapped to the table.

"Pappy... You once told me you weren't going to leave me," she whispered.

He slammed his fists against the work table. He heard the chair squeak as she jumped in surprise.

"That's enough!" she shouted. "You said you wouldn't leave me! You wouldn't let me die! You promised! An' it took a long time before I finally got free and got my life but I did an' I'm glad I lived long enough to do it! An' you're gonna deal with this for me, dammit! 'Cause I did it for you, so you wouldn't lose us both!"

Rabbit grimaced and began to sob. She had his number and he almost hated her for it. And that hurt too.

Upgrade stood and leaned over him, laying her head against his shoulder, and cried with him.

"I don't wanna hafta yell at you, Pappy!" she whimpered. "But you're too strong to break this easy!"

"It hurts, baby!"

She stood and looked into his face. "What hurts? Talk to me, tell me what hurts! We're all guessing an' no one really knows!"

Rabbit shuddered, trying not to think of the memory. They all knew now, but it didn't help at all!

"I can't! I can't face it! I just... feel so scared... every time I think about it..."

"Is it about your Pappy? About how he broke you?"

"Stop..."

"That's what I came to tell you. He was sorry, Pappy. He was so sorry."

"What?" Rabbit gasped.

She pulled the letter from her pocket. "We found a letter, Pappy. From Col. Walter."

Rabbit's eyes opened wide.

"Do you want me to read it to you?"
Rabbit's eyes flicked between her face and the letter several times. "I don't... look... what... what does he say? Just... s-s-sum it up first..." Rabbit breathed.

"He loved you. An' he said he was sorry. He said he wished he hadn't broken you and locked GG away. He said he couldn't bear to make you a girl because Delilah had died and he missed her so much! And he wants you to decide what you want to be. Because he made it so that you had a choice."

"What..."

"It's your choice."

Rabbit was thunderstruck. "Read it, baby. Read it to me..."

She did, looking at him from time to time as he lay quietly crying. She showed him the sculpture of Delilah's face, meant to be used to form a face plate someday.

"It's okay to remember now, Pappy," Upgrade said softly.

"I try but something's wrong..." Rabbit said tremulously. "I remember some of it but it hurts. I'm so afraid of it, even knowing he was sorry!"

"Then let me help. Let me come with you."

She gripped his hands and looked into his eyes. Rabbit stared up at her.

"Ya gonna... link with my brain, baby?"

"Yes, Pappy. So you don't have to see it alone."

"Are you sure? I don't want ya ta have nightmares..."

She laughed and kissed his brow. "I don't want you to be alone, Pappy. I'm connecting now."

Rabbit closed his eyes.

"Found it," she breathed. "We can go in and play them just like the ones Mama left you. I'll be there the whole time and we can exit if it's too much. Ready?"

He would never be ready. But she was right... he couldn't just die when she had charged him to live, invoking her mother's name in the process. However it ended, he had to live for his daughter. He had tried to tell himself that she would be alright without him. He was sure she would. But he should have known she wouldn't take it lying down.

It was right after the implosion that the changes had begun. After a month or so of being off-balance and stupidly sensitive, Rabbit had started scanning for damage to his primary memory and behavior modules. He should have gone to Peter for maintenance, but he'd never been crazy about it and it wasn't Peter's business, and besides, he could scan himself as well as anyone.

And one day he found it. A charred little corner of his mind. It hadn't been easy. Every time he came near it, he felt a strange desire not to look.

But when the feminine behaviors worsened, he pushed himself and checked the sector.

He'd caught a glimpse of his Pappy's rage... angry, sloppy, eyes burning, shouting at him for... what? That he reminded him of Delilah? He wasn't sure how that was possible... but he had.
And Rabbit had tried to lock the memory again. But it was open, open and waiting. And he knew now what The Spine had endured as he lived day after day trying to stop the memory from activating further while more and more, he felt like a woman. His body felt off, as if the center of gravity was in the wrong place. He kept expecting to have a bust and was startled again and again to find it flat instead. He cried so much. Pretty clothes seemed to call to him. And shoes... He didn't even want to think about shoes...

But Rabbit couldn't stop. And he knew his Pappy had been angry when he had asked to be beautiful. He remembered that, too. He hadn't understood why his Pappy had refused. Looking back, Rabbit couldn't understand why he had wanted to be beautiful at all if his Pappy had made him male just like the others.

Rabbit knew how proud Pappy had been of his sons. He was always assuring them of that. His sons. Robotic but still so precious to him. If Pappy had been angry that he reminded him of Delilah... maybe he didn't want him to be like her at all... and so he fought. He pushed the feelings back and they nearly destroyed him.

It was time to face it. Time to see what his Pappy had really done, really said. He was afraid, but Pappy had been sorry about it. And knowing that, maybe, with his little girl's help, he could at last face this.

Alright, baby... he signaled. I'm ready.

"Rab-bit..."

There was a soft chuckle. Feminine. The automaton noted it and stored it to memory.

"Hello, Rabbit," said a voice.


"Say hello, Rabbit," a male voice encouraged.


"Rab-bit."

"That's all it says for now," said the male voice.

The automaton continued to record as they spoke. Creator had encouraged it to note the differences in the cadence, tone, and pitch of their voices. Creator's voice was lower in pitch than Miss Delilah's.


The automaton was... it didn't know. Something was agreeable about both voices but there was not yet a word that seemed to describe the impulse they received from them.

"Can you say other words, Rabbit?" asked Miss Delilah.

"Rab-bit..."

They kept calling it Rabbit. It was slowly coming to accept that they meant it to be the automaton's designation, such as "Miss Delilah" was to the female.
"Say, 'Hello!'" she coaxed. "Hello..."

"He..." Rabbit began.

Creator's movement accelerated. "That's it! Hello..."

"He..." Rabbit faltered.

"Lo..." she said gently.

"Looo..."

"Hello..."

"He... lo... Rab-bit..." the automaton droned.

Miss Delilah giggled and Creator clapped his hands together loudly. "Well done, Delilah! I knew it would respond to your touch. I haven't been able to get a thing outside of 'rabbit' from it in a week!"

There was an impulse indicated by the tone of Creator's voice. It was akin to the impulse Rabbit felt on hearing their voices. Miss Delilah was agreeable to Creator.

"It, Peter? You told me she was going to be like me," Miss Delilah said.


Creator smiled in response. "So I did."

"And she's beautiful, Peter. Just stunning. Look at that construction!"

"I know you favor copper, my dear," he responded.

"It's so lovely, of course I do! It's pink when it's new and green when it's old. Are you going to give her a more feminine chassis, then?"

Rabbit sat beside her, watching her movements. She moved more... gently than Creator. There was a word... graceful. That by definition fit.

Delilah was touching Rabbit's simple faceplate.

"That's the plan," Creator said. "Refine that faceplate, maybe give it a porcelain veneer to match your porcelain skin, my dear, and give her copper plating all over for flexibility. It'll take time and money so I'll have to pace myself. Father wasn't keen on my interests and has me on an allowance."

"Oh, dear!" she laughed. "Pappy has given wittle Peter a penny a week, hm?"

*Creator's face temperature ascent: two percent. Rose hue increase in saturation: three percent.*

"It's no laughing matter... I have my own income but the allowance allows me to..."

"I know, Peter. But if he'd only known you'd make him a grandfather so young!"

"A wh-what..." gasped Creator.

Creator was agitated. Rabbit quickly began to track and store their vocal tones.

"Well, yes! He has a fine copper granddaughter!"
Tone: mischief. Miss Delilah had taught her this one rapidly.

"Oh... Really, Delilah..."

Tone: depression.

"Rabbit, say hello to Father!"

"The idea..."

Tone: tension.

"Hel-lo... Fa... Fa..."

"Delilah! Oh, my giddy aunt! Why?"

Tone: distress.

"Fa-ther..."

Creator put his hand over his eyes. Miss Delilah laughed brightly.

"That's right, Rabbit. This is your Father."

Tone: mirth.

"That's not what I intended for her to call me, Delilah," Creator moaned.

Tone: patience.

"But it's so sweet!"

Creator uncovered his eyes. "Well... if you like it, I suppose... She can call you mother!"

"Oh, no..." she laughed. "I'm not her mother..."

"Rabbit! This is mother! Say mother!"

"Peter! Don't you dare!"

Rabbit gazed at them placidly as they fell to, laughing and bickering. They had begun speaking far too rapidly for her to track their tones any longer. Her systems signaled a need to for rest. She went into stasis.

Rabbit could sense Upgrade's delight at this memory. It was his baby album. He felt a little pain at it but it wasn't frightening. Delilah had been lovely, and he could see how besotted with her the Colonel had been.

Ready for the next one? she signaled.

Go ahead.

"I've brought her something. I think it might help her to grasp music."
Rabbit looked up eagerly. She was back! And Rabbit had learned so much that she wanted to show her!

"I've entered programming, Delilah. She's been practicing her singing," Father said.

"But she's a child, Peter. Just a little girl. And little girls start simply."

Delilah breezed into the room bringing a puff of fresh air and carrying a small box. Rabbit stood happily. She had learned since their first meeting that this human was dear to Father. And Rabbit had learned the word for the impulse she felt toward them both. She liked them. The impulses were called emotions, feelings. And she felt that liked them both very much!

"Rabbit! Oh, how sweet, you gave her some of your clothes!"

"I still have to find a dress big enough and her chassis still isn't especially feminine. These were all that really fit.

"Isn't that your showman's outfit?"

"If you mean the one I wore to reveal your giraffe, yes it is."

"Thaddeus said you looked like a clown," said Delilah faintly.

Rabbit looked down at the clothes, puzzled.

"Never mind. They're temporary," he said dismissively, his tone slightly tense. "Sherry?"

"Yes..." Delilah was still smiling, but there was something different. Her teeth seemed too set. Her smile was usually so light...

But Father had turned away without noticing.

"Let me sit down and show it to her," Delilah said, her playful tone gone in favor of a gentle but pleasant voice. She hastily sat by the hearth and took a deep, slow breath.

Rabbit looked at Father worriedly, but he was still oblivious to the sudden change. He was pouring drinks at the sideboard.

"Come here, Rabbit, and I'll show you the secret," she whispered. Her face was paler... or was it the light?

Rabbit sat beside her and she opened the box. Inside was a tiny metal figure, white with a little skirt. A tiny dancer. Delilah cranked the handle on the box and it played a melody. Rabbit stared in wonder.

"Try it," Delilah whispered.

Why was she speaking so softly?

"Oh, I don't know, Delilah," Father said, giving Delilah a little glass of sherry which she hastily sipped.

Delilah closed her eyes for a moment. Opening them, she smiled and said softly, "I think she can do it."

Rabbit took the handle and slowly cranked it. The music played, just like it had for Delilah. Rabbit
clasped her hands, delighted.

"That's how she smiles," Father said. "For now. Do you like the box, Rabbit?"

"Yes, Pappy!" Rabbit said happily. "It is clockwork like Rabbit!"

"Well, in a manner of speaking..."

"Clockwork," sighed Delilah. "How clocks have their way with us all! But in you, clockwork is a beautiful thing, Rabbit. Let ever so much time pass, never to be turned back. Still there will be Rabbit. When we are gone, you must remember us all, my dear."

"Delilah!" Father laughed, but there was a difference in his voice. Pain. "Surely that is a long way off for us both! And Rabbit, as you said, is still a child. Such concepts might prove troubling to one so young."

"Of course," she murmured. "I'm sorry, darling Rabbit. But I see this box, hear that melody, and remember being a little girl myself, carving my name into the front and making mother so angry! But it was mine, you see.

"It just seems so long ago. Where did that little girl run to? I suppose we must all have a little child inside us. But even that childhood must end..."

Rabbit decided she loved Miss Delilah, just like Father did, and just like Rabbit loved Father.

Father, however, was looking at her with concern. "I'm afraid this unusually cool Winter has made you melancholy, my dear," he murmured. "Perhaps we should take a turn in the park..."

"That would be lovely, Peter, but I think I just need some rest. I'll try and return within the week. Rabbit may keep the little box until then."

"Are you sure? She's still learning to handle things gently."

"I see how careful she is with it. She can use it to practice."

Father walked her to her carriage. Rabbit played with the box until it was time for stasis.

More, Pappy?

She was dying... she knew she was. Couldn't you see it? Rabbit asked.

Of course. No wonder he couldn't tell. She was very subtle about it.

Yeah... alright. Keep going. I can do this.

Okay.

"I wanna try it!"

"You can't hold it! You only have hooves."

GG stomped angrily, but the sound was light and pleasant as her little hooves clinked on the hard
The door opened. Col. Walter walked in carrying a letter. His face was pale. He sank into a large chair and stared into the hearth.

Rabbit and GG looked at each other. He hadn't told them to stop fighting. He hadn't even said hello.

GG trotted over to push the door closed but one of the staff arrived first. She turned from closing it to look with concern at the Colonel.

"Is everything alright?" the woman asked gently.

Col. Walter looked up and she gasped. There were tears shimmering in his eyes. He swallowed hard.

"Iris... no... Nothing is alright... nothing in this world..."

"Oh, dear! What has happened?"

"Delilah is ill. Consumption."

Tears filled her eyes. "Oh, dear! Oh, I'm so sorry!"

"It's... it's not always fatal, though? Is it?" he asked desperately, wiping hastily at his eyes. "It can sometimes be defeated with long rest and care."

Iris dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief and looked at him with the most pained expression Rabbit had seen. "I... I believe I have heard of cases, yes," she said with effort.

"Yes... she must take a rest cure, go to the desert and recover. The dry air will thwart the decay of the lungs. Yes... I will go and make the arrangements."

"Shouldn't you ask..."

"Of course. I must go to her and discuss it. But I will hear no arguments to the contrary! She would work herself to death if I allowed it. I must insist she defer to my advice."

"Oh, dear..."

"Rabbit, GG... come along. I intend to accompany Delilah and it will be necessary for the two of you to remain in stasis until my return."

"Aw, Pappy! Why?" whined GG.

"GG, I told you not to call me... Never mind. It's for safety. I know what Katzenjammers the two of you can be."

"But I'm working on my singing, Pa... Father! I need to get better so that when you make the others we can sing Miss Delilah's song!" Rabbit protested as they entered the lab.

The Colonel stopped and looked at her with an agonized expression. He glanced at the assembled automatons waiting throughout the lab. The second one had been briefly activated that very morning...

"There will be time," he said at last. "Once Miss Delilah is well."

"Alright, Pappy."
He opened his mouth for a moment and shrugged. "Thank you."

He connected each to a crudely constructed electrical framework and threw the switch. Everything went dark.

*This is it, Pappy. This is the one.*

*Do it. Don't talk, don't think. Just get it over with,* Rabbit begged.

The room was lit by a lantern when Rabbit became aware once more. Her clockwork resumed ticking but did not tell her how much time had passed.

GG trotted daintily from her station. "Pappy?" she squeaked.

"Go... go tell Miss Iris I'm not to be dishturbed... dist... disturbed. Stay with her..."

"Okay, Pappy..." GG said uneasily, trotting out.

Rabbit remained, staring at her Pappy. Something wasn't right. He was sweating. He hadn't shaved. His hair was disheveled and there was a slightly crystallization of salt of his face... dried tears.

Col. Walter slid down his goggles and sighed deeply. He took a long drink from a brown bottle, picked up a screwdriver, and rose, stumbling a little as he approached her.

"Pap... I mean, Father... are you okay?" Rabbit murmured.

"Fine... it's time to finish the work. Time to finish the singing robots for Miss Delilah..."

His voice broke and he stopped, looking down at the screwdriver. He trembled and a ragged sound came from his lips, something between a sob and a groan.

"Father?"

Col. Walter shook his head, swallowed, and set to work. He removed part of Rabbit's right arm and set it aside... it had been in need of adjustment for some time. He pulled up a chair and began to tinker with Rabbit's diaphragm.

"Are you going to make me beautiful, Father?"

"Hold still."

Rabbit tried, but she was excited in spite of Pappy's strange demeanor. He was going to finish them!

"I want to be just like her."

"Hold still."

"I'm to be a lady when complete, yes? Just like her..." Rabbit asked, pulling a little photograph from a small compartment of her chassis.

"Hold still!" Pappy began. He stopped short. "Wha... where... where did you get that?"

"I found her in Father's desk drawer," Rabbit said meekly.
"Give it here! It wasn't yours to take!" Pappy cried, snatching it away.

Rabbit said softly, "I am sorry, Father."

Pappy leaned back in his chair, clutching the photograph. Rabbit waited as patiently as she could.

"When are you going to finish me and show her?" Rabbit whispered. "You said you would make me just like her."

Pappy resumed working, tinkering with Rabbit's core, his jaw set as if forcing himself to work.

"So very beautiful," Rabbit said soothingly, trying to sound like Miss Delilah. Pappy loved Miss Delilah... "Just like she. And then you will take us to see her."

There was a long pause as Pappy worked in silence.

"Correct, Father?" Rabbit asked, twitching slightly. He was making her so nervous!

"Stop moving, you infernal machine!" Pappy shouted. The screwdriver slipped, cracking Rabbit's core housing. "Agh! Look what you made me do!"

Rabbit shook. Something was very wrong...

"Father... I don't feel so... w-well..." She tried to steady her voice but couldn't. "May-maybe if you f-finish the upgrades-upgrades... I-I will function better..."

Pappy sank back in his chair and tore off his goggles. "Shut up!" he barked. "Stop with your incessant babbling!"

Rabbit couldn't cry. She didn't know how. GG knew how but couldn't explain it. But how Rabbit wished now she been able to teach her! How she wished now that she could cry!

So Rabbit did instead what she always did when she was distressed. She hummed the little song from the music box and rocked herself... shakily this time, unable to control her body properly anymore.

"I'm trying to fix you!" Col. Walter roared, grabbing at her as if to silence her. "Shut up!"

Rabbit recoiled in terror and his scrabbling hand caught her jaw. It popped loose and her vocal assembly fell with it to the floor. She stood, shaking violently, unable to hum, unable to cry out... unable to even ask what she'd done wrong...

"I can't stand to hear you..." he whispered, hanging his head and closing his eyes. "I can't stand to look at you! You... You remind me of her."

But I'm supposed to... I don't understand...

"...And I can't stand you looking at me... like that... Stop it."

Rabbit just stared. She didn't know what else to do. She was so afraid...

"She's gone! Dead! It's all dead!" Col. Walter moaned, reaching for Rabbit's cracked core. There were sparks and Rabbit heard a shrill scream. It sounded like GG...

Pappy why... Rabbit thought as the power drained from her.
Rabbit awoke.

She saw Col. Walter's anxious face staring at her. But it had been only a moment to her since he had frightened her, pulled off her jaw and torn out her core. She couldn't help it. She was terrified. She started trembling.

He scowled and reached for her.

"No!" Rabbit shrieked, cringing. "Please don't hurt me, Pappy!"

He jerked his hand back as if from a flame.

"I'm sorry..." she whispered. "I d-didn't mean to do what I d-did... D-D-Don't be mad anymore... Don't hurt me..."

"You... didn't do anything wrong, Rabbit. I am trying to repair you. Alright?" he said tightly.

"Y-Y-Yes Pappy..."

Colonel Walter reached once more. Rabbit tried to hold still but as his hand neared her face she shuddered and whimpered with fear.

"Rabbit..." he groaned. "I won't hurt you!"

"I kn-kn-know..."

"I have to fix that stutter."

He reached for Rabbit a third time and she jerked away.

"No!" she sobbed. Oil began to leak from her eyes.

I'm crying... this is crying...

"Rabbit?" Col. Walter said, astonished.

"I'm scared! Some-something's wrong!"

She turned away from his searching gaze. She heard the sound of the tools being set down on the table. Col. Walter sighed.

"I'm sorry, Rabbit," he said wearily. "Power down and I'll make the repairs while you're offline."

"Y-Y-Y-Yes Pappy..."

Rabbit powered down.

"That's everything from the locked sector, Pappy," Upgrade told him.

"I know," Rabbit whispered. "It all fits now. Next time he powered me on, he'd locked it all up. I could remember when I was new, and I could remember The Spine. I remembered we were
supposed to be for music, but he said we were goin' to war. He started callin' me a 'he' but he didn't make a big deal about it. The Spine called me a 'she' once and Pappy got kinda sharp with him. I guess Spine don't remember much. He remembers the kitten but not much else from when he was a baby. And Jon got powered on right before we went to war.

"I remember I always got worried when Pappy wasn't happy, but I thought that was just because I love him so much. I guess... Maybe I remembered when he was so angry at me and I was scared to have it happen again."

Upgrade was crying against his shoulder. He held her and cried too.

"Maybe," she whispered. "But he felt horrible, Pappy. He was so, so sorry!"

"I know..."

"Uncle Spine is really angry. He's disappointed knowing what your Pappy did to you."

"Good ol' Spine..."

"But Col. Walter made you a girl. And you wanted to be one, see?"

"Yeah. I do now. Thanks, baby."

"So what will you do?" she asked, sitting up to look at him.

"I need to think for a while, baby. Okay? Pappy... Pappy ain't gonna do anything rash. You c-c-c-can leave tha straps on. I just gotta think."

"Alright," she whispered. She leaned down and kissed his forehead. "Just remember, whatever ya choose, yehr still my Pappy. Got it? I'll call ya whatever ya want, but I love ya just tha same."

"I love you, too, baby," he whispered.

Upgrade walked out and shut the doors behind her.

Rabbit looked up at the ceiling, shaking. It was slowly sinking in... so very slowly.

Pappy was sorry. That was at the top. That was something to cling to, to wear like a warm blanket.

Pappy loved Rabbit. That was at the top too. He'd been so in love with Delilah, and the robots had all been for her. And then she was dead, and she'd never been in love with him at all. It must have hurt so much!

He'd made Rabbit to look like her... or meant to. Rabbit leaned a little to look at the hardened clay face plate design. She was very beautiful. She certainly hadn't been Rabbit's height, but Pappy hadn't refined his designs until he made The Jon, and both of the older singing robots had been scaled to match the inner workings. Rabbit was shorter than The Spine anyhow... that was sort of feminine.

It could have worked.

It could still work.

"I forgive you, Pappy. Ya didn't mean it. Stuff just happens sometimes. She broke yehr heart and you broke mine. Hey... that was a pun.

"I said I just needed ya to send me a sign, Pappy. I said if ya to-to-told me it was okay ta give in an'
be a girl, I'd do it. But ya made me a girl in tha first place, all because ya loved her.

"I was happy enough as a guy. But I ain't felt like one in months. I almost can't remember what it was like.

"And ya gave me a choice in the end. I know it hurt to even th-think about it but ya did. That's something ya do when ya love someone.

"And I have damned great legs. Guess it won't hurt ta give it a try..."

Rabbit closed her eyes and sighed. A year ago she would have laughed at the idea. She had in the past. She had also been angry.

Well, if anyone tried to grab her butt this time, he was gonna find out just how mad she could get. Maybe Bunny would let her borrow that dress. And she could do better than Jon's spare wig...

"Baby?" she called. "Come back in. Pappy's made her choice."

Chapter End Notes

I'm so proud of that last line. That's just very Rabbit. She'll call herself whatever she pleases dang it.

*Hatchworth was quoting Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen.*
A Way into Your Heart

Chapter Summary

Rabbit is a work in progress. But she, at least, is getting somewhere, unlike certain people.

Chapter Notes

One last giant bowl of MUSH for the road. Weird mush with two very weird people. But I'm just gonna run with this. I want to wrap up this fic on a high note and this is almost the very last thing I will add to it, I think.

Stressing again that these are not real people, only thinly based upon them and characters they created. I do not presume to know what really went on between Bunny and Paige, but they had to break up in my story so I came up with something that fit events, and I wanted to include some kind of mention here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"So which one, d'ya think?"

"Rabbit, please understand that I fully support your choice to restore to your original design..."

"Yeah! You've been a p-p-peeach, bro!" Rabbit said brightly.

The Spine sighed deeply. "That said, I would really rather not take part in choosing your breast size."

"Weenie. Whaddya think, Hatchy?" Rabbit asked, turning toward Hatchworth to display the metal hemispheres she was holding to her chest plate.

"I believe the left one is both proportional to your height and suitably buxom," Hatchworth said blissfully.

"Double F it is!" Rabbit said happily.

The Spine smiled weakly. It hadn't been easy since Rabbit had finally come to accept Col. Walter's original design. It wasn't that he had a problem with it, especially since Rabbit was at last crawling from her deep depression and finding purpose in living once more, bit by bit. The melancholy was still there, considering the realizations that had come with their many discoveries. But it was enough, apparently, to give Rabbit something to hang onto, and knowing his sister, as The Spine had to remind himself she now was, she would rally and rise to the occasion now that she was no longer under the weight of the terrible dread of remembering that her Pappy had harmed her.

No, considering the improvement in Rabbit's state of mind and the fact that this was her original design, he could hardly see an objection, except to the fact that Rabbit was every bit as open with The Spine as ever, including in matters that he had never really wanted to contemplate... such as the
size of her breast upgrade.

But he seldom complained. He didn't want anything to interfere with the new and engrossing occupational therapy of choosing the design. Nothing, that is, except for cutting the next album, since it would be needed to fund the upgrade. Peter had offered to sell some of the jewelry he had found in the safe, but Rabbit wouldn't hear of it. They were Walter family heirlooms, and she insisted that since the Colonel had been strapped for cash more than once in his lifetime, he must have locked the jewelry up because their value was greater than money. She also admitted that she needed a little time to get used to the changes. As a result, Rabbit was still "male" on the surface, performing at concerts and recording songs.

She did sound decidedly feminine in some of those songs, but to his ear Rabbit had always straddled that line when singing, sometimes sounding deep and masculine, sometimes light and feminine. Which made a lot of sense, looking back.

But she was at peace with her appearance now. She had even allowed Peter to temporarily shorten the support bars in her hips to enable her to continue wearing her old stage costume without pain until the funds became available. Meanwhile, Peter and Bunny were hard at work designing the new build and costume, with her constant input. At the moment, however, they were sitting and softly snickering as Rabbit happily pushed the larger of the two metal cups across the table toward them.

"This one, baby," Rabbit said, smiling.

"Even now you still use that sexist talk?" Peter asked, his amusement fading.

"Nah, it's affectionate! An' now I can get away with it," Rabbit said confidently. "Me an' Bunny had a talk an' we're bros now."

"Rabbit..." Peter groaned.

"Girls use that, too, Peter," Bunny whispered. "And Upgrade still calls her 'Pappy' so why worry about terminology if Rabbit doesn't mind?"

"I know but..." Peter shrugged. "Mmkay."

"Besides, for all you knew, she could have been calling you baby," Bunny giggled.

"I wouldn't appreciate that either. I'm not just a hot body y'know."

Bunny giggled her whispery giggle and Peter continued to sketch rough adjustments and designs. The Spine glanced at Rabbit and she grinned. No one knew whether Peter and Bunny had at last reached an understanding, but it was clear that they at least had buried the hatchet, and even appeared fond of each other.

"Oh? You don't want to be treated like an object, huh?" Bunny whispered.

"That's right. It's out of control out there. I can't even walk past a nail shop without getting a bunch of catcalls."

"Hey, now who's sexist? You saying there's only women in the nail shop?"

"No, I'm not. You shock me, Bunny, assuming only women are attracted to nerdy male scientists."

Bunny's near-silent giggles broke out once more.
Why don't they just get a room, Rabbit sent, and Hatchworth burst out laughing.

I don't get it, he sent a moment later and The Spine snickered in spite of himself.

They're joking around. It's not exactly foreplay, The Spine sent.

Bunny and Peter either didn't notice or decided the laughter was due to their own tiresome jokes and continued to work.

Pete's totally in love with her though, Rabbit sent.

You're kidding, Hatchworth responded.

No lie! He was freaking out because he thought she might be in danger since people think she's trans which she kinda actually is...

Can we not gossip on this channel? The Spine sent irritably.

You know it's true, Rabbit sent.

Surely you have seen the signs, brother Spine, Hatchworth agreed.

Well... he responded uneasily.

What? What? Spill it already!

I did see Mistress Bunny admiring Peter's backside not long ago... The Spine confessed.

Aw yeah! Rabbit sent. It's true freaking love!

There will be a Peter VII in no time at all.

Now let's not leap to conclusions... The Spine sent hastily.

David walked into the lab. "Did you ask, Bunny?"

"Hello to you, too," Hatchworth said dryly.

"Oh, yeah. Hey Hatchy. So did you ask?"

"About what?" Peter asked.

"Playing D&D in Kazooland. We want to get in a game while Sam is here for the wedding... and Bunny can talk there. Bessie's not the same without that voice..."

"Oh... I never thought of that... but where would you play?"

"Oh..." Bunny whispered, blushing slightly. "There's this house there that I think would be okay for it..."

"Is there?" Peter said, sounding puzzled.

Bunny stared at him. She looked almost disappointed. "Yeah... there is."

"Must have been one of the ones you dreamed up. Oh, it's that wood house with the white curtains, right?"
"Right!" Bunny gasped, smiling.

"Yeah, you told me about that last time we were there! Well, sure, I guess. If Marshmallow passed through okay then humans should be able to do it."

Bunny's smile faded slightly and The Spine could swear he saw tears starting. She blinked rapidly and looked down at her work. David, however, was staring daggers at Peter, who was looking at his notes.

"Great, thanks," David said shortly, turning to leave. His clipboard smacked Peter in the back of the head as he did so.

"Ow!" Peter cried, clutching his head.

"Oops... sorry... forgot I was holding that," David said, not sounding a bit repentant.

Bunny glared at him and he shrugged as he hurried out.

"I could swear he did that on purpose," Peter moaned.

Bunny grinned weakly and whispered, "Hey... about that game... Y'know, we usually have a fifth at the table and well... I think we need a whipping boy."

Peter looked at her, still rubbing his head. "Not literally I hope."

She laughed sincerely and whispered, "No, just in game. You want in?"

The eagerness of her expression spoke volumes, to the robots at least. If it said anything to Peter, it was, unsurprisingly, well hidden.

"Sure! I'd.. I'd love to. That sounds fun."

"And Peter's ranger Elfminster is brought out of the warlock's cave dismembered in a sack. Surprisingly, due to the Undying Spell cast by Salgexicon, he is still alive."

Bunny was face down on the table laughing. Tears were streaming down David's face as he gasped, "I'm sorry... sorry... that was supposed to help..."

"Like a monkey's paw," Peter sighed.

The house had been there, just as Bunny had said. It was a really nice house. And really familiar. It bothered Peter but he could swear he'd been in it, and yet he hadn't. He supposed it was because he'd been having one particularly steamy recurring dream about Bunny, and it always took place in a house very like this one. He was sorely tempted to go upstairs and see if the bedroom was like he remembered, but if it was, what then? It had to be coincidence. He was positive he would have remembered sleeping with her... or anyone, for that matter.

But especially her.

"I have never seen luck this bad," Sam chuckled.

"Is there such a thing as loaded dragon dice?" Peter asked, resting his chin on his hand.

"Could be," Steve said, gathering his. "But not this set. Anyway, work won't wait so I gotta scoot.
"Game over."

"So you get your face and you get your voice," David said as they began packing up, "but what about us? Does this place grant each person a wish or something?"

"I think it only does it for people who got hit with a Blue Matter blast," Bunny said. "It still sounds corny but there must be some scientific rationale behind it."

"So if Norman came here, he might get something back?" Sam asked.

"Oh... I didn't think of Norman. Better not tell him. We each only got one thing and if he chooses his mind over his body it won't end well."

"You all talk about him having brain damage but I've never noticed a problem with his mind," Sam said. "I think he just learned the same thing you two did."

"What do you mean?" Peter asked sharply.

"Well... you all got a taste of mortality."

"What?"

"Well... not to be rude or anything, but you weren't what you'd call cuddly people. You two were rivals before, trying to compete with the scientific community. But after one brush with death, Bunny is closer than ever to David and even hangs out with the girls in the manor, and you, Peter, actually spend time with your parents. And Norman took up gardening and got married."

"Well, after all, those are really what matters, right?" Peter murmured. "Family and all, appreciating nature, all that junk..."

Sam chuckled. "And none of you were really spending time on any of it. I mean, I'm assuming Norman wasn't seeing as how he was trying to take over the world or something. Nothing like facing death to put it all into perspective, right? Anyway, you can go ahead an tell me to butt out. I shot my mouth off enough already."

"No, it's okay," Bunny said softly. "You're not wrong."

Sam patted her on the shoulder and walked out with Steve Negrete. David hesitated at the door.

"Are you two coming back now...?" he asked slowly.

Bunny frowned. "Why wouldn't we?"

"No reason. Only there's no rush if you wanted to take some time off."

She folded her arms and he slipped hastily out the door. Peter stared blankly after him.

"Is he trying to set us up?" he asked, heart pounding.

"I don't know what he thinks he's doing!" she growled. "But he needs to mind his own business!"

"I thought he was against... I dunno... you getting involved with... um... anyone..."

"He was. But it's been months. I'm settled as I am now. So I guess he's decided I'm up to it and he's trying to fix me up with a boyfriend!"
"I thought you were bi..."

"I am, but you're a man, aren't you?"

Peter snorted. "Well, yeah!" he said firmly.

Bunny's frown melted away. She smiled and patted his arm limply. "Dork."

He felt as if she'd praised him instead of insulting him. "Well, I'm in good company, then," he teased.

"Yeah, David's right outside."

"Ho ho ha," he said flatly. He peered through the screen door. "Um, no, he's gone through the portal."

Bunny clapped her hand to her head. "It's like trying to breed dogs or something. Leave them alone and let nature take its course."

"What, he's trying to create a race of dorks?"

Bunny snickered and Peter beamed at her. He savored the moment. Things were so much better as friends! He could talk to her about anything.

Well, almost anything...

"Well... we'd better get going," he said reluctantly.

Bunny's smile faded slightly. "Yeah, I guess so."

"It's nice having your voice back, huh?" he asked as he held the door for her. She hesitated before going through.

"You don't have to do that, y'know. Hold the door for me I mean."

"I'd do it for anyone. If you're worried about sexism."

"No, it's nice of you, but... I guess it's still an adjustment. First I had to learn the whole dynamic of being female and then I'm expected to turn around and champion women."

"Well, I know you're perfectly capable of opening a door. I just don't think it's nice to let the screen door slam in someone's face."

She laughed.

"Hey... where's the portal?" Peter said.

Bunny sighed. "David again. I assume the idiot shut it and figured we'd make the most of it."

"Oh!"

He felt his face getting hot. There it was again. The subject kept coming up, and the moment was all wrong, and Bunny seemed so irritated by it, and David was making it worse. Peter resolved to give the Matter Master extra litter box duty.

With a sigh, he reopened the portal.
"Alright, he knows it's coming so we go-go-gotta make it really raunchy. I got a room reserved at the dirtiest strip club I could find. They got pole dancing!"

Steve paused mid-chuckle and stared at Rabbit. "Um, that's not actually that dirty. I mean, it can be pretty suggestive but it's become a whole exercise thing..."

"You think The Spine would find anything dirtier than a human girl dry-humping a metal pole?" Rabbit scoffed.

The others spluttered with laughter. "No. No, I do not," Steve said. "I think that's about as embarrassing as you can get under the circumstances. But I still can't believe he's got a... ahem... well, that he's anatomically correct. I thought it was just his hardware showing through those slacks."

"It is!" Hatchworth crowed and the laughter resumed. "I appear to have said something amusing," he added pleasantly.

"Don't let it go to yehr head," Rabbit said.

"You sure you're still up for this, Rabbit?" Michael Reed asked, his cheeks bright pink from the subject matter. "It's a bit different now."

"It's a lot different now, but I was just as much of a girl when he asked me to be his best man. An' I didn't get ta do it last t-t-t-time. I heard of people askin' a lady to be best man before. An' I look like a guy still anyway. I'll get weird looks but maybe I'll blend into the shadows a little with this shape."

"She makes a good point," Sam agreed.

"Nice!" Rabbit commented. The pronouns were an ongoing struggle. Most of the staff had slipped up at one time or another.

Peter sighed. "I can't believe I'm going along with this..."

"I can. I bet pole dancing makes ya real curious," Rabbit giggled. "Now that yehr into girls anyhow."

There were murmurs of amusement and Peter groaned, "Can we not? I'd rather not even be there but I feel like you all need a sitter."

"No problem, they got lap dances too..."

"That's not what I mean! Just... get back to your dirty little scheme, alright?"

David wrote something on a pad of paper as Rabbit snickered with the others. He nonchalantly showed it to Peter.

It read, "She's feeling a lot better now."

"I know," Peter said softly. "She's having a great time teasing me."

"I meant Bunny. She's feeling better. She's ready to move on with her life."

Peter swallowed hard. Maybe they'd misunderstood David's intentions. It sounded an awful lot like he was trying to warn him off. It even sounded like Bunny was thinking of leaving... but she'd never mentioned it!

He took the pen and wrote, "In what way? Is she looking for a new job?"
David clapped his hand to his head.

"What?" Peter hissed.

"You two g-g-got somethin' ta share with tha rest of tha class?" Rabbit demanded. "Only we're tryin' ta plan a public humiliation here."

Peter sighed sharply. "Look, just tell me where to be when and stick to the budget. I need to go feed Marshmallow."

He stood quickly and started for the door. He needed to talk to Bunny about this... and about some other things he'd been keeping back. Now was the time, before it was too late...

"Peter!" David called.

"What?" he growled.

"She's not looking for another job."

Peter took a slow, deep breath. "Alright."

He walked out slowly, feeling surprisingly deflated. He wouldn't do it now. The stakes were high once more.

He felt his phone buzz and tugged it out of his pocket.

"Oh!" he gasped, jogging down the hall and ducking hastily into an old lab. Time to shift from thoughts of bachelor parties to the complications of marriage. "Hello? Yes, this is Peter! I'm so glad you called!"

Bunny left the lab, scratching notes on her clipboard. Rabbit's refinements looked promising. She wouldn't be quite the supermodel ideal but she would be tall and shapely and still have all essential systems in place, including her bellows, despite a slight narrowing of the waist.

She had written a new song for the album, so singing was still very much on her mind. Most of Rabbit's contributions had been dark, even sinister. Her months of growing depression explained that, of course. But this one was poignant, inspired by her own struggles and the early death of Delilah. Rabbit had even broken down after singing part of it and they were using that, too. Bunny wasn't sure she wanted to hear it. Her current emotional struggles were more than enough to keep her busy.

She supposed Peter was with the others in their "secret" planning session. She wanted to discuss some of the design aspects... among other things. Some cold truths had come home to her since that night on the train. Realizations that made it harder and harder to just work beside Peter, to just be his friend.

She did want to be his friend, of course. His best friend. His closest friend. Soulmate sounded pretty good.

Lover sounded perfect.

She'd had romances and thought she'd been in love once or twice. Then she met Peter and it had started. Attraction, interest, aversion, rivalry, and then what she could have sworn was sexual
tension. And then... friendship. Was that how it was supposed to happen? It seemed out of order, and then to have that twist into this constant state of longing...

But had she missed her chance? He hadn't made a single move... not since they had fallen into each others' arms one day in Kazooland in a wild moment of passion. She'd relived the moment in her mind countless times and realized she had wanted him as much as he'd wanted her.

Or as much as he'd seemed to want her! Maybe she had been the equivalent of his first crush! Maybe he wanted a real woman!

David got angry when she said things like that. He insisted she was a real woman. But she had always struggled with self-image and it was a fact that she still often thought of herself as one kind of creature and the rest of the Walter girls as real women. She knew it was stupid. She was all woman now. Kissing Peter, she had come to realize, had awoken something inside her. In that moment, with that dream of being with him, having a baby, living that life... That was the moment she had come to realize that she was a new and complete being, that her desires hadn't changed but some of them had receded and others had come forward. She still wanted to pursue science and art. She wanted all that, and to be a woman, to love and be loved, to have children of her own.

And with time and soul-searching, something new had risen from the ashes of her reserve. She wanted Peter to be the one who loved her, and to be the father of those children someday. But right now, she was Peter's friend. Just his friend.

"Have you considered my proposal?"

Bunny froze. That was Peter! He sounded like he was on his phone in the next lab, one often left unused... and she had to pass it to get back to her room!

"Wonderful! You've made me very happy! Wait'll I tell Mom... she's been on my back about this for a while. I've been restless all week waiting for your answer. I really need someone like you. We'll have the pitter-patter of little feet around the manor in no time at all."

_Dumbhead. No one says that anymore..._ Bunny swallowed hard, trying not to think what was playing out in her head, but the thoughts forced themselves to the front. It was too late... she was too late!

"Well, I mean... not until... Right, exactly. Got to have some time as a married couple first, right? You can only know someone so well before you've actually shared the same bedroom."

She clutched her clipboard with white knuckles. To describe her feelings at the moment as "sinking" wouldn't begin to do them justice. It felt more as though a hole had opened inside her and everything that mattered was draining away...

Peter's getting married, too?

"I mean, GG was enough of a wrench and Marshmallow is just reaching his teens so to speak. Not sure about the growth rate on giant cats. So there's no rush to have babies around just now..."

_Why is he going on and on about babies?_ she wondered miserably. _Shouldn't he be calling her pet names or saying he loves her?

She wanted to run away but she couldn't move. Everything had gone numb.

"Right, see you then. Yeah, good, good, thanks again, Miss Keaton. Oh... right, Lorene. Alright. This is great news. Okay... Mmbye."
It was an odd way to end a call to his fiance but she was in no state to think about it. Bunny rushed down the hall at last as if freed from a spell. She darted past the lab, hoping he didn't notice.

"Bunny! Hey!"

Dammit. Caught. She jingled her chime, refusing to leave the shadows of the old hallway.

He hurried around the corner. "Hey! I... uh... guess you heard some of that call..."

"A little," she whispered.

"Oh! Good... it's just a little surprise I'm working on..."

"Right. It's none of my business..."

"Oh, no, I'm not saying you're not entitled to know but I really want to keep it lowkey right now... Are you okay?"

She affected a yawn. "Just tired."

"Oh! I'm sorry! Get some rest, okay? Take care of yourself..."

He was still so sweet, so concerned! And it just broke her heart more...

"You want me to walk you back?"

"No! No... I just need some rest. Um... Good luck, Peter."

"Why? Oh, right... secret project."

"Yeah... Goodbye..."

"Goodnight, you mean. Wow you are tired!"

She couldn't take it anymore. She nodded and hurried away.

That call had sounded very specific. It wasn't flowery but Peter was pretty stupid about that sort of thing. He hadn't really shown any sign of wanting to be with Bunny romantically since the night they talked on the train. Maybe not even then. She couldn't deny that. He was warm and sweet, but maybe she just hadn't given him the chance to show that side of himself before...

She reached her room and sank to the bed and sat. Just sat.

"Bunny? You're still up?" David said.

She jumped and looked at him in shock. How long had she been sitting there?

"Sorry! We just finished our little meeting. Paige says the girls are doing theirs the same night. Um... which one are you going to?"

She would have laughed any other time. It was a fair question. She didn't mind seeing a shapely female form... and Paige was hosting the bachelorette party, which promised to prove awkward. But she didn't much care for the atmosphere of a strip club (even as a joke) and she suddenly wanted to talk to Paige. It had been eating at her anyway but now it sank into her like a knife how much she understood what Paige had been feeling when she left the manor.
And she wanted to apologize.

"Um... the bachelorette party. Might as well face up to it, huh?"

"There's gonna be a stripper, though," David said with a look of amusement.

Bunny did crack a small smile at this. To her dismay, the slight show of emotion broke the spell at last and she felt the realization sweep over her.

Peter was marrying someone else.

Fighting tears, she whispered thickly, "I need to talk to Paige. I've put it off for too long."

David, misunderstanding her emotion, nodded. "That's great, Bunny. You're gonna feel a lot better."

She nodded, unable to speak.

"Alright, I gotta get to bed. Don't be up too late," he said.

"Schmuck," she choked.

He laughed, hesitated, shrugged, and walked away, leaving Bunny to her misery.

Paige had still been in love with Bunny when they broke up. But she'd been hurting, too. Bunny could see it now and it only tore her up more. She'd been a jerk. She deserved to have her heart broken like this. It was karma.

But it was so stupid! A woman didn't need a man to be happy. Love was wonderful but the world was full of people to love. Paige was seeing someone else already, so she'd heard. And nothing was stopping Bunny from loving Peter even if he did marry this Lorene Keaton...

And she did. It had been a battle but the battle was over. She loved him so much she could barely think straight. She knew he was a genius idiot and kind of a scrawny dork but it was how she felt. And he was marrying some stranger and he would bring her back to Walter Manor and have babies with her and...

She didn't care what everyone said. She knew she didn't need a man to be happy. But it was going to hurt like hell trying to be happy without him.

Bunny melted at long last into the pillow and sobbed as softly as she could manage.

"Show me the way to go home.." Steve sang.

"You're a nerd, Steve," Peter chuckled. "Everything that comes out of your mouth is a movie quote."

"That song was around before Jaws, y'know. There anymore jalapeno dippers?"

The bachelor party was a lot tamer than anticipated. None of them were particularly adept at debauchery. There were indeed girls twirling around poles. Peter was fascinated with them at first. Maybe they were supposed to be provocative, but they almost seemed to defy gravity and his scientific mind wrapped right around that.

Sexually, however, they did nothing for him. He had noticed this lately. His sexuality hadn't really changed that much. He'd learned to admire a female form but still seldom felt attraction to those he
admired. Only once, in fact. And that one person had only grown more attractive with each passing day.

These girls were lovely but not one of them was like her. He'd had just a brief mental flash of what she'd look like whirling around a pole and had to order a cold drink.

They sat now in a large corner booth, talking and laughing. Rabbit was still Rabbit, with a more feminine manner but the same bawdy sense of humor. She'd arranged a lap dance for The Spine which was performed by a very bemused dancer. She later said it was so easy to stay balanced on his rigid metal form, especially since he sat stiff with anxiety the entire time.

But now both Rabbit and The Spine leaned back, sipping water and, from their reactions, carrying on their own conversation via wifi. Hatchworth occasionally chuckled, suggesting he was listening in. The Jon, however, was several tables down learning to pole dance from three laughing club dancers. He was doing rather well, too.

Steve was downing the last of the snacks as David looked sidelong at Peter.

"Something on your mind?" Peter asked.

"A lot. You remember what I mentioned at that planning meeting?"

"Yeah?"

"How I said Bunny wasn't looking for another job?"

Peter felt sick. He didn't like where this was going. "Yeah?"

"That... may have changed."

"Can you just spit it out?"

"Something's upset her, Peter. She won't say what but she's talking now about leaving."

Peter's heart gave a very painful thump. "No! I mean... Why... How do you know... What did she say, David? Exactly?"

"Just that she couldn't stand being in Walter Manor anymore. That she thinks she needs a change. Sounded a lot like what Paige said, actually."

"Paige..."

"Y'know, after Bunny broke up with her. After she realized she was in a hopeless romance. Like that."

Peter stared at him. "Bunny had a romance? Was it... maybe she realized she still loves Paige? Is that it?"

David groaned softly and sipped his juice. "Wow. Maybe she really would be better off leaving..."

"What?"

"Look, stupid... I am trying to be subtle here but apparently you don't have that option. Bunny hates it when I butt in but I'm sick of this."

"Um..." Peter stammered.
"You remember that engagement party where you two disappeared for a while? She couldn't stop talking about you after that. She's interested in you. And she needs to know whether you are, too, because it's killing her seeing you every day without knowing. And I've never seen her like this but I know it's what's happening, okay? I don't know what she sees in you but she sees something and if you care about her at all you'll tell her before she does something stupid like taking a job at a burger joint just to get away from Walter Manor!"

Peter realized all at once that the others were staring at them.

"Ho-ly crap..." Sam breathed.

David ignored them. He pulled out his phone. "In fact, I've been meaning to check on her... She wouldn't admit to anything but she's had puffy eyes all week."

"David, I swear I didn't know! I thought she wanted to be friends and I did too..."

"Just friends?" asked Steve.

"Okay, this has gotten just a little too public..." Peter muttered.

"Paige? Sorry to butt in but... Yeah, I can hear the music, sounds like a good party! Is Bunny around? Yeah, I know she has a phone but I don't want her to know I'm checking up on her. No, she can tip the stripper all she wants..."

"What?" Peter gasped as the others laughed.

"In fact I hope she does. She was feeling kinda down earlier. How has she been?"

There was a breathless pause.


"What? Alright, I guess I'll text her. Thanks." He sighed and started typing.

"What's going on?" Peter demanded.

"She's not with the others. Paige isn't sure where she is. I'm sure she's just in her room."

"Right."

"What're you gonna do, Peter?" Michael Reed asked with a little smile.

Peter sighed deeply. "I... I don't know."

"Well, do something!" David said. "And don't tell her I said anything!"

"Sure... I'll have a talk with her."

David shook his head and sighed.

The bachelorette party was going well. They had a nice cozy arrangement of household furniture on one side of the ballroom, leaving plenty of room for food tables and dancing on the opposite side. There was a stripper but he was a friend of Chelsea's, brought in just to make Breanna blush rather than for anything too suggestive. He only stripped down to a little pair of shorts and was now
teaching dance moves to most of the women with Chelsea's assistance. Bunny had the feeling the other party was much the same... Rabbit would have tried to embarrass The Spine but the rest of them just didn't have much debauchery in them.

At the same time, she wondered whether Peter was currently staring at a pair of silicon inflated bare boobs with twirling tassels. Big dummy probably thought they were real.

She wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. She just felt so empty...

"Hey! Remember me?"

Bunny jumped but tried to laugh it off as Paige sat on the sofa beside her.

"I was wondering where you were! You're over here all by yourself," Paige said, a little stiffly. "You can come join in... We're just learning some ballroom dance moves."

"I know."

A heavy silence fell between them. She'd wanted to speak to her, but how to begin? Bunny had never much cared for delicacy, and Paige knew it. No sense holding back now.

"Paige..." she whispered at last. "I'm sorry."

"What?" Paige said, astonished.

"I'm sorry. I was a terrible boyfriend. I got so obsessed with work that I didn't give you what you needed. I didn't work on things like I should have. I let myself drift away and left you alone and blew myself up and... well, I just... wanted to apologize. I wanted to give you that at least. I didn't mean to be a jerk. I just didn't try hard enough not to be."

Paige wiped her eyes and hugged Bunny. "Thank you," she said softly as she leaned away.

They sat in silence for a long moment.

"So... I heard you're seeing someone," Bunny whispered at last.

Paige looked away. "Yeah. He's really nice."

"Meaning he treats you right? Gives you the time and attention you deserve?"

"Bunny... you have to forgive yourself, too, y'know."

"I know. So does he?"

"Yeah," Paige sighed. "We have a lot in common. He's a great guy. So don't worry okay?"

"Good. I want you to be treated right, and not... not have your heart broken again..."

Bunny stopped, unable to choke out any more. She turned away slightly, trying to swallow the tears. She felt a hand on her shoulder. "Bunny... look, I don't want to poke at a sore spot but I heard something was up with you and Peter."

Bunny grimaced and turned still further away, blinking rapidly. Damned household gossip!

"Is everything okay?" Paige asked gently.
Bunny shook her head and sniffled miserably.

"Are you two... Are you together?"

"No..."

"But... I thought you'd... y'know... slept together..."

"No!" gasped Bunny, her cheeks burning.

"Stupid gossip... sorry sweetie. I shouldn't listen to that crap after all this time. But... you're obviously upset about something. You wanna tell someone who isn't in the loop anymore?"

"Promise to keep it to yourself?" Bunny whispered.

"Don't I always?"

Bunny nodded. "You remember back when I signed on here, and we thought Peter was gay?"

"Yeah. Guess we were wrong, hm?"

"Yeah. He was ace. Y'know..."

"Asexual. Oh! Is that it? You like him but he's not interested in a relationship?"

"No... Look, this may sound nuts, but when he was blasted with Blue Matter he was changed. Not just his face. He ended up suddenly liking women."

"Oh, come on..."

"I'm serious! Didn't anyone mention that?"

"They said he was ogling you, Bunny! No one said he was ogling everyone!"

"Of course he was ogling everyone! How could they miss it?"

"The mask maybe?"

"I guess..."

"But even if he was, I'm sorry, but how can Blue Matter give him a precisely heterosexual libido? Why would it?"

"Maybe he just needs time to explore it. Maybe he's pan. Hell, he may turn out to be attracted to living room furniture for all I know. But... for a while it seemed like it wasn't just libido. He seemed to be especially interested in me. Maybe I was just the closest woman..."

"Bunny... Even with the changes, that's not like Peter. He wouldn't say he loved you and then..."

"He didn't. He stared at my boobs and got a... Sorry but he had the biggest boner, so help me..."

Paige spluttered with laughter.

"I know... And I lost my balance on the train and fell right on his lap and I've never been so embarrassed in my life!" Bunny giggled, wiping her eyes.

"Oh my gosh, that's so cute!"
"Cute? I fall into his lap while he's frighteningly tumescent and you find it cute?"

"Kind of! I mean, it's not like he came up and rubbed it on you to send you a message... oh... I am so sorry..."

She fell silent, looking at Bunny sidelong.

"Come on! I only did that once!" Bunny hissed angrily.

"Sorry, really, I just mean he was probably trying to be inconspicuous..."

Bunny sighed irritably. "Yeah, I know."

Paige, still looking annoyingly amused, added, "So you knew he found you attractive. Did he do anything to suggest he wanted to be with you? I mean, besides wanting to sleep with you?"

Bunny thought of the kiss. But it proved nothing. It was physical. She wanted to know Peter loved her. She'd already known he'd wanted swap fluids.

"Not that particular day. But then... he was so nice after that! He was always checking on me and trying to make sure I had what I needed and one night we even went back to Kazooland... that's where we were before..."

"Right. Bree mentioned it."

"And we just rode a train and talked for hours and since then we've been like, best friends..."

"Oh!" Paige cried, as if finding some sudden truth. "That was why... okay, I think some of the gossips around here jumped to conclusions about you and Peter based on that night."

"What, they thought we snuck away to screw around?"

"Pretty much. They sorta figured it was a done deal, but that you were having fun with your little secret affair..."

"I wish!" Bunny whispered with as much feeling as she could muster.

Paige stared at her and Bunny broke down at last.

"Paige..." she whispered thickly, "he... he doesn't love me..."

"That's not how I heard it, though. And that's not gossip. That's from you."

Bunny put her hands over her face. "No..."

"I know you're new at being a girl but when a guy acts the way Peter has he's usually interested."

She shook her head, "I told him I wasn't interested. Back in Kazooland. He backed off and now... It's so stupid! I love him. How idiotic is that? Telling him to stay away and falling in love with him right after! And I thought maybe I could tell him I changed my mind but... but he loves someone else!"

"What? Who?"

"Some lady named Miss Keaton!"
"Miss Keaton?"

"That's what he called her."

"What? He calls her Miss Keaton?"

"He's weird, okay? I heard them on the phone. Maybe he called her that in case someone was listening. I dunno! It's some big secret thing with them, he said so! But they were talking about marriage and kids..."

"But... Miss freaking Keaton?"

"Yeah! Miss freaking Keaton!"

"No one calls their girlfriend 'Miss!' This isn't Pride and Prejudice! You must have misunderstood!"

Bunny shook her head. "He called her Lorene right after like she'd reminded him. I know it sounds weird but I didn't misunderstand. You didn't hear what he was saying..."

"Okay... Bunny, baby... I know you. You get scared and you expect the worst and then you see it because you're looking for it! You probably feel insecure about Peter because he hasn't made a move, which is all because you told him you weren't interested, so he's giving you your space because he's a good guy! And now you're afraid he's not interested so you misconstrue..."

"Stop it! Just stop trying to get my hopes up!"

Paige took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"I know..." Bunny sighed. She'd just apologized and here she was being a jerk all over again. Maybe Peter was better off with Miss Keaton. "Sorry. Again."

"It's alright. But... Look, I just wanted you to know that I do understand. This isn't really news, either. You've always been into Peter, more or less. I know you're bi but you never really got too into guys before this. But I could tell from early on that he was a threat."

"Oh, yeah?" Bunny whispered hoarsely. "You get any vibes from him then?"

"Well... obviously not! Because he wasn't into girls or guys or anyone. But I remember you two getting along great at first."

"We get along great now," Bunny whispered wearily.

"And that's awesome. But please don't decide anything until you know for sure, okay? Just make sure it's what you think. Because... well, I think you're wrong. Okay? Deal with it. You know what you heard but I know what I've seen. I've spoken to him a few times while I was here planning the party and Peter does not seem like he's just your friend. If anything he talks like a doting husband... He seems so proud of you and sounds so warm when he talks about you."

Bunny shook her head. She wanted to be thrilled at the thought. She refused. It was all romantic hype.

"Look... I gotta get out of here," she whispered. "Give Ben a twenty for me. Seems like a nice guy."

Paige smiled, but there were tears in her eyes. "Okay, baby. Good luck."

"Yeah."
She rose and hurried out. Well, things were cleared up with Paige, who was far too good for her, but she was still miserable. She needed the cry of all cries but she didn't know how long the parties would each go on and David, when he returned, might look for her in her room...

Well, there were places he wouldn't look. She just needed to get away to grieve what had never really been. And she knew the best place for self-pity.

The conversation drifted, the hour was late and none of them were really party animals. David kept checking his phone for a reply and in the end they gave in and headed home. The Spine carefully peeled The Jon off of a pole, throwing him over his shoulder after The Jon attempted to use his new skills to twirl around The Spine himself.

Peter was restless all the way home. Why had David told him that in front of everyone? He couldn't blame alcohol since David didn't drink. And why did he keep looking at his phone? Hadn't she responded?

When they arrived home, David hurried to the Walter Girl wing and Peter, unsure what to do now, paced in the entrance hall. His phone buzzed and he jumped. Across the front screen were two words that made his blood run cold.

It was David, and the words were, "She's gone."

He called back, running toward her room. "Are her things here?"

"Yeah! And her phone! Crap, Peter... if she killed herself over you, I swear!"

"I'm not worth it!" Peter squeaked, alarmed.

He nearly collided with David one second later. "Apparently..." David gasped, turning off his phone, "she disagrees."

"Did she leave a note?" Peter wailed into the phone. "Is there a suicide note? She can't have done it, David!"

David reached out and pulled the phone down from Peter's ear. "I'm right here, stupid, you can put away the phone. Take a deep breath and think."

"How can you be so calm?"

"I know Bunny. She wouldn't kill herself over a broken heart. I was just screwing around with you."

"Dammit to bloody steaming Hell, David!" Peter roared.

"Look, she is pretty upset and I do want to find her, but you need to be the one to talk to her, okay? She'll get over it in time but maybe she won't have to. I mean, if you really do care about her..."

Peter gulped and fought tears. "Yeah, I care about her! Of course I care about her!" he cried.

"As a worker or as a woman, though?"

"As a woman for crying out loud! I love her, dammit!"

"Finally! I thought your head was gonna explode. Why didn't you own up?"
"I'm not sure how anyone could have missed it! David... She has to be okay! We have to find her!"

His voice broke. He swallowed loudly. David snorted with laughter and hugged him abruptly. Peter flailed and cried out.

"Good. You're both idiots," David chuckled, shoving him briskly away. "No more objections from me. You were made for each other. So where do we start looking?"

"Well..." Peter gulped, thoroughly shaken by the hug. "I still can't believe she could be eating her heart out over me, but... if that's the problem, I know where she might have gone."

"The portal?"

"Yeah... I mean, it's as far away as you can get anyway, but we had some... um... Some intimate moments there... Oh, I don't mean that kind of intimate!"

"No details. That's between you two. Let's go see if it's been opened."

David set off rapidly toward the labs. Peter jogged beside him.

"And if it has?" he asked.

"We assume it was her, and you go get her."

"Oh."

"And don't screw it up! No dancing around the subject. She hates that. Just tell her how you feel. Trust me, she's crazy about you."

"I don't get this complete change of heart from you..."

"She's been miserable, okay? And I hate it. I hate being in love and happy watching her struggling and getting her heart broken. If you really do love her that much, then the whole thing is fixed and my sister gets to be happy. Are you prepared to do what it takes to make that happen?"

"You sound like a drill sergeant..."

"Well?"

Peter sighed. "Yeah, I'm prepared. I'd do anything to make that happen. Let's get in there."

"Bless you, my children," David chuckled as they entered the lab.

"Dork," Peter growled.

Bunny lay curled in white sheets. She was almost positive that she'd fallen asleep at some point. The tears on her face had dried in crystalline trails. She could just catch their sparkle at the edge of her vision, lit by the street lamp outside.

The house was full of ghosts to her. She felt as if she could see him everywhere. But it suited her mood. She was haunted by dreams she'd allowed herself to have. Peter may have spoken to that Miss Keaton more like a business partner than a lover, but he was kind of a nerd and his words had been clear. A proposal, children, happiness. All without Bunny.
So she came here while she still could, before she found another job and left Walter Manor. This had been their house, if only in a dream. She stared at the bed and imagined he was there beside her, bare and flushed, covered loosely in the bed sheet, smiling as he reached out to stroke her cheek. If she looked toward the bathroom, she could see him shaving, humming Brass Goggles. If she looked at the floor, she could almost see Peter there, too, holding their baby up as she giggled...

Sometimes she even thought she heard his voice. Really, honest-to-goodness heard it. It was fantastic and terrifying. She thought of going back where things were comparatively solid and sane. But that was where reality had thrown a javelin straight through her chest, where hope was as dead as cold stone. She would face it when she had to. For now, she remained and listened to the faint voices, saw the ghostly forms, closed her eyes and pretended it was real.

"Bunny?" called Peter's voice.

*I'm here...* she thought. **Come and join me...**

She sighed. It sounded real, but she just couldn't believe it.

"Bunny! Are you in there? The door's locked..."

That was oddly direct...

There was a scratching sound. She sat up sharply and looked out onto the balcony. Nothing.

"I could have sworn..." she breathed.

The trellis along the side of the balcony trembled. There was a grunting sound.

"Hello?" she said faintly.

The sounds paused. "Bunny?" he called again. He sounded out of breath.

She hurried to the French doors and stared. Peter's keyhole mask was just visible through an opening in the trellis.

"Bunny!" he cried.

He struggled up still further. There was a sickening crack and he grabbed onto the balcony railing with a cry of alarm as the trellis collapsed.

Bunny gasped. Was he real?

"Um... Help..." he gasped, wrestling an arm over the railing and clinging for dear life. He scrabbled at the edge with one shaking foot.

She moved slowly closer, her arms folded over her stomach. "No... No, you're another fantasy!"

"I'm what?" he gasped as his foot lodged precariously on the narrow lip of the ledge.

"You can't really be Peter coming up the rose covered trellis to my boudoir!"

He paused in the middle of trying to push himself higher. "I... ow... thought that was ivy..."

"It's too good to be true, it has to be another illusion!"

"I... I can't climb anymore... My arms are like jelly..."
"I'll help you up and you'll disappear... Or I might even sleep with you and in the morning you'll be gone..."

"What?" Peter squeaked. "I just want to get up there, then we can talk about this!"

"Or maybe you'll stay and I'll waste away here with an imaginary lover eating imaginary food until I die..."

"Bunny... Holy hell, that's... ungh... dammit... that's so dark..."

The railing popped ominously and he squeaked in alarm.

"Could you maybe..." he gasped, groping toward her feebly with three fingers.

"I could... if you were real."

He was starting to sag. "Bunny! *I am going to die...*" he choked, his chin on the railing.

She reached down and gripped his hands. He felt real enough, but maybe that was how it worked. After a frantic struggle he lay trembling on the balcony, panting with effort. She sank down beside him.

"David... was worried about you..." he panted.

"So he sent you?" she asked skeptically.

She reached down and removed his mask. He smiled weakly at her.

"I insisted... I need to talk to you."

"What could be that important?" she scoffed. "What could you possibly have to say that's worth dying over?"

He looked at her for a long breathless moment. A great struggle appeared to be taking place. He reached one trembling hand out and touched her cheek and tears stung her eyes once more.

"I love you," he whispered sincerely.

It almost seemed to have form of its own. She could swear it hung in the air between them. She wanted to embrace it, to let it settle into her skin until she owned it.

But it was too perfect. Still too perfect.

A wind picked up suddenly. The curtains flipped wildly at the window.

"I knew it! It's not real!" Bunny sobbed. She ran inside and slammed the door as rain began slanting down across the balcony.

She heard loud cursing outside as she sank onto the bed. The door rattled and opened. Peter, already sopping wet, shut the door hastily and knelt by the bed.

"Are you upset because I said I love you? Did you just want to be friends, Bunny? Bunny? What did I do?" he asked desperately.

"I can't believe it... I just can't!" she said in a trembling voice. "I want it to be real but... why would anyone love me?"
"What?" Peter gasped. "Are you kidding? I mean... wow. I just... don't get it. Bunny... I can't imagine not loving you..."

"And that's the problem!" she choked, looking at him at last. "Peter and I used to fight all the time. Then we both changed and suddenly we're all cozy and I really thought... never mind. I'm talking to a dream. What's the point?"

She turned away once more.

"How do I prove it to you?" he begged. "How can I possibly prove I'm not a dream? Hell, I can't believe I'm what you dream about given the options available! Look, I've loved you since that day in Kazooland... I found out what you were really like and... I just couldn't stop thinking about you but I was afraid of driving you away and then... I just... needed to tell you. David said you're thinking of leaving and... I had to try. I had to tell you how I feel and hope that you'll stay."

She said nothing. The rain was the only noise in the darkened house. Peter sighed.

"I just love you. I could give you a list of reasons but... I just do. I can't help it. Please don't leave."

He seemed real. None of her little flashes of memory had been this vivid. But everything he was saying was too wonderful and the doubt gnawed at her.

"Bunny..." he murmured weakly. "Please. You've become part of my life. I'm just so happy with you and... I don't want to have to learn to live without you."

That was so pretty! She was afraid, but she couldn't risk missing what just might be a very real declaration of love. She had to try and find out if it was.

"Why?" she whispered.

"Why what?"

Bunny turned her aching head toward him and swabbed at her nose. "Why now? I heard you talking to that lady. Aren't you getting married or something?"

"What? No! I mean... Not to her..."

"Who are you gonna marry, then?" Bunny asked miserably. It hurt, but she had to understand.

"I thought telling you I love you would clear it up..."

"Well, it didn't!" she roared.

"Alright!" he cried. "Honestly, I'd be incredibly happy if you'd consider marrying me!"

Doubt crept in once more. She sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes. "What the hell..."

"Up to you of course..." he said sheepishly.

"If you're trying to convince me you're real, you're going about it all wrong."

"What? I suppose you believe love never works out in real life?"

"For me, yeah..."

"Well, damn. I have nothing, okay? I am Peter Alexander Walter VI. I love you. I just asked you to
marry me, and very poorly at that. I don't want you to go. Tell me what would prove to you that it's all real."

Bunny took a deep breath. "Go home."

"What?" he gasped.

"Go back. I'll use my remote, open my own portal, and meet you there. If you still love me there, I'll marry you."

"Holy crap... just like that?"

"Well?"

"Well? Either you're that convinced that I'm a product of your imagination or you want that much to marry me..."

"How about both?" she asked dully.

"But then you realize that even going back might be part of a dream?"

"There's only so much I can prove even to myself, Peter..."

"Fair enough. Alright, see you there..." he murmured, bemused.

"Wait!" she cried.

"What?"

"In case you're not real..."

"Hm?"

She slid to the edge of the bed and pulled him close. "If I'm right, I'll never get a chance like this again except in a dream."

"If I'm right," he murmured, slipping his arms around her, "and I am, and I still can't believe you don't realize it... you'll have all the chances you want."

"Diva," she whispered.

He smiled and pulled her closer. She leaned down and was met halfway. She almost sobbed. She'd wanted another kiss for so long! He felt real... Warm, alive, his pulse racing against her fingers where her hand rested on his neck... she could tell he'd been drinking a little, but so had she... mingled with that was a faint scent of jalapenos which couldn't be coming from her.* His hand had curled into her hair again and it gave her pleasant shivers. Could a dream feel this much like the real man?

She drew away and held his head against her breast.

"I love you, Peter," she whispered. "Even if you never find out there, I love you so much!"

"Bunny..." he breathed, looking up at her. "We've been so stupid..."

She kissed him again, her heart pounding. The last time they had kissed, right before going home, she had felt a terrible longing. She felt it again now... If he wasn't real, she never wanted to know. At least, not yet. She was willing to live in the illusion while she could. She slid her hands down and
began to tug at his shirt.

"No..." he said, pulling quickly away. "Not like this. I don't want to rush into it. I want you to know this is real."

"But if you're so sure..." she cried, frustrated.

"No... I won't cheapen it. I'd love to be with you but only once you're sure it's me." He stood, activated his remote, and said, "Got that? I love you, Bunny. I promise. Wait and see."

He turned and stepped through the portal. In a flash, he was gone.

Bunny sighed. He was right and she knew it. The fact that she knew it cast more doubt, since he wasn't saying anything she didn't know. But it was still right. If he was real, if she was not in fact so far gone that she was dreaming up her own alternate life, then there would be the chance, once she verified things. And if he was, if it was true... then he loved her!

She felt silly. The idea that she had gone this long thinking she was imagining him! True, she had dozed a little and it was late, and her perceptions were a little warped, but nothing had seemed this solid since she'd arrived. Surely she couldn't be this aware...

But she had dozed. This was a strange place. Who knew what it could produce? And she'd wanted so very much for something just such as this to happen. He might be waiting for her... anxiously pacing, wondering why she wasn't there yet... just waiting to bring her back and join her in their lovely room...

But if she went back and he wasn't there... If he was in bed or still at the party and had no idea and didn't love her...

Bunny stared into the blank space where the portal had appeared. He was right. Either he was real already or going back might be part of the dream. It proved nothing.

And she was right, too. There was only so much second-guessing she could do. If she had at last gone over the wall and lost her mind, she might as well run with it.

She activated her own portal, took a deep breath, and walked through.

Peter stood before her, his face obscured by shimmering blue light. "Bunny! Thank goodness... I was starting to worry!"

"Peter," she whispered.

"I still love you," he murmured.

She put her hand over her mouth.

"I hope you you believe me now. I don't want to freak you out again. But I've loved you for so long now! I know you've had your doubts but I just want to be near you and if that's upsetting to you... I guess I can only say I'm sorry..."

"That's a stupid thing to be sorry for..." she whispered.

"Yeah. It is."

It hit her all at once. She burst into tears. Peter pulled her carefully into his arms, keeping his vortex clear of her head. She could feel waves ruffling her hair and wondered once more what was really
there. But she could wonder later. She was exhausted, almost too weary to feel this happy as she rested her head on his shoulder and cried.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I didn't want to spoil what we had. I thought you didn't want a romance," he said softly, stroking her back.

"I know," she whispered. "I told you I didn't. And then I changed my mind. It's not your fault."

"For a change."

She felt a tug at her hair and realized it was his face. What a man she had chosen! And he'd ended up this way out of guilt for what she'd done to herself! She resolved to make it up to him if it took her whole life.

"We should get your mask back," she whispered.

"Oh yeah. Guess it's still on the balcony..."

She wasn't sure what would happen there. Maybe they would wake up in bed together. Maybe they would just talk all night. What was certain was that the imaginary house felt like their home and if they did make love tonight, that was the place for it.

As she activated the return portal, Peter said, "I'm not gonna hold you to your promise, though. We don't need to rush things, okay?"

Promise? What had she promised? She couldn't seem to focus. Whatever it was, she'd done it for real, promised it to the man himself, the very real Peter Walter VI.

It came to her at last. She had said she would marry him. That was the promise. And he was right, she wanted to think that over. Because right now she wanted it with all her heart and she just didn't trust herself to be objective.

"Okay," she whispered. "I'll think about it."

He squeezed her and she almost burst into tears again. Peter was holding her! He loved her! Paige had been right...

"Wait," she whispered as he took her hand and led her toward the portal. "Then what was that call about? From Miss Keaton?"

"Oh, that! Well, I guess I can tell you, if you don't tell anyone else yet," he murmured as they stepped through. "It's about some adjustments to The Spine... so he'll be ready for the wedding night, y'know. So they won't have to be afraid of what might happen when they sleep together. I don't want to get his hopes up or embarrass him... it's still just a theory but I think I can make some pretty important adjustments."

"Oh!" she gasped as they disappeared from the lab.

The portal buzzed once and grew still.

Bunny woke in the white bed, still wearing her party dress. The morning sun slanted in and the curtains fluttered. She stared at the light and sighed. As much as she would have liked to think she and Peter had come back here and fallen into each others' arms (and from there into the bed) she had
no memory of making love. This was exactly where she was when she'd heard him calling to her.
It had been so real... it just wasn't fair!

"Was it just a dream?" she whispered miserably.

She heard a snuffling snore right behind her. A long arm reached over her and she was pulled gently against someone.

"Good morning," Peter mumbled into her hair. "Still don't believe it? I can hardly believe it myself..."

She wiped her eyes and tried to catch her breath. He'd just scared the hell out of her! And if they were in bed together...

"Oh man... did we...?" she gasped, blushing.

"We're fully dressed," he said sleepily. "We just fell asleep talking. Well, you did, remember? Oh... I guess you wouldn't! I was rambling a little about the party and you... heh, you fell asleep in my arms."

"Oh! Sorry..." She'd been so tired from crying...

He chuckled in her ear. "It was nice. I got to just lay here and hold you until I fell asleep too."

She rested her hand on his and relaxed against him. That did sound nice.

"I love you, Peter," she said experimentally, still struggling to believe it.

"I love you," he breathed.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Wonderful. Well... mostly.

"I'm such a yutz! I really thought I was dreaming the whole thing!" she moaned.

"And I'm seriously flattered. I feel like a Disney prince. I'll have practice waking you with a kiss I guess."

"You'll have to sleep with me first," she murmured, giggling nervously.

"I just did," he chuckled.

There was an awkward silence. Peter sighed deeply but said nothing.

"You know what I mean," she said after a moment.

"Well, I don't object if you want to... I mean... Well, I'll be honest. I'm ready when you are but I don't want you to feel you have to rush into it. We only just found out we love each other."

He gave her a squeeze and she smiled and wiped her eyes on the sheet. She was as ready as he was, and it would be thrilling to just let it happen and not think about it too much, but it was only fair to tell him the full truth. She was uniquely able to see his side of it, and in his place she would want to know.

"I never have, though," he was babbling. "so I'm probably not very good, but I'm willing to learn."
"Learn what?" she murmured. "Oh! That... Well, I'm no expert myself..."

"You have before, though."

"As a man. And that's all very well but... well... I have to tell you something, Peter..."

"Nothing bad I hope."

"Not too bad but... well..." She took a deep breath. "I'm a virgin, too."

"Oh! Wait, what? No, you're not... Oh, right! I guess you mean as a woman? Well, I'm one too actually. A virgin that is. Just as the same self I always was. I already said that didn't I? Yeah, I just never had an interest in it..."

"Um... yeah..."

"Well, we can learn together, then," he breathed.

He kissed her on the neck and she felt like someone had poured warm water down her entire body. That was really nice, and no matter how new he was to it, she suspected he'd intended it that way. So much for not rushing into it!

"It's not just about figuring out our erogenous zones and favorite positions, Peter," she said quickly. "I saw a gynecologist. I'm intact. Y'know..."

"Intact?"

"Downstairs, bro."

"Y-you mean..."

He gasped so hard he sounded like he was choking.

"Peter?"

"That means..."

"It's kinda like a fresh start. A whole new body."

"No... well, yeah, but I mean... I-If we make love then... I'd have to be the one to... to... break the thing!"

"What thing?"

"Your... y'know... you said you were intact!"

"Oh! Right. My hymen. Yeah. That's... why I told you..." she murmured, twisting around to look at him.

He was blushing fiercely. "Crap!"

"That a problem?" she asked nervously.

"Well, yeah! I mean... Bunny, I can't... I mean when we do decide to... I can't do that to you! I can't imagine being so turned on that I'd just..."

He groaned. Bunny laughed softly. Sweet dumb baby! She'd known it might bother him a little, but
he seemed to be having a panic attack.

"You couldn't just jam it in there, is that it?" she teased, trying to lighten things up with some crude humor.

"Stop," he said tremulously.

Crude humor did not appear to be his thing.

She rolled onto her back and stroked his cheek. "Sorry... I understand, okay? I've had sex as a guy... you know that. But I never had to be anyone's first and I was just as glad."

"There has to be something we could do... I dunno, some kind of surgical procedure or something?" "That doesn't sound better! It's such an intimate thing... I'd rather have you do it in the heat of the moment and get it over with."

"If I have to do that to you there's never gonna be that much heat!"

"Oh."

He sat up, his hands over his face. Bunny lay back and stared at him. She'd never considered the possibility that Peter would be afraid to make love to her if there was a chance it would hurt her. She wondered whether she should have just tried to get him into bed without mentioning the problem... then it would have taken care of itself. He wouldn't have had to know until afterward...

She heard a loud sniffle and sat up.

"Are you crying?" she gasped.

"No..."

"Yes, you are! Silly thing... I trust you to do this, y'know. Just you. I know you'll be gentle..."

He sniffled quietly but said nothing. She sighed. She was going to have to come up with a solution or learn to be happy with stolen Kazooland kisses. She did not think she could be content with that. She had too many fantasies involving making love to a skinny man in a wooden mask.

"Look, Peter... I'll look into it, okay? I'll find out whether there's a way to prepare or something. Okay? Modern technology must have figured something out."

He nodded, wiping his eyes. They lay back once more and she settled against his chest.

"This is so embarrassing," he moaned.

"What, crying? Guys can cry."

"Crying over sex though..."

She snickered. "Pretty sure that's the number one thing guys cry about."

"I'd call that sexist coming from anyone else."

"Don't hold back. I'm all woman."

"Yeah, you are," he sighed, holding her close.
There was a nagging worry, though. She shivered. "Actually... Peter, are you sure about this?"

"What?"

"Loving me. Asking me to marry you. There's a lot of people out there who think I'm a man really."

"But you're not."

"But I was. You'll have to deal with the stigma."

"I'm a Walter. Add it to the list."

"But... if you ever changed your mind and wanted a real woman..."

He made a sharp hissing sound.

"Um..." she faltered. Oops. Peter seemed to share David's views on the subject...

He looked her in the face. "I don't like being that kind of guy but I'm only gonna say this once. The Blue Matter blast isn't reversible. What you are what you'll stay unless it happens again. Whatever you were is kind of moot so it's time for you to just be what you are and live as a woman and quit apologizing for it. You're you. You're real. And I love you as you are. Don't ever tell me you're not a real woman. Got it?"

Her eyes prickled with tears as he kissed her passionately, without regard for mutual morning breath. Someday, she hoped to live up to the standard these dorks had for her. Someday she would own it.

"You wouldn't care to prove it, would you?" she gasped breathlessly a moment later as Peter pulled her against his shoulder.

"I'd love to, but I can't," he whispered. "I want to be with you right now so much it hurts, and here we are already in bed, but I just can't. I'd have to live with knowing I was willing to do that just to gratify my lust."

"And mine!" she said irritably.

"I know... wow, really?"

"Yeah! I believe I made that clear," she grumbled, pinching his bottom. "What did you think, fool?"

"Oh!" he cried, startled. "Well... That's awesome but still... You really want me like that?"

"Are you surprised? I said I love you."

"I guess... I'm so skinny. Not really sexy..."

"In your opinion. If you thought you were sexy it would be weird. Leave that to me."

"Mmkay. Anyway... um... hee... yeah, let's wait. Okay?"

"Yeah. It's okay."

"I'm sorry. We have to find out whether there's a way to do it without hurting you. Okay?"

"Alright."

"Besides, I didn't bring any protection..."
She snorted. "That would prove it, though. I mean, if you got me pregnant..."

"Why does everyone keep talking about that?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Yeah... Anyway, weirdo... I'm just saying, if I had a baby, I could never say I wasn't a real woman. Hard evidence. Well, small and squishy evidence but definitely real."

"I could see that," he murmured. "You promise?"

"What?"

"If you have a baby, you won't ever say you're not a real woman."

"Um, sure. I was already planning to stop saying it but... okay. I promise if I have a baby I'll accept the fact that I'm a real woman."

"You want a boy or a girl?"

"It's not like placing an order..."

"I could think really hard one way or the other. My DNA might come around to my way of thinking..."


He kissed her warmly. She ran her finger along his neck and around his ear. Maybe she could change his mind... The comm crackled abruptly on his wrist, startling them. "Peter?" said a very hesitant voice. "David?" Peter cried hastily into the comm. "What's up?"

Bunny sighed with feeling. Plan B aborted. "Um... never mind..."

"What's up?"

"So you're... not busy..."

"Yeah, I wouldn't be talking to you if I was. We're just laying around talking."

"Good!" He sounded enormously relieved. "So you found her? You didn't message..."

"Oh! Sorry!"

"No! No... I just didn't want to bother you before this..."

Bunny snickered. "He thinks we're doing it. Must have misunderstood that sigh."

"Bunny... dammit..." David said.

"We didn't though," she said. "I mean, we're not and we haven't, okay? So don't worry about it."
"I don't want to know..." David began. "Oh... well, that's alright. That's between you two. But everything is alright?"

"Yeah. Peter asked me to marry him."

"What?" David squeaked.

"I said yes."

"Seriously?"

"Oh, yeah. Absolutely."

"Now you're just screwing around..." He swore softly. "I mean... ugh. Just come back when you're ready, okay?"

The comm switched off. Peter laughed.

"Just had to mess with him, huh?"

"Yes and no. I actually meant it."

"Meant what?"

"Yes, Peter."

She could hear him swallow. "Bunny... you needed time to think..."

"I slept on it."

"You'll marry me?"

"That's what I'm saying, dummins. We're already talking kids. Let's get married."

"When?" he squeaked.

"Whenever," she said casually. Maybe he'd be more willing to have a wedding night if they had a wedding. She was fine either way...

"Thank you..." he whispered. "I'll try to be everything you want, Bunny."

"Ditto," she sighed. Her stomach growled. "Ugh! I'm getting hungry. So if you're not prepared to go ahead and get me pregnant then I guess I'd better get home and start doing research so that you can."

"Come on, Bunny!" he groaned as she got out of bed.

"I mean it, Peter. I do want to have a baby. Someday. I would prefer that it be your baby, seeing as how we're getting married. And I'd like to place an order for one little girl, okay? The rest are up to you."

Peter stood and took her in his arms. "Can they have your looks?"

"I think they'll have to. And they can have your vocal chords."

"Done."

They kissed once more before fetching Peter's mask and opening the portal.
"I expect you to put my dreams to shame," Bunny breathed as he took her hand.

Peter gave her a squeeze. "I'll do my best," he whispered.

They passed through the portal together.

Chapter End Notes

*Footnote because I noticed something difficult here in regards to a later chapter (mild spoiler here)... Yes, he'd been drinking, but not pounding down 3+ glasses of champagne in a short span on an empty stomach, considering he'd at least managed to consume a jalapeno popper and likely ate before heading to the party. Furthermore, his being just a little tipsy here on a more slowly sipped mixed drink would account for his excitability and the choice to climb an ivy covered railing instead of checking the back door of the house, or considering that she might not be there...
Bridegrooms

Chapter Summary

The Spine's wedding draws near and certain preparations must be made. But another couple prepares for their own unusual union under the radar.

"You ready for this?"

The Spine looked anxiously at the doorway, holding his unbuttoned shirt self-consciously over his core. "Are you sure no one will be coming in here while you're working?"

Peter chuckled. Typical doctor. At least, he was The Spine's doctor, and from what he recalled of doctors, they always seemed to laugh at your worries.

Although it was a bit unusual for Peter... at least until the night of the bachelor party. It was common knowledge that he and Bunny were at last an item, and most believed that this time they really had slept together. The Spine dismissed such gossip, of course... but it would certainly explain why he was so relaxed! Clearly David, who was now helping The Spine out of his shirt, had come to accept it as well.

"I was very clear, okay?" Peter said lightly. "Not explicit, just clear. It'll just be me and David working on the retrofit. Strip off."

"Alright..." he said. "Does it have to be everything, though?"

"Everything, Spine. We're working with straight up electronics here. There's going to be some sparking and I don't want you to be a fire hazard."

The Spine sighed, looking once more at the open doorway before he wriggled reluctantly out of his trousers and unnecessary pair of briefs. He sat on the table and lay back uncomfortably as Peter walked away to prepare the tools.

"Don't worry, Spine," David said softly, pulling a sheet over The Spine's now bare chassis. "I've checked out the designs and it's all pretty tight. I don't see any problems."

"It's not that. Peter's abilities aren't in question. It's just... very uncomfortable."

"But you've had the parts maintained before."

"I know, but... there was always a screen or something... and I usually had something on somewhere! Now, well... I'm here in an open lab, stark naked, and you'll be dismantling things and laying them on a table and... I just would rather not have an of the ladies wander in, that's all."

"I sorta figured Bunny would be helping, at least. But she said she had a doctor's appointment."

He looked at Peter, who had turned his head slightly toward them.

"Oh... I hope she's feeling alright," Peter said over his shoulder.
"I'd think you know that seeing as how you're her boyfriend, Peter," David said.

The Spine frowned. What now?

Peter laughed awkwardly. "She probably just needed a check-up. Nothing to worry about."

"Um... she had one right after the implosion. She even saw a gynecologist. And that's who she's seeing today."

"What's your point?"

"Why would she need another visit so soon?"

"I guess you should ask her."

"I'm asking you. She's been telling you everything since the bachelor party."

The Spine gripped his sheet and tried to keep from screaming at both of them. Maybe David wasn't as easy with their relationship as he had thought. Still, did they have to do this now, of all times?

"She's still your sister..." Peter argued.

"But you two are thick as thieves since then and..."

"Are you accusing me of hiding something? Only it sounds like you are."

"No, I just figured..."

"I mean, it's like you think I shamed your sister or got her pregnant or something..."

"You don't need to get defensive, Peter. Unless you do have something to hide."

"Look, you told me..." Peter said sharply. He stopped and sighed. "The Spine really needs this done, okay? Can we talk about it after this? I don't think you want to know as much as you think you do but I can try to sum it up. For now, just trust me on one thing..."

"What?"

"She's fine, David. It's not anything bad. You want her to be happy. Well, we're working on that."

David sighed and nodded, and The Spine relaxed. Thank goodness for that, now maybe they would keep their minds on their work!

"Sorry, Spine," David murmured as Peter turned back to his cart. "Hey, kinda curious. What about Bunny? Would you have been okay with letting her help, considering she's seen it all before?"

"I... don't know. I realize she's not the usual Walter girl but she's embraced her new identity with such determination that honestly... I just don't see her as the same person."

David smiled. "You get used to it, huh?"

"It's about time I did. What with Rabbit..."

"Yeah. You think she'll be ready for the new chassis soon?"

"She's leaving off parts of her old costume one by one but you know Rabbit... change is always a struggle and maintenance still upsets her. I don't think she's having second thoughts but she's easing
into it slowly. I do think we'll have the money by January so possibly by then she'll consider allowing the work to be done."

"I hope so. I've already started crafting casts for the chassis plates, with Bunny's help," Peter said, pushing the cart full of supplies toward them.

"Yeah, I've seen you draw. You need her help," David snorted.

The Spine suspected Bunny and Peter didn't get much done but wouldn't have said so for anything, especially considering they had only just agreed on a truce. Why had she seen a doctor? Peter had implied that he hadn't "shamed" Bunny or gotten her pregnant. It led him to wonder whether Peter and Bunny really had been intimate. He had decided, when Peter V began to drift mentally, that he might someday need to fill the role of father and advise the backward young Peter VI on matters of sex and women. Assuming he was interested in women. That at least was confirmed, but... was his help still needed?

But this was no time or place to ask about such a delicate matter. He would have to look for an opportunity.

"Alright, Spine. Power down. Leave the rest to us."

"Please be careful..."

"We will."

"And maybe just text everyone and remind them to..."

"If you want to have this up and running by the wedding night, shut the hell up and power down already," David said mildly.


He powered down.

The first thing The Spine heard when Peter powered him back on was an awkward chuckle.

"Alright, Spine. I've rerouted the power and insulated everything. I checked for functionality but you're going to have to test it."

The Spine sat up, relieved to see that his pants were back on and that David was still the only worker present.

"Um... test it how exactly? We're waiting until the wedding..."

"I meant the waterproofing, actually. I know you're able to enter water so I want you to do something a little unusual... You need to take a shower."

"Actually, I already take showers from time to time..."

"I know. So do that and check to make sure there's no sign of arcing. It doesn't have enough charge to significantly harm a human but she probably wouldn't appreciate it all the same."

The was a soft snicker from David. The Spine affected a wholly nonchalant stare.
"Fine, then. Thank you, Peter."

He rose, grabbed his shirt and hat, and hurried out.

The shower was pleasant. He remembered when he was human, for just a couple of days. The feel of the warm water had been astounding. He could feel it now, too, thanks to changes made by Peter. He'd found the controls behind the core during The Spine's considerable repairs and asked whether he would like to be able to make those adjustments through his own processor. It had been a part of his intimacy with Marie, having her make the adjustments. But it was time to move on. And it was nice to be able to feel the water pouring down his chassis.

He looked down a little uneasily. This hardware. What an awkward thing it was, and yet how he cherished having it. It was one step closer to being a human. Unlike Rabbit, who had acted male for decades, The Spine was male... inside and out. He had never felt any inclination towards any other identity. Even if documents were found today suggesting he had been meant to be female, he would calmly put them away and assure Peter there would be no need to bother.

The warm water caused no electrical arcing at all, he was pleased to note. The wedding was just a week away and the hotel room was booked on the Queen Mary. He still couldn't believe he was so lucky.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and walked out of the shower. Bree, just walking into the room, put her hand to her throat.

"Oh, sorry!" she gasped. She looked him up and down and a smile crept to her lips. "Or not so sorry..."

He smiled sheepishly. "I was just... rinsing off some oil deposits..."

"Good. I don't want stains on my new teddy."

His boiler bubbled slightly. "Y-You have a new teddy..."

"Mm-hm," she purred. "Red."

"Oh!"

She kissed him lightly on the lips. "Peter asked me to bring you this."

She handed him a note. He scanned it quickly.

"He wants me to meet him in Delilah's barn tomorrow morning. What the hell?"

"Weird. But I assume he has a reason."

"Alright," he murmured. "I guess I'll see him there in the morning. Why didn't he just tell me earlier, though?"

Bree shrugged. She stood smiling at him for a long moment and sighed. "I just fought and won a deep internal struggle. I almost tore off your towel."

"Oh!" he gasped. She laughed and kissed him once more.

"Soon enough," she sighed. "I've made it this long and the anticipation is only going to make it more exciting. Besides, I know Peter still needs to make some adjustments, right?"
Actually... "Right. They'll be done in time, though."

"Good. Because you look so hot in that towel that I'd be pretty tempted to just give in and go for it otherwise."

He gripped the top of his towel tightly and willed the newly rewired parts to stay in neutral. He was feeling alarmingly human, especially since he had forgotten to dial back his surface sensors, but at least he didn't have to cope with the physical manifestations of those feelings. He just hoped she planned to talk dirty to him when the time came... she'd shown many signs of being so damned good at it.

"I know what you mean," he said with difficulty. "Um... see you later."

He watched her walk out, finally allowing the built up steam to vent. A red teddy. Rrrawrrr...

"One week," he whispered.

"Thanks for meeting me here," Peter said as The Spine walked into the lab the next morning.

"Your note was awfully mysterious. What's the big secret?"

Peter shut the door. He'd been afraid The Spine would find his request too weird, and he just couldn't discuss this around other people.

"I need to discuss something fairly intimate," Peter explained.

The Spine raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

"Well... I've been thinking a lot about sex lately..."

Peter stopped short. His neck was burning.

"You need any advice?" The Spine asked, his cheek plate twitching.

He's trying not to laugh... "That didn't come out right. I mean that I've been contemplating a subject that... ugh."

"I know you and the Matter Mistress have become rather close," The Spine said carefully.

You have no idea... Bunny had seen her gynecologist alright; he had done a small procedure that would at least spare Peter the need to... well, he just wouldn't have to force himself on her. He knew she was willing but it felt like force and he just couldn't do it without some surgical interference.

Even better, she had suggested that while they waited for the incisions to heal, they might as well get married! She was now, to his joy, getting ready to head to the county clerk's office. He'd offered to try and have a more formal ceremony, but she had shrugged and told him that The Spine's wedding was already enough fuss and expense for the manor. She also had no interest in bachelorette parties where they teased her with some hunky beefcake. She only wanted one kind of party, no teasing, just her and Peter and cool white sheets. He couldn't have agreed more.

Such titillating thoughts did nothing to dispel the awkwardness of this moment, however. Peter hung his head for a moment and sighed.

"Let me try this again," he said, turning once more to The Spine. "You know we made the
adjustments to your core and, um... specialized equipment."

"Oh, yes. There was no arcing."

"Excellent. That's not what I wanted to discuss though."

"Oh."

"I've been giving some thought to the future of your family, specifically your ability to have one. I know you were considering artificial insemination."

"I think it's our best option. Bree would like to carry at least one of our children. But that's not going to be for a few years, I should think. Why worry about it now?"

"I think it might be possible for you to be able to perform the procedure yourself."

"I did see online that home kits are available. Or..."

There was a long silence. Peter waited, letting his words soak in.

"Do you mean..." The Spine whispered.

Peter smiled. With all of Bunny's talk of having kids, Peter had come to feel that much more determined to help The Spine do the same.

"I mean you, Spine, personally deliver the sample. Just like any other man, with the same delivery system as any other man. Do you follow?"

"I can't... can I?" The Spine faltered.

"Look, I know how private you are, but... well, I needed advice on my idea, so... I spoke to some experts without your consent."

"What?"

"I mean, I couldn't tell you what I was doing, could I? It might not have turned out to be feasible and besides, I wanted a wedding gift that you didn't already have, heh heh..."

"Peter..." he chided.

"Sorry. I'm just saying I needed some help with this. I've been researching the idea with the aid of a fertility doctor and a couple of other robotics experts and we've come up with a pretty tight design. I think I can craft a small temperature regulated unit that will fit into your pelvic assembly. There should be room for that and a small pump. You'll have a little access panel where you can insert a capsule with the prepared sample, then the regulator will keep it cool until needed. You already have the ability to read temperatures and heart rate and that sort of thing, so I just upload an app to provide you with the info required to time it just right and wire the entire gizmo to activate on your signal.

"What I'm saying is... You'll have the ability, with the help of donor cells, to attempt to get your wife pregnant the old-fashioned way. Pretty much."

The Spine stood, silent, gripping the railings and staring into Delilah's storage.

"Spine? What do you think? Is this something you'd be willing to try?"

The Spine wiped his eyes. There was a hand shaped indentation in the railing.
"Spine?"

"It's almost... almost real... It would be like I was human..."

"With some slight differences of course. But yes. Like a human. It would require cleaning and maintenance of course, but if you're willing to accept the extra bother then I do think we can have you fully functional within six months. Then you'd be free to choose to start trying as soon as you and Bree decide you want kids."

"I just don't know what to say... You don't know what this means to me, Peter," The Spine said hoarsely.

"I have a glimmer..." He was not insensible to the buzz of warmth he got when he thought of Bunny carrying their child someday. "But you're right. I'm just guessing, from what I heard about your... y'know... your daughter."

"Lily."

"Yeah. She was kind of a big deal..."

"Peter... she was everything. For that little while, I was a real man. A father. Dave gave me that, of course, but to find out Marie was pregnant, and that it had to have been me..." He laughed quietly and wiped his eyes again. "I suppose a lot of men feel silly pride over fathering a child but for me it was so much more. And she was wonderful. She was the most wonderful little girl in the world."

"In fact... Peter... This might seem like an odd time to ask, but I was wondering whether your mother and father told you anything about her."

"They knew her?"

"Your father grew up with her. Thank goodness your mother never knew her, though. That might have been awkward."

"What? Why?"

The Spine sighed. "Peter... your father was married to Lily. The year before she passed away."

Peter had never stood so still in his life. He didn't even breathe for a moment.

"Shut up!" he gasped at last. "Are you kidding me?"

The Spine chuckled. "He was. I swear. And he made her so happy. She lived a full life because of him. There's only so much parents can give a child. She wanted love of a kind we couldn't provide. Your father could, and did."

"Why didn't they tell me?" he cried, still astounded.

"Lily is a tricky topic. You know that. She's no secret but her burial site is. Besides... I'm sure they didn't want to upset me. So I'm telling you.

"You've offered me something I thought I could never have again. And you're offering to make it so I don't have to bear the burden of knowing my child won't live to old age just because of how it was conceived. I always had that with Lily. My part of her was what shortened her life. And I always felt that guilt, for her and for everyone who loved her and lost her.

"It broke your father's heart. He fought tooth and nail to stop it, to find some way to keep her alive,
and still lost her. But she was happy. She'd had a loving family and a doting husband. She was even pregnant for a few months before she miscarried. She lived a better life than some people who live to a ripe old age.

"All the same, to be able to make love to Bree and conceive a child with all the genetic puzzle pieces needed to live a long and healthy life... to have that! Peter, it's a gift greater than any you could have bought us. Of course we would have been content with the kit, or a doctor visit, if it achieved the same thing. But..." He shook his head. "Thank you so much, Peter."

"Well, I still haven't crafted the protoytype yet..." Peter said, feeling rather pressured. He hoped his theories would be prove true!

"Do your best. I told you, if it comes to it, we'll work with what we have."

"Got it. I'm glad you... are glad."

"So... about the Matter Mistress..."

Crap. "I wasn't really trying to ask about her..."

"I know. But I've been thinking about the two of you. Did you need any advice about..."

"No... no, we're fine!" Peter cried.

"It's just that I know your experience is limited and there's no certainty that your father can advise you."

"I do appreciate it," Peter said uncomfortably. "but... ugh."

"But you don't want to talk about sex with a robot older than your own father," The Spine said with a smile.

"It's not that, it's... well, kinda."

"But you must have questions even your considerable resources won't be able to answer."

"Uh..." Peter rubbed the back of his neck. Would The Spine be able to advise about his particular situation? "I guess..."

"Well, go ahead. I know I seem very aloof but I've loved a woman and made love to her. I'm not afraid to field questions."

Peter's neck was on fire, but The Spine was right. He might be twenty-eight years old, but he needed the advice of an experienced male. Even with the surgical procedure done, there was no guarantee that he wouldn't hurt Bunny's otherwise new and unused parts with his built up longing. Books and the internet told him only so much.

Peter turned to him, sighed deeply, and breathed, "What if I hurt her?"

"Um... in which way?"

"In a very direct way, Spine. What if... what if I literally, physically hurt her in the act?"

"Oh! Then you haven't... been with her... yet."

"No. I haven't. And that's the reason. I don't want to hurt her."

"Then... you haven't..."

"Yes. That's why..."
"Ah. I understand very well. And the fact is, sometimes you will hurt her. A little, if you aren't being a complete brute, which I trust you won't. So you apologize and promise to be more gentle afterward. And preferably have lubricant handy."

"Lubricant."

He hadn't even thought of that. The Spine was waxing almost poetic and the answer was as simple as some lubricant.

"A practical item you don't generally see on a bridal registry. No one should go on a honeymoon without it. Of course, Marie and I almost always required it due to, well, you can imagine."

"I try not to. But yes, I get it."

"Anything else?"

"No... I'm good."

"Then let me offer you this, Peter... I just want to tell you not to hold back. Don't waste time. She loves you now and you love her. Make each other happy. I feel a certain responsibility for each of you... you, because your father is no longer able to advise you. Her, because I was the one to carry her out of the lab that night. I put her in a bed beside her brother and I couldn't help thinking of my own kids.

"And the way she looks now... She's a lot different physically but with her dark hair, well, it still reminds me so much of your father and Lily. The relatively inexperienced scientist and the unusual, energetic, vibrant woman."

Peter sighed. "She is vibrant... she's dazzling. She..."

The Spine laughed. "You're in love, alright. I guess it just took the right woman."

Peter laughed softly. Again, he just had no idea how right he was.

"It certainly did. We're not wasting time, though. We're getting married."

The Spine beamed. "Congratulations!"

"This afternoon, in fact."

The Spine stared at him.

"We didn't want to wait. We're going to the county clerk and taking care of it."

The Spine looked deeply troubled. "She's not... you did say you two hadn't been together..."

"We haven't. Why?"

"So you didn't get her pregnant?"

Peter snorted with laughter.

"Is that a no?"

"Spine... You're showing your age."
"Well, you put it so... you said you were taking care of it. It's not terribly romantic."

"No, it's not. You're right. We really want to be married. We don't want to deal with a big wedding. A simple ceremony is all we need."

"Are you at least going to tell your mother?" The Spine cried.

"Oh, of course. And David. They'll be joining us."

"Well, that's good," The Spine sighed. "But don't you want to celebrate at all? I'm concerned that family and staff might feel slighted."

"Oh..." That could be a problem.

"We could at least have cake... In fact, if you don't mind, I think that we could at least include the household in a small family gathering when you return. Would that be alright?"

"Well, sure. We aren't going to head off on a honeymoon just yet. She... she isn't up to it."

"Oh, yes, of course... I suppose she is subject to feminine problems now..."

Peter fought laughter. He saw no reason to explain the truth. "Yeah, pretty much."

"Right. Well, I'll speak with Hatchworth about preparing a small meal and cake while you're out. We can hardly allow the current Walter heir to marry without some sort of fanfare. I wish you happiness in your choice, Peter. She's an extraordinary woman to say the least."

Peter wasn't sure how he meant that, but he did agree. She was the best. The only woman for him, he was sure.
The Bride

Chapter Summary

A quiet little wedding before the big one. Bunny and Peter were just trying to take care of business in their usual way, but they didn't reckon on the rest of Walter Manor.

Chapter Notes

Because it's possible for people to be this nice. Just because so many people choose not to be doesn't mean we let them off the hook. We know they can. Happy Yulemas!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bunny stared at the clothes on the bed and sighed. There were jeans and a button-up blouse, a Walter Girl uniform, and a party dress with seven layers of petticoat netting. None of which seemed quite right for the occasion. Not that she was an expert.

She'd dressed up as a woman before the implosion, of course. Sometimes in nice dresses. But her waist had been wider, her hips narrower, and her bust... well, she'd had a couple of sizes of inserts and sadly one was larger than her current size, the other smaller. Which meant any dress she had from before either squeezed her rack or bagged around it. She'd managed to alter the party dress with the stretchy waist... after trying it on Rabbit, she got to thinking maybe she could go ahead and fix it up... and it didn't look bad, even if it was a little too flamboyant for the county clerk. But her sewing skills were limited and it had taken a while. She'd started pinning up one dress so as to have something to wear to Breanna's wedding, but it wasn't done. And after buying all those things over the years, she hadn't felt right about spending money on more dresses when she had some already. Money had always been a struggle.

She turned to the closet. She could manage with one of the larger ones maybe...

There was a soft rap at the door frame. "Having trouble?" asked Chelsea. Bree, peeking in around her, waved.

Bunny shrugged. Of course they knew. Everyone probably knew by now. After all, she'd already told David.

"Not much I can do about it. I never expected to need something like this..."

"What, a wedding dress?"

"Not for this. But maybe a formal dress or a nice suit or... I dunno. What do you wear for a civil wedding?"

"I'd say something pretty, just not a floor length gown," Chelsea said, walking in and looking down at the bed.
"Or any of that," Bree agreed, following her in.

"I know!" Bunny whispered miserably, folding her hands on top of her head. "I suppose of the three it has to be the jeans."

"Nope!"

"What?"

Bree grinned. "We're taking you shopping!"

"Oh, I don't know... That's just so... chick flick."

Bree rolled her eyes. "Come on! Real humans go shopping too. You need help. I know damned well you already have your Halloween costume ready for the reception, but nothing suitable to wear to any place real people go."

"What?" Bunny gasped.

"Don't worry," Bree murmured soothingly. "You act like we just met, I swear. I don't know what your costume is. I know you well enough. You haven't changed that much! I remember the golden rule... Bunny's costume reveal is a sacred ritual."

Bunny sighed with relief and casually pushed a drawer shut.

"Anyway, yeah, shopping. Gotta get you looking like a bride."

Chelsea nodded. "There are shops with plus sizes that might have something long enough. And if not, well, you've got the legs for that, too."

"But Peter's telling his mom! There's no time!"

Bree laughed. "It was her idea."

"Is she ready?" Annie called. She walked into the room a moment later. "I thought so. Come on, sweetheart. We can't have you getting married in your pajamas."

Bunny looked down at her Jack Skellington t-shirt and fleecy Deadpool pants... the same pajamas she'd had as a man. Bree was right; she hadn't changed that much.

"I can't, Annie. Isn't Peter waiting?"

"Oh, he's off talking to The Spine about some science project. He'll be there for ages and there's a big girl's shop just down the street. You're what, a size fourteen?"

"Sixteen actually..."

"Even better. They have loads in that size. Come on!"

"But the money..."

"I'm paying for it."

"That's what I mean! I can't let you spend your money on me..."

Annie laughed and put her arms around Bunny, who stiffened in spite of herself. She felt terrible
because Annie surely could feel her discomfort. This was going to be her mother-in-law! But she had never been a huggy type in the past and she was once again reminded how much she was the same person.

Well, in a lot of ways. Then she fell in love. Nothing would ever be the same now, and she wasn't looking back.

"Sweetheart," Annie said gently, putting her hand on Bunny's cheek. "It's alright. I know how independent you've always been. I was the same way at your age. Sometimes... life just won't cut you a break. But one day I found out that it's possible to find someone I can trust, someone reliable enough to make me able to relax and let others be kind to me. And I was brought back to a beautiful old house that was now mine, a family that was now mine, an estate and all that came with being a Walter, and I had to adapt to the fact that it was all now mine. Do you understand? I married a Walter and the house was mine as much as his."

Bunny nodded slowly. It was true. She'd loved the Manor from the first day she entered it. And it was going to be hers, her home. It was almost painful to be this happy.

"You're marrying my son," Annie continued. "I'm not spending my money on you. We're spending our money to get you some suitable clothes. But you don't have to, alright? The county clerk will accept you in jeans and a nice blouse. But even if you're just not comfortable with it right now, this is now your home and your family. I'm proud to welcome you as a daughter."

Bunny stared at her in disbelief as the inevitable tears came. She hugged Annie impulsively and heard a little gasp of surprise as she did so.

"Sorry!" she whispered, letting go.

"Oh, don't be!" Annie chuckled. "You're just so tall! The perfect height for Peter, of course! Well, what do you say? Shall we go shopping?"

Bunny grinned weakly and nodded. Let the chick flick commence. Bree and Chelsea whooped.

"Wonderful!" Annie said brightly. "I think that between the four of us surely we can get something that will fit that gorgeous figure."

Talk like this did nothing to stop Bunny from crying. Annie accepted her! She could make a long list of reasons why she wouldn't have, and had expected at least one or two of these to be raised as objections. Instead, she got, well... a warm, accepting mother. She'd never had one, not one that actually cared much, anyway. Certainly not one who would embrace her new identity this way. It was going to take some getting used to.

But as Annie discussed clothing ideas while guiding her to the car, arm in arm, Bunny decided she would just have to cope.

Peter strolled into the house, feeling more relaxed than he had heading out. It was an awkward topic but it had gone well. And now he had some idea of how he could go through with something he had once never thought would be in his future. Bunny had told him she'd be healed up by the day after The Spine's wedding. They were planning to make a nice little trip to Kazooland then.

He shivered with anticipation. It was kind of embarrassing, even with no one there. He'd actually been a little proud of being asexual. It seemed so efficient for a scientist to be untroubled by base matters of the flesh.
But those days were gone. He was nothing if not troubled by exactly that. He didn't really mind, either.

But he and Bunny had discussed how it was possible. Neither, it turned out, had quite been able to accept his startling Blue Matter orientation change. It should have been a small matter to believe it after everything else Blue Matter had done, but it just made no sense. And so they had done some research and found a possible answer, one that Peter had come to embrace.

He'd never been asexual at all. Close, but not quite. There were subcategories, some of which fit perfectly, and suggested his sexuality had just been dormant, in a manner of speaking. All that was needed was the right trigger. And that trigger was a Matter Mistress.

He traced the first indications back to when Bunny and David had come to pick him up from the facility. He'd woken to see her looking into his face with tears in her eyes. He was moved by her concern and the bawling out she then gave Sidney by way of David. She'd been so angry, so worried about his well-being. It had caught him off guard.

He'd watched in silence, thinking of how brave she'd been to face her own accident, how clever she'd been in setting up the experiment in the first place. He thought of the time she'd dragged herself out of bed, fought her own traumatic depression, and grabbed hold of life once more.

He began to think of her sense of humor. How she cared for her brother and the staff. Even her fallibility in neglecting Paige for science... a flaw he could relate to. He began to feel he'd been unfair to her.

He hadn't really had any animosity toward her since the accident anyway. He knew she thought he did. All he'd really had was awkwardness. How did he talk to her now? Her mistake was one he might have made... and he didn't blame her for it, but his own lax management of the household. He wanted to help her. She was very pretty but of course she probably wanted to get back the way she was. He had to at least try, and he had a few theories.

And then he had up and blown his face off. It was interesting on some levels, humiliating on others. The panic that had seized him on the way home had surprised him for obvious reasons, but when she turned in the car to look at him, it had grown worse. He didn't want her to see him that way, as a fool and a failure, a loser who had destroyed himself trying to help her, now helpless in the back seat like a child, wearing a cheap plastic mask! And soon after, curled up in terror, he'd thought, for just a moment, that she had been the one stroking his hair. While he was glad it was his mother, he had a tiny stab of regret that it wasn't Bunny. But of course she wouldn't have presumed, then.

And then she'd come to his room one day and snapped him out of his panic. For a split second he'd had the idea that she was there for something else and the thought was as thrilling as it was terrifying. But no, she had come to shake him from his stupor, and she had. Not that it had cured him, but he'd managed to crawl out of bed rather than let her see him burrow in deeper. He couldn't do that again with her watching, he just couldn't!

And at long last, when he sat watching her working in the lab, trying to track down Hatchworth and later all four robots, he had finally felt it in a way he couldn't deny. There was no doubt about it in retrospect. His eyes traced every curve as she moved through the lab. She had begun to wake things inside him.

By the time she was looming over him in that train, reaching up, her shirt tugging snugly around her breasts... he had to admit, the only word for how it made him feel was... well, from what he'd heard, he was... **horny.**
So embarrassing! But, well... now he understood. It felt a little less coarse knowing he never could have felt it if it wasn't her. He'd tested it, even. He'd tried looking at internet porn. It did nothing at all for him. The actions and positions were actually fairly idiotic. Why did they shave their... Well, it just made him kind of sick. Until he imagined Bunny in the same poses. Then he got angry. He could never treat her like that! In what world did people act that way? Yuck.

But when he thought of the times since that first day in Kazooland, the bickering, the tears, the laughter... the feel of her in his arms, her lips... well, his hair stood on end in the best way. And that, for him, was the scientific proof. He was a one woman man.

Peter realized he'd been strolling slower and slower as his mind wandered. He sped up his steps, pulled out his phone and texted her. "All done. It went well. You ready?"

He walked into the house and headed for her room. There was no response to his text.

"Bunny?" he sent.

She wasn't in her room. There were clothes lying on the bed. Where was she?

His phone buzzed. "Sorry! I was dressing," she sent.

"Where? Are you in the bathroom?" he typed, bewildered.

"No, we're just checking out."

"Checking out what? Wait, who is?"

"Your mom took me shopping for a dress."

"What? Why?" There was a dress on the bed...

"She knew I didn't have anything appropriate for a wedding."

Peter scowled. What was this? She'd seemed so happy about it when he told her... "I am so sorry! She means well I'm sure."

"Of course she does, dummins! She's so happy about it, Peter! She was trying to help me feel more comfortable. I really do have nothing to wear. I mean, I had nothing. I do now though."

Peter wandered toward the entrance hall in an aimless sort of way. "What did you get?"

David met him halfway there. "Where the Hell is Bunny?"

"Mom took her shopping."

"What? Why?"

"She told you, right? About..."

"You getting married. Yes. I said it's her funeral."

Gee, thanks. "You're okay with it, then?"

"Yeah. Just treat her right or sleep with one eye open," David said smoothly, folding his arms.

Peter had a feeling he meant it. His phone buzzed. "Wait and see," Bunny sent. Ooo...
"Congratulations, by the way," David said. "So why did Annie take her shopping?"

"Mom said she needed something appropriate to get married in."

David raised an eyebrow. "She's not the only one."

Peter looked down. "What's wrong with this? We're just going to the county clerk..."

"In a striped sweater vest?"

"Yeah! In a striped sweater vest!"

"Didn't you get a sport coat for The Spine's wedding or something? Tell me you weren't gonna wear that to The Spine's wedding..."

"Of course not!"

"But you'll marry my sister in it."

Peter opened his mouth and shut it again. Sure, if he put it that way it sounded crummy...

"Come on, stupid," David sighed, grabbing him by the arm.

"I can dress myself!" Peter barked, yanking his arm loose.

"Can you? Can you really? Because if this is the proof..."

"I'll go put on a jacket, alright?" Peter shouted.

"Alright!"

"I suppose I need a f***ing tie too?" he snarled.

David looked insufferably amused. "No, that's too much. Look, throw on some slacks, lose the sweater vest, put on a jacket, don't button it. The shoes are fine. Oh, and brush your hair. It looks like Tim Burton designed it."

"This is as good as it gets!" Peter growled, wondering at his rage levels.

David laughed. "This is more like it, y'know. I thought you were way too calm for a guy going to his own wedding."

"We were just gonna keep it simple, then I could be calm! But you and mom had to come along and make it a whole... thing!"

"It should be a thing, you a$$hole! You're marrying my sister in a simple civil wedding like some loser who got a girl pregnant and wants to take care of the legal part in a hurry."

"No one does that anymore..."

"I'm sure someone does. Anyway, if Annie is getting Bunny dressed up for this wedding, then you had damned well better be looking sharp to match. And Bunny once told me you looked good in slacks and a jacket so go put them on for her."

"Oh..." That gave it a different feel entirely. His rage evaporated almost instantly.

"Yeah, I thought so, now you want to wear them."
"Wouldn't you?" Peter asked faintly, picturing Bunny seeing him dressed up.

"Well, yeah. Quit wasting time."

"Wait, what about you?"

"I was just going to dress. Is it okay if I bring a date?"

"Sure, why not? I am."

"Very funny. Hey, wait... you have a Halloween costume, right? For The Spine's reception?"

Peter froze, half-turned to head to his room. "What?"

"A costume. The Spine wanted us all to wear what we wore to the Halloween party last year..."

"To his reception, yeah, I know! But I didn't wear a costume last year!"

"Yeah, so?"

"So that's what I wore! Not a costume!"

David shook his head. "It's not going to work, Peter. You're going to marry Bunny. You have to have a costume."

"Oh, come on!" Peter cried, his rage rekindled. "It's not like she can wear the same costume as last year, so why... Well, crap."

"You just made my argument for me. Thanks. Find a costume."

"Isn't the mask enough?" Peter asked weakly. A costume? He sucked at costumes...

"Throw on that long trenchcoat of yours or something. Let everyone guess what you're supposed to be."

"Oh..." That could work. "So what's Bunny wearing? You do know what she's wearing, right?"

"Oh, yeah. I know."

Peter waited. David smiled.

"Right," Peter murmured. He would have to wait and see like everyone else.

Peter's phone buzzed. "We're heading back," Bunny sent.

"They're heading back!" Peter cried.

The two men ran in opposite directions to dress.

Peter waited for Bunny in the entrance hall, looking at himself in the mirror. He wasn't sure what she saw in him even with a face, but he did look a little sharper in a sport coat.

She looked nervous as she walked in, and he could understand that. Her cheeks pinked when she saw him and he saw her eyes trace his body from top to bottom and back. He liked it. It made him feel like he actually looked good.
But Bunny... He sighed deeply as he looked at her. She was gorgeous! The dress they had found was deep rose and cut to flatter her bust and legs. He couldn't have been happier with it.

She hurried to him and took his hand.

"You look amazing," he murmured as she leaned in and kissed him lightly on the neck... one of her workarounds to the problem of not being able to kiss.

"Thanks," she whispered. "You sure about this?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Well, no, dummins. Are you sure?"

He chuckled. He was nervous but he wasn't backing down.

He hugged her and whispered, "Very sure. I love you."

"I love you too."

Annie soon joined them, with David and Chelsea following, and they hurried to the county clerk.

It was real. Bunny sat in the soft, shape hugging dress they had helped her to choose, and considered pinching herself. The forms were all filled out, everything was done, and they had their appointment in a few minutes. She sat between Peter and Annie in the small waiting room chairs.

"Thank you, sweetheart," Annie murmured as they waited, patting her hand.

"You're thanking me?" Bunny whispered.

"Of course. You've done so much for this family. Peter was a loss until you came along. I always had a feeling about you two."

"Wait, whoa, Mom... always?" Peter interrupted. "How could you have always had a feeling about us?"

"Of course I did, dear. I was certain you were gay for the longest time."

Peter shook his head. "Why does everyone just assume things about me without asking a question? Even if I was I'd like the courtesy of being asked before people start labeling me."

Annie chuckled but Bunny sat reeling. Annie had always had a feeling about them? She agreed with Peter. How in the world was that possible?

Bunny had gone through multiple stages in her feelings for Peter... initial attraction followed by a terrible rage that later dissipated when Peter started to be nice to her after the accident. And Peter... he hadn't even been attracted to anyone until after his accident! She couldn't see where in that Annie could have formed a concrete belief that Peter would ever be interested in a relationship with anyone, much less his argumentative employee.

Not until recently, at least, when Annie had come across the two of them embraced in one of the labs with Bunny's lips firmly against Peter's throat and her hand on his butt. And Peter, if she remembered correctly, had been gathering data on the softness of her... well, his hands had been exploring too.
Her neck got warm at the memory. It was embarrassing but in such a delightfully filthy way! He couldn't kiss her here, but she just had to kiss him... somewhere.

And Annie had just made her apologies and left with a wink. Still, Bunny couldn't get over the fact that Annie was happy to have Bunny marry her son! And apparently would have been just as happy before the accident. That was a load off.

"You two fought but there was always an edge to it," Annie was saying. "Just like on TV, right? And I expect you to bicker after you're married, too. It's not the end of a marriage, y'know, disagreeing about things. Not if you don't let it end things. You two always seem to come up with such brilliant solutions after a good argument."

Bunny glanced at David, but he was kissing Chelsea's hand. That pleased her, too. David would likely never marry anyone. But he had someone he loved, and that made this easier, too.

They were called in for the ceremony. Bunny stood with the others, holding the small but beautiful bouquet Bree had hastily fashioned from roses in the garden.

This was it. She didn't even try to stop the tears. She was just glad she'd kept the makeup simple...

Peter cried. No one could see it, but he couldn't help it. She was so awesome, and she actually wanted him!

He held her hands, looked into her beautiful eyes, and promised himself to her. It was one of the weirdest moments of his life, not because of the unusual nature of his bride, but because he was in love and getting married at all. A year earlier, he'd been all about science and the only relationship worrying him was The Spine and Bree and his fear of them hooking up and producing a Blue Matter baby.

He was thinking of babies now, too, but in a different context. Bunny had made it clear that she was happy to have a baby any time he managed to provide her with his half of the genetic matter. He was beginning to think that it wasn't a bad idea at all.

But first things first!

"Looks like you'll have to be content with hugging Isabella, Peter," the officiant said with an awkward chuckle.

Peter caught Bunny as she threw herself into his arms and buried her face against his neck. Her dress was soft and so was she.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," he murmured, close to her ear.

And Chelsea soon interrupted them to hug Bunny, Annie to hug her son, David to hug Bunny, and so it went, until they hurried at last to the car to head home.

She looked again and again at the ring Peter had given her. It was one he had found in the desk the day they found Rabbit's faceplate form, resized to fit her. It was beautiful, but far more than that, it really brought things home to her.

She was married to Peter Walter and they were going home.
To their mutual surprise, the household, staff and family alike, met them in the now brightly decorated entrance hall, tossing confetti in all directions. Bunny laughed silently and dodged some very well-aimed throws. Peter shielded her with his body. She could feel him giggling as he held her.

The Spine walked up through the chaos, smiling. "Let me be the first to offer congratulations," he murmured.

"Thanks, Spine," Peter said as they separated.

"May I kiss the bride?" The Spine murmured.

"Oh! Well... of course," Bunny whispered, blushing.

The Spine smiled gently and leaned down, kissing her cheek. Bunny gasped softly in spite the warning. She seldom got kisses, and almost never on the cheek. And the steam tickled!

"Oh, me next, bro!" Rabbit cried.

She felt her face grow hotter. What was this? How many of them were going to kiss her?

Rabbit grinned. "Gratz, baby!" she said, and kissed her right on the lips.

"Rabbit!" The Spine barked.

So this was what Paige had taught Rabbit, Bunny thought. She'd done a pretty good job...

Just as The Spine was opening his mouth to raise a further objection, Rabbit finally pulled away, laughing. Bunny surprised even herself with a fit of silent, half-hysterical giggles. Peter was shaking his head.

Rabbit looked her in the eye, smiling but oddly serious. "I once stole that from ya. Thought I should g-g-g-give it back. But it had to be one of the good ones."

Holy crap, it had been! She made a mental note to keep an eye on Rabbit around the fans.

"I'm not mad anymore, Rabbit," she whispered. Terrified, but not mad...

"I know."

"May I also kiss the blushing bride?" Hatchworth asked delicately, peering with effort over Rabbit's shoulder. "I have heard it brings good fortune."

"Ya don't have any lips, dummins," Rabbit said lightly as she stepped aside.

"Rabbit!" The Spine and Peter shouted simultaneously.

Hatchworth touched his lips sadly and started to turn away. He looked so crestfallen that Bunny put her hand on his shoulder, leaned down and kissed him on his molded brass mouth. He beamed.

"Thank you. Many happy returns of the day!"

Hatchworth shuffled happily away after sticking his tongue out at Rabbit, who shrugged.

And just as she had feared, others came along after to do the same. She knew she could say no, but after the first few, a spell seemed to have come over her. The whole day had gone from seeming like an ordinary, practical day to some sort of fairy tale dream. To be showered with congratulatory kisses
suddenly just didn't seem to be that strange anymore.

Annie kissed her cheek and Peter V, hovering at exactly the right height, kissed her on the lips... though he didn't seem entirely clear on who she was. The Jon kissed her lightly on the lips, too, which bemused her since he had to look up to do it. Upgrade stood on tiptoe and kissed her cheek. Matt Smith, their new drummer, just kissed her hand and congratulated her. The Walter Girls each kissed her cheeks. David hugged her, as did Wanda, and Norman kissed her hand. Steve Negrete grinned roguishly and asked if tongue was okay, to her shock and Peter's outrage, and could barely kiss her hand for laughing afterward.

Michael Reed had been noticeably holding back. He came up last with a crooked little smile and asked to kiss her on the lips.

Her hair stood on end and Peter fidgeted beside her. She wasn't sure what to say and glanced at Peter.

"Up to you," he said carelessly.

Bunny turned back to Michael, who winked very slightly out of Peter's view. She felt a bubble of amusement. Of course. Peter's best friend just had to mess with him.

She gave a little nod and Michael kissed her softly on the lips. She did her best to cover the shiver it gave her. She loved Peter but Michael was awfully good looking.

"Good luck to both of you," he said with a small grin.

Bunny smiled as Peter looked studiously in another direction. He had nothing to worry about. She knew she and her awkward new husband would share many kisses and more when time allowed.

They all headed in to the dining room. Bunny was blushing so hard it almost hurt and trying not to cry. So much for the simple practical wedding! They had all conspired to overthrow her sensible plans and make her feel like a blushing bride. She sat next to Peter in a daze as everyone chattered, made little jokes and winked in their direction. Everything was a flurry of happiness and good wishes. She'd never imagined it would be like this when Peter said Hatchworth was making "cake and a little lunch."

Peter squeezed her hand. She looked sidelong at her husband. Husband. She shivered and smiled.

"You okay?" he murmured.

She nodded. "I had just wanted to get the wedding over with but... I feel like a bride, Peter. I had no idea I could."

"You sorry we didn't have a big, fancy wedding?"

"No... this is perfect," she sighed.

A plate was placed before Peter. Her smile faded. How could he eat? He usually went to another room...

"It is time to move forward, Master Peter. You are a man now," Hatchworth said pleasantly as he moved on down the table.

"What does that mean?" Bunny whispered.
"I know what he means," Peter replied.

He took a deep breath, reached up, and began to unfasten his mask.

"No! You don't have to..." she gasped.

"I'm hungry. It's okay."

The room fell silent and every eye was on him as he carefully removed it and put it in his lap. The others gasped as one. Most of them had never seen Peter without it after the accident. He had willingly shown Bunny the night of the bachelor party and she realized now just how intimate that had been.

But now he needed to eat, and he wanted to stay at their wedding lunch. And so he let everyone see. He carefully brushed back matted hair from where the mask had rested, smoothing it behind his ears. The glow started from just beside where his eyes should have been and extended from the middle of his brow down to his chin. He sat for a moment, catching his breath, then took the fork in one shaking hand and began to eat.

He turned as if glancing around. "It's okay," he said, his voice as shaky as his hand. "I know this must look weird... go ahead and look, alright?"

"Sorry, Peter..." Chelsea murmured. "We weren't trying to be rude."

"We never thought you'd let anyone see," David said.

There were nods from other staff. Annie had tears in her eyes and a small smile on her face. Peter V sat as though transfixed.

"I know," Peter replied. "It really is okay. I can't stay shut away forever."

Bunny reached over and squeezed his hand for just a moment. She could tell he smiled. There was a slight change to his neck muscles.

They ate without further incident. Hatchworth announced that cake was to follow and hurried away with Chelsea. They returned rolling a cart with a surprisingly elaborate tiered cake on it. At the top was a small blue light and it was covered in delicate swirls similar to Bunny's art, mingled with little frosting keyholes.

"Hatchy!" The Spine cried. "How did you make that so quickly?"

"I had already had much practice in the design of your cake, Brother Spine. And I have had the design for this one forming in my head since the day I saw young master Peter in the arms of the lovely Matter Mistress in Kazooland. And everything I have seen since has pointed to a strong wish on the part of both parties to become one, so it only made sense to be prepared."

The table was in fits of laughter as Hatchworth carefully began to hand around pieces of the beautiful, if unusual, cake. The inside was swirled chocolate and vanilla and Bunny smiled. Hatchworth had chosen the cake she would have wanted if she'd been willing to wait for a fancy wedding. And she knew David liked chocolate cake...

The Spine had carefully primed the household about what he thought was Bunny's period, and neither saw fit to set any of them straight. The truth was far more personal. But due to the knowledge, instead of trying to send them on their way to a wedding night, they all stayed together and played games, sang, danced, and had a generally wonderful evening. Bunny truly wished the
wedding night could follow, but she'd told him she needed to wait until the day after The Spine's
wedding.

So she enjoyed the evening with friends and family... at least, they were her family now. She'd
expected to be happy tonight, of course. She loved Peter and while she'd have been just as happy as
long as they were together, there was a certain celebratory atmosphere to weddings and receptions
that made it seem more set in stone. No one threw a party when you started dating someone.

By midnight, she was beginning to doze against Peter's shoulder. She heard a soft chuckle nearby.
"Well, you can at least take her to bed," said a voice. It sounded like Annie. "To sleep, of course.
The rest is on you, sweetheart."

"Mom..." Peter groaned. "Bunny... Come on... time for bed, you'll get a kink in your neck if you
sleep here."

She sighed and sat up sleepily. "Carry me?" she whispered with a half smile, knowing full well he
couldn't.

"I... don't think I can... Sorry, I'd like to..."

"Got this one, beefcake," Rabbit said, scooping her up. She gasped and grabbed on frantically. "Her
place or yours?"

"Peter's room," Bunny whispered. She took a deep breath and rested against Rabbit's shoulder.

"Thanks, Rabbit," Peter said.

Rabbit put her gently on Peter's bed, ruffled her hair, and left with a wave. Peter sat beside her,
unfastening his mask.

"I really wanted to be able to do that, but I'm made of matchsticks," he sighed, setting it on the bed.

"I was just teasing. Trust Rabbit to call my bluff." Bunny smiled sleepily and began to try and reach
for her zipper. She stopped. "Don't you have a folding curtain or..."

She stopped, staring at the doorway. Was that a door?

"What?" he asked. He turned to look. "Where the hell did that come from?"

It was folded back, wide open. Peter closed it, opened it, and closed it again.

"It works..." he said blankly. "Wait..."

The doorknob had a lock, and a note was taped to the inside of the door in the shape of a large arrow
pointing to just that. Peter pulled it off.

"Time you had one of these again. Love, Mom," he read.

Bunny laughed her silent, whispery laugh, and resumed groping for her zipper. Peter was shaking his
head as he turned back to her.

"Thanks a lot, Mom," he sighed. "Oh, hey... need some help?"

She nodded, and Peter began to unzip her dress. She felt a chill down her spine as he pulled it slowly
open. The zipper went all the way down to her bottom...
He started to ease the dress off her shoulders. She could feel his breath on her skin. She wondered what would happen if he tried to kiss her neck... probably best not to risk it. But she could feel his fingers stroking her shoulders as he slid the dress down. He gripped her arms briefly and she wondered what he would do next. But all he did was groan softly as he released her and turned away.

Bunny removed the dress, deeply frustrated. They were both thinking the same thing, and it was maddening. She didn't want it to just be them getting ready to go to sleep. She wanted to lock that door and, sleepy or not, finish where they had started, with a long anticipated wedding night.

"You sure you want me sleeping in here tonight?" she whispered, starting on her stockings. He was unbuttoning his shirt and she could just feel his eyes following the delicate fabric as she slid it down her legs.

"Hm? Oh, yeah. It would feel weird to get married and go to separate beds."

"True..." she breathed as he took off his shirt.

But this feels weirder...

She was wearing a slip and decided it would do for a nightgown. She could keep awake to make love, had it been an option, but failing that she really was too tired to drag back to her room and get anything to sleep in. She wriggled her bra out from under the slip and tossed it to the floor, quickly slipping under the covers. She was painfully aware of how the sheer satiny fabric of the slip looked on her otherwise bare bust, now that she was stripped, and certainly knew the effect that would have on Peter. He didn't need anything else to torture him.

But she could see how red his neck was and knew he'd been a fool and watched her take it off. So much for sparing him the sight. Torture accomplished.

Of course, she thought with irritation, it was his own fault. If he hadn't insisted on the hymenotomy, they'd have been able to make love right now. She pushed the thought from her head and snuggled in. Oops... there was only one pillow.

There was a knock at the door. It opened and a copper hand reached in, tossing a pillow and the pajamas Bunny had left on her bedroom floor. The door slammed shut again as Peter stood in his undershirt and loosened pants, staring at it.

"Alrighty then..." he murmured. He locked the door and tossed the pillow onto the bed. Bunny happily stuffed it under her head.

Peter started to slide off his slacks and pulled them up sharply.

"What?" she whispered.

"Um... I wore the thong. The slacks are kind of thin..."

She grinned under the blanket. *Sure, that's why you're afraid to take them off in front of me...*

"So take them off already!" she whispered.

"Won't it bother you to see my butt or something?"

*Weak, Peter.* "No, I wanna see your butt. The sooner the better."

"No.. I mean... it might bother you that we can't... y'know..."
We could have... she thought once more, sighing.

"Well, fine, put on some briefs or something, if it helps."

He fished in his dresser and hurried into the bathroom, returning in a pair of pajamas. She smiled sleepily as he put his mask back on.

"Can't really sleep without it. I dunno what could happen and I'm afraid to find out."

"Ah."

She closed her eyes as he settled into bed and turned out the light.

"Y'know..." she whispered. "We could do some things without you actually... y'know..."

"So you did notice."

"Hard to miss, Peter. It's not small."

"I don't really define myself by the size of my manhood y'know..."

"Of course. But as a matter of fact yours is..."

"Stop..." he said quickly. She could hear the faintest tremor in his voice and wondered whether it was a laugh or something more visceral.

She giggled silently. "I'm just saying, if you want some relief now, I can take care of it. Okay?"

"No..."

"It would still be me. Us. It's still pretty damned intimate."

"I know, but... I just want it to be special," he sighed.

"Who says it wouldn't be?"

"Well, we can't really kiss and besides... suppose I got too into it and... wasn't willing to settle for a grope..."

"Are you saying you'd just... take me?" she gasped. She doubted he had it in him, but the fact that he thought so was pretty shocking. "Do you really think you'd lose control that much?"

"No! i mean... I don't know. I wouldn't think so but... I've never had to deal with this before."

Obviously, she thought. She'd dealt with it before and she was frankly worried about him. He used to be so confident... had it been bravado? And he was going to be a basket case by the time they took their little trip...

"I think..." he faltered. "I think I'd be so afraid of how I felt and what I might do that I wouldn't be able to relax."

Wanna bet? Still, it was more in character for him than his other worry. "I swear you are the most f***ing neurotic man I have ever met," she hissed, exasperated.

"Just a few more days, okay? That's what the doctor said, right?"

Sort of... "You're going to go around for five days like that rather than let your loving wife give you
a hand job now..."

"Bunny, come on..."

"Okay, okay... I'm just glad to be here with you, okay? I can wait if you can."

"Thank you."

He took her hand and squeezed it. She pulled his back to her and kissed it, resisting the urge to troll him and... well, he probably wouldn't have appreciated it, but she would have. She sighed and snuggled in. His bed was pretty comfortable...

"Goodnight, idiot. I love you," she whispered, already beginning to doze.

"I love you, too."

It took her a few minutes to relax enough to sleep. She only hoped he could manage to do the same.

Chapter End Notes

I do enjoy the strange irony of Rabbit kissing the bride here. We must learn to love ourselves... ;)) And it's not that kind of kiss, it's Rabbit trolling. I would also suggest that had Rabbit completed her chassis retrofit and therefore looked female, she'd do it anyway. It's all about annoying people.

Edit: I edited. I've done that to several chapters in an effort to smooth out some of the spicier imagery (without sacrificing story elements) and to correct or improve a few small lines here and there.
The Spine met the in-laws and lives move forward with a vengeance.

There's a first time for everything. *wink*

I meant to have this chapter up on Valentine's Day but time didn't cooperate.

The Spine looked in the mirror and sighed. The clothes looked good, but there was still a robot wearing them. He'd thought he was entirely at peace with that. He'd done just about everything a man could do. He could even reproduce now, after a fashion... or he'd soon be able to do so. He was a man.

But he'd have to convince Bree's parents of that.

Rabbit jogged into the room. "They're almost ready for the rehearsal. How ya b-b-bearin' up?"

"Alright, I guess. I think I can cope. I'd ask if you're sure about being best man but it's a little late to change your look."

"I told you I'm d-d-d-delighted and I meant it. And I'll look hotter than Hell in that tux. I'll be pretty soon enough."

"I know you will," The Spine said, fussing with his tie.

"Ya look fine, bro! Bree's gonna melt on sight."

The Spine tried to laugh and stopped in surprise when his boiler made a very audible bloop, followed by a burst of steam from his collar.

"Yeah, yehr n-n-nervous!" Rabbit laughed.

"I hope it doesn't do that during the rehearsal!" he cried. "Bree's parents are coming..."

"I know. But they gave their blessing, right? And it's better than ha-ha-havin' d-d-diarrhea," Rabbit teased.

"Well, they haven't exactly given it..." The Spine paused and fixed her with a studiously blank stare. "It's not going on the album, Rabbit."

"I thought ya wanted me to encourage him."
"In some things, yes! In other things, I'd suggest you don't encourage him!"

"What's the big deal? No one's gonna believe a robot has diarrhea!"

"Most of the world thinks Matter Master David is the one singing! He could have diarrhea!"

Rabbit snickered and The Spine shot her a sharp look. She hastily assumed a serious expression and said, "I just mean that they know it's a joke..."

There was a soft rap at the door frame. Annie peeked in.

"They're here, Spine. Oh, you both look charming!"

The Spine's boiler blooped again.

"Rabbit!" he gasped.

"Easy big fella! You can do this. It's just family and friends out there."

"I can't stop, Rabbit!"

"It's just a little air bubble..."

"So is a fart!"

"Should I tell them you're going to be a few minutes?" Annie said slowly.

"And what if it keeps up all the way through the wedding, Rabbit? Can you imagine? Ringo and Bob RSVPed!"

"Yeah, how cool is that? I mean sure, we know them from way back, but the staff is gonna p-p-plotz!"

"Rabbit..."

"Okay. Worst case scenario, ya bloop through it but ya still end up married. It don't make or break anything..."

"But what will her parents think? I don't think they even know I'm not human yet! They won't want their daughter marrying a f***ing water cooler!" The Spine squeaked.

"Spine!" Rabbit laughed.

Annie walked into the room and put her arms around The Spine. "Spine, sweetie... you've come too far to back out now. There's hotel room waiting on the Queen Mary for a bridal couple and you and Bree are gonna be in it tomorrow night come Hell or high water or bubbling boiler. I'll get Peter, he'll take a look, and you'll be at that altar both days, got it?"

The Spine pressed his lips together as though trying not to cry, and nodded.

"Alright. Do your best, Rabbit. I'll be right back."

"My best, huh?" Rabbit said as she hurried out. "Ya want a magazine?"

"What?"

"Maybe antacid?"
Bloop. "Stop joking around."

"Some soap fer that po-po-potty mouth maybe?"

"You say worse."

"A puppet show?"

"Seriously..."

She waved her hands in front of the lamp. They cast shapeless shadows on the wall. "Lookit the bunnies, Raist..."

"I have no idea what you're talking about..."

"Those weren't your books? I wonder who bought 'em..."

"Which books?"

"The Dragonlance set..."

"With a name like that, most likely an employee. Specifically one with a twin."

"Oh, yeah. Well, how about a hug?"

"Look, I said... oh. Actually..."

Rabbit grinned and gave him a crushing hug. The Spine squeezed back firmly and Rabbit sighed.

"In the end, Gigantor... you're still my little brother. I get to hug ya better and boss ya around. An' I'm tellin' you to m-m-m-marry that girl and make love to her. I know ya been havin' fever dreams about it."

"That's personal..." The Spine began.

He stopped and stared at her.

"Oops..." Rabbit breathed.

There was a long, still moment filled only by one thunderous bloop as The Spine absorbed this revelation. He carefully released Rabbit and sank onto the bed.

"You were supposed to calm me down..." The Spine groaned.

"I sent the override and the command to sever the link, I promise!"

Bloop. "I was broadcasting the equivalent of a wet dream?" The Spine wailed.

"Never for very long..."

"How many got into the network?"

"Three."

"Ugh! Why did Pappy install that dream module?"

"To keep us sane, bro."
The Spine put his hands over his face and blooped three times in a row.

"Ya say it's like a fart but it's more like hiccups," Rabbit said softly.

"You realize how many people can get access to that stream? Qwerty stores everything, Beebop has no filters yet, Upgrade, Jon, Hatchy... Holy Hell, if I accidentally logged onto the internet..."

"You didn't! And it wa-wasn't too racy..."

"I do remember the dreams, y'know! They were thoroughly pornographic!"

"Look I'm t-t-tellin' ya that the dreams stopped before you two got na-na-naked, okay? I switched off the stream! If ya tell me any more I'm gonna have nightmares!"

"You sure?"

"I swear it. The last thing I want is to have to look either of you in tha eye after seein' s-s-something like that."


Peter hurried in carrying a screwdriver. "Would you believe I was expecting something like this?" he asked, chuckling.

The Spine sighed deeply and blooped twice. Peter and his chuckling. Worse, lately it was a nervous chuckle and The Spine, like the rest of the manor, knew exactly why. Despite having a certain sympathy for him, however, he just wished he'd make love with his wife and get it over with instead of walking around chuckling like a lunatic. At the moment, The Spine just didn't have the patience.

"Hey, lookin' good, Six," Rabbit crooned. "Bet Bunny's eyes jumped outta her head hen she saw ya wearing real clothes."

Peter tipped his head at her. "You have a problem with my clothes?"

"Not since ya got that coat outta mothballs."

The Spine blooped and irritably considered clearing his throat.

"It's new. I just bought it for the wedding," Peter said.

"Whatever. Hey, ya got a costume for tha-"

"Not now, for crying out loud!" The Spine roared. Bloop.

Peter jumped and clutched his chest. "Spine!"

"Down, boy..." Rabbit said smoothly, putting her arm around his shoulders. "Lay back and let little Petey check it out before ya give him a heart attack."

The Spine opened his shirt and Peter began to open a panel near the boiler. "It's funny, this happening now," he said.

"How is that funny?" asked Rabbit.

Bloop.
"Well, it's almost like a nervous response."

"It is a nervous response, ain't it?"

"I realize you all can have emotional responses but the idea of you getting hiccups when you're nervous..."

"Didn't I t-t-tell ya, Spine?"

"It started when I was worrying about meeting Bree's parents, Peter. It is a nervous response!" The Spine gritted.

"Well, there has to be a setting to correct it, then," Peter said, clearly not convinced.

He began to fiddle with The Spine's steam exhaust system. "Got it!"

"Got what?" Rabbit asked.

"I just need to redirect the exhaust system away from the boiler."

"Oh."

Peter rerouted the tubing and tightened the valves. The bloops stopped.

"I should have done that sooner but I didn't expect you to put so much strain on your systems. Kinda silly of me, considering the circumstances. Well, let's get to the rehearsal."

Rabbit helped Peter up from the crouch he had assumed while working. Peter groaned softly.

"You okay?" Rabbit asked.

"Oh, yeah, fine. Just stayed in one position too long."

"Maybe yehr outta shape."

"I know I'm out of shape. Mike has suggested we start hiking together. I might take him up on it."

"Good, yehr need to stay fit. Ya got a big event comin' up."

"It's more Spine's event than mine..."

"Nah, I mean with Bunny, nudge nudge wink wink."

"Rabbit..." The Spine muttered. Peter sighed.

"Just sayin'. Keep up yehr strength, kid."

"Please don't mention it..." Peter murmured.

"Why? Ya scared of ge-ge-gettin' laid?"

"Rabbit!" Peter snapped. "I just... need to keep my mind off it for a couple of days, okay?"

He walked straight out the door without another word. Rabbit looked at The Spine.

"Huh. What's that all about?"
The Spine smiled and finished tying his tie. "You shouldn't butt into his sex life, that's what it means. You've been around long enough to know that."

"Yeah, but... why don't he wanna thi-thi-think about it? I thought all tha fleshie guys thought about it all tha time!"

"Oh, that's easy. He can't make love to her yet, but he wants to."

"Well, yeah. Like I said. So?"

"He's also afraid to make love to her. He thinks he'll hurt her."

"What? I thought only little kids thought j-j-j-junk like that! So he's really never done it?"

"Never. It'll be his first time. Between you and me, he's scared because it'll also be hers... um... as a woman."

"Oh... like Ma?"

The Spine nodded. "So he's trying not to let the impulses run loose. It's not easy waiting when you feel like your whole body is... It's just a feeling of... Well, if it's anything like my programming, and from what little I remember from those few days as a human, it definitely is... yes, well, it feels like standing on the edge of a cliff and trying to keep from falling off just by thinking about something else really hard. There's an irresistible force ready to pull you one way and the only thing stopping that is sheer force of will. That's how he feels right now."

"Holy Hell."

*And he's not the only one,* The Spine thought. But he had a feeling it was a lot easier for him than it was for Peter.

"They'll find their way. If he can ever get past his inhibitions."

Rabbit nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah. Humans can sure have a hard time loosening up. Unless they're drunk!"

The Spine chuckled as they headed out the door. "Small chance of that. Peter doesn't drink."

"Oh... yeah."

The Spine looked at her sidelong. "Don't even think about it, Rabbit."

"How would I? He's always in tha mask, even after that one lunch where he took it off. And Bunny would take me apart if she thought I'd slipped him a mickey."

"And I'd hand her the tools. So watch your step."

"See this halo? Totally innocent..."

"Right. See you at the altar."

"Good luck!" she said as she hurried away, leaving him to approach the ballroom alone.

He was almost positive Rabbit would try to find a way to get Peter drunk. He was just as positive that she'd fail, one way or another.
He turned and walked as confidently as he could manage, using his best human stride, toward the next hurdle. So much for the temporary distraction. The real trouble was waiting.

Bree met him outside the ballroom. She took his hand. "Ready?" she murmured.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"They're primed. I've shown them your picture. I think Dad thinks it's a prank and Mom... she's trying, okay?"

He nodded and hoped Peter's work was enough to stop any nervous bloopers.

The ballroom was decorated for the wedding. It looked much like the Halloween party from last year, with some extra frills thrown in as part of the wedding theme. Bunny's influence was visible in the table settings, proving she and Paige had made peace at long last. It was beautiful and he almost wished they could skip the rehearsal and go ahead and have it at this point.

Bree led him to the front of the bride's side, where two people sat. They stood when she called to them. Her mother, on seeing him, looked up with a startled expression, which was quickly swapped for a forced smile.

Her father, however, looked shocked, and gasped, "You were serious!"

The Spine had been prepared to shake the man's hand but this threw him. He slowly lowered his hand and murmured, "How... how do you do, sir?"

"It talks..."

The Spine fought the urge to turn and walk right back out again. Bree squeezed his hand firmly... no doubt suspecting as much.

"Dad!" she snapped, glaring at her father.

"Well, really! Did you honestly think I'd believe..."

"This is The Spine," she interrupted. "The groom. I told you all about him, Dad..."

"Bree, we need to discuss this..."

Dammit to Hell...

She sighed deeply. "Which is why I waited to tell you. It's all set, Dad. I'm doing this."

"But... where to begin?"

He might as well have let the blooping go on. This was a disaster.

"Hello! I'm Peter Walter VI," said a voice. "And this is my wife, Isabella."

The Spine was glad for the distraction, until he saw Bree's mother staring at Peter's mask. Great, now she thought they were weirder. Bunny looked back and forth between them, frowning.

Bree's father looked at Peter and gasped. "Are you another one?"

"Another what?" Peter asked. He glanced at The Spine. "Oh! No, I'm just a human. I'm the descendant of the man who built the automatons, actually."
Bunny signed something to Peter and he shook his head ever so slightly at her.

"Oh, is she deaf?" asked Bree's mother.  

"Mute. She can hear just fine."

"Oh. Pleased to meet you!"

Bunny wiggled her fingers weakly at the woman and returned to glaring at the man.

"But... why are you wearing that mask? I thought the costume party was after the wedding... damned weird reception but..."

"Oh! Well, it's a long story. I had an accident in the lab and thought it best to cover my face after. I tend to get stares..."

"Oh! Of course. Right, very sorry. But..."

Bree's father turned once more to the sight of his daughter standing hand in hand with a tall silver automaton. The Spine, now that the initial shock was past, was feeling a bit more secure in his approach.

But before he could speak, Peter said, "I assume you're having difficulty with your daughter's choice of husbands. It's quite understandable. Most people who don't know our family aren't aware that we consider all of the automatons to be members of it."

"My great-grandfather built them over one hundred years ago. As you may have noticed, they surprised him by having intellect and emotions at least as sophisticated as any human child, so he raised them as his children. The Spine here, for example..."

"But they're machines!" Bree's father interrupted, looking toward the doorway as Rabbit entered with Paige.

"I assure you, they're so much more than that. And your daughter is marrying the most human of them. I assume she mentioned that it's not his first marriage..."

Both parents gasped. Bunny put her hand over her face.

"Or maybe... she hasn't..." Peter said weakly.

Peter hadn't helped. Bree was seething. She looked up at The Spine and he could see tears in her eyes. She'd warned him it might be this way, and he knew she was afraid to speak up for fear of crying or saying something she'd regret. The Spine smiled reassuringly at her and gathered his wits the best he could in the middle of the disaster. For good or ill, it was time to tell it like it was.

"We're all made of something, sir," The Spine murmured. "We're all constructs of the parts given us by our parents, our creators. I called my creator Father, and I miss him very much. I have lived, fought in wars, loved my family and lost them. I love Breanna very much and she has given me the inestimable gift of promising to be my wife. I consider it to be one hundred percent her choice to do so. However, if you as her parents are not comfortable with the marriage... well..."

"Oh, now..." Bree's mother began.

"No!" Bree gasped, eyes wide. "We're getting married, you old-fashioned dork! I'm old enough to make this choice for myself, for crying out loud! Don't you dare back out just because my parents
don't approve!"

The Spine smiled and kissed her hand. He looked into her eyes and said firmly, "I was only going to say that it would be a blot on an otherwise perfect day. I have no intention of changing my mind as long as you're still willing to marry me."

Bree slipped into his arms. He could feel her trembling as she tried to calm down.

"It's your choice," he whispered. "I love you. You know what my choice is."

Bree relaxed and turned to her father who was watching them with a strange expression. She took a deep breath.

"Well, there it is, Dad," she said weakly.

He made no response. She sighed.

"Mom? You haven't said much..."

"I figured I'd better just let you all blow yourselves out," her mother twittered, beaming. "Hello, Spine... is that alright? Can I call you that?"

The Spine almost cried with relief. This was a much more promising response. "Yes!" he gasped. "Please do! And... Bree said your name is..."

He froze. The file! Where was the file with her parent's names?

"Melanie," she laughed, extending her hand. "I'm delighted to meet you! I was beginning to think Breanna wouldn't get married at all!"

"Mom..." Bree groaned. Her tone was belied by the huge smile on her face. This was a far more promising parental reaction.

Bree's father sighed. "Alright. Let's see how this goes. You're right. I admit it. It's up to her. I can't say I'm even surprised come to think of it, considering."

The Spine looked at Bree questioningly. She smiled sheepishly back. He'd be asking about that later.

"She's explained about the legal issues. No one's going to get arrested, are they?"

"No, silly. You don't even have to get married to set up housekeeping anymore," her mother scoffed. "If it's good enough for Bree..."

"Mom! Mom, Dad, it's okay. It's under the radar but the license is legal. The Walter family has a lot of friends, okay?"

"Alrighty," her father said, suddenly docile. He resumed his seat.

Her mother grinned and patted The Spine's hand before joining her husband. Peter shrugged and moved with Bunny off to the groom's side. The Spine watched them with a stab of envy. Bunny hadn't even bothered to introduce Peter to her family, outside of David, who he already knew. It was not unlike when he married Marie.

But he wouldn't go back. He'd tried hanging onto the past. That wasn't living.

He kissed Bree, smiled encouragingly, and walked away to take his place with Rabbit.
The rehearsal went smoothly. Bunny was glad; she'd been so nervous for hers, but this was a lot more formal and she sympathized with anyone going through all of it, especially after the friction with Bree's father. They were even having champagne toasts that night, just to add to the pressures. The Walter Girls had made this their personal Barbie wedding and she was just glad she'd dodged that bullet herself... even if it would have been kind of fun to be dressed up like a doll.

But she still felt like a sword hung over her head. Peter had been tense the last few days. She knew damned well why and wanted to relieve that pressure, but she'd set the date for it and they were still two days short. She wished for the nth time that she'd never told him it might actually cause her some pain their first time. As apprehensive as she was herself, she was ready to just get that first time over with so that she could go on and learn how to do things as a woman. But Peter... she wasn't sure what had Peter so upset, though she'd learned over the last year that when Peter said he didn't want anyone hurt, he wasn't saying it because he was afraid of a lawsuit. He had a strange sensitivity to the pain of others. He really didn't want anyone hurt.

She looked at him as they headed for the dining room for the rehearsal dinner. She'd had him all wrong. He'd been cute at first, but then she'd decided he was a hard-nosed control freak... and the truth was somewhere in the middle. He was a freaking marshmallow hiding inside a suit of armor. She wanted to get him out of the armor, that's all... all the way out...

There she went again. Just about every thought she had turned to sex, and she wasn't even sure if she'd like it as a woman. That didn't mean she didn't want it, of course... but the big dummy wouldn't risk hurting her!

Which was so sweet!

Well, she could hug him, at least. David nearly plowed into the back of them when she stopped Peter in the hallway to do so. He muttered a whoops and slipped around hastily with Chelsea, who was giggling.

"Thanks," Peter said in rather startled voice. "Something wrong?"

"Nothing. Everything's good."

The others moved past with smiles as they stood embraced. Rabbit turned back and gave Bunny a swift wink as she entered the dining room.

"Should I be worried?" she whispered. "Rabbit just winked at me."

"Oh, ignore it. She's been nagging me about... Just ignore it."

Bunny sighed and rested her head against his shoulder. "I guess we should get in there."

"Yeah," he murmured, holding her tighter.

"Or..." she breathed, kissing his throat, "...we could go somewhere else and..."

He breathed a deep sigh. "No. No, you said it was two more days."

"But that's just to make sure, of course..." she whispered, sliding her hand down to his bottom.

"No, we want to make sure," he said huskily. She was having an effect... "I don't want it to hurt you at all."
She gave his bottom a tweak. "You're new at it, Peter. It'll probably hurt anyway."

He took a deep breath and pushed away from her. "Not if I can help it. I don't want that tainting the memory of our first time."

So close! "You make it sound like the only freaking time you're going to have sex, Peter," she sighed, frustrated.

"It's just..."

"Not as sacred as all that. It's a starting point. I want a great sex life, sure, but I didn't figure we'd master it on the first try. I intend to practice as often as possible."

"Soon, okay? They're waiting."

"Dammit, Peter..."

"If a man was pressuring a woman like this, you know what people would say."

"People can go f*** themselves, and so can you!" she hissed, scowling. "Or since that's anatomically impossible, well... I'm always up for the job."

"Bunny..."

They heard a tap of a fork on a glass. Bunny sighed sharply as they hurried into the dining room for the toasts. She forced a sheepish smile for Breanna, who gave a little wave. The Spine was standing and babbling a very awkward toast with a glass of what appeared to be sparkling water.

Peter and Bunny found their seats opposite David and Chelsea. David gave Bunny a questioning look. Bunny just shook her head and looked at The Spine.

The Spine had somehow worked his way around to raising his glass to Bree's parents, who had given their hesitant blessing, and Peter once again thanked his lucky stars that Bunny had opted for a simple wedding and that no one in the manor had made any toasts.

Bunny sipped her champagne. Peter sipped his cider by way of a small straw that had been placed in his glass. It wasn't bad. It didn't quite taste like sparkling cider, though. He peered at Bunny's champagne.

"Funny," he murmured, leaning toward it. "The cider and the champagne look exactly alike."

"That's the idea," she whispered as Bree's father stood to make his own awkward toast. "Look at David's. He asked for the cider, too."

Peter looked. She was right; they looked the same. Oh, well. He kept his mask slightly away from his chin and drank each toast dutifully.

The toasts done, the group settled down to eating and talking. Peter's glass was refilled and he sipped it thoughtfully, watching Bunny eat. He was planning to eat after the rehearsal since he preferred not to eat in front of Bree's parents. The Spine was enough to take in for one evening.

He thought the lights flickered for a moment and shook his head. He felt a little sloshy... He set down his empty glass and looked once more at Bunny.
Ye gods, she was beautiful! He knew she was, of course, but it just hadn't hit him so hard just how really, really beautiful she was. Just so damned gorgeous...

She glanced his way as the glasses were refilled yet again. He grinned at her. Oh, yeah... she couldn't see his face. That was annoying...

He lifted his drink and sipped more from his straw. She drank from her glass. He watched her lips press against it. She had such nice lips...

Bunny turned and signed to him in the noise of the conversations around them, but he forgot to look at her hands.

"Sorry, I missed that..." he said, staring into her eyes.

"What?" she whispered. At least, he thought so... the room was loud and he couldn't hear her.

He said it again and giggled. She looked at him with a puzzled expression. He started to sign something to her... he wasn't sure what... but couldn't seem to keep his hands straight. He shrugged and she looked at David, who was seated opposite, with a peculiar smile. Huh, That was weird. He turned to look at David, too.

"You alright, Peter?" David asked.

"Dandy," Peter said pleasantly.

David and Chelsea grinned and glanced at each other.

"Do you drink, Peter?" Chelsea asked, smiling.

"Nope! Just like David."

"Yeah, but I asked for the sparkling cider," David said with a grin.

"Sho... so did I... Isn't this cider?" Peter said with difficulty.

Bunny started signing to David rapidly. Chelsea appeared to be holding her breath for some reason. David's eyes were watering and his cheeks trembled.

"Yeah," David said loudly, his voice cracking slightly. "They aren't serving a lot of alcohol tonight but I hear champagne can get you hammered pretty fast, especially if you don't drink usually."

"Well, I'm jusht... jusst fine... It ta... tasstess a little weird but it'sh totally cccider..."

"Yeah. Sure..."

They were giggling again. Peter beamed. He supposed they still couldn't see it. Maybe if he took off his mask it might show if he smiled really hard. He started to reach up and Bunny, noticing, hastily stopped him and leaned in close.

"Not tonight, Peter, remember?" she whispered into his ear.

Her breath tickled his neck. Peter shivered from head to toe.

"Do that again..." he giggled.

"Holy Hell," she breathed, signing to David again. Peter caught a few of the signs.
"Shouldn't we stop him?" she was asking.

"It won't hurt him. It's a little glass and it's just the rehearsal," David signed in response.

He and Chelsea could barely eat for laughing. Peter supposed they must be telling jokes or something.

He stared at Bunny as she resumed eating. Her fork flickered in the low lights and it was sort of fascinating. But his eyes soon drifted to her lips, and from there down her body and back again. She looked so amazing... He reached out to stroke her hair. She smiled benignly at him and turned back to her food. He pulled his hand back and finished the glass of cider. He hiccupped loudly.

Bunny turned as he set it down and stared at the glass for a moment. She looked at him, her eyes slightly widened.

"How much did you drink?" she signed.

He'd seen what she'd signed this time because he'd been staring at her chest. "All of it. See?"

"How many times did they fill it, Peter?" she signed.

Her cheeks were twitching now. Was she alright?

"I drank one... and then they brought more. And then I put that down and then... I think they filled it up again and... oh, thanks!" he said pleasantly as the waiter leaned down to fill his glass again.

David quickly told the waiter to bring Peter the cider. The waiter moved on.

"I wass already having the cccider..." Peter said slowly.

"He's bringing the other cider," David giggled.

"They were supposed to stop pouring the real stuff after the toasts anyway," Chelsea whispered, getting up. "I'll go take care of it."

"Too late," David snickered.

Peter giggled with him. He had no idea why but it seemed polite. David resumed eating with a helpless grin on his face.

"He'ss in a good mood..." Peter told Bunny.

She nodded. She looked like she was trying not to laugh.

Her hair just looked so soft! It was almost shoulder length now... He reached out again and stroked it. She and David were giggling at each other across the table. It was so nice to see everyone so cheerful!

Her hair felt as soft as it looked. He slid his fingers through the strands and pulled his hand away slowly, feeling the silkiness against his skin. He liked it so much that he reached in and did it again. Soft...

Bunny had stopped eating. She seemed to be at a loss. Her eyes were focused somewhere on the opposite wall.

"Oh, f***, you feeling alright, sweetie... um... baby... honey?" Peter drawled.
David was giggling again, but he hastily said, "Watch the language, Peter... Bree's folks are kinda touchy about it."

"What did I say?" Peter asked. "Oh! Whoops, right, sorry!"

He waved at Bree's parents but they weren't looking. Bunny smacked his hand down. She was really cute when she did that... Her eyes were just so luminous...

"Don't attract their attention, dork!" she signed rapidly.

"Okay..." he mumbled meekly, sliding his fingers back into her hair. She gasped and he hesitated. "You want me to stop that?" he asked with difficulty.

She shook her head. She stared down at her plate but seemed to have lost interest in eating. Chelsea returned to her seat, stared at Bunny for a few seconds, and leaned in to whisper to David. His smile faded. He in turn whispered to her.

Peter absently continued to run his fingers through Bunny's hair. His fingertips connected with her neck and that felt even softer.

"Bunny..." Peter said, sliding his fingers down the back of her neck. She trembled. Weird. "Hey... why don't I have a pet name for you yet? Maybe... Maybe Honey Bunny..."

"Oh, I don't know..." Chelsea said faintly, watching Bunny with wide eyes. David was looking away.

Bunny's cheeks were very pink. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Bunny!" David hissed. "Hey, Chelsea just asked the waiters and..."

She looked at him with a haunted expression and began to sign so rapidly that Peter couldn't follow.

"Yeah. I guess that's okay," David said softly. "I mean, it's just gonna be dinner and dessert and then people talking. But... look... you are just going to put him to bed, right? To sleep?"

She smiled a rather dopey smile and shrugged.

David sighed deeply and closed his eyes. "Fine. You're an adult. See you in the morning. Just... don't forget to show up to the wedding. Understand?"

Bunny nodded, tossed back the rest of her drink, and signed to Peter, "How about we go somewhere and talk?"

She stood and pulled him to his feet. "Mmkay," he said calmly as she led him by the hand out of the dining room.

Bunny couldn't believe it. There must have been a mix up in the orders. She knew sparkling cider had been ordered for Peter, and David had certainly gotten his. And she'd figured the champagne couldn't be that potent, yet Peter was actually sloppy drunk on three glasses of it! But then, champagne could do that shockingly fast and he wasn't used to it. She even felt a little buzzed herself. She wasn't an especially big drinker, either, and she was almost certain she'd had at least two glasses of it. There was an interesting lightness to her brain...

She had a slight nagging feeling she shouldn't take advantage of Peter's condition. She just couldn't
imagine waiting even one more day. He'd just had to run his fingers through her hair! She'd had no idea what that could do to a woman... She felt like she was on fire.

She saw The Spine and Breanna look at them as they hurried out, Bunny leading Peter by the hand. Peter waved and Breanna looked like she was giggling. Rabbit looked up and winked.

Bunny tried to wink back but couldn't seem to close just one eye at a time. She turned and almost ran into the door frame as they left the room.

"That's so f***ing weird," Peter giggled as they hurried through the hallways. "Hey, where we goin'?"

"Somewhere quiet," she whispered, now that they were away from the loud conversation.

"Oh! But it's quiet here!"

"Quieter."

"Ohhh... But it'sss quiet heere," Peter whispered carefully.

Bunny snorted with laughter. She was kind of sorry she wasn't making a video. Peter pulled her clumsily into his arms.

"Look at you... you're ssso hot when you laugh... Dammit, I can't kiss you..."

"I know!" she breathed. "But you can in Kazooland. Let's go there."

"Nope... nooo... you jusht wanna have your way with me..."

Hell, yeah! "Sure I do. Let's go have our way with each other."

"But you sh... sh... said... we had to wait until tomorrow... was it tomorrow... didn't you?"

"Did I? Maybe it is tomorrow."

He breathed out a prolonged moan of understanding, as if she'd offered him a deep and profound truth. "Maybe," he breathed. "Yeah... It always is, sooner or later..."

"See? Come on, Peter. Let's go to bed."

"Kay... I'll carry you!"

"No..." she gasped, too late to stop him. He tried to pick her up and slipped to the floor. Bunny flailed and kept her balance, just barely.

He groaned. "Ow..."

"I swear, Peter, you can't be this drunk on champagne..." she giggled.

"I'm drunk?"

"Yeah!"

"Are you?"

Bunny hesitated. She blinked slowly. Funny how you never thought about how weird it felt to open and close your eyes...
"Nah... Come on, stupid. I bet it's psychosomatic."

She helped him up and together they made their way to the portal room. As she activated the portal, he put his arms around her again.

"You're so pretty..." he sighed, stroking her cheek.

She shivered. Her head was buzzing and her body wanted to buzz along with it. She shook her head sharply. She had only had a couple of glasses, right?

"So are you," she laughed and pushed him aside to grab a remote comm unit.

"Hey..." he complained.

"Come on," she breathed, feeling a little nervous. "We can go through now."

She caught him by the hand and pulled him through behind her. The portal again had opened directly into their bedroom, anchored to the last place they had passed through it.

_Aw, yeah... "That's convenient," she said as the portal closed._

"It's perfect..." he said huskily, pulling her against him.

He tore off his mask and kissed her wildly. Her heart pounded. It was like their first kiss... The blood went straight to her head and she swooned.

"You okay?" he drawled as the fog passed.

"Fine..." she breathed, shaking her head once more. What were they doing again?

Peter kissed her and her hair stood on end. Oh, right... She tugged at his jacket and it slid easily off one arm. He shook it off the other. He kissed her again and she felt like someone had fired electricity through her. But he hesitated, looking at her sleepily.

"Bunny... you sure..." he breathed, "you sure this is okay...?"

He was drunk, and half-mad from waiting, and still worried about hurting her! She sighed and held him tightly.

"Yeah, it's so damned okay!"

Peter grinned. "Great!" he cried happily... and grabbed her and pulled her onto the bed with him. She cried out in surprise. He kissed her again, pressing against her. Bunny laughed mid-kiss and leaned away.

"Huh?" he murmured, trying to pull her in for another.

She pushed back again and giggled, "Is that a bottle of sunscreen in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?"

They both roared with laughter. Bunny rested her head on his shoulder and giggled, feeling no desire to stop.

"It's not even that funny!" she choked.

"I know!"
"Hey..." she drawled, frowning.

But he only laughed harder, arms tightened around her as he shook with mirth. Bunny, forgetting what had upset her, felt the heat spreading along her body. He was so cute when he got silly and she liked how he felt against her when he laughed.

She disentangled herself from Peter's hands for a moment to grope helplessly for her zipper. He tried to help and couldn't seem to grip it. She laughed again and opened the button on his pants.

"Just try and get out of those while I deal with the dress," she said, sitting up.

She managed to snag the zipper pull with two fingers and started to wriggle out of her dress. He stopped what he was doing to tug the dress off and pulled her into his arms once more for yet another kiss.

"You have one pant leg off and one on..." Bunny cried when she managed to get a breath.

"Don't care... you're sso gorgeous," he breathed. He rolled her to the side, kissing her neck again and working his way downward this time.

"Peter..." she gasped. "Oh, wow... holy crap, dude! You should get drunk more often!"

"Filthy habit..." he sighed distractedly.

Bunny grinned, pushed him gently onto his back and tugged the slacks off the rest of the way, tossing them sloppily over her shoulder. Peter stared unashamedly up at her as she sat up on her knees and slid her bra out from under the slip. She stretched to show off a little, slinging the bra behind her. She heard it slap loudly against the wall and cringed slightly, but he seemed impressed just the same. At least, there was a smile on his face.

It helped. His ogling made her feel sexy, and she needed it. Even with the champagne buzz, she was starting to feeling genuinely like a virgin bride and the nerves were at odds with the dizzy longing she'd been enjoying until then. She didn't want to be too afraid to enjoy being with him, but she'd never done this before... not this way, anyway. And Peter was no more experienced. It could go very poorly, especially since he was stupid drunk...

But that meant he was just drunk enough to get on with it... hopefully just a little too drunk to notice her reaction if it hurt more than expected... but then again not so drunk that he couldn't remember tonight...

And he wasn't the only one. Her head was buzzing from the twists and turns in her logic as much as from the feel of Peter's hands on her skin. She sighed deeply; to her surprise it trailed off into a manic giggle. She clapped her hand over her mouth. So much for being sexy...

"Sorry... I think I'm a little drunk..." she tittered.

"Me, too!" he cried proudly.

This brought on a fresh round of giggles.

"That wasn't funny either!"

"I know!" he squeaked.

Oh, well, logic was overrated. She couldn't remember what she'd been trying to figure out anyway as
they lay snuggled and giggling like cartoon characters. Her head rested against his chest as the mirth subsided and other impulses regained dominance. Back to business. She began to fumble with his shirt buttons.

"You were wearing that before. I like it..." he whispered, patting her bottom.

"What?" she gasped.

"The... the thing... thiss shlippery thing..."

He didn't know what it was called? What a weirdo... wait... he was patting her bottom. That was nice. She shook her head. What was she doing?

She was half sitting on Peter's leg, wearing only a slip... his pants were half-hanging from the bedpost... oh, right!

"It's a slip, dummins. Glad you like it... Shame I'll be taking it off so soon," she breathed, shivering.

"How soon?"

She finished the last button, kissed his bare chest, and smiled. "Now is good."

Back in the dining room, The Spine noticed the group was more giggly than before. He supposed Peter's stagger could account for that. What was he thinking, taking the champagne?

"Was he drunk?" The Spine asked Bree quietly.

"I think he was!" she laughed.

"That must be why Bunny dragged him out so quickly. I appreciate her tact."

Bree laughed harder and he gave her a puzzled look. "Sometimes I feel older than you, baby," she sighed.

"Hm?"

"Just my personal opinion, of course, but I think she dragged him off to bed, if you know what I mean."

"But Peter said they would be starting their honeymoon the day after we leave for ours."

"Maybe her period ended sooner than she thought. Not my problem. It's so weird, though. I could swear she just had one a couple of weeks ago..."

"Well, it's none of our business. As long as they're back for the wedding tomorrow."

"Yeah. And the reception... She said she needs to have everything ready before the wedding even, since I guess her costume needs lots of makeup."

"But she can't wear the Rabbit costume again! She stole his stage suit last year and there's no way..." He trailed off.

"No, you're right. It won't fit over her boobs."
The Spine gave her a wide-eyed look and she laughed.

"Well, it won't! So she has another in mind."

"What is it?"

She shrugged. "Only David knows. And he values his life so he isn't telling."

"Ah."

They had the dessert, a simple strawberry shortcake. The staff began to excuse themselves in ones and twos.

"Well, sweetheart..." Bree's father said, pushing back his chair. "It's getting late. We'll be here tomorrow, okay? I'm still not fully convinced about this... if only because you're marrying someone older than Grandpa..."

"Oh, Jeff, hush," Melanie said. "I'll be here early to help you dress, okay?"

Bree stood to hug her mother. "Thanks. I'm sorry I didn't let you in on it sooner..."

"No, I do understand," she said, glancing briefly at her husband.

Breanna smiled and she and The Spine walked them to their car. After they'd gone, The Spine took Breanna in his arms and kissed her lightly.

"They were nice," he murmured. "I can totally understand your father's reaction."

"I guess. Thanks, baby. You were really patient with them."

They stood in the light of the front porch, Bree's head resting on his chest, his lips pressed against her hair.

"This time tomorrow, we'll be on our way to the hotel," Bree breathed.

"Mm-hm..."

"One more day."

"I know."

"Spine..." she sighed.

She felt so nice in his arms! He almost kissed her again. But he had a feeling that if he did, the rest would follow. And they'd come this far. The anticipation was delicious.

He pushed her carefully away and murmured, "See you tomorrow. I love you."

She smiled. "I love you too. You're a good man."

"You have no idea," he sighed.

"Then you can show me tomorrow," she breathed, winking. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

She walked inside. He stayed outside for a little while longer, staring at the stars.
Just realized that I said in an earlier chapter that he was drinking at the bachelor party. I guess he took his time, had food in his stomach, and wasn't as affected...

I'm not exactly an expert on the subject. And again, if he had been drinking at the bachelor party, it wasn't much and was on a full stomach and he paced himself knowing his drink was actually alcoholic.
Chapter Summary

The big wedding day has arrived. But it just can't seem to run smoothly, and Rabbit has gone too far... again. Business as usual in Walter Manor.

Chapter Notes

We're going to have a few running plots dodging each other for the next several chapters. I hope it isn't too confusing to read... it certainly has been to write.

Paige stared into the empty room.

"Dammit," she muttered.

She was one of the first ones up. She had to be. There was a lot to do as maid of honor. Up until last night, it had been a pleasure, even when things went a little awry.

Then Peter and Bunny had staggered out of the rehearsal dinner halfway through. Fortunately, Bree's parent's didn't seem to have noticed. Paige had slipped away and asked David about it, and to her embarrassment, he'd strongly advised against checking on them until morning.

Well, it was morning. And as she seemed to be the only one who thought they might just have needed looking after in their tipsy state, she'd summoned her courage and come to their room.

Only the door was open and their bed clearly hadn't been slept in!

She texted Bree. "Hey, you up?"

The response took a few minutes. "Yeah, I am. I didn't sleep well."

"Oh, sorry! If you want to sleep in a little it's ok! You have time."

"No I'm wide awake. I'll take a shower."

"Alright, see you in a while."

First duty of the day discharged; wake the bride. She texted David and Chelsea.

"Peter and Bunny aren't in their room and it looks like they haven't been all night."

Inside of ten minutes, they were sitting in the kitchen, arguing in soft tones. Chelsea's hair was still in a puffy topknot and David's looked like it had gone through a cyclone. Neither seemed to notice as they sipped coffee and argued about who should have done what, and when. Hatchworth, who had been decorating the cakes, had come in and joined the discussion and looked angrier than she'd ever seen him.
"Who has done this terrible thing?" he demanded. "Who has set Master Peter drunk and gotten him lost?"

David looked from him to Paige with a scowl. "Yeah. I'd kinda like to find my sister, too!" He groaned and rubbed his forehead. "I should have checked on them last night!"

Chelsea sighed and patted his hand. Paige prudently refrained from agreeing with him... aloud. She hadn't done it either, but it was on his advice.

"I'm sorry," Chelsea said. "The waitstaff told me they'd misunderstood about how many rounds of champagne to pour and I just assumed that they'd screwed up Peter's order too."

"Don't worry about it, Chelsea," Paige sighed. "It makes sense that you'd think that. But when I asked them, they thought I'd done it. So here's the thing... I've figured out who did do it and I'm just as pissed off as the rest of you. I just don't want anyone to go on the warpath, okay?"

There were only cold stares in response.

"Well?" she pressed. "If I tell you, do you promise not to run off and do anything stupid?"

"Stupid is subjective, really," Chelsea said carefully.

"Alright, just don't do anything unless we all agree on it."


"Hatchy?" she coaxed.

"Very well, little one. I will do as you ask."

"Thank you. Well... the waitstaff told me that someone called them right before the rehearsal dinner, and it said it was from my phone number. And the only person who had access to my phone at that time was Rabbit."

"Rabbit?" cried Hatchworth.

"Big shock," David muttered.

"How did she have access to your phone?" Hatchworth barked. "Were you giving her kissy-kisses again?"

"What? No!" Paige cried. "She asked for it to take a picture of the ballroom!"

"What a load of crap! She can just do that with her photoreceptors!" David snapped. "You fell for that?"

"She said her eyes weren't focusing properly, okay? It's not that hard to believe considering the source!"

"David, come on..." Chelsea murmured.

David glanced at her and sighed. "Sorry. Look, I need to go find Bunny. You all can figure out what to do about Rabbit. Just make sure I get a few blows in..."

"We're not going to beat her up!" Paige gasped. Hatchworth made a little spluttering sound and Paige looked at him in surprise. "Are we?" she said sternly.
Hatchworth was examining the ceiling. "No... don't be silly..."

"I was actually kidding..." David said with a half smile.

"Anyway..." Paige said a bit loudly, "first we need to find them. And hope they at least have a blanket covering them."

"What?" Hatchworth cried.

"We've already figured they probably went off to... y'know, Hatchy. They're married."

"You think they disappeared to have the sex."

Chelsea snorted and David shoved her gently.

"Yes, Hatchy. I do think so," Paige said firmly.

"But why would they not have the sex in their own room?"

"I'm not really comfortable speculating..." Paige murmured.

Nothing she knew about Bunny from their years as lovers explained it, and she didn't really want to be spending time discussing it. It was awkward enough thinking about it, considering this was her ex in a new relationship. Not that she grudged her the happiness, but there would always be that little sting of regret.

But she was sure Bunny's brother was no more delighted with the subject, and besides, part of her duties included keeping the bride peaceful and happy. Which she would not be if she had to cope with this, or if her bridegroom was pissed off at his sister. So Paige pushed herself forward.

"But they just didn't. And I checked Bunny's old bedroom too. Nothing."

"Thank goodness," Chelsea breathed.

"What?" David gasped.

"There's no door on her old room, David... and I sleep in that wing."

"Oh. Oh!" David blushed fiercely. "Well, that was the next place I was going to look, so instead I think I'll go to the portal room and try using the comm to see if they're at that old house she dreamed up. They were gonna honeymoon there in a couple of days so if they went somewhere to... um... y'know... I just figure they went there."

"Oh! Of course..." Chelsea breathed.

"Old house?" Paige asked.

"In Kazooland. Long story, be glad to explain later. Right now I have to check."

"I think I might have heard something about it. Well, alright, let us know if you don't find them in case we need to search the manor."

"Got it."

As David hurried out, Paige continued, "So. Rabbit. I'm mad as hell and I'm not letting it slide. Any ideas?"
"First of all, why did she do it?" Chelsea asked. "That's a pretty sick prank."

"Well, as to motive, she gave me a little hint last night. I didn't think much of it at the time but now I think I get it. We watched them stagger out and she told me some people just needed a little push."

"Oh... maybe it was just talk, though?"

"She winked."

Hatchworth whistled like a tea kettle and Paige gasped in shock. "Rabbit set Master Peter drunk so that he would engage in the sex with Mistress Bunny?" he roared. "Without so much as a by-your-leave?"

"It's just a theory, Hatchy!" Paige cried, cringing.

Hatchworth exhaled a long plume of steam through his mouth and said gently, "My apologies, my dear, for frightening you. I am not rogue. I am simply indignant at my sister's callous actions."

"Some people just don't get social boundaries," Chelsea sighed.

"At her age, too," Hatchworth agreed.

Paige took a deep breath. She didn't much care for Hatchy when he was angry, but at least he was quick to apologize. "So here's the trouble. The people who usually put Rabbit in her place are out of the question for one reason or another. Rabbit obviously thinks she's hot stuff because her trick worked. So maybe she needs a taste of her own medicine to show her why it was wrong."

"Let the punishment fit the crime," Hatchworth agreed.

"How? Get Rabbit drunk?" Chelsea asked.

"No, I suppose not..." he sighed.

"Oh, I get it. Rabbit pushed them," Chelsea said slowly. "So we push Rabbit."

"Into what?" Paige asked.

"Something she's been dragging her feet on for months," Chelsea said.

"The carpet?" Hatchworth asked, frowning.

Paige smothered a snort of laughter halfway through a sip of coffee and scrambled for a napkin. "No, Hatchy," she gasped. "We aren't going to shove Rabbit into the carpet."

"She does drag her feet on it..." Hatchy responded.

"Nevertheless, we will not be pushing her into it," Paige choked.

Chelsea snickered. "Pretty sure Hatchy would enjoy that."

"No, indeed, it would damage the fibers, my dear."

"Of course. Good point, Hatchy," Chelsea giggled.

"Then what do you mean to push Rabbit into?" Hatchworth asked, tipping his head.

"Sounded like you had an idea, Chelsea," Paige said.
"Well, maybe. Rabbit thought Peter and Bunny needed help moving forward with their lives," Chelsea explained. "So maybe we give Rabbit some unsolicited help with hers. And I do have kind of an idea how, but you be the judge, okay?"

"Sure! What is it?" Paige asked eagerly.

"She plays a terrible prank on the current Peter Walter and we are going to give her our help?" Hatchworth demanded.

"Ah, Hatchy. It's not that kind of help. I'll explain it in detail and maybe it'll make more sense. First of all, though, we give Rabbit the chance to make things right. Y'know, apologize, own up, try to make it up to them somehow. Since she'll probably play dumb or act like she did nothing wrong, we'll have stage two ready. For that, we need to ask Steve to get us some costume pieces from the theater and 'borrow' a couple from Bunny..."

Paige leaned in, listening intently. This sounded interesting...

Walter Manor slowly woke. There was a large breakfast buffet, considering how many guests had stayed the night in the manor. The Spine was nowhere to be seen but the word was circulating that this was because he, in his old-fashioned way, believed he shouldn't see the bride before the wedding.

David had reported that he'd had one muffled response from the comm. Bunny was indeed there with Peter, they were sleeping off the champagne, and she wanted him to shut the hell up already. Further details would have to wait, David said, hopefully forever.

Breanna came into the dining room looking beautiful but very pale and didn't eat much. No one was terribly surprised at this. She sat with Paige, Dave and Sunshine, who tried their best to keep things light and casual.

Rabbit, meanwhile, circulated through the pleasant chaos with no clue that karma stalked her. Those preparing her payback liked it best that way. She couldn't make amends until Peter and Bunny returned anyway. Steve had been contacted and had assured them that he would indeed provide the needed items, once he understood the reasons for them.

"Have you seen Peter?"

Paige jumped. "What?"

She turned and saw Annie and a smiling Peter V. Well, crap.

"Oh, Annie... he's with Bunny in Kazooland..."

"Oh..." she said with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah. Apparently there was a little mix-up last night in the drinks..."

"I noticed. I hope it's taken care of?"

"Oh, yeah, I fixed it for the reception. But they're still sleeping it off. David's keeping tabs on them, okay?"

"Alright, sweetie. Poor baby. Let me know when they come back. Oh, and I have a great hangover
remedy if anyone needs it. Just fyi."

Peter V chuckled and Paige wondered whether it was because of what Annie had said or something no one else could hear. He walked slowly to Paige and patted her hand.

"You're doing a great job, dear," he murmured and walked away with his wife.

Am I really? Paige thought. She'd been fairly convinced things were spiraling rapidly. But as long as she managed to get Peter and Bunny back and ready in time for the wedding, there was still hope.

Eleven o'clock came and went, however, and David reported that they still weren't back. Even though the wedding was at five, Paige was growing nervous. She would be heading in to Annie's room with Bree shortly in order to start preparations; they didn't want to be too rushed. It was time to set things into motion and let others attend to the rest. She excused herself and went to talk to Rabbit.

"Hey, baby!" Rabbit cooed as she approached. "You have a good breakfast?"

"It was fine, Rabbit..."

"Bree's lookin' pale! No surprises there, huh? Big day for her..."

"Right. Look, Rabbit..."

Paige sat beside her and Rabbit's smile faded. "What's wrong?"

"I found out what you did, Rabbit."

Rabbit stared blankly and Paige had a feeling she was checking off a list, trying to decide which one had been found out.

"When you borrowed my phone, dammit!"

"Oh! I... I t-t-t-took a couple of photos..."

"And made a phone call."

Rabbit attempted an uneasy smile. "Well, that's what a phone is f-f-for..."

"Rabbit!" she hissed. "You were out of line!"

"What? Did something bad happen?"

"No! I don't think so..."

"What actually did happen?"

"How should I know? They're still in Kazooland..."

Rabbit's face lit up. "Ohh, baby! I heard about that place! They got some little love nest there..."

"But anything could have happened to them!"

"Yeah, and I bet it did in spades! Whoo, yeah! Success!"

Paige was sure she must be giving off more steam than Hatchworth. She caught Rabbit by the collar.

"You need to make this right! You can't just be slipping people alcohol!"
"B-B-But they never woulda got into bed without it! Petes was too uptight! So I figure since it worked for Pappy..."

"What? Wasn't that the night he broke you, too?"

"Y-Yeah, but... even if he did, he also made Jon and the twins and... and... well, it worked, didn't it?"

She released Rabbit's collar and scowled. "That doesn't make it right!"

"It was just a l-l-little prank..."

Paige groaned.

"It didn't hurt nobody..."

"Rabbit," she said slowly and patiently. "You once said you loved me."

Rabbit's eyes widened. "Yeah."

"Do you?"

She leaned away from Paige and looked down. "Yeah," she whispered.

"Then do the right thing. If someone else had found this out first, it would have looked like I did it out of spite because Bunny used to be my boyfriend."

"No..."

"Yes, it would have. It would have looked like I was trying to get back at them for what I couldn't have. I would have looked like a jealous woman."

"But I woulda told 'em..."

"And then it would look like you were taking the rap to protect me."

Rabbit looked at her once more, her expression pained. "I didn't mean for any of that to happen!"

Paige sighed. "It didn't, sweetie. Just apologize, okay?"

Rabbit leaned away. "Apologize? I don't think that's ne-ne-ne-necessary..."

"Rabbit, please... just own up and don't do it again, and take whatever punishment Peter and Bunny think is appropriate..."

Rabbit scowled. "They'd probably thank me."

"Rabbit..."

"And punishment? What am I, a toddler?"

Paige glared. Rabbit turned away.

"Look, if you're so sure they're okay, just go and make sure they get back from Kazooland. People are beginning to wonder where they are."

"But they might be... y'know... doin' it!"
"David messaged Bunny and they're just sleeping. Go and bring them back."

"But what if they're naked?"

"Rabbit..."

"Fine! Fine... goin'..."

Rabbit rose and stumped away without so much as a nod. Paige sighed and watched her go, admiring the sassy wiggle she'd been developing more and more. The walk would fit a female body perfectly, but it was a feast for the eyes already.

And she while she enjoyed Rabbit's old "male" body, the automaton had made her choice and the new one, she'd been told, would be impressive in its own right. If they got the money for the extensive reconstruction needed to install it. And if Rabbit ever braved her fear of change and let them install it.

Well, she could start dressing the part, anyway. And their plan would help with that...

The Spine sat in the HoW, contentedly strumming his guitar and singing softly to himself.

"Her eyes... sparkle like butterflies..."

But butterflies didn't sparkle. He shrugged. It was pretty and so was she. The lyric stayed.

He'd gone up to the HoW just an hour before, after spending a little extra time after stasis just laying in bed, admiring the decor. He and Bree had redecorated his bedroom to make their fresh start complete, and her touches could be seen everywhere.

And when they returned from their honeymoon, she would share it with him. Which brought him to pleasant thoughts of a lovely girl in a red nightie.

He grinned and strummed. His joy was complete. He knew he would probably have difficult times as they started life together... memories of Marie would have to be stirred. Bree knew this as well, and had asked him to promise not to block anything just to spare her having to deal with it. If he had to take a little time to himself to cope, it was okay.

But he refused to let it be too long. He knew now that he didn't always have to be strong, and that it was a kind of strength to admit he needed time, or help. It was still hard but he understood. But he wouldn't shut her out. No, he might need a little time, but Bree needed to be part of his life even when it wasn't perfect. She'd said as much herself.

"INCOMING MESSEGE SPIEN," Qwerty droned.

"Bring it over, Qwerty."

"GET IT YURSELF..."

He glared up at the monitor and it rolled rapidly to him and he opened the message.

"Good morning, sunshine! You excited for today?"

He chuckled. "I'm more excited for tonight," he dictated.
"REELY SPIEN?"

"Just send the text, Qwerty," he said in a heavy bass tone.

"You and me both! Where are you hiding?"

"The HoW. Where are you?"

"I'm in Annie's room with Paige and the others, so you can come out of your hiding place and move about freely. I won't be coming out until the wedding. They're giving me a complete makeover."

He tilted his head. "Why?"

"I'm the bride, silly! Don't worry, I'll still look like myself when they're done."

"Oh. Alright. See you soon."

"Love you, baby."

"Love you, too."

He played for a little while longer before getting up to go and look over the wedding preparations. The ballroom had been almost complete last night, of course, but there had to be other things going on and he wanted to take it all in.

The first person he met was Matter Master David, striding one of the long hallways, scowling. The man looked up at his approach and his face flushed.

"Matter Master," The Spine said, smiling.

"You know you can call me David..."

"I know."

David sighed and forced a strained smile. "So... excited?"

"Of course. Is everything alright? You seem troubled."

"Oh... it's nothing... I mean... Peter and Bunny had a little too much champagne last night... and they're having a hard time getting moving. It's just a little frustrating."

"Ah. Well, there's plenty of time yet..."

"I know. I'll take care of it."

"Oh... alright. Thank you."

"Um... you're welcome. Well... I gotta go see about... stuff..."

The Spine stared down the hallway after David, pondering. His consternation exceeded his explanation. He hoped it was nothing serious.

But nothing worried the Matter Master more than the welfare of his sister, who had been through a great deal in the past year. Even within the past week, considering she'd gotten married. So surely the problem was connected with her, and possibly her new husband.

He'd seen them himself, staggering out the door during dinner. But Peter didn't drink as far as he
knew. Maybe he’d decided to try something new? Only it seemed like an awful coincidence after Rabbit’s musings before the rehearsal...

He opened a wifi link. Rabbit?

Yo.

Hey. How’s everything going?

Oh, don’t worry about me. It's your big day. You worry about yourself.

I was just wondering whether anything was wrong.

Why should it be? Everything is fine.

Ah. It's just that I heard about a certain incident with Peter and some champagne...

Silence. Interesting.

I was wondering what you know about it.

Nothing. What about Peter and some champagne?

He doesn’t drink.

Good thing, too. Awful stuff. Terrible habit.

Uh-huh.

Anything else?

Yes. You’re supposed to help me get ready.

Okay. When do ya wanna get ready?

Four, I suppose.

Fine, see ya at four.

Rabbit severed the connection. Either she was bored with the conversation, or wanted to avoid a rekindling of the previous topic...

Well, David said he was on top of things. No sense making a fuss. He didn't want Bree to worry.

And Peter and Bunny were adults, after all. They'd each come a long way in the past year. No, he was staying out of this one. He continued along the hallway, trying to push it out of his mind.

And stopped with a heavy sigh. He activated his remote text module and sent a message to David.

"I would appreciate you telling me the full story about Peter and Bunny's situation. I have my own suspicions about the circumstances and it would set my mind at ease. And I may be able to assist. I don't have anything to do until four, anyway."
ALL kinds of tense family scenes take place. Rabbit's little plan worked... too well. And now some people need to get over themselves. Unfortunately, these are some of the most stubborn people in the manor.

Sex is going to be mentioned a lot, and not in the prettiest way. The Spine is right, it's a learning curve. Personal recommendation: don't be in a hurry to do it, and save it for someone who actually cares about you and has the maturity to handle the responsibility and learn it with you. PSA

The Spine was worried. He'd had a talk with a very reluctant David, who had confirmed his suspicions. How could Rabbit be so callous after all these years among humans? She'd learned a lot and could be so nurturing and kind, but it never failed to shock him how sharply she could turn in the opposite direction.

But the idea of loosening Peter up by getting him drunk! She'd hinted as much the night before, but to actually think it was a good idea? Or had she thought at all?

He supposed the recent revelations about Col. Walter's "accident" with Iris had made it seem simple. But that had been the same bender that had resulted in a traumatic experience for Rabbit herself! The Spine had to wonder whether he should ask Sunshine for a referral to a quality psychiatrist. Rabbit clearly needed help.

But there was little he could really do. He'd offered help and David had refused, saying he and Paige had it under control. He'd further demanded that he stay focused on the wedding and the bride. But how could he just go on with his happiness when things were such a mess?

But he'd told David he would and intended to do just that... once he had dropped just one more little message.

Rabbit?

What?

Rude. There's no point in lying this time so don't even try. I know what you did to Peter. Have you found him and apologized?

What? Why would I?

You got him drunk!
I gave him a little assistance, that's all...

Are you out of your mind? Go and apologize and make sure everything is okay!

I bet they're all cozy in their room... probably should wait.

_Dammit, Rabbit! You know what you did, he sent, and I like to think that after all these years you know it's wrong._

Says you! They'll probably thank me!

_Thank you? For putting them in a position like that? Bunny was tipsy and Peter was sloshed! And you know he was afraid of hurting her during sex and I highly doubt he had the self-control to be gentle!_

What? You were serious about that? I thought it was all about losing control. Humans say crap like that all the time... one thing leads to another and they wake up in tha sack! It's in all tha movies! An' no one says it hurt!

_But it's a learning curve, Rabbit. You don't just know how to do it._

_Learning curve? Come on! It's sex! Sex is amazing!_

_Just because your first time blew out the power grid and conceived a daughter doesn't mean others don't have a hard time adapting. It's different with humans. And need I remind you that, along with the rest, Bunny used to be a man._

_You say that but she told me..._

_Physically, alright? I daresay it was a shock, to say the least, to experience it from that... um... perspective. Look, I don't know. I don't want to think about it. Go and check on them, apologize, make things right._

_If you're so worried, you do it._

_The Spine counted to ten before responding. I usually hold back but I'm playing dirty today, he sent. As younger brother, I'm telling you that you screwed up. As peer, I'm calling you out for it. As groom, I am insisting you not ruin my special day with this._

_Dammit, Spine..._

_There was no response for a full minute before The Spine gave in and sent, So... are you..._

_Yeah, yeah, fine, whatever, I'll look in on 'em... or something. So shut up already. Bridezilla._

_I'm not a..._

_Rabbit cut off the connection. The Spine sighed and walked toward the ballroom. He'd done all he could without stepping in more than he'd said he would, and he still had time to kill. Maybe they needed help setting up for Matt Smith's jazz band._

_It was the same every time. Everything was purple in the mime city. Peter saw his reflection in a darkened window. He was wearing a trenchcoat and his favorite striped sweater vest. He ran until he came to the fountain. She was always there._
She gestured to him. He hurried to her, his heart full. She was dressed in pink stripes and long pink hair. Their hands touched and they seemed to fly through the night. He longed to hold her... he started to pull her closer...

And then a vivid green light appeared and something tore him away. And he knew, somehow he knew he could have stopped it... he could stop it... he had to stop it...

Peter opened his eyes. That dream again...

Something wasn't right... He was cold... no doubt due to being stark naked. His head throbbed right down to his shoulders. His face was on fire. And his stomach...

Oh, no... He got up and lurched toward his bathroom. To his dismay, it wasn't there.

"No... no, no, no... not okay..." he breathed, swallowing hard.

He looked around and saw an open door. Porcelain tiles were visible beyond. He lunged for it and made it just in time.

A minute later he was trembling and clutching the rim of the bowl as his sickness subsided enough for him to realize his bladder now required some attention.

"Never ends... what the hell happened to me...?" he gasped as he clambered up to sit on the toilet.

"Do I have the flu?"

He aimed himself carefully into the bowl and groaned softly. This was worse than a flu. He'd felt like this before... not often, but enough. As a teenager, sneaking drinks from the liquor cabinet with a young Michael Reed...

As his head cleared a little, he noticed other things. His mask was off... he was in an unfamiliar house... he thought he heard someone breathing softly in the next room. And by now he wasn't a bit surprised.

Peter leaned carefully to look out and had his suspicions confirmed in a familiar slip crumpled on the floor, and an arm ending in a long, graceful hand hanging off the bed.

A lot of things were coming into focus. He could just remember holding a glass of odd-tasting sparkling cider and had a feeling there had been a mistake. He remembered laughter. Being with Bunny in the hallway, delightful wrestling in the lab... And, as if it was only seconds later, being in her arms, and in her...

Oh! Whoops. Well. Yes. Just like that, then...

It explained a great deal. He could just recall the final and complete loss of control, an earth-shattering explosion of sensation. And giggling softly as he lay weakly beside her afterward, taking in her sleepy smile. Hearing her gentle whisper, "I love you so much, Peter..."

"Dammit. I can't remember any more of it..." he muttered.

His head was still throbbing. He finished relieving himself and stood to stagger back out and slip back into bed beside her. Hopefully there was time to get a little more sleep before heading back...

There was a mirror facing the toilet. Peter stopped short and stared. Ordinarily he'd have looked away from his too-skinny build; he was what he was, but he didn't much like seeing that completely naked. Only now, something in the dimness caught his eye and made his stomach churn afresh.
Blood. At least, he didn't know what else it could be. Dried blood, in just a certain area... He swallowed as his stomach churned afresh. Just like his ancestor, he now had the mark of damage done in the act of sex. He wasn't sure if it was a lot; it was spread out a great deal...

He closed his eyes and turned away. "Bunny... I'm so sorry..." he breathed.

Peter found a cloth and cleaned off as much as he could. He returned to bed shivering, trying to ignore little brown smears of the stuff dried on the clean white sheets of Bunny's dream bedroom. There was a blanket crumpled on the floor. He dragged it over the bed, tucking it gently around her before wriggling into the warmth himself, and lay watching her, shaking. He thought of waking her, but what could he say? She would dismiss any pain she'd suffered. She always did.

And she must have been a willing participant. What little he remembered was consistent with a woman in a state of ecstasy. He was pretty sure, anyway.

But then there was the blood.

Peter wiped his eyes and sniffled. He didn't remember starting to cry. He didn't know why he was crying. It was just so barbaric. And he had wanted it to be beautiful.

She shifted, stretched her arms over her head. The bedding slipped off of her breasts and he gasped. They were everything he'd imagined...

Bunny opened her eyes and smiled at him. "Hey, you," she said sleepily. "Did I hear the sound of puking?"

His cheeks burned. They may have made love last night but he didn't remember much of it and she was just laying there, bare-breasted, smiling at him. Not that he was complaining...

"Oh... yeah. Sorry," he mumbled.

"For puking? Not your fault. Where'd the blanket come from?"

"It was cold..."

"Yeah, but when David messaged earlier..."

"He did?" Peter asked dully.

"Yeah. I told him to shut up and let us sleep. Anyway, I was cold then but I was too lazy to get up." She put her hand over his and sighed. "I guess you had no choice since you had to puke..."

"Yeah..."

"That was so sweet of you, though... Are you okay?" Her eyes opened wider. "Are you crying?"

He hastily wiped his eyes again. She stroked his cheek.

"You are. I could get you something to settle your stomach if you feel that rotten."

"No... just... no, Bunny. Are you okay? Do you hurt?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"Hurt? Oh! You mean... oh, you poor idiot. I'm fine, Peter!"

"Fine? But..."
"Seriously. I mean, sure, for a minute I...

She paused, looking into his face.

"You what?" he gasped, wiping his eyes.

She sighed and smiled wearily. "I couldn't believe it was real, that's all. You were great last night!"

"How could I have been great?" he cried. "I've never done it before and... and... I didn't even wait until you were healed up! I just got drunk... and took you and... and you bled, it was all over the sheets and... I-I don't even know how to make love and I just, y'know... went for it! I'm so sorry!"

"Oh, um..." She raised the blankets and peered awkwardly into the bedding. "Right..."

"Right? Then it did hurt!"

"A little, sure! It just kinda burns now. Give me a day or so and I'll be up for another..."

"It does? It burns? Can we get some kind of ointment for it? Maybe an ice pack? Damn, I was gonna bring lubricant so it wouldn't be so bad and... This is just a disaster!"

"Whoa, there, stud!" she laughed. "A night of bliss is called a disaster now?"

"Bliss?" he choked.

"Bliss, you ninny. Look... how much do you remember?"

"Well..." He wiped his eyes and sniffled loudly. Bunny laughed and scooted over to put her arms around him. It was suddenly very hard to concentrate. She was so soft... not to mention naked.

"Do you remember coming through the portal?" she asked.

"Kind of..."

"Stripping off?"

"Not really. Wait... I remember your bra smacking into the wall."

Bunny snickered. "Classy. I was kinda toasted myself. Um... do you remember... foreplay?"

"I think so... I remember you kissing my throat."

"Oh, yeah." She grinned. "I remember you kissing a few things yourself."

"Did I?"

"Yes. I'd like you to make a habit of it."

"Okay..."

Maybe he hadn't done such a bad job of it after all. Bunny rested her head against his chest and sighed.

"Do you remember... um..."

"What?" he murmured.
"Y'know... starting?"

"Oh! No. I really can't."

"Ah."

"I remember finishing."

"Thank goodness for that, at least!" she chuckled.

"I understand the appeal now."

"As well you should."

He stroked her back. It would have turned him on a day earlier. At the moment he found it soothing. She had wonderful skin.

"Anything else you remember?" she asked.

"You appeared to be enjoying yourself. Did you?"

"Yeah, I did," she murmured. "Yes, even though it stung a little. But I wanted to experience that."

"You wanted to experience stinging?" he cried. "There, of all places?"

"Well, I mean, I'm not a masochist or anything but... Look, I know you think I wasn't healed up but I have to make a little confession..." She took a deep breath. "There was nothing to heal. I never had the procedure done."

Peter blinked up at the ceiling.

"Peter?"

"I don't understand..."

"I lied, okay? I was still intact as of last night. I figured you'd take care of it better than a doctor."

"Bunny!" he gasped. "Why?"

"Well..." She tipped her head up to look at his face. "Are you upset?"

"Yeah!"

"Oh... um, well, it's just that I'm a woman now, and as it happens I married a man. So looking back at human history, well... it's been done this way millions of times over and I'd say most of those seem to have worked out pretty well. Besides, I looked up hymenotomies and they were all so clinical and they sounded painful and unnecessary! Unless you have like no hole at all or something. So I talked to the doctor and he agreed that it wasn't needed, and that it would only hurt a little and it really wouldn't even register in the heat of the moment, so it would be easier to just make love and let it happen."

"But... I thought you'd had it!"

"Well, I've had it now! It's all the same, right?"

"You made me think you'd had it!"
"Well, yeah," she said irritably. "You'd have had a hissy fit if I didn't..."

"I would not..."

"Yeah, you would. Just like you're doing now! You'd have a fit and refuse to go to bed with me. Am I wrong?"

"Yeah!"

She raised a sculpted eyebrow and he looked away.

"We could have worked something out... I guess..." he muttered.

"Worked something out?" she cried, sitting up. "What does that even mean?"

"I don't know! I just think you should have told me!"

"Look, I've explained my reasons. I spared you the worry and dealt with it myself. I did what I thought was best!"

"But I just can't believe you lied to me about something like that!"

"Oh, for the love of... Yes, dammit! I lied!" Bunny snapped. "I lied because you couldn't find it in yourself to get into bed and deflower me like I wanted! You thought it would be better to get my privates snipped in a doctor's office!"

"Okay, you make it sound so brutal but you agreed to do it! You're telling me you thought it was better for me to just shove my... my... self in there and tear your..."

He couldn't say it. He forced himself to look at her and looked away sharply. Her face was pale with fury as she climbed off the bed and snatched up her bra.

"Well?" he cried as she wrestled it on.

"Forget it."

"Forget what?" he shouted. "Forget that you lied to me?"

"Sure, dig the hole deeper, jerk!" she growled. "And yeah, I lied, because as it happens I did think it was better for you to just shove it on in there, because I wanted to just let go and be with you, same as men and women have done since freaking forever! I've gone full girl and I wanted to experience all of it, even if it hurt a little! And I'm luckier than some because I had the chance to have my first time with a man I love and trust! Do you get that? I trusted you with a vulnerable moment because I love you, and you're griping about having to do it! You didn't even ask, you cried and howled until I felt sorry for you and I promised to look into it, just in case you forgot! But if you thought I was suddenly a saint just because I became a girl and fell in love with you, then you're an idiot, Peter Walter! I'm still me, I lie when I think it's best and that means if I think you need it I will lie through my teeth!"

He sat up, shaking. "I just... didn't want it to be like this..."

"Like what?" she shrieked, looking around and snatching up her panties. "Wild and spontaneous? Rough and amazing and uninhibited? Because that's what it was! And I'm sorry you can't remember but we could have more and more chances to make memories! But no, you gotta keep that stick up your ass!"
He frowned. Now she was just being mean. "In case you forgot, you flat out lied! And I would remember it if it weren't for the fact that someone got me drunk!"

She stopped cold, her panties halfway up her bottom. Peter considered diving behind the bed.

"Excuse me?" she said coldly. It was absolutely terrifying. "Am I going deaf now? Are you accusing me of arranging for you to get hammered on champagne? Is that what I'm hearing? Peter Alexander Walter the f***ing Sixth is telling me I got him drunk so I could get into his pants?"

"No! I just meant that someone must have made a mistake and... and... oh, hell!" he spat, frustrated.

She yanked her panties up the rest of the way, snatched up the rest of her clothes, and grabbed the comm. "Don't give yourself that much credit, a$$hole!" she growled as she opened the portal. "I didn't want to be with you because you're some hot beefy stud! I want to be with you because... because I love you! And I lied about something that would hurt me, got that? Just me! I didn't get you drunk and rape you! I don't treat people I love like that!"

Her voice was trembling. So were her hands. Her face was an astonishing mixture of fury and grief. His blood ran cold. When had this gone so wrong?

"Bunny..." he whispered, not sure of what to say. "I didn't mean..."

"Shut up! Just shut the hell up! You've said enough!" she screamed, her voice thick with tears.

She threw the comm at his head and he scrambled to catch it. The portal snapped shut behind her.

Rabbit shuffled through Walter Manor, grumbling softly to herself. It just wasn't fair. Every time she tried to help, something went screwy. And now she had to do one of her least favorite things in the whole wide world.

Apologize.

Ugh! And they'd just yell or something! Or think it was stupid for her to apologize because everything was just fine. The one sure thing was that it was so unnecessary!

First it was little Paige with her guilt trip, then The Spine had to add to the pile! Just when she'd found a good hiding place, too. She wasn't going to hide for long, just until it was time to be "best man" and help The Spine dress. Paige would cool off eventually, especially when Peter and Bunny turned up looking all lovey dovey because they'd spent the night in bed together. It always happened that way. As far as she knew.

But The Spine just had to butt into things, as usual. She was sure that on his wedding day he'd manage to keep busy but no! And she couldn't get past the fact that when The Spine gave her advice like this, he was usually right. She hated that so much!

It was such a lot of fuss anyhow. Just a harmless prank, but would they see reason? No. And all she'd done was steal Paige's phone and imitate her voice and tell the waitstaff at the rehearsal dinner to serve Peter champagne which had resulted in both of them staggering out visibly drunk in front of Bree's parents and now they were on another planet where they most likely had sex that might have hurt.

So just a little fun! Nothing to make such a fuss about. But two of the people she cared for most in the world had charged her to apologize. So she was going to have to do it.
She was still worried about walking in on round two. There was always the chance that it hadn't hurt after all and she didn't want to witness any fleshies moaning and leaking. Kissing had been fun but she'd decided... fleshy sex was just nasty.

Though she'd never tell them that. The Spine said it was racist to talk like that. Rabbit was pretty sure you couldn't be racist if you were a robot.

And speaking of fleshies...

As Rabbit was approaching the portal room, she saw a flash of light. Seconds later, a pale pink streak came pelting out of the room and down the hallway, apparently unaware of the automaton watching. Rabbit was relieved to see that she had on basic underwear but the question of why she was running around in just that, carrying the rest...?

What she realized after the shock wore off a few seconds later, was that Bunny had been crying. Oh, hell...

Rabbit turned and hastily clanked back to her hiding place at top speed, in case Peter came out of the portal next. She could apologize later. She didn't know what had happened between Bunny and Peter but she wasn't taking the rap for it.

It was raining. He wasn't sure when it had started, but he had a feeling it was during the argument. Bunny seemed to have an effect on the weather.

There was a clap of thunder as Peter slowly climbed out of bed. He jumped, and swore quietly. Everything had spiraled straight down the toilet...

Toilet. He frowned and wandered in to flush.

He dressed slowly, muttering to himself as his emotions cycled from regret back to rage. She'd agreed! He could have sworn it! She'd told him she'd seen the doctor and that she'd be ready the day after The Spine's wedding...

Peter swore loudly this time. Clever damned half-truths! She knew how he felt about it! How could she do this to him? And who in their right mind wanted to feel pain during sex*? It could have been so simple...

He took a few minutes for calming breaths before reopening the portal and heading back. This needed to be resolved.

She wasn't in their bedroom, so he went to her old room. Her clothes were on the bed and the shower was running. To his dismay, he could also hear the sound of whispery sobs. The rage seemed to burn away all at once, leaving queasiness and an aching head to accompany the pain rising in his chest. His eyes stung and his throat ached. Bunny...

He felt the sudden impulse to walk right into the shower, clothes and all, put his arms around her and apologize. He reached for the doorknob... but while that was exactly what a rom-com hero might do, Peter Walter VI knew it had a lot of flaws.

He was still trying to figure out how he felt about everything that had happened. He hadn't gotten around to buying an extra pair of slacks for the wedding (and he was wearing the only pair). And he was pretty sure Bunny would start chucking shampoo bottles at him if he made an appearance.
Instead, he wandered miserably back to their room with the idea of taking a shower himself. He stopped in the doorway and stared. She'd already started putting some of her things in it and they'd discussed redecorating like Breanna had done with The Spine's room. The worker wing was more like a dormitory and she was only too glad to move into his large bedroom.

It had only been a few days, but the bedroom just seemed too large for one person. It looked so empty without her in it.

Peter felt his breathing grow shallow. He forced himself to breathe slowly. It was going to be okay. They'd work this out. He'd been angry, sure. He still was, come to think of it. But he could let it go. Yes. He could be the bigger person. Even though she'd said he had a stick up his... well, he could relax and loosen up. He'd prove it now.

He forced himself to walk in and sit on the bed. He took out his phone and began to type a message.

"Bunny... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made such a big deal out of it. I understand if you wanted to do things a certain way and you just didn't know how to tell me. Only I thought things were different between us now. I thought we'd agreed to get it taken care of, and you didn't even bother to tell me! I mean, I understand but it was a matter of trust and you..."

He sighed irritably and deleted it. Too soon. All he'd done was make himself angry all over again.

He could shower later. He rose and went to find Marshmallow.

Chapter End Notes

*recognizing there are all kinds of tastes in the bedroom and that Peter's still a novice. ;)

I enjoyed their fight way too much. Not because of the tears and misunderstandings, but because there's something hilarious to me about Peter saying something way out of line and thinking maybe he should dive for cover. I figure this is a regular thing for him because he's used to saying what he thinks and just every so often he takes it that one inch too far with someone who isn't inclined to humor him and gets his ears slapped back. With love, if he's lucky.
Chapter Summary

Rabbit is finally starting to get the full view of things, Peter VI broods with his cat, Bunny broods with the bride, and The Spine has to field every awkward question he ever heard in one sitting... The father of the bride wasn't done with him yet.

Rabbit stumped into the dining room. She’d tried to lay low but there was too much going on and she hated to miss the action. Besides, she could track The Spine and avoid him if she tried really hard. It meant pinging him every twenty seconds or so and hoping he didn't notice and block her...

But the last ping told her he wasn't in the dining room. She smiled as Annie trotted toward her.

"Rabbit! I was wondering where you'd gone! Have you seen Peter?"

Rabbit almost cringed. Did she know? Not that Rabbit was ashamed or anything...

"Nah, I haven't," she said warily.

"Well... oh! Just a minute, Rabbit... David! David, sweetie, could you do me a favor?"

David, who was just finishing his lunch, looked up and scowled pointedly at Rabbit. She leaned away slightly. Did he know? Only he usually scowled at Rabbit...

"Sure, Annie," David murmured, dragging his eyes away from her. "What do you need?"

"Bree's mother has just arrived and I'd rather not have her bothering Bunny. Could you go and get her out before I bring in Melanie?"

"Oh... okay..." David said blankly. "Any particular reason?"

"Oh... Just trust me, sweetheart. Bunny won't want to be around her."

"No, I think I understand. I've met Melanie. I'll go get her out."

"Thanks," Annie said as he walked out. "Where was I? Oh, yes... Peter. I know he came back from that Kazooland but he wasn't with Bunny and she won't tell me what happened!" Annie complained.

"What... why d'ya think something happened?" Rabbit mumbled.

"Chelsea found her crying in the kitchen earlier! Just crying in the dark over a soggy bowl of kid cereal..."

Dammit.

"That's why she's in my room with the others. But she just sits in the corner writing and crying and Peter won’t answer his phone!" Annie cried. "I really don't want to be involved in this, but if those two ninnies are going to act this way then maybe I need to butt in for once!"

"Annie... Annie, baby... they're grown-ups. They ca-ca-can work things out..." Rabbit said.
But while she was trying to soothe Annie, her boiler was bubbling worse than The Spine's. This wasn't how it was supposed to go!

"You say that but you know those two. He's so stubborn and sensitive and she's so stubborn and sensitive and dramatic! He probably wore his socks to bed or something silly like that and between them they turned it into World War III."

"I dunno about that... but tell ya what. I'll go see if I can find him."

"Thanks. I just wish his father or The Spine could talk to him now. But my Peter woke up a little fuzzier than usual and I don't want to bother The Spine..."

"I'm older'n either of 'em. I'll do my best."

She hurried out, frowning. Those two mooks were going to get her into serious trouble! Yeah, sure, she'd done something that was... somewhat questionable, but they were madly in love and there was no reason for them to be messed up after they... Well, it just didn't make sense. She had no idea what she was going to do about it, but she was going to do something. Once she found Peter, anyhow.

She knew where he was likely to have gone for a sulk. He used to go to a far lab to play with chemicals, but lately he was all about his cat. And Rabbit could see the attraction. Kitties were awesome, so bigger kitty clearly equaled bigger awesome.

Sure enough, she found Marshmallow fast asleep in his room with Peter settled in against his side in the curve of his tail, typing into his phone.

"No... stupid! Why am I apologizing?" he muttered, thumbing a button irritably.

"Can I come in?" Rabbit said softly, leaning against the door frame.

Peter looked over Marshmallow's tail at her. He sighed.

"I guess..."

"So... how've ya been?" Rabbit asked, shuffling into the room.

"I don't really feel like talking, Rabbit."

"Oh. Do y-y-y-you need anything?"

"I'm fine, Rabbit," Peter said firmly.

"You are?"

"Yes. Just fine."

"No worries, then! As long as you're just fine, I'll just be g-g-going."

"Great."

Rabbit turned to go... and didn't. Paige was worried, The Spine was worried, sweet little Annie was, too... and Bunny, well... Rabbit had seen her crying and running down the hall in her drawers that morning, and apparently she hadn't stopped crying since. And sure, she was a girl now, but she was the same person. Bunny hadn't really done a lot of crying that Rabbit had ever seen. It made a robot think.
Maybe she'd been... wrong...?

She turned and looked at Peter.

"You need something?" Peter asked dully.

"Oh... um... Can I join you?"

"I already said you could," he droned. "You're the one who decided to leave..."

"Right." Rabbit settled down next to him against Marshmallow's softly heaving stomach. "Cat's do-do-doin' great..."

"He is. You're right. The cat is fantastic."

"Yeah. Good cat."

"Right."

Silence. Where in the world do you start on a thing like this, Rabbit wondered. Peter had said he didn't want to talk...

"Ya... ya feelin' okay, buddy?"

"A little sick... nasty headache..." Peter muttered.

"Ah. Ya take anything for it?"

"No. I haven't." He took a deep breath. "So. What did you hear?"

"Oh... um... nothin' much..."

"Sure. And that's why the awkward silence."

"Look, kid... Tha Spine is better at this dad stuff... mom stuff? Parent stuff..."

"Skip it. I don't need any of them right now."

"But ya need somethin'! Yehr in here sulking a-a-an' Bunny is cryin' in Annie's room..."

This got him. Peter turned toward her. "Crying?" he asked softly.

"Yeah. Which makes ya wonder why her husband is here when she needs him."

Peter turned away again and heaved a shuddering sigh.

"Look, Petes... I ain't yehr dad or yehr mom or even human or even shaped human but... I been around tha block a few times. If ya n-n-n-need any advice I guess I can take a swing at it."

Peter shook his head. "No... well... Look, it's not like you've ever..."

He huffed irritably and stopped.

"Never had sex, right?"

"Dammit..."
"You really surprised? I mean, that I know? Well... that I g-g-guessed, anyhow. Y'know." Rabbit's voice dropped to a whisper. "That something went wrong last night."

"Kind of..." Peter groaned.

"And I dunno if you got the memo but I have had sex. So there."

"A electrical circuit isn't sex, Rabbit."

"Hey, watch yehr mouth!"

Peter shook his head.

"It was, though. It was personal, an vulnerable, and exciting, and fun, and it felt damned good..." 

"Could you not..."

"And we only did it with each other. I even leaked."

"Yes, that totally describes sex, Rabbit," Peter scoffed. He groaned softly. "Oh... dammit to hell... leaking..."

"What?" Rabbit asked nervously.

"Nothing. I don't want to think about it."

"Alrighty, so anyway... sure, no one had to po-po-po-poke anything into anyone but it was special to us. And sometimes it even hurt."

"Hurt?" Peter cried, his voice breaking.

That didn't bode well... "Well... yeah... y'know, I just heard that sometimes it hurts a little bit..." Rabbit mumbled.

Peter was silent except for a soft snuffling sound under his mask. Rabbit sat waiting and wondering whether she really wanted to delve.

"It shouldn't have to hurt, though," Peter whispered at last.

"No. Yehr right. Something that nice shouldn't hurt..." Rabbit said softly. "B-B-But... Well, hell, sometimes it's so hard ta hold back... it don't mean ya d-d-don't care."

"Yeah. I know."

"Honey left a few dents I swear I can still feel..." Rabbit grinned in spite of herself. "An' that body..."

She rolled her tongue luxuriously and Marshmallow raised his head sleepily and sniffed her.

"Hey, buddy," she murmured.

The cat resumed his rest with a faint, "Mow."

Rabbit sighed. Peter had fallen silent again.

"Well... look, if ya need anything, let me know. Tha Spine is better at this kinda stuff but he's got to take care of himself and his sweet little bride today so I'm f-f-f-fillin' in."
"I don't need anything. Except maybe a stiff drink."

"Oh, now... I thought you didn't drink..."

"Yeah, and yet last night I did. I swear I shouldn't even pay that damned caterer..."

"What, why?" Rabbit asked nonchalantly.

"Didn't you see me stagger out drunk? I can just remember it... and if I had been sober when we..." Peter trailed off in an angry sigh. "I dunno. Probably wouldn't have made a difference." Under his breath, he added, "Though I might have thought to grab a condom."

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Doesn't matter."

Rabbit stared at the far wall. Her boiler didn't feel right...

"I gotta go get ready. Thanks for the talk," Peter said shortly, clambering to his feet and hurrying out of the room.

Rabbit stayed where she was until her clockwork told her it was almost time to be the best man.

"Is Bunny in here?"

"David?" Paige said, surprised. She hurried to the doorway. She whispered, "Did you get it?"

"Yeah, Steve brought his part a while ago and the rest was easy to boost with her in here. Pretty sure it'll fit."

"Oh... made your best guess?"

David grinned. "Between you and me, I tried them on."

Paige giggled softly. "Alright, tell Steve to go ahead with it. Rabbit hasn't apologized yet as far as I know."

"Got it."

"Yes, she's here," Paige said loudly.

"Annie sent me to get her out. I guess Bree's mom is on her way in."

"Oh... I don't understand..."

Bree hurried to them with Chelsea close behind. "I do!" she whispered. "Mom figured out which Bunny she was."

"She didn't know?" Chelsea asked.

"Peter introduced her as Isabella. So mom heard us talking about Peter and Bunny and put the pieces together. And since she only knew Bunny as Paige's boyfriend, well, you can imagine. She saved her questions until she got home at least. Then she called me and dumped them all on me with a few from Dad thrown in."
"Holy crap," David breathed. "I won't even ask what she wanted to know. It'll just piss me off."

"Very wise. Let's just say that she did not successfully process my explanation of the implosion and is still convinced Bunny is transitioning. She thinks she's being very modern about it but I think she used up her resources in accepting The Spine. I just know she'll be eyeing Bunny and asking passive-aggressive questions."

"Yeah... time to get moving, then. I'll go and..."

"No, I want to tell her something real quick," Bree interrupted. "I'll go get her."

"Oh, okay..."

Bree hurried to the window to get Bunny. David looked on apprehensively.

"She okay? I haven't seen her or Peter all day and Annie said they'd had a fight or something..."

"So we assume, anyway," Chelsea sighed.

"Yeah," Paige agreed. "Bunny isn't sharing."

"That's a switch..." David said.

"Yeah. It worries me. I can't imagine what could have happened between them to get her like this."

"I'm trying not to imagine it..." he mumbled.

Bree and Bunny walked to them, arm in arm. "I know you don't want to talk right now." Bree was saying, "but if you ever need to, don't hold back, okay? We're going to be spending a lot of time in this big old house together over the years. Our kids might even play together someday. I want you to think of me as a sister. I'm here for you. Don't forget it."

Bunny nodded and grimaced as tears started once again. David stepped into the room and embraced his sister.

"Oh, and... look, Bunny," Bree continued, "if you're not feeling up to it tonight... seriously, I won't be mad if you want to skip the wedding, okay? I don't want you to take that the wrong way either. I'd love to see you there. But if you're not up to it, it's cool. Okay?"

Bunny nodded weakly.

"Thanks, Bree," David murmured. He gave Chelsea a quick kiss and took Bunny's arm. "Well, come on... Melanie's coming in and you don't want her staring at your crotch."

Bunny sighed with feeling and walked slowly beside him. Paige waved as they walked out. Bree closed the door.

"Hope she tells him what's wrong. It'll drive him crazy, not knowing," Chelsea said.

Bree nodded. "I do want to see her at the wedding, though. I just don't want her to have to sit watching us get married if she and Peter... you know. I had hoped they could get over themselves but if they've found out they can't..."

"Oh, but they just started!" Chelsea sighed. "They have to give it more time that this!"

Paige shook her head. "Those two can be so impulsive. I know Bunny well enough and I've seen
how Peter acts. Most likely they had a fight about something small that they think is huge, and said things way worse than whatever happened in the first place, and both of them are angry and both are hurt... and since they're ridiculously in love, both are getting more and more panicky while waiting for the other one to make the first move to apologize."

"Hm..." Bree murmured, turning back to her makeup. "We could trick them into dancing together at the reception. Or does that sound too much like an episode of Friends?"

Paige and Chelsea laughed.

"Spine... um... Spine?"

The Spine looked up from the drum set he was helping to assemble. Bree's father, Jeff, was peering in through the doorway.

Well, hell. Maybe he just wanted to say hello...

He left with a nod to Matt Smith and hurried to the door.

"Jeff! Good afternoon. You're a bit early..."

"Well, um... holy hell, you're tall... Melanie wanted to get here and help Bree get ready. She's off with Annie now..."

"Of course! Well, I understand there's a buffet being steadily replenished for house guests if you haven't had lunch yet."

"Oh! Thank you... I had hoped to get a few minutes to talk to you, though."

The Spine kept the smile plastered onto his face to cover the sinking feeling in his chassis. The man had given in too easily the day before. He really should have seen this coming.

"Of course," he said lightly. "Come get something to eat and we can find somewhere to talk."

They settled at the end of the long dining table once Jeff had filled a plate with various cold cuts. The Spine sat across from him, drinking a glass of water, waiting for the axe to fall.

"So..." Jeff said around a bite of turkey sandwich, "You don't actually need to eat, I suppose."

_It begins._ "No. Not organic food. Just water and oil."

"Um." He swallowed. "Look... you know why I'm here, right? I can't just let her marry a robot..."

_Dammit to hell._ "She's an adult..."

"I understand that. I'm not going to make a fuss. If she's determined to go through with it, well... She's a good girl. Always was way smarter than the rest of her family. I guess she knows what she wants."

"Then I'm not sure what you mean, sir."

"Sir? No, call me Jeff, first of all. I'm trying, okay? You try too."

"Oh! Of course... Jeff..."
"She can make her own choices, but I just think it's nice to know something about the... um... man my daughter is marrying. I get that you're not some factory assembly line robot, alright? I understand you're older than my grandmother and you've fought for your country. I'm trying to wrap my head around it all, honestly. You're new to me, but you're old. You're an alien thing and you're an American hero. You're a man but you're a machine. And she says she's in love but... don't take this the wrong way, but... with what? It's damned confusing."

"I understand..."

"No, I don't think you do. You've never had a daughter."

It felt like an accusation. He felt a mingled ire and sadness and looked down, his face tense.

"Peter mentioned I'd been married before," he muttered.

He heard Jeff move his chair closer. "Holy hell... you have had a daughter, haven't you? I didn't... I suppose I didn't believe it. You had a family..."

"Yes," The Spine said thickly, looking up. "Is that the information you want? Do you want the details of my life? Do you want to understand just what your daughter is getting in marrying me?"

"Yes, I do. A human man would have ambitions, goals, a damned life expectancy. A lot of real, practical, predictable qualities, and we'd just have to find out whether he had a decent job and no diseases and wasn't some kind of closet sociopath. I know Bree thinks she's got it under control and she knows all there is to know about you but I'm asking from where I sit... Do I have anything to worry about?"

The Spine filled his bellows and exhaled slowly. A soft plume of steam dissipated in the air as Jeff stared.

"I'll do my best to explain, if you like. Do you want a general assurance or some actual benchmarks?"

"Benchmarks?"

"Do you want my history? I can sum up the essentials."

"If you have the time, I think I would appreciate the full history. I'm starting with almost nothing. I vaguely heard of your band over the years and I had sorta figured it was a gimmick."

"Ah. We could be seen that way. We're a bit off the beaten track in the music business," The Spine murmured. "Alright. Well... I was born, so to speak, in 1896. Yes, that long ago. My creator was Peter Alexander Walter I. I was originally intended to perform music and was later reprogrammed for battle. The musical programming was restored and I currently have no weapons active.

"I have one older sister and two younger brothers. The older sister currently looks male because she was designed as a female and later reprogrammed as a male. She's currently in the process of restoring her original design and programming."

"Yeah, speaking of... well... we figured out last night about that Bunny... um, kid... That used to be Paige's boyfriend!"

"She's a woman, Jeff."

"Oh, I know they want to be called that but they dated for years and I never saw him in drag..."
"Nevertheless..." The Spine said patiently. "She is Peter's wife."

"Oh. Well, alright..."

The Spine was actually relieved. After the tone he'd taken, it had seemed that Jeff was going to make a fuss. He could tell the man didn't know Bunny was literally female, and yet he had quietly dropped the subject. But no one said he had to like it, just tolerate it, and hopefully keep his mouth shut around Peter and Bunny.

Besides, The Spine wasn't willing to attempt a more accurate explanation. Jeff had enough misgivings about his daughter living in Walter Manor without hearing about chromosome changing Blue Matter explosions.

"As I was saying, I have three robotic siblings, and two human siblings, identical twin brothers. We, that is, the robots, first fought in a small war in Africa in 1897. It was after that, that Col. Walter restored our original programming and we performed as musicians. We fought in the Great War along with one of our human siblings. The other was 4F due to poor eyesight."

"Only one twin had bad eyes?"

"It can happen, but I'm not sure it did. It's just my opinion, of course, but I'm almost positive the other found a way to cheat."

"Ah. I heard Ronald Reagan did that."

"Did he? Well... in 1937, our brother Hatchworth was stored due to a damaged core. He was repaired just last year. The rest of us fought in World War II. Our father died while we were on leave, fortunately, since we were able to say goodbye. It was painful to continue on active duty after the loss, but I could see that the others were hurting more, so I... I found it best to appear aloof. This became a bad habit and by 1950 I seldom shared what I was feeling. That was the year that I met Marie."

"Is that your first wife, then?"

"Yes. That's her."

"Damn, I wasn't even born yet..."

"Ah. Well... I was dressed as a human, complete with makeup, and we fell in love almost at first sight. Of course she had to find out the truth eventually, and to my great joy she chose to overlook my exterior and love me for who I was. And I learned that I had been keeping myself back for too long. I was capable of human emotion but I was afraid to let myself feel it. With Marie, I learned that I could have a full life. I grew more in the thirty-three years of our marriage than I ever thought possible."

"But how in the world were you allowed to get married?"

"Just like now... with the help of family friends."

Jeff shook his head. "Alright. Times have changed enough that I suppose it's anything goes anyway. So what about this daughter?"

This was something he saw no reason to ever tell his in-laws. If they couldn't grasp Bunny's transformation, Lily's birth might well send them running for the police...
"Well... soon after our marriage, we adopted a son we named David. And... later on, Lily joined the family as well."

Yes. That covered it. Provided the man never asked a direct question, he wouldn't be lying... not in the most literal, blatant sense anyway. He could live with a sin of omission... so to speak.

"Are they... y'know, are they coming to the wedding?"

"David is. Lily passed on some time ago."

"Oh. I'm sorry. That must have been hard..."

"It was. She passed away at the age of twenty-one. I loved her more than my life. But... she was always in poor health and we don't speak of her much. Losing her was like dying.

"She had gotten married, as well. I want you to understand that. I know how it feels to have to let your daughter love someone else. I don't understand the adjustment you have to make to letting her marry something you never knew existed. I admit that. But I have felt the pain of no longer being the man in her life."

Jeff sat back in his seat, his food forgotten. "Well, that's a pretty full life, Spine. But you've left out a detail."

"Hm?"

"Your wife," Jeff murmured. "What happened to her?"

The Spine filled and emptied his bellows once more. He'd actually hoped to avoid discussing Marie, today of all days, and here he was, reliving their years together. But then, for all he knew, that was Jeff's design. He knew there was a lot on the line, that their good graces relied on his answers, but more than that he couldn't shake the feeling he was being tested.

"As I said, we had thirty-three wonderful years together. She endured sending her husband away to Vietnam, having a son on drugs while I was away and unable to help, and losing her daughter. She was a remarkable woman. She held us all up even when she was sick herself. And..." He sighed.

"She died in 1983 of cervical cancer," he finished softly.

"Oh. I'm sorry. That was... well, quite a while ago. You didn't marry anyone in between?"

"No. I really didn't even see women. It wasn't easy to move on."

"No, I suppose it's not easy to find a woman who can get past the... y'know?"

"You'd be surprised," The Spine said with a sad smile. "As a musician, I've had more than my share of offers."

"Have you really?"

"I have. I'll be honest. We've performed concerts at conventions and I've been given a surprising amount of notes and room keys and... well, some fairly clear innuendo."

"Holy hell... you mean they wanted to get you in the sack?"

"I can only assume so. After the first few back in the twenties, I decided it was best to keep to groups in public. The girls back then had no filters at all."
"Well, the joke would be on them, wouldn't it?" Jeff chuckled.

"In what way?"

"Well, I mean, they're barking up the wrong tree... you don't have a... y'know... Because you're a robot. There wouldn't be a reason for... y'know... right?"

The glance he flicked at The Spine's crotch told the tale far better than his words did. Jeff stared at him in the awkward silence that followed.

"Holy hell..." he breathed at last. "Don't tell me you do have one...?"

"Well..." The Spine said reluctantly.

"You do?" Jeff cried.

The Spine wanted to do a large amount of swearing. Instead, he nodded.

"But... why?"

"Why not?" The Spine asked tightly. "Did you think she would be marrying a man who couldn't make love to her?"

"Well... I tried not to think about it. She's my baby and with you being a robot it was already a lot to take in. I'm sorry... cut me a little slack. I'm trying here, I swear it. No parent alive has had to adapt to something like this."

"Of course," The Spine sighed. "I apologize if I seemed abrupt."

"No, it's fair. It's just that... this is kinda complicated. If she wanted to live without... y'know... I guess I'd leave her to it, but I just want to know she'll be safe when you two... Can I tell you how much I hate this conversation?" Jeff wiped his brow with a napkin. "Look, I don't know where to go with this. You just tell me what you think is relevant and if I have any questions I'll ask them after."

"Alright. Without going into detail... I was given it by the US government in 1955. It was more or less top secret equipment at the time. I'd really prefer it not be mentioned outside of the manor. And before you ask... the idea at the time was that I would be disguised as a human to engage in espionage missions. I did so only once and yes, the equipment was used."

"You make it sound so technical..." Jeff muttered, his face red.

"At the time it was, and I prefer to think of it that way. I felt terrible in retrospect because I loved my wife and felt I'd been unfaithful. She understood but I still hated myself. But we still had a healthy sex life for the majority of our marriage. So I'm not a novice..."

"That's... that's enough. I don't need the mental image. So... Bree is satisfied with, um... things, then. I mean, she already knows about all this?"

"Yes, I told her all about Marie and about... that, yes."

"Told her? You two haven't... y'know... yet...?"

"No. We haven't. I wanted to wait until after the wedding."

"A robot saving himself for marriage?"
"Are human values exclusive to humans? I respect marriage and sex as part of a lasting commitment."

Jeff gave him a long appraising stare. The Spine looked back as calmly as he could manage... which he knew was very calm indeed. Inside, his boiler was churning. What a hellish ordeal! He'd had no idea just how lucky he'd been that Marie's father had already passed away! And this long conversation about his habits and his family and his... his damned penis! And while Jeff had been calm the whole time, well... would the idea of his daughter making love to a robot be too much for this man?

"Spine... I think we understand one another now. I'm frankly in awe. Holy hell, she's lucky to find someone like you. If she'd gotten sweet on that David twerp..."

Were his audioreceptors malfunctioning? It sounded as though he'd passed the test!

"I believe he's learned a great deal since he started working here..." he said faintly.

"Still..." He shook his head. "I never thought I'd say this, but... I'd be proud to have you as a son-in-law."

The Spine didn't know what to say. He'd expected the conversation to end in Jeff storming out and attempting to forbid their marriage!

"Well, I mean..." Jeff continued. "I don't know that I'll get the chance to be proud of it. Can we even tell anyone about this? It would be damned hard to explain. And I don't want people bothering you two here. The paparazzi..."

"No, you're right. We'll have to have some cover story."

"And kids! Wait... what about kids? Adoption I guess?"

The Spine had hoped to slip away now that the grilling was complete. But no, there was an epilogue...

"Um... y'know," The Spine mumbled, "I wish you'd discuss that with Peter VI sometime. We have some ideas about that but he's more or less my doctor..."

"Wait, whoa. You can't have kids, can you? Like reproduce? That daughter was adopted too, right?"

"Uh, no. I can't," The Spine said truthfully, avoiding the last question. Whether he once had was, in his opinion, moot. "Not on my own..."

"Not on your own? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means... not without donor cells..." he said reluctantly. "I mean, if..."

"So you mean to tell me that thing doubles as... as a... y'know? Turkey baster?"

Again with the penis! And... turkey baster?

"Yes, Peter is considering the possibility that it can be adapted to function as a... how to say this... a means of introducing a donated sample," The Spine said uneasily. "For artificial insemination."

"Holy hell... the things they can do these days... Well, no need to say more. I promise I'd never have asked if I thought there was any other way. You've got character, but I've got to make sure she's got a chance at having a normal life with you. Do you understand?"
Normal. Apparently it was normal to grill a prospective son-in-law about his penis. Well, if Jeff was satisfied, after all this, with his ability to provide what he considered normality...

"Well..." The Spine said briskly, inching his chair away from the table, "I believe it's time for me to go and begin dressing for the wedding, and you probably want to finish your food..."

"Oh, of course, go on and get ready. Don't worry about a thing, alright? We're all squared away. Welcome to the family!"

"Oh... thank you," The Spine breathed.

Unsure how to commemorate the occasion, he extended his hand. Jeff chuckled and accepted it, shaking it lightly before letting go.

"And you're a lucky man. Don't forget it," the man added, returning to his plate.

The Spine stood, relieved. "I do know that. I never thought I would find another woman I could love who could see past my exterior."

"See past...?"

"Well, yes. I know I have my share of fan girls but to truly love me as I am? Not an easy feat."

Jeff was giving him a curious smile.

"What is it?" The Spine asked.

"Oh, nothing. Congratulations!"

"Thank you," The Spine murmured. "See you at the wedding."

He strode from the room, wondering whether he should be worried. Clearly the man wasn't telling him something. Although he could only be pleased that there was something he wouldn't say...

As he headed for his room, he activated his remote text module. "Hey, baby. I have some good news..."
Union - Part 4 - Everybody Hurts

Chapter Summary

Take comfort in your friends. Everybody hurts, sometimes.

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNING: Somewhat awkward conversation about losing virginity in the strict physical sense. It doesn't hurt everyone but others... well...

Also a frank, but not explicit, conversation about a past sexual assault re: it happening to a friend. It's just a short passage near the end but I figured I should mention it.

Just a lot of tmi. Some big dumb babies have things to work out.

Bunny trudged beside David, half-listening, trying to stop crying as he chatted nervously about nothing. Bree's kind words had stung on multiple levels... none of them intentional.

Would they really live here for years together? Bunny had been analyzing her options while she sat writing and crumpling numerous letters to Peter... angry letters, hurt letters, apologetic letters. But she couldn't get past the hurt, the fact that in doing what she thought was right, she'd been treated like... like he used to treat her. Only it was a hell of a lot more personal now...

Was this really what she wanted? She'd felt sure down to her stockings that morning when she said yes. She'd thought it through before that, felt she understood him well enough to move forward with whatever kind of relationship he was willing to have. But now that they'd slept together, suddenly it was the same old thing... Peter's priggish self-righteous anger, and her own petulance. Yes, she owned that... she knew she had a temper and lost it far too easily.

But when things went even a little sour in a relationship, she ran away before she could get really hurt... and she was tired of running away. The personality problems each of them had would follow them wherever they went. Here, if she could only learn to resolve conflicts instead of running from them, she could have everything she craved; a home, security, a family, love, the freedom to pursue her art, and the science she had come to love since taking the job. Even children... Peter's and hers. She'd been dreaming about those children...

The tears that had never really stopped received a fresh round of reinforcements. A little cough escaped her lips and David looked at her sharply.

"Oh... crap, what did I say?" he gasped.

She shook her head and whispered, "Nothing. It's just... everything else."

"Alright," he sighed. He put his arm around her and they continued down the hallway. "Holy crap, you're a mess."
"Thanks..."

"Where are we going, anyway?"


"Oh."

They walked on in silence.

"Look..." he said as they turned into the worker's wing, "you know how much I want to hear all the dirty details. Y'know, like, not at all if I can help it. But if you need to talk about it, well... I worry about you, okay?"

"I'll be fine," she breathed, trying to smile.

"Oh, shut the hell up," he muttered. "Don't give me that, that's not an answer."

"Trust me, you don't want to know..."

"Don't tell me what I do or don't want to know. I'm f***ing worried about you! Is he hurting you, Bunny? Did he do something to you?"

"No!" she gasped through her tears.

"Yeah, but you're crying just like you used to! Don't tell me he didn't hurt you while you're crying like that. You used to say the same thing about her! I'm not letting him abuse you, and neither are you, you hear me?"

"Shut up!" she gasped, flailing her arms. Why did he have to get so angry? "I-I need to say something but you're too loud!"

David clenched his jaw and took a slow breath. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'll be quiet so you can talk. I just... I won't have it, okay? I love you and I don't want you hurt."

"Dumb baby," she sniffled. "I love you, too. But you've got it all wrong. Peter isn't abusing me. Alright? He doesn't have it in him."

"Oh. I just figured it's always the quiet ones. Well... good. Then what the hell are you bawling about if he didn't hurt you?"

Bunny bit her lip as they strolled at last into her room and sat, as one, on the bed. David pulled her close and she rested her head on his shoulder. So he got mad. She did, too. They'd been through too much not to get mad sometimes, and David had always been especially protective of her. The shouting had been because he was scared for her.

But it only reminded her that Peter had been upset because he didn't want to hurt her...

"Well?" he asked softly. "I'm listening. Whatever it is, I can take it."

"You sure?" she breathed.

"Just... keep the personal details light and PG-rated..."

She sighed. She needed to talk to someone. Bree had offered, but she still wasn't quite comfortable telling her personal details. And Peter... even if they made up, she couldn't tell him the truth, could
Bunny dragged her sleeve across her eyes and took a shuddering breath. "Well... I said he didn't abuse me. I didn't actually say he didn't hurt me."

"What? Oh..." His eyes opened wide. "Oh! Hello!"

She had the strangest urge to laugh. She swallowed hard and murmured, "Yeah. Like Col. Walter and the maid..."

"Well, not exactly like... um... I mean... y'know..." David stammered. "Holy crap..."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what? It wasn't your fault. Was it? We are talking about you losing your virginity, right? Well, y'know, sort of..."

"Yeah, we are. Peter too. But he hardly remembers any of it and..."

She broke down once more and felt terrible for it, knowing he would worry more. But something had been creeping over her slowly all day. She might have been able to cope had things gone differently in the morning...

"Bunny, come on! You're freaking me out! Did he or didn't he do something to you... like on purpose?"

She looked at him and gasped, "He didn't! He didn't know... But... but... oh, hell! David... I know you don't want to know but... I-I couldn't relax! It was consensual but he was so drunk and horny, and I totally understand that, but I was so scared of it, y'know, it, being a girl now, and I was tense and... and it hurt! And it wasn't supposed to be like that! It was supposed to hurt a little and be beautiful and sweet... but it wasn't... which was all my fault because I didn't tell him the truth!"

She could feel David's arm stiffen around her shoulders. He was angry again.

"I'm sorry..." she gulped, trying once more to regain control. "That was tmi but... but I just had to tell someone... and I can't tell Peter..."

"Don't you think he should know what he did to you?" David muttered.

"I told you, he didn't mean to do it!" she gasped quickly.

"I didn't say he did," David said in soft, lethal tones.

"But you're angry! I can tell you're angry!" she choked, looking up at last.

David pulled her into a hug and sighed. "But not at either of you. I know it wasn't his fault and it wasn't yours either, okay?"

"Y-You do?" Had he been talking to Peter?

"Yeah... I mean... you just told me..."

"I said it wasn't his fault..."

"Well, yeah..." He sighed. "I'm just... angry, okay? Because life sucks sometimes. I hate to see you hurting."
"Probably sounds stupid to be whining about it, though," she whispered as she rested once more against his shoulder. "Because I wanted it to be prettier... with roses and chocolate and stuff. I was gonna... well, it doesn't matter now..."

"You schmuck... you had a whole romantic scene planned out in your head, didn't you?"

Bunny nodded. He chuckled.

"Same old Bunny... So this is why you were crying, then? Because you lost your romance novel moment? Because you know it's just the first time, right? You can have chocolate and rose petals and... whatever the crap... another day..."

"I know. But... Peter and I had a fight this morning, too."

"What? Why?"

"I told you. I lied to him."

David snorted. "But you always lie to him."

"Yeah, but... it's about time I stopped. I mean, we're married. I love him. I shouldn't lie to him, should I?"

"I don't know. There's plenty of good reasons to lie, especially to people you love."

"Doofus. What if it hurts him? Like if I lied about something that was really important to him..."

"Look, quit being hypothetical and just tell me what you lied about this time. And yeah, you hinted at it and I know I'll regret knowing so just get it off your chest."

"Alright... without all the gory details... I lied about having had a hymenotomy."

"A what?"

"It's a surgical procedure to, um... break the hymen. Like in a doctor's office ahead of time. So it won't break during sex."

"They do that? That's awesome!"

"Are you kidding?"

"No! I used to be so worried about that."

"Yeah," she whispered. "But Peter worried way more. He was so freaked out about it that... he actually cried because he was so afraid to hurt me."

She fell silent and cried quietly against his shoulder, waiting.

"So you said you'd had one," he murmured. "And then..."

She nodded. "He asked me to find out what could be done, and I mentioned that and he just figured that was the answer, but I didn't really want one..."

"Holy crap, Bunny... so he thought it was a done deal?"

"Yeah..." she gasped, trembling.
"Bunny, why? Why not get it, and why lie about it if you didn't?"

"I didn't think it would be that bad! And I didn't want to lose my virginity in a doctor's office! I mean... you know what I mean. But Peter was so afraid to hurt me that I had to say something... I never actually said I'd do it but I sorta hinted I had."

"Well, crap..." David muttered. "I don't know what to say... What do you plan to do?"

"I don't know... confess? Apologize? How can I tell him this, though? It's everything he was afraid of and he's already mad and... he'll hate me!"

David shook his head and gave her a squeeze. "I doubt that. He was made of ice and you melted him. He's completely whipped. He's probably somewhere crying and trying to decide how to come in and say he's sorry."

"For what? It's my fault!"

"I dunno. Yelling I guess. I just know he's crazy about you."

"But he hasn't tried to talk to me all day..."

"Well, maybe he thinks you're still mad."

Bunny sighed, frustrated.

"You know he's a weenie."

"No, he's not," she whispered wearily. "This is so pathetic. I shouldn't even need a man, or a woman, or anyone. I should be self-reliant."

"Everyone says that, yeah. You shouldn't be some loser who can't let go or stand on your own two feet. But... you're married. You're crazy about each other. You just have some things you don't agree on. And it pretty natural to need to have someone in your life. Look at all the old married couples... the happy ones, y'know. No one calls them co-dependent or obsessed or sad losers. They're kinda... they're living the dream, dang it. We all talk big and we want to be free agents but it's human nature to need other people.

"You just don't want to need them so much that you let them hurt you or mistreat you. But after all this I'm not even worried about it anymore. He hurt you, you hurt him... And just the idea of hurting each other is killing you both. So if Peter is as good as you seem to think he his, you two will meet halfway and work this out."

"And if not? If he can't get over himself?"

"You found out early. Before it was too late."

"Too late?"

"Y'know, before you had kids and stuff. That complicates everything."

"Yeah."

"Good thing you're on the pill."

"Yeah. Because we didn't use a... never mind."
"Ah. Yes, thanks for censoring. So..." He took a deep breath. "I guess there was... y'know... blood?"

"Oh... um... yeah..."

"Ouch. You need an ice pack or something?"

"Oh..." Peter had suggested that. That was so sweet... of both of them. "Yeah, kinda..."

"Well, let me get that ice pack. And you really should blow off the wedding. You need some rest."

He walked out and Bunny wearily texted Bree.

"Hey, I'm not feeling so hot so I think I will just stay in bed after all," she typed.

"Alright. If you're feeling better in a bit, there's always the reception."

"Maybe."

"Okay. See you later."

Bunny curled at last in bed, as comfortable as she could get with an ice pack jammed in such a sensitive area. How could she sleep, though? She'd ruined everything...

But talking to David had been such a relief that she drifted off almost immediately.

Peter trudged in the general direction of their room, his heart in his throat. He didn't want to be fighting with Bunny! He loved her!

He brooded as he waited for the shower water to warm. Bunny had said it was amazing last night, and he remembered just enough to know she was absolutely right. They'd been drunk and clumsy but even that hadn't been enough to ruin the joy of just giving way to their feelings for each other.

And he had been angry to find out that she'd lied, and that he'd hurt her... and he'd shouted and hurt her more, and she'd run out, and he hadn't seen her all day, and and maybe she'd never forgive him, and...

It swept over him all at once. By the time the warm water hit his back, he was a ruin. Reason vanished and all he could think of was the sound of her crying, the hurt on her face... the anger! He'd been so hard-nosed and stupid and she was so upset with him! He couldn't go back to being her enemy! They never should have been enemies!

He leaned against the wall of the shower and choked with misery.

"I'm sorry..." he whispered.

He dragged himself upright and managed to wash while crying softly, glad for the privacy. He emerged at last from the shower, still sniffling and trying to regain control. His headache was worse than ever and he just wanted to crawl into bed... but he didn't want to be there alone.

Alone. She still wasn't here... his heart pounded... She'd been in the wrong... how could he just drop it? Would that be right? But then maybe she knew he'd have trouble with that. Maybe she figured he couldn't change! What if she'd decided he was the same jerk he always was and wanted an annulment?
An anguished squeak burst from his lips and he forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply as he clutched his towel in both hands. It felt terrible; a wave of panic swept over him and he gasped and sat on the toilet seat, trembling.

"Calm... calm... it's going to be okay... it's going to be okay..." he repeated breathlessly, rocking himself. "It always passes... it's okay..."

"Peter Walter VI?"

"Hatchy!" Peter cried.

"Are you in need of assistance? Your door is locked. Do you require me to force entry?"

"D-Don't... don't break the door... I'll be right there..."

Peter scrambled to wrap the towel around his waist and hurried, dripping, to the bedroom door. He opened it and Hatchworth looked him over with concern.

"I heard the sounds of grief. Has anything untoward happened?"

"Just come in... come in, please... I... I'm having a panic attack and I just need someone here."

"But where is your charming wife, Peter?" Hatchworth asked as he walked into the room, carefully closing the door behind him.

Peter broke down and leaned against the cool wall, shaking.

"Peter!" Hatchy gasped.

"She... she's so angry at me... it's all a mess and she was so angry, Hatchy! I can't do this... I mean I don't have to have her to calm me down but if I've lost her I just... I need to be independent but... I didn't mean what I said I just meant... I made her cry, Hatchy! I hurt her..."

Hatchworth was staring at him as if he'd grown another head. He probably thought he'd lost his mind.

"Hurt her?"

"It was her first time... as a woman... and..."

"Oh, dear me... Do you mean that you were obliged to rob her of her maidenhood?"

"Hatchy, please..."

"And you have quarreled as a result!" To Peter's surprise, two oily tears formed at the corners of the automaton's eyes. "Dear boy... but how very tragic! Surely this must be brought to rights! We have all kissed the sweet bride, and only good fortune must come of it!"

Peter nodded vigorously.

"But for what reason was there a quarrel? Did she object to the process?"

"Hatchy, no!" Peter cried. "No, she was willing... I just... I never wanted to hurt her..."

"But by all accounts that is how mankind has continued to thrive. A maid must lose her virginity through sometimes painful means, as it has been for centuries untold..."
Peter felt a stab of anger. "Not the finest precedent for it, though, is it? Looking back at the history of men? Raping and pillaging, taking their underage virgin brides and deflowering them like breaking a damned horse..."

"I... don't really know what to say. To be sure, that is a real historical truth, but she is not a child bride, she's a consenting adult."

"I know, but... Look, every story I ever heard in school about sex, I swear, seemed to be about some guy taking a girl's virginity. And... I've never told anyone about this, but I had this little friend when I was a kid... Mary. She told me once that her uncle had molested her, but I was eight years old and I'd never heard of such a thing in my life. I didn't believe her so I never told anyone. I even kinda forgot about it until years after we lost touch and I heard her mom had finally found out what was going on and was pressing charges because he'd moved from molestation to... well, rape. And that was when I realized I'd known and could maybe have saved her from it but... I didn't understand. I was so little. But so was she.

"So after all that, well... I just didn't want to be one of those guys. It haunted me, y'know? I kept seeing it in my head... my friend as she was, being hurt by this big horn pervert. How can anyone do something like that, Hatchy? How can a man just help himself to some kid's innocence?"

Hatchworth dabbed at his eyes. "I could not begin to understand, I'm afraid. I only know that humankind can be very selfish, and very cruel."

"Yeah," Peter sighed. "So... anyway, when I grew up and had no sex drive I was kind of relieved. And then I fell in love and it turns out I did have a sex drive, when it was the right woman, and I thought maybe I could deal with it now, for her. Only it turned out I might have to see her in pain because of me. If I wanted to be intimate with her, I'd have to to start by being the thing I'd never wanted... a man making a woman hurt.

"And I knew it wasn't the same thing, but just the thought of it was too much so I asked Bunny to have a doctor take care of the hymen so it wouldn't break during sex. It was just a little surgical procedure but... I dunno. It sounds stupid but it really bothered me and I thought it wasn't a big deal compared to feeling like some horn animal. But I never told her why because... because it hurts to remember my stupidity and because I didn't want it to sound like I was trying to make her feel bad in order to push her to do what I wanted. Only it seems she didn't want to and... and she had good reason to believe she couldn't just open up to me and tell me. So she pretended she'd had it done and we had sex and I'm an a$$hole because I got angry and yelled about it and made her cry when I found out even though it was really..." He sighed roughly. "It's just that I woke up sick and miserable and then I had to find blood all over my...

"Ah, yes. All over your penis."

Why? "Um... yeah..."

"Indeed. Much like Col. Walter."

"Too much like..." Peter muttered. "Considering I was plastered."

Hatchworth stared at him for far longer than he ever wanted. Why had he opened up to Hatchworth, of all people? The conversation had grown desperately awkward, and now he was angry again. And still nervous! Peter sank to the bed, sighing, still clutching his towel.

"If you had not been drunk," Hatchworth asked in a soft, serious voice, "do you think you would still have hurt your sweet wife?"
"Yeah. Yeah, honestly I think I would have. I might have noticed... something, but I still wouldn't have understood what was going on and it still would have happened."

Hatchworth nodded and let out a puff of steam. "Thank you. I was on the point of seeking out Rabbit and having a chat with her."

"Why?"

"A private matter between the two of us, for now. But my boy, rest assured of one thing. Your fear does not sound stupid at all. It sounds like a very kind sort of fear."

"Thanks, Hatchy," Peter replied softly.

Now that he was a bit calmer, he could feel his head throbbing. He groaned.

"Your head appears to be at an unusually high temperature in comparison to the rest of your body."

"What? Oh... yeah... I have the worst headache."

Hatchworth opened his hatch and produced a bottle of pills and a glass of water.

"Oh, thanks..." Peter murmured. He hastily took three.

"Do you require a hug?"

Yes... "I... I'm not really dressed for it..."

"I will wait, then. Dear me, but why is it always the sex?" he sighed. "I have no first-hand experience with the sex. Possibly I should summon The Spine..."

"No!"

Peter breathed slowly and tried not to think about his situation, for now. He just needed to calm down and then maybe he could find her and talk to her. Surely at the ceremony there would be a few minutes...

Hatchworth was watching him with what he swore was a look of pity. "Do you realize that The Spine would be only too glad to advise you, lad?"

Peter looked at Hatchworth, surprised. There were times when he sounded very human.

"Yeah. But... well, he's already done that. He told me something very important."

"As well he should, with his long experience. If I might ask, what words of advice did he offer?"

"Apologize," Peter sighed, rising and opening his dresser at last. "And be more careful in the future."

"Ah, yes. He gave Rabbit similar advice."

Peter turned away and carefully slipped into his underwear. "I'm sure he has to give Rabbit that advice almost constantly, Hatchy."

"No, I mean... Well, yes. Indeed he does."

"But it never would have happened this way if she'd just had the procedure done instead of lying to me..." Peter sighed. "And I just don't know how to take that."
"Ah. Well, I too can advise. Though I know nothing of the sex, I do know about honesty. It is always the best policy."

"Is it?" Peter said absently, hopping into his slacks.

"Indeed. You may be inclined to see this as censure of your failure to tell your mother what happened to your young friend. I assure you, it is not. That was the innocent mistake of a child. I refer to the knowing honesty of an adult, which is in its way sacred. Though it is sometimes best to keep it to oneself so as to avoid offense. There are also times of great difficulty in which it must be suppressed, such as when the revelation might lead to harm."

"And if harm comes from suppressing the truth?" Peter asked irritably.

"A difficult situation. I suppose the offended party requires an apology."

"Yeah..." Which she'd never do...

"And the offending party requires understanding and forgiveness, as they acted in their best conscience. Much as you, in your innocence, did once. And as your dear wife, by your own admission, has done for you."

Peter stopped in the middle of buttoning his shirt. He felt as though a light had been turned on; everything was clear.

Why was he so hard-nosed? It always made people angry but still he did it. And all along, it had never been about who was right. If she meant well, he could just... forgive her.

She hadn't tried to be controlling. She was just used to telling him what he wanted to hear and then doing what she thought best anyway, because when he got worked up about things, he stopped listening. Trust was something they needed to develop after years of their awkward working relationship. But it wasn't only the kind of trust that came from being open and honest.

He needed to trust her judgment instead of always pushing his own. He needed to open up to her about all the reasons why he felt the way he did. It was ridiculous not to trust her after all these months of working closely together, and after falling so very deeply in love with her.

And she needed to know that he did... sooner rather than later. Because he knew Bunny well enough to know that his anger had crushed her, and that she was probably sure it was over.

He needed to talk to her...

He noticed Hatchworth looking at him with concern and nodded. "She really did..." he sighed.

"Are you feeling calmer, Peter?"

"A little..." Or he had been, until he thought about how much Bunny was hurting...

"Do you require a hug now?"

Peter laughed, a nervous, brittle sort of laugh. "Maybe once I'm dressed..."

Hatchworth waited patiently for Peter to button his shirt and hugged him gently.

"Do not delay your apology. She is the best thing that has happened to you, as well you know."

He patted Peter's shoulder and left. Peter stood thinking, staring at the door. He should find her now
and straighten things out. She was probably in her room by now... but could he make himself clear? Would his thoughts instead whip up into a maelstrom at the sight of her tear-streaked face? Or maybe she'd had time to get angry because he left her like this all day!

Shaking, he sat down and tried to write another note, this time on plain paper.

"Bunny," he wrote. No. Not enough. He ripped the paper off and wrote instead, "My dearest love..."

Corny. He almost tore it off again and stopped. It might have been corny but he owned it body and soul. She was dear to him. And right now, sincerity was needed. He couldn't let a disagreement get between them. He needed to pour out everything he had and hope it was enough.

He imagined her reading it. If she was still angry, it wouldn't hurt, and if she was still crying... it might be enough to touch her heart. She couldn't possibly mistake the tone.

"I'm so sorry," he wrote. "Not only for hurting you last night, but for hurting you this morning, and leaving you all day to wallow in the damage I've done. It was hard for me, and I had thought we'd agreed to do things a certain way. I wanted nothing to interfere with our first time together. And I didn't want to see you in pain that I had inflicted. There's more to it than that, more than I can say in a letter. I just didn't want to hurt you.

"I didn't think about how you'd feel about it. I get that to you it was just a part of the process, and that you were the only one it hurt. I should have let you make the choice and trusted your judgment. I should have had the courage to do what it took to make love to you. You have no idea how much I wanted to do that. Now I only wish I could remember more about last night. What I do remember is, well... just what I'd hoped it would be. Beautiful.

"I want us to have more memories together, Bunny. I love you. I hope it goes without saying that I'm not angry anymore, and I forgive the white lie that my actions forced. Please forgive me for not being stronger. I'll do my best to be there for you in the future.

"Love, Peter."

He stared at it. It had a thousand flaws but in the end it said what needed saying. It was enough to tell her how he felt. He could only hope she believed him.

But he still hoped to deliver it in person. He knew he could never say it aloud as well as he had written it. He dressed hastily, tucking the letter in his coat pocket, and hurried to the ballroom for the wedding.

Bunny was dozing in her bed...

...until she fell into cold water!

Peter was flailing in the river behind her. Why wasn't he swimming? Was the mask interfering? Could it?

Whether it was or not, he was clearly drowning. She paddled back toward him and tried to grab hold of his sweater.

A second later she was seeing stars! The idiot had punched her and gone right back to drowning!

She tried again... he flailed and hit her in the shoulder and bobbed under the water. To her relief, his
head popped out again almost immediately.

She stayed at a careful distance, worrying. How could she save him if he drowned her, too?

He went underwater again and she held her breath until he reappeared, squawking in terror and flailing for the surface.

Moron. She was almost positive he knew how to swim, but here he was panicking and if she tried to save him, they both could drown. If she wanted to live, she might have to let him die, or hope he managed to find an overhanging tree root like in the movies...

But she had one other option. It was terrifying and dangerous, but she couldn't just let him drown or count on circumstance to save him. She paddled behind him, grabbed his shoulders, and pushed down, bracing herself against his back.

Her heart thudded in terror as he struggled. It took every ounce of courage to fight her instinct to let him go. Suppose she did it too long? She just wanted him to pass out, then she could haul him to shore...

The second he stopped struggling, she pulled him awkwardly above the water. She couldn't tell whether he was breathing. It was only when she at last dragged him onto the shore that she realized he wasn't! Wheezing in terror, she fumbled with his mask. Maybe it was just a vortex under there but she had to try!

She gasped when she saw his face! There was no time now to ask how he could have one, though... she quickly tipped his head back, cleared his mouth, and began to puff air into his lungs.

She lost track of time as she struggled to revive him... how long had it been? Still she fought... still nothing worked. His lips were blue... David was screaming over the comm. Bunny began to sob...

It wasn't working! It was supposed to work! He'd woken after a scant minute the last time... wait, what?

She sat up and looked at him. This wasn't real! It couldn't be! Because she'd done this before and he'd lived... or had *that* been a dream? But now... he was dead. Cold, dead, and she'd drowned him...

"I'm sorry!" she whispered, stroking his cold cheek. "Peter! Peter, please! I'm so sorry!"

He was still... pale... She took his hand. It was already growing stiff...

She screamed and shook him. "No!" she howled. "You can't do this, you a$$hole! I love you... just wake up, please... don't leave me! Peter! Wake up!"

Wake up... she thought. It can't be real! This can't be what really happened!

Bunny sat up in bed, gasping. Her face was wet with tears.

"Peter... oh, hell... Peter..." she whispered, shaking.

She looked at the time. The wedding had already started.

Well, she'd wondered how she would manage to find time to put on her whole costume. She had a head start now. She rose, washed her face, and started to dress.
Union - Part 5 - The Wedding

Chapter Summary

Even with all the chaos and nonsense, The Spine and Breanna finally get to the altar.

Chapter Notes

I chose no wedding processional music because I'm having enough trouble writing the wedding. Honestly, I have a pretty good marriage but weddings leave me cold. Insert the processional music of your choice. Just imagine Michael Reed playing it on a piano.

You can picture any wedding dress you want, too. Seriously not my thing. It's the meaning that matters here.

"I was afraid you weren't coming..." The Spine said as Rabbit walked into his room.

Rabbit sighed and sat on the bed. "I could see that."

The Spine was buttoning his shirt. "So... have you spoken to Peter? Or Bunny?"

"What do you think?" she asked darkly. "Yeah, actually. I talked to Peter a little bit. I didn't apologize. He was in a foul m-m-mood... Spine... Why am I so damned impulsive?"

He stopped and sat beside her. "I expected you to start right in defending your actions. I'm not sure where to go with this."

"Somethin' we-we-went wrong last night. With Petes and Bunny," Rabbit whispered.

"So I understood. What did he say?"

"Not much. He just told me that... sex shouldn't have to hurt."

The Spine sighed. "Damn. He was afraid to hurt her and I have to conclude that he did."

"Why does it hurt? I acted like I understood but I really don't! You said it does sometimes but... why would you wanna do something that hurts?" Rabbit cried.

The Spine, to her irritation, smiled wickedly.

Rabbit shoved him in the shoulder. "Come on, Spine, I'm freakin' out here..." she scolded.

He hastily straightened his features, but she'd already heard the faintest chuckle...

"You horny old fart," she muttered.

"Shut up, Rabbit," he said with an infuriating little giggle. "To answer your question, it doesn't always hurt. Okay? And I'm sorry to dump more on you but it probably hurt because it's hard
enough for humans to control themselves sober. The very inhibitions the alcohol suppressed would have helped him to be more careful. I warned you off for a reason.”

Rabbit groaned and put her face in her hands.

"I can dress myself if you want to go talk with them," The Spine murmured.

"What would I say?" Rabbit cried, emerging from behind her hands. "I'm gonna apologize and they'll probably make my new chassis look like a gargoyle or somethin'. But I can't change what happened. I can't fix this."

"True. I don't know what to do, Rabbit. We just have to hope that they love each other enough to get through this. And that they don't press charges."

"What?"

The Spine was snickering.

"Fer cryin' out loud!"

"Sorry. I do mean to help, honestly. But you crossed so many lines with this little prank of yours. There might have been a time this would have been considered harmless, but this decidedly wasn't it."

Rabbit slumped. She felt even worse now. "You usually give better advice."

"You don't usually dig yourself this deep. So sooner or later everyone falls short of expectations. It doesn't mean they don't mean well. And you learn from your failures."

"You talkin' about you or me?"

"Everyone, actually. I failed at advice, you failed at understanding. It just makes you more human."

"Wash your mouth out with soap," she grumbled.

"Sorry," he chuckled. "Look, you did what you did. All you can do now is apologize."

"Yeah. I'd ask why you're so cheerful, but I guess that's obvious."

She needed to take care of the apology. It was going to eat away at her until she did. But she had taken on the role The Spine had asked and didn't mind so much putting off the painful business of facing the people she'd wronged. She sighed a long, steamy sigh and stood.

"Welp, let's get you ready. At least I can do one thing right... get you married and off to that bridal suite."

"Oh, yeah..." The Spine said weakly.

Rabbit stared. He'd been so confident a moment ago...

"Jitters?"

"No! Well..."

"Yep. Buddy, ya done this before."
"I know. And I do want to marry her, Rabbit. I'm just nervous. I walked down the aisle in that same ballroom with Marie sixty-two years ago. Bree is so young... Maybe she'll regret choosing to marry a robot."

"Marie never did."

"Yeah. But..."

"Look... you gotta take that chance. Okay? I ain't gonna try to talk you out of worrying because life ain't certain. But she said yes, didn't she? And I mean she melted all over you when you asked her... she didn't have any doubts that I could see."

"That you could see?" The Spine cried, aghast. "But we were in the rose garden alone!"

Rabbit raised an eyebrow. How was he surprised at this? "Yeah! This place has windows, ya know! I couldn't stand the suspense."

The Spine's face softened to a smile. "Ah. Forgot who I was dealing with for a minute. You're right. I proposed and she fell into my arms and kissed me. It was wonderful."

"Then I guess she's okay with marryin' a robot. Get yehr pants on and get married. What happens after is none of my business."

"That didn't stop you before," The Spine chuckled. "Alright. I wasn't going to back out, anyway."

"I know, buddy."

He stood and finished buttoning his shirt as Rabbit pulled her tux out of its bag. Hatchworth and The Jon finally wandered in to join them, followed by Michael Reed, Steve Negrete, Matter Master David, and Sam Luke. Rabbit couldn't help staring at them; she'd never seen any of them dressed this fancy before. They looked good!

Michael Reed, when he caught her staring, blew her a kiss and winked. Rabbit turned hastily and struggled with her bow tie. Humans! Ugh.

Once The Spine saw her struggle, he interrupted and tied it for her, and she slumped to a seat to watch them joke with each other. She would have joined in before, but she couldn't miss the sidelong glares coming from Hatchworth, David, Sam and Steve. She couldn't be surprised. Clearly everyone knew by now, except maybe for Peter and Bunny. At least Michael and The Jon weren't pissed off at her... that she could tell. She wasn't sure either of them knew how to be angry.

She tuned them out and spent the rest of the time brooding about how and when she should apologize.

Bree stood looking into the mirror, bouquet in hand, while Paige adjusted her veil. Her mother had already gone, with Annie, to find her seat, after tearfully hugging her and saying a number of trite things about losing her baby. She didn't mind it. Her mother did mean well, and had accepted The Spine easily enough, even if she wasn't one for original sentiments and had terrible timing with difficult questions about friends and family.

But Bree was just as glad to spend the last few minutes alone, except for Paige, who knew when to let her think in peace.
"You ready for this, baby?" Paige asked.

"This is so surreal," Bree murmured. "I mean, this is movie crap. The bride, all dressed up, getting the final touches. Annie even has a full length, stand alone mirror..."

"Looks old. Probably belonged to a dead Walter," Paige commented. "Well, you're right. You look like the perfect bride. You sure about this, though? And yeah, I know it's kinda late to ask."

"Not too late. I had a tidy panic attack before getting out of bed this morning."

"Oh! Why didn't you call, poor baby?"

"I needed to think my way through it. I gave this a lot of thought before today and I just needed to remember why I decided to get married."

"Well, that's good because I know you and I just wanted to make sure you're not just thinking with your heart."

"I'm thinking with my head and my heart. That'll have to be good enough."

Paige hugged her gently. "It is good enough. Alright, baby. Let's get you to the altar."

Bree's father was waiting outside the ballroom. She blinked away tears as he carefully hugged her.

"That shows a lot of skin..."

"Dad..."

"I assume he let you know about our talk," he said.

"Yeah. Did you have to grill him?"

"I'd have grilled anyone you decided to marry. Him I had to put through a blast furnace. You didn't give me much time to get to know him. Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

"You know why. I thought you'd object."

"Can you blame me?"

"No. So why aren't you?"

"Because he has character. I don't expect you to find another man like that out there. And besides, you've made it clear you're going to do it anyway. But you've got my blessing, alright?"

He kissed her cheek and she gulped.

"Thank you."

He held out his arm. "Time to put up or shut up. Ready to be given away, even though you aren't really mine?"

She smiled and took his arm. "I'm yours just as much as his."

"That's a real honor, sweetie. We're both lucky men."
The Spine was tapping his fingers together nervously.

"Showtime, cowboy," Rabbit said. The Spine nodded and straightened his tie.

*It's time... I can do this. It's not letting go of Marie. It's just moving forward and bringing Bree into the family.*

*I'll always love you, Marie. But it's different now. If I thought for a moment you wouldn't approve... but I know you. I know you want me to be happy, to not be alone.*

*I'm ready.*

Rabbit opened the door. A pleasant tune was being played on piano; there was no lack of musicians in the Manor but most were part of the wedding party. So Michael Reed, who technically was as well, had volunteered to play before and during the ceremony as a wedding gift. The Spine had been delighted... No amount of money, in his opinion, could have hired them a finer musician for the purpose.

The Spine smiled as they approached the altar. There were murmurs all along the way as guests on both sides saw him. The Spine would have felt self-conscious once. But while he didn't regard himself as sexy, he knew without conceit that he looked pretty damned good. The tux was tailored, his hair was slicked back on the sides and had a little wave on top, and his smile was already one of his most famous features.

Rabbit, he noted, looked striking as well. Ironically, she was downright handsome! It was a nice send-off for her years as a male automaton. He never got the feeling that Rabbit felt cheated of those years. She seemed to appreciate having gotten to be a husband and father. She would have plenty of time to explore the role Pappy had intended for her.

The Spine waited at last for Breanna to join him. He delicately dabbed at two oily tears with a cloth he had discreetly brought for the purpose. He saw Annie and Peter V beaming at him. Dave and Sunshine were sitting with Wanda and Norman and smiling reassuringly. He favored them with a nervous smile in return. Peter VI, to his dismay, sat alone, and Bunny was nowhere to be seen, but he couldn't allow himself to brood about it.

Other friends and family looked on with smiles and tears. The Jon was crying non-stop. Hatchworth smiled, but he could see a certain strain in it. He assumed that was because of Peter VI sitting alone. It was reassuring. The Spine couldn't help today, but Hatchworth had been looking out for Peter since his emergence from the vault.

He continued scanning the crowd and caught the eye of Bree's mother. She looked momentarily surprised and then smiled as brightly as any other guest.

The music changed at last, and they all stood for the bride.

The doors opened. Paige walked through, followed by Chelsea and Upgrade, who bobbed a little in her excitement at being a bridesmaid.

Bree's heart thundered as her father led her down the aisle. The Spine, eyes literally shining, looked at her with an awe-filled expression and she felt chills all over at the sight of him in a tailored tuxedo. He was just gorgeous! She knew somewhere in that room was one of The Beatles, but she only had eyes for the sexy silver groom.
It didn't feel real. Even the tangible things, the floor under her feet, her father's arm in hers, felt almost like cloud matter. There was a tickle of terror in her chest. She kept it at bay by keeping her eyes fixed on his. They'd built up years of trust. She'd been in love with him longer than even he knew. She'd made her choice.

His mouth dropped open slightly as she entered. She was stunning! He fought yet another in a series of flashes of memory... Marie, so long ago now, walking a similar aisle. He felt no conflict, however. The vision he saw was almost like an old film, and he could swear he saw Marie wave at him to return to the present...

He knew what he wanted. He couldn't help fearing someday she would realize it wasn't easy being married to a machine and reconsider. But as long as she was open to remain and try to make it work, he would be there, doing the same.

He smiled down at Bree as she ascended the steps. Her father, hesitant that very morning, handed her off willingly to The Spine. He took her hand and kissed it and she blushed.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too..."

"Welcome, family and friends, to the union of The Spine and Breanna," the officiant began, smiling.

They said their vows. Bree had helped write them, but she couldn't remember a single one after the fact. What she did remember was the tone of his voice... sincerely promising to be hers alone... and the look on his face... the warmth and intensity, the shine of oily tears of joy. She felt her own tears starting.

Her heart pounded harder as the officiant directed them to kiss. The Spine gently lifted her veil. She leaned toward him.

"Do you trust me?" he asked softly.

What? "Of course? I mean, of course I do..."

"Good."

He smiled and kissed her warmly, even passionately, despite the watching crowd. She was startled... he was usually so reserved! She heard soft giggles in the crowd and grew self-conscious. Her face was burning as they parted and she smiled sheepishly as she glanced around. She caught Rabbit winking at The Spine and laughed softly.

There was applause and cheers as they turned to face their guests as the officiant introduced them as husband and wife. Rabbit stepped forward and instructed the guests to get into costumes for the reception, which would start in 30 minutes. Bree and The Spine hurried out hand in hand, receiving congratulations and a shower of confetti as they went.

They parted with a kiss and went to their separate rooms. She'd suggested changing in the same one, but The Spine had objected, saying that if they did, neither would likely show up to their own reception. It gave her chills when he talked like that...
Bree passed Peter as she hurried to her room.

"Peter? Everything ok?"

"She didn't come to the wedding..." he whispered.

"Oh! Oh, Peter... I told her it was okay. She was... well, she was a mess, Peter! When are you going to straighten this out?"

Peter was clutching a piece of paper in both hands. He held it to his chest like a doll.

"I was going to do that when I saw her," he said meekly.

"Oh! Crap. Sorry. Then please, see her! She's in her room."

"She is?" he gasped. He sounded relieved. "But maybe she's dressing..."

"She's your wife, Peter," Bree said dryly. "You're allowed to see her dressing."

"I know..."

"You're scared, aren't you?"

"She was so pissed off at me. I'm not sure how to approach her..."

Good grief, what had he done? Bree put her hand on his arm.

"Send her a text to meet you somewhere, okay? Make it sound contrite and don't give her orders. She always puts a lot into her costumes so she probably is getting ready for the reception, unless she's so upset that she doesn't care anymore."

"Oh!" Peter gasped, clutching the paper tighter.

"Peter, calm down!" Bree laughed. "Just send her the message and put on your costume."

"Right. It's going to be okay..."

"I... know..." she said slowly, realizing what she should have before. Peter was having a panic attack. "Look, do you need any help?"

He swallowed so hard she could hear it. "No," he said brokenly. "No, I got this..."

"Seriously?"

He sniffled. "Yeah, totally got it. You... you should get dressed. I got this."

He hurried away before she could say another word. She could swear she heard a faint sob.

Bree went to her room to change, pausing only to send a message to Rabbit. She had plans to emcee the reception, so she was the one to talk to about a little plot to bring two people together.

Rabbit scowled down at her largely unnecessary bed.

This was not her costume.
At least, not the same one. The bi-corner hat was there, and the pants and boots. The voluminous pirate shirt was there as well. But the jacket, the centerpiece of the costume, had been replaced by one with a skirted back and visible space in front. And to drive the point home, beside it lay some familiar items: a bra and two gel-filled inserts, and a rather stunning black and pink wig.

"Real funny..." she muttered.

Was Bunny responsible? Did she and Peter know what Rabbit had done? And if Bunny had done it, did Rabbit really have the right to be angry about it, all things considered?

Her text sensor buzzed. She activated the module and read, "Hey, Rabbit, I need a favor."

It was Bree. Well. Could it be that with all the gossip, the bride had still been spared hearing about Rabbit's stupid prank?

"Um, sure... only someone messed with my costume..."

"What?"

"It's... dammit, they gave me a jacket with boobs!"

"Oh, that's just rude... but someone's probably just pranking you..."

It certainly sounded like she wasn't angry...

"Only there's a wig an' a bra and everything to go into it! I can't wear this!"

"Well... why not?"

"What?"

"Have you tried it on? It might fit."

"I ain't even..." She hesitated. "I guess I could..."

"Maybe it's a prank, but how about you call their bluff? Show up looking gorgeous in it. That'll put them in their place."

"Yeah... I really could..."

She'd been playing around with makeup lately... It could work. Maybe some stick on eyelashes. And even if she looked ridiculous, well... if Bunny and Peter had done this as revenge, she was getting off easy.

How could she still make so many mistakes at her age? But it had seemed like the right thing to do at the time. And it was a nice break to talk to someone who, for now, had no idea what she'd done. She had no doubt that sooner or later Breanna would be just as pissed off as everyone else.

Rabbit made her decision.

"Yeah. I'm gonna wear it," she sent.

"Do it baby! But real quick, I need a favor at the reception."

Rabbit dressed hastily as Bree explained her plan.
Union - Part 6 - Bridal Dance

Chapter Summary

It's time things were finally understood, one way or another. One couple is starting what looks to be a blissful marriage. Another has to clear the air and decide whether they are, too.

Chapter Notes

Wedding songs by two different sexes because I can't decide which direction Rabbit would take it at this point:

"Embraceable You"

https://youtu.be/RF1yQMPMEMo - Ella Fitzgerald

"My Funny Valentine"

https://youtu.be/kmSPY_sOm2Q - Matt Dusk

"Never My Love"


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter entered his room and sank, shaking, to the bed.

After a moment of just staring into space, he finally came to his senses and pulled out his phone. Bree was right. He should go to her room, but every time he pictured walking in to face her, he saw the fury in her eyes. Or worse, the pain. He wanted to imagine her running into his arms, but he couldn't. Why would she?

His hands shook so much that he could barely hold the phone. He took a few steadying breaths and pulled her name up on the list.

"Bunny," he typed. "Can we talk somewhere?"

He paced the floor and waited, heart pounding, for the response and almost dropped his phone when it buzzed.

"meet me at the fountain in 20 min"

Peter laughed almost hysterically. The fountain? Where was that? He sank once again to the bed and inhaled slowly, letting his mind settle. The fountain... in the courtyard... outside the ballroom. Yes. Good.
He sagged with relief. This had gone on much too long.

Would she forgive him? He hadn't forgotten how all this had begun, but somehow his anger had lost all its urgency. He'd had time to think, and time to miss her. He'd learned how much she meant to him; far more than being right did, far more than any dark, old memory. Maybe it was time to work through those old shadows. Both of them had things to work out. They could do it together.

He supposed he didn't need her to live. It took surprisingly few things to just survive. But he needed her in a different way... the way his parents needed each other. He'd always admired that in his parents while feeling it was a thing of the past. It seemed there were surprises left in life.

He summoned what energy he had left, shrugged on his usual striped sweater vest and put on the trench coat, glancing at himself in the mirror.

Peter froze. Well, that was odd. It was the same thing he'd worn in that dream. It wasn't purple and yellow, though... Chills went up his spine.

But of course it was a fluke. It was a common enough coat. Silly to put so much stock in a dream. He tucked the letter into his pocket, scooped up his phone and ran, realizing only halfway there that she wasn't due for another seventeen minutes. Well, he could wait there as well as in their room. Waiting in the fresh air sounded nicer than sulking in their room.

The ballroom was still mostly empty, except for waitstaff making last minute preparations. The decor was a lot like the party from the previous year, but more fanciful, with delicate garlands and colored lights. If he could make up with Bunny, they might get the chance to dance here tonight. He still wasn't much of a dancer but it sounded wonderful.

Peter turned from the changing colors of the room and headed for the courtyard. The French doors leading to it were open and the colored lights continued outside. But on his way out, he froze.

There, in the glass of the doors, he saw his his reflection again. Dressed as he was in his dream... lit by the changing lights of the ballroom. Violet with a flash of yellow.

His heart thundered as he glanced at the opened doorway. He couldn't quite see the fountain at that angle. Was Bunny there yet? Or was it... her?

The dream had haunted him when he first started having it. *The pink lady.* Who was she? Why had he felt such strong emotions for someone he'd never met? And what was tearing them apart?

But he didn't want to meet this mystery woman now! He wanted to see Bunny!

Peter took slow, deep breaths. This was no way for a scientist to think! Dreams couldn't tell the future. He took a step toward the door...

...And pulled out his phone. But what was he going to type? She was probably dressing...

He stepped slowly outside. No one was there. Peter began to breathe once more. It had to be the panic attacks. They made everything off kilter.

He walked through cycling colored lights of the courtyard and into the darkness of the grounds, taking his time. He just needed to keep busy until she came out. He strolled the grounds, imagining a dozen different ways he would apologize, but only one way she would accept it... in his arms. He had to see it that way. He was too afraid she just wouldn't accept it at all.

He stopped by the duck pond, staring at the water rippling in the moonlight. But what if the woman
in pink did show up? Maybe that was why the dream ended in disaster. Maybe it was because he and Bunny...

He shook his head. No. Superstitious crap. With all he'd seen in his life, every strange thing that was normal to him, he could have believed almost anything. But he didn't believe that some dark destiny could tear him from the woman he loved, not if they were determined to be together, especially after all the strange things they had overcome just to fall in love and marry. It was just not right to let some mystery woman get in their way.

After what seemed like hours, he got her text.

"Are you out here?"

"Yes. Are you at the fountain?" he typed frantically.

"Yes."

"Omw."

"Okay..." he whispered, pocketing his phone. "Nothing to worry about..."

Peter ran back from the pond, jumping over bushes and stones and eventually making his way up the path. As he neared the courtyard, he stopped short, his throat suddenly dry.

Across the courtyard was the fountain. And beside it, a woman in pink.

The colored lights shone around him. He knew now with great certainty that he looked like he was dressed all in purple.

She turned and stared at him. She was waiting for him. She had always been waiting for him. He felt all at once drawn and repulsed, but he had to understand. She smiled. He forced himself to move a step closer, shaking.

Where was Bunny? The woman in pink raised her hands, her smile fading.

She signed, "What's wrong?" and Peter's whole body jerked in shock. He swallowed a scream.

_Bunny_!

"Are you okay?" she signed, starting toward him.

He sobbed with relief and ran to meet her. She took his hands.

"Your hands are freezing!" she whispered.

"Oh, Bunny... I am so glad to see you!"

And he was glad... and afraid, so afraid! If she was the pink lady, and if this was the moment in his dream, then any second something would come and tear him from her! And he couldn't let it, not now that he was going to make things right...

He pulled her into his arms and held her. When would it happen? What was coming? It happened in every dream... but no! Not this time!

She held him tightly. "Peter... I... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I wasn't open with you. That's going to change, okay? And I'm sorry I screamed at you and..."
He was half-listening. Science had flown out the window and anything was possible now... Something was coming... where would it be?

"Peter?" she hissed, shaking him.

He looked at her and saw the sparkle of tears.

"Bunny... Oh! Bunny... I'm sorry, I just..."

"Weren't even listening?" she choked.

"No, I... I'm a weenie and an idiot and I was listening, I promise, only this is exactly like a weird recurring dream I had and I swear I thought something..."

The ambient lights flashed a vivid green and Peter cried out and threw his arms around her.

"No!" he roared.

The lights cycled to yellow and on to violet once more. Bunny was laughing nervously. Peter leaned away, shaking even harder than before as her laughter faded.

"Peter... you're serious! You're shaking like a chihuahua..."

"I really thought something would come and tear me from you..." he said weakly. "I dreamed it again and again... I didn't know it was you but you were wearing pink stripes and long pink hair and I ran to you and something came and pulled me away from you."

"You dork," she sighed, smiling. "I thought you were a scientist. Dreams don't always come true, y'know."

"Well, I didn't think they ever did..." he began. He sighed deeply and rubbed her back. "Then again... this is a dream come true. Bunny... I'm sorry I was so hard-assed about the whole... thingy. And you were right in the end. It went just fine, after all. I should have..."

She had the oddest look on her face.

"It did go alright last night... didn't it?" he asked slowly.

"Now's not the best time..."

"No, it is! I want to know everything, okay? I can take it. I won't push you away again."

"Well... Peter, look... I don't wanna lie to you anymore. Not if I can help it, not about this. But you need to understand. I was so determined to find out for myself that there was really no other way."

"Are you implying that maybe... it was not... good?" he asked slowly, his stomach churning.

"It wasn't horrible!"

That didn't sound promising...

"First of all, it was amazing finally getting to let go, right? And finally getting to be that close to you. But it was a shock for me after what I was used to and... well, hell, we're both new at doing things this way, and we were drunk, and I was really freaking nervous so I couldn't really relax..." She took a deep breath and finished, "It hurt. A lot. At first, I mean! It got better but..."
"Dammit..." Peter muttered.

"But I wouldn't change a thing!" she whispered desperately.

A terrible sinking feeling had settled over him. "Seriously?" he said wearily.

"Yeah. I meant it, Peter. It was what I wanted. It was my choice."

"But... I just kept going... didn't I? Did I even stop?" he asked, voice trembling.

"You asked if I was okay after... I made a sound. Something that could have been taken different ways, alright? And I acted like everything was fine. But you were pretty toasted and had no way of knowing, okay?"

His throat ached. It had hurt her then, and it hurt him now. He clung to her and fought tears. It was exactly what he'd feared and he felt awful. He struggled with a terrible urge to get away from her, go be alone for a while where he wouldn't hurt her, but he'd said he wouldn't push her away again.

But instead, she gently pushed him away. "I'm sorry. It's okay. Go and deal with it."

"What?"

"I know you cope with things best alone. I won't leave, okay? Unless... unless you want me to..."

Peter stared at her face. She was trying to be noble but he could see the terrible fear in her eyes. She was afraid he wouldn't be able to deal, that he'd be too distressed to forgive her honest mistake. He had feared hurting her, but she feared having everyone leave her in the end. And if he walked away now and coped with it alone, like he always had...

"Peter?" she whispered anxiously.

He took her gently by both hands. It was his turn to be truthful.

"Bunny, look... I need to explain. Thing is... when I was a kid..." he began, his throat tight.

The ambient lights cycled again through green, just like in his dream. Her eyes flicked suddenly over his shoulder. Something grabbed Peter's arm. He screamed and whirled, shoving with both hands.

There was a cry of indignation and David, dressed as The Spine, staggered backwards. He heard Bunny's nervous whispy giggle.

"What the Hell, Peter?" David barked.

"Oh, crap..." Peter gasped. "Um... sorry..."

"They're getting ready to start and I didn't want you two to miss Rabbit's costume!" David said in a wounded tone.

"I did say sorry..."

"Yeah. Alright." David looked at Bunny. "You forgot the grin..."

"I ran out of time..."

"Eh, well. Still looks pretty good. What do you think, Peter?"
"About what?"

"Her costume, a$$hole. She's the Cheshire Cat. See the the ears?"

He could just see them now, poking up out of the voluminous pink wig. "Oh! I thought... I don't know what I thought."

David looked at them both alternately. "Everything's okay now, right?"

Graceful. "Yeah, sure. Everything's fine," Peter said shortly. Except that Bunny still thought he was upset. And he was upset. But not at her!

"Alright..." David murmured. "Well, come on then."

David turned and walked stiffly inside.

"He even walks like him..." Peter mumbled.

He turned and looked at her. He wanted to explain, but it couldn't be done in a hurry and they were waiting. Sighing, he held out his hand. Bunny slowly took it and they followed David into the ballroom.

Well, they'd straighten it all out later. What was surely most important was that they had made up. Hadn't they? Because he couldn't shake the feeling, as he sat beside her at the table, that they were across the room from one another. He looked at her but she didn't notice. She had turned to see Rabbit walk into the room.

And Peter, following her gaze, could see why.

Rabbit trotted toward the ballroom. The walls trembled softly as she passed, but she was trembling more.

It had seemed like a good idea when Bree said it. Show up in the costume looking hot and show 'em all. Only right now she wanted to go hide behind the cat.

She had no idea whether she looked hot. She'd had to scramble just to look female. Her body was still broad-shouldered and robot shoulders were too rigid to hide. It had taken all her double stick tape, kept handy for holding her bandanas on her smooth dome, to secure the wig so that it in turn could support the hat, and the eyelashes had kept sticking to her finger. The boobs seemed to be holding position. At least, they did when she wasn't trotting like this. She wondered whether they could bounce out of the bra...

She held them carefully in place the rest of the way, hoping no one saw her.

She slowed to a walk as she neared the ballroom and hastily took her hands off the boobs when a waiter walked past her. From what she could see without entering, almost everyone seemed to be seated and dinner was just being served. There were a few people milling about talking but not nearly enough people to conceal her entrance into the room.

Rabbit stood in the shadows outside the doorway. What now?

*Rabbit?
She jumped. *Oh... hey, bro.*

* Dinner's being served. Are you on your way? The Spine sent. 

* Oh, yeah... totally... *

*What does that mean?*

Rabbit sighed. She couldn't let him down. It was too late to change costumes... she was in charge of getting things going and they were waiting. She was going to have to give her speech like this...

*Rabbit?*

*Be right there, buddy.*

She closed her eyes and walked through the doorway.

At first, from what she could hear, no one seemed to notice in the dim lights of the ballroom. People were chatting, enjoying their meals. But she had to walk all the way to the center tables. Even walking along the walls instead of through the middle of the dance floor, people would notice.

She opened her eyes and kept walking as the conversation around her either silenced or shifted subjects. She could hear it all, of course... The Spine, dressed in full cowboy regalia, was gaping at her. She hoped she saw the beginning of a smile... or was it a fading smile?

She hesitated in the shadow of a pillar, her courage failing.

*You look lovely, sister Rabbit.*

*Hatchy!*

Hatchworth, dressed like Hercules Poirot, approached from where he had been talking to Chelsea. He smiled and offered his arm.

*The hell are you doing?*

*Escorting you to your seat. You seemed to me to be nervous.*

*Damn right I'm nervous!* she sent, awkwardly taking his arm. *Do I really look okay or are you just trying to calm me down?*

*You look stunning. And I do not lie.*

*Hatchy... do I really?*

He sent her a photo of her entrance into the ballroom. She did look nervous... but also... pretty. Yes... it was hard to believe, but she did. The cut of the jacket gave her the hips she still lacked and minimized her shoulders. The ample bust filled the jacket smoothly and her eyelashes and hair created a feminine appearance.

She was pretty! She almost laughed. If the stories were true and she and The Spine had the same face as Pappy... That meant that both Pappy and The Spine would have looked this pretty, too!

Hatchy lightly "kissed" her hand with his bronze lips as they reached her seat. She didn't know how to take that. Even after announcing the retrofit, no one had really treated Rabbit like a pretty girl...
She glanced around nervously as she sat. There were some smiles and some stares. Michael Reed winked again. What was his problem?

She turned to The Spine and was rewarded with a warm smile.

"Hey, cowboy..." she murmured shyly.

"Look at you, Rabbit! I never thought you'd do it."

"Did you swap the costumes?" she demanded.

"What? You didn't do this on purpose?" The Spine asked, his smile fading.

"No! Well, I mean, I didn't plan to, but then someone snuck in an' ga-ga-gave me a girl costume!"

"I'm not sure I like people pulling pranks like that, all things considered, especially today..."

"Eh, it's just a joke. I just wanna know who did it so's I can p-p-pay 'em back!"

The Spine glanced around the room. "I think I might have some suspects."

She sighted along his gaze and saw David, Chelsea, and Steve beaming at her. They waved.

"The hell?" she muttered.

Hatchworth passed them and fist-bumped Steve without even looking.

"You, too, Hatchy?" she breathed, scowling.

"Looks like you have a lot of people to pay back," The Spine said thoughtfully. "I wonder why they did it, though?"

"Do they need a reason?"

"Well, yes. It seems awfully pointed..."

"Pointed..." What the hell did that mean? Was he talking about the fake boobs?

"Yes. You pulled a prank of questionable taste last night, and they pull one today. Makes you think."

"All pranks have questionable taste," she grumbled.

"Not all pranks cross the line. Yours was designed to push someone into something they weren't doing, if you recall... a flagrant case of butting into things that were none of your affair."

"Yeah, I already got guilt, thanks..." Rabbit said nervously. He was right; it was all coming into focus now.

"You must see the similarity..."

"Yeah, yeah, I see it."

"And like Peter, you fell headlong into it," The Spine said pleasantly.

Rabbit wasn't smiling. He was right. She hadn't shown them at all. She'd had done exactly what they'd intended!
"Bunch of busybodies..." she muttered.

"Do I need to say what I'm thinking right now?"

"You do and I'll..."

"No... don't worry. I know you're sorry. They, however, don't."

Rabbit glared at David and Chelsea. Steve had walked away and Hatchworth had disappeared entirely.

"Well, you have a chance to make it up to Peter and Bunny. Bree told me about her idea."

"Oh, yeah!" she said eagerly. "I still need to pick a song. How do we find out what their song is without tippin' 'em off, though?"

"Do I hear scheming or am I finally going deaf?"

Rabbit turned to see Annie and Peter V just taking their seats.

"Oh!" Annie gasped. "Look at you, you're lovely! I thought you weren't..."

"Yeah, I know. But I did," Rabbit murmured, embarrassed by the compliment.

Peter V, to her dismay, strolled up, took her hand, and kissed it.

"Uh... thanks, Petes..."

He patted her hand fondly. "Don't mind those silly police," he murmured. "You don't look like a hooker at all."

"Y-yeah... much obliged..." she said faintly.

Annie's eyes followed him as he found his seat. She shook her head and turned back to Rabbit.

"Well, good for you! So what's up with your little plot?"

"Well, honestly... We're just bein' a coupla buttinskis and tryin' to figure out what song would make Peter an' B-B-Bunny go all goo-goo eyed for each other. You know any?"

"Oh, good! I've been worried about them all day. Well, he was never into mushy songs before that I know of... I know a lot of nice songs but they're old."

"Don't hold back. We know plenty of older ones," Rabbit chuckled.

"There was this one by The Association that always made me melt when I was a kid and it might be just right for this. Oh, but you might need a few helpers for harmony..."

"Well, we got that!"

"Rabbit..." The Spine prompted.

"Yeah, I know, right? We did some great Association covers. Sounds real promising. I think Hatchy downloaded the files for all the stuff from his vault years..."

"Well, that's great, but... Everyone's seated."
"Oh, good."

The Spine chuckled softly. "Um... speech?"

"Huh? Oh! Right! Best man... well... best Cap'n anyhow." She glanced at Annie. "Tell me in a few minutes, baby."

"You got it," Annie said.

"Alright. Speech time. I ain't gonna let you down, buddy."

"Thanks. Just one last thing about the costume, though." He leaned in and murmured, "They're all right. You look beautiful."

"Stop..." she whispered, looking down self-consciously.

"I just wanted you to know. I can tell you're nervous."

"Ya blame me?" she sighed. "Well... thanks. Thanks a lot, cowboy. So... speech."

She stood and tapped her water glass carefully with her finger. This part would be a piece of cake. She'd been working on the speech in her head for months.

"Could I have everyone's attention, please?"

The noise gradually settled and Rabbit filled her bellows as Steve trotted up with a microphone. She gave him a sour look as she took it, but he responded with a winsome smile and she gave up. If he'd been part of it, he clearly had no conscience about the effects.

"Welcome! Welcome, guests, to the wedding r-r-reception of The Spine and Breanna Walter!" she said brightly.

There was polite applause.

"This chucklehead has been my giant little brother since almost before I c-c-can remember. In that time he has shown himself to be a nuisance, a pain, and a spoiled brat."

And now there was a polite chuckle.

"Just kidding, folks... he was more than that." Uncertain chuckling. "He's also been one of the bravest men I ever met, one of the kindest, and a better human being than most of the meatbags... er, humans I've ever known."

The Spine smiled and looked down. She knew she was laying it on thick, but was confident that this embarrassment wouldn't be enough to dim his joy. Fortunately, the guests were all still chuckling.

"And the lo-lo-lovely Breanna has always been prettier and sweeter than any girl has a right to be. My brother is a lucky guy and that's a fact. And she's a lucky girl. It ain't every husband that comes with an instruction manual!"

The laughter was faint until the guests saw that the bride and groom were laughing heartily.

"And I'm lucky, too. Because I get to see my brother have the love he deserves." She raised her water-filled wine glass. "To the lovely couple!"

Everyone joined in and Rabbit sat, grinning. The Spine leaned over and thumped her lightly in the
ear without looking.

"Yeah, you know it was a great speech," Rabbit chuckled. "Ya lucky jerk. Hey, shouldn't you take off that cowboy hat at the table?"

"If you take off the bi-corner hat."

"Nothin' doin'."

"Alrighty then."

Dinner was good. Peter managed to have his in careful bites slipped under his mask. Bunny had personally inspected his drink and sent her own back, requesting cider instead. There were a few toasts and the hum of conversation afterward.

He knew she couldn't be heard over the noise and looked at her frequently to see whether she had anything to sign to him. Bunny, however, always seemed to be looking at something else. Peter sighed and continued working bits of chicken under the mask with his fork, but he had little appetite for it. He needed to explain things to her. She must be afraid he was angry all over again... that had to be why she wouldn't look at him. Maybe he should hug her or something? But it was so awkward at the table, and they couldn't just disappear from the reception the way they had from the rehearsal dinner, could they?

As the dinner dragged by, however, it was all he could do to keep from taking her hand and leading her away so that they could talk. What was more important? His marriage or keeping up appearances?

Rabbit eventually moved from the table to the small stage. They'd hired a band, to be supplemented by Steve Negrete with a playlist of suitable songs, in order to give the robots the night off, but Rabbit had wanted to get up and sing.

The band assembled and played a chord. There was a smattering of polite applause.

"A-Alright, ladies and gentlemen! We'd like to open the dancing with the bridal couple."

The Spine led Breanna onto the dance floor. Peter looked once more at Bunny. She was watching them with a blank expression and he knew how she felt. It wasn't that they hadn't had the full wedding with the trimmings. It was that they'd both imagined things would just continue the way they had been, only with shiny rings and noticeably more sex. If they could get past the awkward first experience, that is.

But more and more he felt they should have made at least a bit more of a fuss. They shouldn't have rushed it through to get it over and done with like a dentist appointment. Seeing The Spine and Breanna together, making vows, kissing passionately, now taking their places to dance with their eyes shining with emotion... Dammit, did he feel any less for Bunny than those two did for each other? He didn't think so.

But he'd been businesslike about the whole occasion. It had taken a complete change in setting to make him see the kind of woman she was, he'd had to have David scare him into telling her he loved her, and even then it had taken alcohol to make his love and desire for her his ruling emotions! And the result of that, instead of being a memory they would both cherish, was a painful and disappointing night with a drunk idiot... so far beneath what he had wanted to give her.
And sure, they'd made up, but it had been cut short. They needed to do it right, clear the air, hold each other... Not just say they were sorry and get back to business! He should have gone straight to her room after the wedding and not rushed her out to see this. Yes, they'd both agreed to a simple ceremony. But there was such a romantic song playing now...

But their wedding was done, and the time for such things was past. Yes, he'd felt a terrible panic when she told him he'd hurt her, but, well... Right now, the thing he wanted most of all was to be able to hold her in his arms, tell her he wasn't angry, didn't hold anything against her, only wanted to be with her even if it wasn't perfect all the time. Most of all, he wanted to say he loved her.

He just couldn't seem to choose the best moment.

The Spine stood in the center of the dance floor, his heart full. Breanna had never been more beautiful, he was sure of it. He took her gladly in his arms as the music began and Rabbit, in a voice more silky than he had heard her use in years, sang the song he'd asked her to sing. Breanna had said she wanted him to choose, since almost everything else had been planned by the ladies. It was the most romantic song he could find and he hoped it had the effect he'd intended.

"Embrace me, my sweet embraceable you..." Rabbit began. "Embrace me, you irreplaceable you..."

Breanna was pink, her eyes shining. He smiled. That was just how he'd hoped she'd react.

"Just one look at you, my heart grew tipsy in me..."

"She sounds amazing singing this. I knew you'd pick something perfect," Breanna sighed.

"Of course you did," he replied. "After all, I already picked the perfect girl."

"Yeah," she said mischievously. "I think you're right. So I guess that means I picked the right man."

"I love all the many charms about you," Rabbit sang. "Above all, I want my arms about you..."

"We must look funny, dressed this way, having our first dance," he chuckled.

"We're adorable," she said, smiling.

She rested her head against his shoulder. If it weren't for the waiting honeymoon, he could have stayed there all night.

But as the song came to a close, Rabbit announced, "And now the parents' dance."

Bree's father joined her on the dance floor while Wanda came for The Spine in lieu of the mother of the groom. Rabbit started the next song without hesitation.

"My funny valentine..." she crooned.

"Sorry to interrupt," Wanda said, smiling up at The Spine. "But you said you wanted a traditional wedding."

"Does it show?" he sighed.

"What? You mean how you hated to let go of her? It always has, Spine. You hide a lot of your feelings, but when you get sweet on a girl it shines like a neon light. It's absolutely adorable."
"Oh, good..." he murmured.

"It really is," she assured him. "I know you're a little embarrassed hearing it but it's the cutest thing to see a man get dopey in love."

The Spine caught Breanna's eye as she danced with her father. She smiled at him and gave a little wink.

"Don't change a hair for me... not if you care for me..." Rabbit sang.

The Spine beamed at his bride as they turned from each other once more.

"Yeah, I have to plead guilty to that," he told Wanda.

Peter watched mournfully as the couples danced. Did Bunny wish they'd done this? She hadn't complained. He looked at her once more. Were there tears in her eyes?

Peter decided it had been long enough. When this dance was done, the floor would be open to all, and people would be mingling and having fun. No one would miss them.

The song ended and there was soft applause. Peter reached for Bunny's shoulder.

"Honored guests, we beg your in-in-indulgence now..." Rabbit announced, "as we break with tradition and have a second bridal dance... We have another newlywed couple in the house who were con-content to keep their arrangements simple and quiet! Well, we can't have that, can we?"

"What the hell..." he murmured. Bunny looked at him at last, her eyes wide.

"At the request of the bridal couple du jour, we would like to invite Peter and Bunny Walter to dance to a song we think is appropriate for the occasion!"

Rabbit clapped her hands encouragingly and the rest of the guests joined in. Peter groaned and looked at The Spine, who was walking up onto the stage along with The Jon, Hatchworth, and Michael Reed. He sighed deeply. Why?

On the other hand... maybe it was a little more public than he preferred, but it was a romantic setting. From the things she'd said to him, the night he'd climbed up the trellis to tell her he loved her, she was a sucker for a romantic setting, no matter how sensible she had been about the wedding. And this could be his chance. He had the duration of the dance to get his message across.

Now he just had to figure out what he was going to say.

Bunny had never felt so attacked. Sure, it had been awfully romantic, seeing the bridal couple dancing together. But no one had asked about this! She looked back around at Peter, expecting him to put up a fight. He hated to be handled. But when she looked, he was standing and holding out his hand.

"Shall we?" he said.

Shocked to her toes, Bunny rose and took his hand. The applause grew louder as they walked together onto the empty dance floor.
And now she was face to face with the very person she wanted most to be with... just not here! Things were still hanging in the air and even if it hurt, she wanted them settled. They'd apologized... sort of. And he was still upset! At least, he had been. But he wasn't acting upset...

But she couldn't relax until she was sure. She wanted to make things right, but how to do it? She'd made a choice for both of them and it had blown up in her face. She was second-guessing every instinct and didn't know how to begin to explain... even if she could be heard over the music.

He put his hand on her waist. She set hers on his shoulder. Their free hands clasped... his gripped hers firmly but gently.

"Bunny," he breathed.

The music began. The Jon stood at the microphone with Hatchworth, with Rabbit and The Spine standing further back at another, and Michael Reed at the keyboard.

"You ask me if there'll come a time when I grow tired of you..."

Bunny cringed slightly as they began to dance. That was exactly what she feared! She couldn't help it... she expected everyone to grow tired of her.

"Never, my love..." they sang. "Never, my love."

Peter squeezed her hand.

"You wonder if this heart of mine will lose its desire for you... Never, my love. Never, my love... What makes you think love will end when you know that my whole life depends on you?"

Her heart pounded. Peter pulled her closer, leaning in so that his mask was close to her ear. Bunny swallowed hard.

"They chose the right song," he murmured. "Bunny... I never really said what needed saying and I'd be a fool to waste this chance."

She closed her eyes. One way or another, here it came. She couldn't believe, in this moment, with this song playing, that Peter meant to tell her he'd changed his mind... She held her breath as he continued.

"I'm not angry anymore," Peter told her. "I said I was sorry and I meant it. I was upset because I never wanted to be the kind of man who would act like that... y'know, who would hurt someone just to get off. I love you so much and I just... wanted it to be perfect, I guess. Sounds kinda stupid."

She looked at him, eyes moist, as the song continued, "You say you fear I'll change my mind, that I won't require you... Never, my love... How can you think love will end when I've asked you to spend your whole life with me?"

Bunny pressed her lips together and closed her eyes, trying to stay in control.

"I should have let you in more," he said. "I should have explained better. And I never really gave you a chance to talk to me... not about anything serious. But that's going to change. I'm going to listen to you and I'm not going to treat our marriage like some chore I have to attend to.

"And I trust you, okay? I trust you to do what you think is right, for yourself and for me. That's all you were trying to do. So it didn't go that great. It's in the past.
"If I could take back all the stupid crap I said, I would. I never meant to push you away. And even if last night was so bad that you never want to make love to me again, I still won't leave you until you tell me to go.

"But... I hope you'll be willing to try again once you feel better..." he breathed, pressing just a little bit closer, "Because I'd really love to have the chance to show you how much I love you."

The only expression he could show her was to lean back and turn his mask fully toward her... as close to eye contact as he could get. It looked very much like he was looking into her eyes.

"Forgive me?" he said as softly as he could with the song playing. "Please?"

Bunny, tears stinging her eyes, nodded. She felt him shudder.

"Really?"

She nodded more vigorously, laughing silently through her tears.

"Thank you!" he gasped. "Oh, lord, I was so afraid you hated me again..."

The band was harmonizing beautifully but she barely heard them. Everything was where it belonged now. Only one thing was missing. She stopped dancing.

Her hands freed, she signed, "I love you, Peter."

He put his arms around her and held her tightly. The song came to an end. The onlookers applauded softly.

"Congratulations a-all around!" Rabbit crowed. "The dance floor is now open to everyone! Thanks for joining us!"

They stayed embraced as couples danced around them to a sweet song. She never could remember afterward what the song was. She knew she was getting her makeup all over him. Neither cared.

"You want to keep dancing?" Peter asked.

Bunny grinned. "Yes... after I sit it out a little. I just want to hold your hand for a while."

Peter took her hand firmly in his and led her back to their seats. She wanted to be honest from now on... but she also intended to live up to his trust. The best combination of the two was to tell him the truth, that she wanted to hold his hand... while leaving out the fact that she was also still sore and just needed to sit down!

As she settled carefully onto her chair, she smiled at him and speculated how long she would need to heal up in order to go back to Kazooland and do things right.

Chapter End Notes

I was thinking this might be getting just too soft and squishy, but the other fan writers are giving some pretty hard feels right now so I decided this would be a nice soft feels blanket instead. So you read the scary and exciting ones and come here for the soft stuff.
For now, anyhow. ;)}
Rabbit Dances

Chapter Summary

A party can be a pretty complicated thing for a bot who has pissed off a lot of people. She acted on impulse but there's consequences, and just a little trolling.

And Peter's patch job after the meltdown was really only meant to hold until that retrofit... which was supposed to happen sooner.

Chapter Notes

A lot can happen on the dance floor...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rabbit grinned. Mission accomplished. Maybe she could even avoid apologizing... But for now she could go ahead and plan her vengeance on her pranksters. At least, once her set was done.

But before she could go on with the next song, Hatchworth trotted up and snatched the microphone.

"Hey!" Rabbit cried, grabbing at it.

Hatchworth dodged. "You're hogging the stage. I would like to sing some romantic songs at brother Spine's wedding!" he cried.

"But..." She'd planned to stay up there and avoid the question of which kind of dance partner a female robot in a "man's" body and women's clothing should have. "I had a whole set planned..."

"You will have the chance to sing it."

"I sorta meant to do that now. Come on, hand it over."

Hatchworth glared at her. "You do not even need to be up here! Mr Negrete has brought many songs to play for dancing so that the band can rest!"

"If I don't need ta b-b-be up here then neither do you!" she cried.

She lunged for the microphone and nearly fell off the stage when he pulled it aside. She turned and made another try and tripped, smacking her head on his chest plate as he hastily caught her. Shaking her head, she tried to take advantage of the situation, but he was ready for her and the microphone was gone before her hand came near.

"Give it, dammit!" she hissed.

There were gasps and snickers from the guests and she realized everyone was watching their argument. She froze. There was a brief static buzz. She looked behind her, confused. No one was there...
"And if you can be up here, then so can I," Hatchworth said placidly.

She turned to him once more, seething. "Fine, stay up here. But I'm gonna sing."

"No."

Rabbit glared with all her power. She had a sudden, powerful desire to knock him down and take the microphone back. "What?" she snarled.

"I was not at brother Spine's last wedding so this will be my first chance to sing for him."

Rabbit gaped, her anger dissipating. How could she argue with that one? The poor robot had missed so much in that vault...

"I only wish to sing a little. Go on and have fun."

"Fun..." She stood with her hands curled awkwardly together.

"Just for a couple of songs."

"Alright..."

She stepped aimlessly down the stairs and stopped short.

Matter Master David, dressed as The Spine, was standing in front of her.

_Crap._ She heard another static buzz. All the evidence pointed to it coming from her own head. Great. It was probably that head-butt she'd accidentally given Hatchy. She needed maintenance and she'd pissed off every tech in the manor. At least, once Peter and Bunny found out.

"Can I help you?" she said uneasily.

"Care to dance?" he asked coolly.

"Not really..."

"Humor me."

_Buzz._ "Um..."

He glanced almost casually toward Paige. Rabbit didn't dare make eye contact with her but she knew she was glaring. Sighing, Rabbit switched on her "dance like a girl" program and reluctantly joined him on the dance floor.

"Alright, get it over with," she muttered.

He raised an eyebrow and held out his hand. They danced, but he didn't say anything. He just stared at her. It was extremely uncomfortable.

"So..." she said nervously. "You're one of those humans who can lift yehr eyebrows separately..."

"I've found it helpful. For one thing, successfully dressing like your brother requires it."

"Ah. Yeah... that suit fits ya real nice. You'd think it was made for ya..."

"Thanks. I've confused quite a few people in it. To make it more convincing, I've been testing Spine's disapproving stare."
"Oh," she giggled miserably. "Is that what yehr d-d-doin'? Only it's real awkward..."

"Good."

"Right..."

Dave leaned in and smiled eerily... the pink gums and off color human teeth didn't match the silver.

"I ought to pull you down to pieces, Rabbit," he said in a low voice, trembling with suppressed rage. "I should rip out your wiring and leave you to rust. After the crap that happened with Paige, you have the nerve to turn around and pull this. And how could you, at your age, think it was okay to slip alcohol to someone? I don't care if you are a damned robot. You hurt my sister. You hurt her husband. And we've played out this little cute charade to give you a taste of your own medicine but in my opinion it's not bitter enough. I'm playing along because I know Paige feels sorry for you, and Chelsea couldn't hurt a fly, and Hatchworth, as angry as he is, would feel terrible if anything happened to you."

Another static pulse. Maybe she was wrong... maybe it was just a failed wifi connection? She wanted to test it but now was not a good time. David was on the warpath, and he wasn't the only one.

Rabbit glanced up at Hatchworth. He was singing a sweet song but she caught the coolness of his glance as he noticed her. Why had he walked her to her table, if he was so angry? Ah, but of course... she had to be in the room to get the full payback.

Although David was right. Hatchworth wasn't the cool kitchen robot they'd put into the vault. He cared, and had probably felt sorry for his part in things despite his determination to follow it through.

"You're getting off easy, for now," David said. "We've been careful who found out and The Spine is too happy right now to pound you like you deserve. But I'll tell you this... you'll make a really crappy girl if you can't find some understanding."

"What, guys don't need understanding?" Rabbit muttered angrily. The nerve! She was planning to apologize but she didn't feel inclined to tell him so, not after this.

"Yeah, they do. You'd fail at that, too."

"You smug, self-righteous son-of-a-bitch!"

"Nice try, but I already knew all of that."

Rabbit opened her mouth to continue the roasting and stopped, her head buzzing once more. He knew... all of it?

"But I called you a..."

"Smug, self-righteous son-of-a-bitch?" he asked dryly. "Yeah, I am being smug, I am being self righteous, and as for son-of-a-bitch, I figured that out a long time ago."

Rabbit gaped, her rage stopped cold for the second time in a row. "Your mom wasn't... nice?" she asked lamely.

"Not to get into it but, no. She was a drunk and she was pretty damned awful even when she was sober. Abusive, especially to Bunny. But we both got more than our share."
Rabbit looked away, aching. Well, if that didn't just put a javelin right through her heart... There was yet another burst of static. She resolved to tune it out until later. She refused to spoil the party, and there was nothing she could do about it now anyway.

"And now Bunny has a chance to be the woman her mother never was, and I think she can do it. I thought Paige was pretty good for her but if it's Peter she wants, fine. But she needs to be allowed to do things her way, her speed. And Peter was being a weenie but they need to work it out together. You had no business pushing them into something they weren't ready to handle."

Rabbit nodded and tried not to cry. Static... and gone. Good. She wasn't going to make a play for sympathy now. This wasn't about her...

"Now luckily those two seem to have made up. And I can't imagine telling them you did it until they've had some time to get past this and cool off. But after that we're gonna have to say something. I just... wanted to make sure you don't apologize too soon."

"Wait, what? I thought you were gonna tell me I had to tell 'em n-n-now..." Rabbit said softly.

"Nope. The Spine told me he already told you to, so I asked Hatchy to get you down here so that I could stop you. You tell them now and Peter will lose his sh!t and well... Look at them."

Rabbit glanced around. Peter and Bunny sat close together at the table. Bunny's head was on his shoulder and he held onto her as though his life depended on it.

"Just look at that. Earlier today she thought it was over and that it was her fault. And yeah, she made a mistake but it wasn't supposed to hurt anyone but herself. She meant well."

Rabbit couldn't help it. She started to cry, very softly, as she whispered, "I don't know what I was thinkin'... I just wanted to help and... and I thought it would be funny. I wasn't even sure they'd sleep together. I thought they might pass out somewhere or something. I'm a jerk..."

She waited, but he offered no argument to the contrary. Fair enough. Buzz...

"So when do I tell them?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Ah."

They danced without speaking for a minute or so. David glanced awkwardly at Rabbit, who looked away. At least the static had subsided... it was really annoying.

"So..." he said dully, his message delivered. "Um... you like the costume?"

"Oh, yeah, actually..."

"You look pretty good. Really. I was surprised."

Bzzzzz. Dammit! Rabbit squinted at him. "Why?"

"I had to try it on before we slipped it to you. Bra, gel packs, everything. And to be honest, I looked like a jackass."

Rabbit snorted.

The song ended at last and David left with a curt nod. Rabbit turned to leave the dance floor and saw
The Spine himself approaching from the far side. He gestured, suggesting he wanted to dance, too. She heaved a relieved sigh. That would be nice after the dance she'd just had.

Her view was abruptly blocked by someone else. It was Michael Reed.

"May I have this dance?"

Static... with little popping sounds. That was no good...

"What?" she gasped.

"Dance?" he asked, unwittingly making the same little dancing motion The Spine had.

"Are you in on it, too?" she demanded.

"In on what?"

She looked over his shoulder. The Spine had stopped and was grinning from ear to ear. Dang it, she'd wanted to dance with her little brother...

*Go on, Rabbit. We can dance later.*

*But... he's a meatbag!*

*And he's good-looking.*

*And male!*

*What's the difference? It's just a dance.*

*Your point?*

*You don't have to but I'm sure he's just trying to be nice.*

*I don't need his pity!*

*It's not pity. Friends dance together. Go on.*

Rabbit looked at Michael skeptically. He raised both eyebrows and she sighed. He was such an innocent baby. Maybe he was in on it but it was more likely someone had put him up to it.

"Alright," she sighed.

As she took his hand, Hatchworth announced, "Hello everyone! This song is for my sister Rabbit. We all love you, my dear!"

Rabbit gasped and turned to gape at him. It was a set-up!

"You with the sad eyes, don't be discouraged," Hatchworth sang. "Oh I realize it's hard to take courage. In a world full of people you can lose sight of it all and the darkness inside you can make you feel so small..."

Michael Reed grasped her hand and led her into a dance as Hatchworth sang.

"Are you okay?" he asked as others joined them on the dance floor.

"I guess... I didn't expect this..."
"But I see your true colors shining through," Hatchworth sang. "I see your true colors and that's why I love you. So don't be afraid to let them show. Your true colors, true colors are beautiful, like a rainbow."

"Dammit... Either he's t-t-tryin' ta give me guilt or he's guilty himself. Either way, he's gonna make me cry..." she murmured.

"Go ahead," Michael suggested pleasantly. "It's a party. Enjoy yourself."

"Nah, my eyelashes might fall off."

Michael laughed. "You'd still look pretty, though."

Rabbit looked at him askance. Was this part of the prank? Only it seemed a little mean-spirited for someone like Michael.

"I think you should know..." she said carefully, "I don't like fleshies... um, humans. Y'know, I don't like 'em like that."

"Oh, I know."

"Good."

They danced without speaking for a scant ten seconds before Michael murmured, "But you like Paige. I mean, you've kissed Paige, and she's a... a human."

"Just Paige."

"Oh. You just wanted to kiss Paige."

"Yeah, I just wanted to kiss Paige," she muttered.

"So you only like human girls."

"I only like human Paige."

Not that Paige liked her back, especially now. She'd been dancing with Sam an awful lot, though...

"That's really sweet, Rabbit."

"Shut up, pretty boy. I dunno what your angle is but I'll figure it out."

Michael laughed. "Can't I just want to dance with a beautiful girl?"

Uh-huh. He was totally setting her up. She was disappointed. The others she expected this stuff from but she'd thought he was nicer than that. Well, she could play this game too.

"Beautiful robot, you mean."

"Beautiful girl robot, then."

Bzzzz. So much for playing along. Rabbit wriggled, trying not to enjoy the compliment. Maybe he meant it, but even if he did, Michael was the kind that saw good in everything. He would probably call her beautiful even if she looked like the back end of a rhino.

"Beautiful girl robot who likes robots and one human girl, got it?" she said sternly.
"Yeah," Michael continued. "But... you liked kissing Paige, right?"

"Yeah, sure..."

"So you're willing to kiss humans."

"If you're gonna go around again, I'm gettin' off at th'a station."

Michael laughed and Rabbit sighed.

"What's your p-p-point, laughing boy?" she asked wearily.

"You say you only like kissing Paige but it sounds like you've only ever kissed Paige."

Well, her and that one girl in tha Vulcan costume who got really drunk at the sci-fi convention in '76 and tried ta get into my empty pants... "So?" she asked, prudently not voicing her thoughts.

"Sorry," Michael said. "I was just wondering... have you ever kissed a man?"

Bzzzzzzzz! What the hell? "Why would I?"

"I don't know... just to see what it's like, I guess."

Is this some kind of flirting? "Oh... I guess I could sometime. Just for the hell of it."

Rabbit gave him a squinty look as he smiled off into the distance. Time to up the ante. She knew just how to shut him up.

"You ain't offerin', are you?" she asked slyly.

He looked her in the eye. His smile had somehow grown more serious. "Maybe. If you're up for it. I mean, if you've never kissed a man, and I've never kissed a robot, we could try both at the same time."

Holy crap... Another buzz complete with little popping sounds. He'd called her bluff! She needed to deflect. That's what she'd heard the Walter Girls call it. Only she had no idea how to do that.

"That ain't what the fan fiction says," she said.

"You read fan fiction?"

Buzz. Oops, backfired... "Don't change the subject..." she muttered. "Anyway, obviously I ain't never tried... y'know... kissing a guy."

"Ah. Well, I'm willing if you are."

What now? She was in over her head, but she was intrigued. Would he really do it? He tended to blush if you just looked at him sideways... he was already pink now. Or was that the lights?

"I guess if you really wanna, I'm up for it. I don't got a lot of options in the robot department, and I ain't kissin' Hatchy..."

"Coincidentally, I also have surprisingly few options in the robot department. And I'm also not kissing Hatchy."

"Well, then..." Time to put up or shut up. She glanced around self-consciously. "Maybe we should
find a dark corner or something..."

Michael's eyes twinkled as the song came to a close. Before she could react, he tipped up her chin and kissed her gently on the lips.

Rabbit started as her head played a full chorus of buzzes and popping sounds. Well, then. Apparently it was impossible to embarrass some people. She debated pulling away but then it would look like he was giving her unwanted affection.

The room was too big to fall completely silent over something happening in one isolated part of the dance floor, but a noticeable quiet settled over on their side. She could hear startled signals coming over the wifi from Hatchworth. He might have put Michael up to dancing with her, but apparently he hadn't instructed the man to kiss her.

Rabbit wasn't sure how to end it. It had come so naturally with Paige, but she'd meant what she said; she wasn't attracted to Michael, despite the fact that he was a good looking human guy.

The static pulse came again, a little louder, accompanied by a strange popping sound directly in her audioreceptors. Was she smelling smoke? It was hard to tell without an actual sense of smell.

Michael leaned away, smiling. "Thank you," he whispered.

"For the dance or the kiss?" she asked, startled at the soft femininity of her voice. Unless she sounded that way because her ears were on the blink...

"Both. Both were really nice."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I had no idea you'd gotten so good."

"At which?"

Michael grinned slyly. "Again... both."

"Well, hell..." Weirdo.

Michael kissed her hand and strolled away, whistling. Rabbit stood, staring at her hand. The Spine approached, leaned down, and made eye contact.

"Hello?" he murmured, smiling. "I don't believe we'd danced yet."

Rabbit snapped out of her reverie. "Mm, no. Not since I taught ya how ta polka..."

"Well, then. May I have this dance?"

She smiled sheepishly and joined him.

So... that was unexpected.

Yeah...

Should I ask him what his intentions are?

I'm afraid ta find out... She sighed. Don't sweat it. He was just doin' me a favor.
Oh?

He was curious about kissin’ a robot, I was curious about kissin’ a guy. He coulda been a little more discreet though...

Well, you certainly chose well. I can’t wait to see the photos.

Rabbit gaped and her head broke out in pops and crackles. What?

The Spine gave her a strange look then shook his head. You didn't notice Beth snapping a photo when you kissed?

No! That little pixie punk!

Oh... but there was a flash...

Well... I guess I was a little caught up in the moment... Or her vision was being affected now...

Ah. But you were just curious, hm?

He was real good at it, okay?

The Spine beamed. She isn't putting any of the wedding photos online, you know. I can make sure if you want...

Please.

And don’t feel like you have to switch teams just because you’ll be a girl, though. You’re a robot. I don’t think there even is a sexuality that describes you, what with Honeybee and Paige and Jenny the Toaster and Penny the Blender and that one nightstand...

Just don’t read too much into it. I don’t really wanna talk about it anymore.

Alright. Should I ask what the Matter Master had to say?

Rabbit groaned. Her head just buzzed this time, fortunately, since The Spine appeared to have noticed the popping and crackling.

Alright. Let’s just dance, then. You’ve paid enough for your mistake.

I don’t know about that. But I’ve taken all I can handle for now.

The Spine smiled and squeezed her hand.

"Thanks, bro," she sighed. "And congratulations."

The Spine grinned, and Rabbit was pleased to note that the static had finally stopped. Good old Spine. She sure hoped tonight was everything he’d hoped. She didn’t want to think too much about it, but she had her doubts whether Bree really knew what she was getting herself into.

But she wouldn’t so much as hint it to her brother. She smiled back and they finished the dance without speaking.

As the evening progressed, Rabbit found no lack of partners. Old friends came up to ask, staff she
was sure hated her even wanted a spin. Hatchworth, showing no signs of anger but not being especially chatty either, made her positively dizzy when he revealed that he'd downloaded ballroom dance steps and had practiced them well. At least, she thought she was dizzy from the dancing. She wasn't actually supposed to be able to be dizzy and the static had returned after a few minutes...

At the end of their dance, she lost equilibrium for a tenth of a second, but it was enough for Hatchworth to notice. He took her firmly by the arm, steadying her.

*Are you quite alright?* he sent as he led her from the dance floor to a chair.

*Of course!*

*But I felt a slight wobble in your balance, Rabbit.*

*I'm an old junkbot. Ya gotta expect that.*

Hatchworth fixed her with a long, thoughtful stare.

*What?* she sent.

*You would tell someone if there was a problem, correct?*

*Hatchy...*

*Rabbit! Would you say so? You are not feeling suicidal again, are you?*

*No! No, I'm not. I just need to sit and recalibrate my equilibrium, okay? Just a quick recalibration.*

*Because I was terrified when you... well... we were all very worried. You must take care of yourself.*

She was touched. Hatchworth had shown her gentle concern before but it never failed to amaze her.

*No, really, buddy. I'll be fine.*

Hatchworth stared for a moment longer and shrugged. *My apologies for the inquisition. This costume is going to my head, I suppose.*

*Oh, ya feel the need to exercise ze little gray cells?* she sent, grinning.

He rewarded her with a rare smile. She liked it. The mustache always made it so friendly.

"If you're quite alright, then, I will go and dance with Annie. She has promised me a waltz."

Rabbit waved from her seat and sighed. That had been an ordeal.

She looked around the room. Upgrade was dancing with Jon. She smiled at Rabbit and sent a message asking for the next dance. Rabbit wanted to do it but had some hesitation. Upgrade was a lot newer. Any loss of equilibrium would not go undetected with her, and she would be a lot harder to buffalo.

*Okay, but I'm a little wobbly after all this dancin'!* Rabbit sent.

*I'll hold you up, Pappy,* Upgrade assured her.

That covered it. She saw The Spine with his bride dancing close against him. His look of contentment mingled with smoldering passion made it all worthwhile. And a little nauseating.
Turning, she could see Peter and Bunny signing to each other.

"Well, I can understand why you didn't. You were in pain."

"I was actually getting close, though. It's just harder for girls, I guess," she signed.

"Oh. Is there some special trick I need to do?"

"Well, I only know what worked on Paige. I might not like the same things."

"We could try them, though."

She grinned wickedly. "We could. I already know you're good with your..."

Rabbit looked away hastily. She was not interested in getting a primer on how to satisfy a human woman. That ship had sailed.

Upgrade came at last to collect her for their dance, bringing Jon as backup. A three person dance was awkward but surprisingly fun.

When the dance ended, she decided, she would take a little rest. Maybe that buzzing would settle and she could get back to her set. But the moment Upgrade and Jon walked away, she heard a voice behind her.

"Oh, Rabbit! Peter wants to dance with you!"

She jumped and turned to see Annie.

"Which one?" she gasped.

"Oh, Peter V. Sorry..."

Whew! She wanted to sit down and let her head settle, but she couldn't pass that up. There was no telling how long he'd keep his energy up before needing to head to bed. She could rest later.

She smiled her old, charming lopsided smile and murmured, "I'd love it."

Chapter End Notes

I hear the sound of ticking...
The Cake hits the Fan

Chapter Summary

The truth comes out just a tiny bit more... to exactly the worst possible person. While a honeymoon begins a life comes to a sharp crossroads.

Chapter Notes

Includes moments of self-indulgence Hatchworth goodness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please excuse the interruption, but we have to get our lovely couple on their way soon, so the dancing will be briefly interrupted so that we can run through a few wedding traditions! First we will be watching the bride and groom cut the cake!"

Peter looked lazily up at Rabbit. "She's been having a good time," he murmured.

Bunny nodded against his shoulder. "I'm glad," she whispered. "She was getting some dirty looks earlier. I'll be finding out what that's all about later."

"Really? Damn, I hope it's not because of the costume."

"It was staff, so..."

Peter stiffened. "It'd better not be about the costume, then, or they won't be staff for long..."

"Relax! One of them was David. He wouldn't give her the stink eye for that. There must have been some crap going on while we weren't looking. He was being a little evasive earlier."

"Lovely."

They strolled over to see the cake cutting. Once the first cut was made, The Spine took a small piece and held it toward his bride.

"Smush it in her face!" Rabbit cried.

"Yeah! Smush it in her face, Unkie Spine!" Upgrade crowed.

The Jon joined them as they chanted, then Dave and Sunshine, and the rest of the guests fell in soon after. The Spine gave them all a sly smile, turned to Breanna, and popped the cake precisely into her waiting mouth. Not so much as a crumb was left on her face.

There was a massive groan of disappointment, but Peter and Bunny laughed with delight and Breanna's father and mother were applauding. What had they expected, really? He may have been exceptionally open with his passion for his bride this evening, but he was still The Spine.
Peter offered to get cake and Bunny went gratefully back to her seat. He debated, as he waited in line, chewing the caterers out for last night's error, but decided against it. He'd already spoken to Paige, who had assured him it was a miscommunication. And he couldn't see dressing down someone who was still providing a food related service. It didn't seem terribly prudent.

But when he reached the head of the line, the server spoke to him.

"Oh! Mr Walter! Hi, I'm Kim. I'm the manager of the catering service. I'm so sorry about the mistake last night! I really wish you'd let us cover the cost of the champagne as an apology."

"Oh!" Peter gasped as she pressed the cake plate into his hands. "Um... that's a bit much. I understand it was a communication error."

"It was, but on my part. There was some uncertainty about it and I missed the final decision so I thought we were supposed to serve champagne the entire evening instead of the first round."

Paige must have decided to let them off the hook, he thought. He was suddenly inclined to do the same.

"Well, I still don't think you have to cover all of it, then. How about just the extra champagne, hm? I wouldn't stop you from that."

She chuckled nervously. "Alright, Thank you. We'll pay for the additional rounds, and I'll include all of the champagne served to the person who ordered cider."

"Well, naturally... wait... It was just one person?"

"Oh, well, no, several people ordered cider..."

He heard a soft growl behind him. It was Steve Negrete clearing his throat.

"Keep it moving, Peter," he said with a chuckle.

Peter stepped aside so that she could continue handing out cake. It seemed to him that Steve gave them both a lingering look as he left with his slice, and he felt his skin start to crawl. Something wasn't adding up.

"So only one of those was served champagne instead? How do you account for that?" Peter demanded.

"Oh, um... I understood there was some kind of prank, wasn't it? I wasn't actually serving last night..."

"What?"

"Um... that's what I heard... Wasn't there someone in your household who called and changed one of the orders? Paige seemed fairly put out that someone had taken her phone and... just a moment. Rob! What was it she said about the champagne?"

A man serving cake on the other side of the table looked up and paled. He looked at the woman with wide eyes and said faintly, "She said Mr Walter had ordered the cider..."

"Oh!" Kim cried, turning to Peter. "Oh, I am so sorry! Let me..."

"Who?" Peter demanded. "Who in my household called to change the order?"
"I don't... Rob?"

"She didn't say. She just mumbled, 'Rabbit,' and walked out. It was weird."

Kim cringed slightly and Peter suspected she, unlike Rob, knew who Rabbit was. Before she could launch into another apology, Peter turned, trembling, and walked back toward the table with the slice of cake.

He was too tired to process this. He just needed to think.

David darted from the cake line and fell in step with him within seconds. "Peter... what did she tell you?"

"What?"

"Dammit, what did she say?"

"Did you know about this?"

David sighed sharply. "Not until this morning, okay? We've been trying to handle it discreetly..."

"Well, way to go! What the hell do I do with this information?"

He glared at David despite the futility of it and hoped the mask looked angry enough. How many people had known?

"Don't do anything, okay? Let The Spine and Bree head out on their honeymoon, don't dump anything else on Bunny. Just don't do anything. Please. We've got this, and you and Bunny just made up so please, let us deal with it. I already chewed the hell out of Rabbit and made her cry a while ago, and The Spine has been nagging her all day to apologize, and plus we gave her some of her own medicine."

"Oh? You gave her some robot booze, laughed at her for a while, and then she did something she'd been afraid of her whole damned life?"

"What?" David asked, half smiling. "You've been afraid of..."

"Oh, shut up!" Peter sighed. "Sorry. Look, I just..."

He swallowed hard and looked across the room at Bunny, who was giving them a puzzled look. He lamely raised the cake to show her and turned back to David.

"Alright. I'll shut up for now; he muttered. "But so help me if Rabbit comes anywhere near me... I don't know. I don't know what to think right now."

"Fine," David sighed, relaxing. "I wouldn't expect you to know that. We'll all have a nice ugly family meeting tomorrow or something, okay? Or we'll get Annie and Upgrade and Wanda to give Rabbit guilt. We'll figure everything out. Now go on and make my sister happy."

"Don't order me around," Peter muttered. "I swear I married both of you."

David snickered. "Kinda. Sorry. I'm just worried about her, okay? She was a mess earlier. She loves you and she thought she screwed everything up. So, yeah. Go on. She needs you."

Peter felt a welcome surge of pleasure at the thought. It cut neatly through the anger. He nodded.
"Alright. Thanks. I felt the same way all day so I guess I understand."

"Big shock. Alright, gonna get some cake and act natural."

"Don't overdo it."

"Which one?"

"Both."

He strolled at last to the table and set the cake before Bunny, who thanked him warmly and began to eat. She glanced at him sidelong from time to time but to his relief didn't ask questions.

He watched her and seethed in spite of his promise. He couldn't show it, but he was still so angry he could cry. Rabbit, of all people! How could she do this? And Bunny was so eager to make things easier for Rabbit, had felt such a connection despite the way they'd clashed in the past. How could he tell her who was responsible for the emotional and physical pain they had suffered?

Not that he didn't own his part in it. But the alcohol had aggravated everything and she had been the one who arranged for him to drink it.

Bunny looked at him and smiled. He put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze. David was right. He couldn't upset her now. He had never been so accepting of his mask. He was downright grateful for it, because Bunny couldn't see the anger he so easily concealed behind it. They would deal with Rabbit later. For now, he could only act as though nothing was wrong, for the sake of Bunny.

Once the cake had been served, the bouquet was tossed... and caught by Chelsea. David actually managed to go pale through his makeup.

The Spine surprised everyone once again by lingering over the removal of the garter from Bree's shapely saloon girl leg. With a wicked look in his eye, he flung it over his shoulder, with robotic precision, directly at David, who hadn't even joined the crowd waiting to catch it. Rabbit whistled and applauded, both because of the joke and because as a result David successfully completed a glare that made him look exactly like The Spine.

Rabbit sat at last, resting her creaky old chassis. Maybe it was time to man... er... woman up and face the retrofit. It was just such a big change, and she was so scared of any! But if she already looked this hot (enough people had told her and getting a kiss from the handsomest guy in the room had added to the ego boost) then how gorgeous would she be if they did things right?

She sighed. She was getting ahead of herself. Of course her reluctance was a big factor, but money was another. They had it, but her upgrades would take so much of it! And they had expenses. From what Peter had told her, they could just afford to install one boob at a time, a couple of weeks apart...

She'd seen Peter walk by earlier and had stayed prudently in the shadows while he brought a slice of cake to Bunny. This was good. They needed to be happy. Cake made humans happy.

She caught herself watching the clock. She'd tried not to and had even managed to enjoy a lot of the party, but she had a guilty conscience and seeing Peter didn't help. What would he do when he found out? And he would find out... and probably take her apart. So she couldn't fully relax. It seemed like everyone knew, everyone was just waiting to accidentally tell Peter or Bunny... She shuddered. Bunny. After everything that had happened, Bunny would just go for the chainsaw...
But she would consider it a relief after this damned popping sound in her head! It had started with the bigger upsets and escalated. Now it would fade away and come back every time her fear flared up again, every time she laughed, every time she felt anything! As a result, it was popping like hell right now.

She'd never really known how she could feel emotion. Maybe she had a little chip for it somewhere and it was on the blink. But that sounded so Star Trek...

She had another less self-centered reason to watch the clock, though. The happy couple had stepped out to change into their traveling gear and would be heading out soon, and she wanted to see them off. The staff had had a plan for decorating the car and she had, at least, been able to take part in it the night before. Sam had drawn a scrotum with shoe polish before wiping it off at Michael's insistence, and she wished he hadn't caved in because he'd managed to make it look mechanical with little rivets and it was comedy gold.

Michael. She touched her lips and shook her head. Eh, well. He wasn't a bad kisser, but if she ever went for anyone again, human, male or otherwise, she'd look for someone who was a lot more trouble. Michael was just too... good. Sure, Honeybee had been a saint on the surface, and Paige was almost as good. But Rabbit had always scented that little hidden firecracker inside of Honeybee, especially in bed. And Paige had that same quality as far as Rabbit had known her. Michael, on the other hand, probably was filled with flower petals and sugar candy... and maybe a little weed.*

And speaking of flower petals and sugar candy... and drugs... The Jon trotted up to her. "It's time, Rabbit! Wait'll he sees the car!"

Upgrade, close behind, gave Rabbit a hug. "We had so much fun, Pappy! Did you?"

Rabbit smiled weakly and nodded.

"You look so pretty! Like a real pirate!" she crowed as they jogged away to join the crowd.

Rabbit snickered in spite of herself. Pretty like a pirate. Kids say the cutest things...

The popping came again, startling her. She shook her head and hurried out.

It had been a wonderful reception. They'd danced most of the night together, seen the people they loved all in one room wishing them well. Bob had canceled at the last minute, but Ringo had brought a gift from Paul: a ukulele. The Spine explained to Bree that it was an inside joke; they had once concluded that the instrument was irresistible to women. Bree laughed a little too much. He had a feeling she was just a bit overwhelmed by the gift giver... a fact confirmed once Ringo had gone, when she pulled him down to whisper, "That was a f***ing Beatle!"

He'd laughed and embraced her, one of many opportunities he'd found to do so. Seeing Ringo again was great, but far from the highlight of his evening.

They'd excused themselves eventually to head upstairs and gather their bags. On the way to the staircase, The Spine stopped Bree and pulled her into his arms. He just had to mark this moment with a lingering kiss.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," she murmured as their lips parted. She lay her head against his chest. "It's still a couple of hours to the honeymoon suite..."

"I know," he said, holding her carefully. "But this is the spot... where we stopped a year ago and had
our first kiss. This is where it all began. At least, where we tried to begin."

"Oh!" she breathed, looking up. "You romantic idiot. So you just had to kiss me here, dressed like
this."

"Yep," he said, tipping his hat.

She beamed. "I suggest we kiss every time we happen to pass this spot together."

"We can at least try. There are a lot of factors that might..."

She laughed and pulled him down for another kiss. Oh, well. He couldn't say no to a request like that. Whatever the circumstances, he would do his best.

They hurried to change and gather their things. The Spine grabbed a makeup kit and stacked it atop the bags as he carried them out.

Most of the group was friendly enough as they walked out. She supposed the party would carry on into the night once Breanna and The Spine had left. They had a long drive ahead and had to leave a little early.

While Rabbit was debating whether to stay for the rest of the celebration, she noticed she was passing Peter and Bunny. She stiffened, trying to act natural. Bunny noticed her and signed a compliment to her costume before walking ahead to her brother. No sign of anger there. Good.

But before she could relax, she realized Peter was hanging back... and was still looking at Rabbit. Even without a visible face, it had an impact. Her sensors told her his neck had increased in temperature and she could see the tension in his shoulders. He looked away, shaking his head slightly.

"S-Something wrong, Petes?" she asked faintly.

"Yeah," he muttered. "I had a chat with someone on the catering staff while I was getting cake for Bunny."

Rabbit trembled. The sound in her head was like an angry beehive. But she never could resist poking beehives...

"About wh-what, exactly...?" Rabbit asked reluctantly.

Peter sighed sharply. "She's happy right now and I'm not screwing that up, Rabbit," he growled. "We'll talk later, okay? When I've cooled off."

He strode ahead and joined Bunny as she finished her conversation with David. Rabbit, slowing to a halt in the foyer, stared after them as the rest of the guests flowed around her.

He knew.

Her whole body seemed to be shaking. The popping sound was so loud she was sure it must be audible to everyone. She couldn't go out there now! She couldn't! Not if Peter knew! She had to get away...

She turned and fled. Where could she go that Peter wouldn't find her? Was there anywhere? At least, she could head away from the ballroom...
The popping and buzzing in her head became a sharp crackling as she hurried into the depths of Walter Manor. There was a particularly sharp pop and her vision was half obscured by static interference. She gasped in pain.

*Help... Something's wrong... I need help... but who would help me now?*

She staggered on into lesser used hallways, paying no attention to where she was going, turning always into passages that seemed the most quiet and cold. She came to a stop at last, staring around her. She was alone in the darkness. Where... where was she...

Rabbit tried to calm down. It helped, a little. Her vision cleared slightly. She was in an older wing... there was a very old lab ahead. That was good... something was wrong... she needed a tech...

But her techs were all angry at her!

Another crackling pop and a sharp hissing sound in her ears. Her eyes were completely obscured by static. She sobbed and leaned against the wall, clutching her head. Was this what a headache felt like? It was a hell of a time to learn a new trick... She just knew it hurt. She'd been in pain during her meltdown but she hadn't noticed any in her head. Panic rose once more. So much important data was stored in there!

*Pop!* She shuddered, gasping to keep her systems cooled.

"No..." she choked.

She'd wanted to die last time. Now she was so close to starting over again! If she could ever get past the fear of making the change... a costume was one thing but...

A stabbing pain came from the rising panic. Her head was screaming and she wanted to scream, too. She needed help... Spine... no, no, not Spine, not now... Jon? But he was with Upgrade... she couldn't worry Upgrade... that left one person she could summon by wifi, if it was still working... she hoped it was because telegraph would be received by all of them... she activated her wifi.

*POP!* Rabbit cried out and sobbed into the cold darkness of the empty hallway. *Help... please... it hurts...*

No wifi, then...

She beat on her skull plate, trying to think. Radio! They each had their own frequency...

*Hatchy!* she sent desperately, as the static swelled and filled every corner of her processor. *Hatchy, please... please help me!*

There was a crowd waiting, tossing confetti and shouting off-color remarks. He rolled his eyes and opened the door for Bree. She kissed him quickly and got into the driver's seat; The Spine had learned long since that he lacked the fine motor ability to drive a car without putting a foot through the floor. He knew from playing guitar that he could develop it, but that had been a lot safer to learn, and less expensive to fail.

He waved at the crowd of family and friends before getting into the car himself. He didn't see Rabbit, but he could understand that. She was probably laying low.

He loosened his tie and collar and put on his makeup in the mirror as they drove toward the freeway,
finishing to his satisfaction before they'd even left San Diego. He was skilled at it and it looked convincing enough to fool a desk clerk. He'd modeled some of the finer details after Matter Master David's skin, adding a careful hint of five o'clock shadow and a little darkness under the eyes. The result was that it had looked as though David was leaving and The Spine was staying behind.

Bree glanced at him and made a face. "That's so creepy," she giggled. "You sure I'm leaving with the right guy?"

He grinned and tugged his collar aside, showing the silver chassis beneath. "Good enough?"

She beamed. "Perfect. Does it bother you that he looks so much like you?"

"It's peculiar but not the weirdest thing to ever happen to me."

"Ah. Yeah, that I believe."

"Does it bother you?" he asked hesitantly.

"Only when you wear the makeup. Wash it off when we get there and things will be perfect."

"No, I meant... that I'm not... y'know."

"Hm?" she asked, frowning.

"That I'm a robot," he sighed. "I know, I know, it's a hell of a time to ask, I should know better by now, you love me the way I am..."

"That's for damn sure..." she said, frowning prettily.

"I just mean that... obviously there will be some drawbacks. You know... some things that differ between a man made of flesh and a man made of metal..."

She giggled.

"What?" he asked, perturbed.

"Look... just you do your part and I'll do mine. And quit apologizing for not being human. I promise you, it won't bother me in the slightest."

He sighed. "Right. I just... Thank you."

She shook her head. "You thank me for it all the time, baby. Always the humble robot. Well, I guess I'm going to have to be that kind of wife and straighten you out about a few things. Well, one, anyway. Just one."

"Which one?"

She smiled and put her finger to her lips. "Spoilers."

He stared at the road ahead. What did that mean?

Hatchworth laughed and waved as The Spine and Breanna drove away. The jollity of the group that turned back into the house to continue the celebration was infectious and he felt it down to his core. People thought he had no emotions but it simply wasn't true. He had self-control, yes, more indeed
than The Spine for all his posturing, but he most certainly had emotions. Just now, for instance, he felt a rich and satisfying joy in the happiness of his brother.

Yes, his brother, he mused as he strolled among the well-wishers. He felt it now, after many years of thought. For truly what was a brother or a sister but a connection that was...

*Hatchy*

He sighed. Speaking of sisters. They had danced, to be sure, but after all her nonsense of the past day, he had little patience with her.

On the other hand... why was she using radio signals?

*What now, Rabbit?* he sent, but another message, crackling and desperate, cut across his response.

*Hatchy, please... please help me!*

Oh, dear.

He stopped short and Camille ran into his back with a squeak. He swiftly turned and caught her. She looked up with a surprised expression that melted into a sheepish smile. He smiled back, choosing the smile that best set off his mustache. Her cheeks pinked as he stood holding her, and his furnace burned just a little warmer as he looked into her eyes.

My, she was a cute little thing... He had no interest in the human sex act but he'd always been aware of beauty and fancied he had a rather romantic streak. And he had become very aware of her beauty in particular. They'd danced a few times already and there had been some stolen looks in the last few weeks... he'd just begun to fancy the possibility that there was more than one woman interested in romance with an automaton. Bunny had managed to place a kiss on his bronze lips... if she could do it, then so could Camille, should she be so inclined...

But as much as he would have liked to savor this moment and that telling blush in her cheeks, he could scarcely take the time. Rabbit's signal had been desperate and her wifi was potentially malfunctioning. And he hadn't seen her since before The Spine drove away. That didn't bode well.

"I do beg your pardon, my dear. I believe my sister requires my assistance," he said in his silkiest tone, gently releasing her.

Chelsea, who had approached with David, said, "What's she up to now?"

"She is sending for help. It sounds rather dire."

"What?" David cried. "What's going on?"

"I will ask for further information," he said, feeling a stab of guilt at having been distracted by a pair of pretty eyes.

*What is the trouble, Rabbit?* he sent, trying the wifi.

There was no response. He switched to radio signals.

*Rabbit! Where are you? Are you in distress?*

To his dismay, he received exactly one weak, buzzing signal.

*Help me...*
There was a string of random code and then... static.

Hatchworth turned without a word and ran, connecting to Qwerty as he did.

*Where is Rabbit?* he demanded.

*RO0d!*

*I will send you a virus, so help me I will...*

*SHE IZ IN TEH OLD WING...*

*There are many old wings!*

*THE OLDEST LOL*

Hatchworth called over his shoulder to the humans, who he knew had given chase. "She is in Pappy's old lab!"

Of course, he didn't know if she was. But by the time they caught up, she would be. He increased speed and left them behind.

After what seemed like eons of running with the humans shouting in the distance for him to slow down, he found her. She was standing against the wall as he approached, her back to him. He slowed to a walk.

"Rabbit, what is it?" he said lightly. Perhaps he had overreacted... "Is this another silly prank? I should have thought you would have learned your lesson by now..."

She didn't respond. He noticed, now that he was still, a steady tic of her motor functions. Keeping his fear in check, he walked around to face her. Her eyes seemed to stare through him.

"Rabbit!" he said sharply.

*Zero zero one...*

His fear was no longer in check. "What?" he cried.

She grimaced as if with a great struggle. Her mouth opened but for a moment there was only a crackling sound.

*Zero... Ha-ha-ha-hatch... box... one one one...* Her whole body began to shudder.

He lunged forward and caught her as she started to fall, holding her firmly as the spasms escalated.

"Rabbit!" he shouted, holding on for dear life.**

He heard a sharp pop and Rabbit cried out in agony as her limbs at last stopped thrashing and went limp. He eased her to a sitting position on the floor and knelt beside her, searching her face in vain for some sign of awareness.

"Rabbit? Rabbit, can you hear me?" he cried, anguished. Her cry had cut him to the core.

She looked past him with a blank expression, black tears leaking out and sliding into her vents. Her lips worked soundlessly. He received a message, but it was all static. Her eyes went dark.
"Rabbit..." he whispered thickly. "Rabbit, please... say something... can you signal? Rabbit?"

No response. He lifted her, with the greatest care he could manage, letting the bicorner hat fall to the floor. It was hard... she had shut down completely... limp as a marionette with cut strings.

"Please don't die..." he whispered as her head flopped alarmingly against his shoulder. "I am sorry I was so very angry... and you were getting better... it was all going to be better soon..."

Her systems were silent. His throat clicked audibly as he grappled with his distress. Rabbit was never silent, even after her meltdown...

Heedless of the oil now slipping down his faceplates, he carried her into the old lab just as the Walter Workers arrived.

Chapter End Notes

*for the record, the only thing I know for a fact that Michael Reed has ever been "addicted" to is yerba mate (lol) and I will not speculate about other possibilities nor discuss rumors on the subject.

**this might seem unrelated, but I understand that if you encounter someone having a seizure, you do not do what Hatchy did. Don't try to hold them still. Obviously he's tougher that we are though. ;)}
Honeymoon

Chapter Summary

Unaware that there's anything to worry about at home, The Spine travels to Long Beach for his honeymoon.

Chapter Notes

It's not an exciting story, but a happy story is usually isn't. Mature but not explicit content ahead as The Spine face the next big step in moving forward with his life... sex with a new partner. Marie was modern for her time, but Bree is right out of Star Trek.

Also a little fourth wall breaking fun for SPG fans, before we return to the tension of a freshly broken Rabbit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Love... I know you don't want to think about the future right now..."

"Of course I do. Our future."

"You know what I mean. I won't be around forever. And I want you to know that I want you to marry again someday."

The Spine looked away. "Marie..." he breathed, aching.

"I know. I won't say any more about that. But I want you to be happy, okay? As happy as you can be, because you've made me happier than I ever thought possible."

"Me? I... I didn't do anything special."

"Sure you did."

He shook his head. "No... you're the one that made life wonderful, Marie. If you hadn't accepted me then..."

"Oh, that," she scoffed. "Of course I accepted you. I love you. The you inside, understand? I love the real you."

He closed his eyes briefly and softly replied, "I understand."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "There it is again. You always go a little quiet when I tell you that, like you don't believe me."

"I do believe you, love. I promise," he whispered, putting his hand over hers.

"Good. Never forget it. I love you, not your body. You're not a robot to me, got it? You've always
been a man. The man I love."

"Thank you," he whispered. He kissed her softly. "You should get some rest."

"Alright, love. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," he murmured.

He was in a hotel suite on the Queen Mary. His wife was in the bathroom, showering after a long night of dancing. He'd seen her walk into the bathroom carrying the red teddy and he had hastily produced the little silk outfit she'd given him. It was just shorts and a robe, but she'd said she wanted to undress him just a little. And it would be just a little; he'd accidentally put his foot through the shorts and had stuffed them into his suitcase.

It had been a nice drive. The air was cool and the windows were open just a little. He'd turned up his sensors to appreciate the feel of the wind.

And they had talked about whatever sprang to mind. There was no pressure, no work worries, no one watching. Just two people enjoying each others' company. He hadn't had the ever-present thought of being a robot trying to be human. And that was good.

Because he felt he'd moved beyond that as a person. He truly felt he'd begun to own the man he really was... not flesh and blood and never would be. And every bit as much of a man for all that.

But now, for the first time in decades, he was going to put it to the test on a much more intimate level. He'd always been enough man for Marie... at least, she'd seen him as a man. But what did she mean by "man"?

The shower turned off and he adjusted his position on the bed once more. He wanted to look sexy when she walked out, but no matter how he positioned himself, he just felt silly. He couldn't even imagine a human man looking sexy in some pretentious pose, much less a robot. Of course, he wasn't much of a judge of male attractiveness.

She walked out drying her hair. He sat up for a better view, his attempts to look seductive forgotten as he watched her approach. The red satin slid over her form as she walked. He felt a gentle electrical surge pass along his body and he shivered. He'd switched on his full sensory array and she, in a matter of seconds, had sent it over the top.

Bree looked him over and blushed deeply. "Oh... did the shorts not fit?" she asked faintly. "That's... um... pretty flattering, baby..."

"What is?" He glanced down and hastily tugged the robe across his groin, mortified. "What the hell...?"

So much for sexy! That was just... cruel! Sure, he'd felt a decided burst of programmed libido, but since when did it show like... like that?

"I think maybe Peter made a little programming adjustment," she giggled, sitting on the side of the bed.

"He could have warned me!" he cried. "That's so embarrassing..."

"But more human," she murmured gently.
He said nothing. Human. The thing that he decidedly wasn't. She'd said she accepted him as he was...

She crept into his arms and lay against his chest. Her hand slid along the exposed pectoral plates and he sighed. Her touch was so gentle...

"It's okay. You're supposed to feel like that on your honeymoon, right?"

"Well... that teddy was a big part of it," he breathed, holding her close.

"Good. I bought this to impress exactly one robot."

She twisted around and kissed him. He could feel the tension her body as he held her. Was it longing? Nerves? Or... regret?

Her fingers continued to stroke his chassis under the robe. She touched an access plate and he shuddered. He had security sensors connected to those plates ever since his accident; Peter had gotten fed up with the mechanics in L.A. opening panels they didn't understand.

"I'm sorry!" she gasped, pulling her hand back sharply.

"What's wrong?" he murmured, dazed.

"I didn't mean to... whatever I did..."

"What do you think you did?" he asked, confused.

"It must have hurt or... or something! You shook all over!"

He had... but it hadn't hurt! Bree sighed and he saw a sparkle of tears in her eyes.

"Spine... Look, baby, I've done maintenance on you but... I don't know how to make love to you!"

He took her hand and kissed her fingertips. "Well, first of all... it didn't hurt," he murmured, holding her close.

"It didn't?" she whispered.

"No, sweet. Far from it."

"Oh!" she gasped. "But you... oh... Are you telling me you liked it?"

"I think so... Those sensors are fairly new and no one has just... stroked one like that. I'd like to explore it."

"Oh, those... oh, man..." She giggled softly. "Are you telling me you have erogenous zones on every access plate?"

He blinked. "Maybe. I didn't think of it that way."

"Yeah, I think it fits."

"Oh! That's interesting."

She giggled. "You're telling me!"

He smiled nervously. "I, uh... never had one before."
"On the plate seams, though. That's so robot!" she chuckled.

"I... guess..." he murmured uneasily.

"Oh, but how... I mean, didn't Marie, y'know... pleasure you?" she asked, blushing.

He'd been growing uncertain but when she said it like that... he felt another soft surge of power and wondered why they were still talking.

"Well," he breathed, "My whole chassis was sensitive enough and my reactions are wired to mimic my partner's. So it just sort of took care of itself."

"Ah. Interesting." She settled her head against his chest once more. "I'm sorry. I know I was acting so horny up until now, but... now that it comes to the point, I guess I'm just realizing what I'm up against."

"I know. But you don't have to worry. I'll take care of everything."

She snickered. "The hell you will. I'll do my share, but... I'm just saying I'll need to some time to adapt."

"I understand. You... you didn't really face the fact that you married a robot..."

"What?" she gasped.

"That's it, isn't it?" he asked, trying to sound more casual than he felt. "You're having a hard time adjusting to a physical relationship with... with this."

"Oh, Spine..." she sighed.

"What?"

"You're not the problem!"

"I just thought... when I accidentally flashed you, maybe you got scared..."

Bree laughed a little hysterically. "No! Are you kidding? Getting an accidental peek at your package doesn't bother me, baby."

"Package?"

"Your junk. Y'know... Your penis, Spine," she finished flatly.

"Oh! Package... That's an interesting way to put it..."

She giggled weakly. "Package really means more the whole, um... Never mind. Anyway, yeah, no big deal, okay? I just thought it was cute."

"Cute," he said dryly.

"Yeah. You were so innocent. You never said why you didn't wear the shorts, though."

"I, uh... missed the hole with my foot and they're so fragile..."

"Ah... good. Less layers to get through."

Huh. "So you aren't finding that I, well, turn you off?"
"Spine..." She sat up, staring at him. "For crying out loud, will you accept the fact that I find you attractive?"

"Well... I know but..."

"Seriously! What will convince you? The fact that I fantasize about you? Would that persuade you?"

"Kind of..."

"Because I do and I have. Really filthy ones too."

"Oh... Really?" he asked, wondering whether she might share a few...

She smiled and shook her head. "Alright, story time."

His eyes widened. Was she going to tell him some of them?

"Spine, I have been into you from the first day I came to work. I considered quitting because of it. You are so attractive it scares me. You don't know how many times I've had to leave the lab just because you took your shirt off."

Well, it wasn't a dirty story, but it sent a shiver of delight through him all the same. He'd had his own fantasies, and a few started with her becoming overcome with desire during a maintenance session...

"Really?" he breathed, touching her cheek.

"Well, yeah! You're just so beautifully constructed." Her eyes drifted across him where the robe lay open and she heaved a shuddering sigh. She reached out with one hand and touched his chest. "The first time you took off anything was overwhelming. I watched you open every button on that shirt. And when you finally opened it and I saw your body underneath... Holy crap. I just... I wanted to touch what I saw so much and I asked myself whether that was professional interest, but when it came down to it... Baby, I just wanted you to keep stripping."

She was stroking her fingers slowly over his chest plates as she spoke, as if living out the fantasy she had once suppressed. But she was also clearly embarrassed and he wasn't sure how to take it. If she wasn't ashamed to be his wife, why be ashamed of being physically attracted?

"You never told me... I mean, you've made your feelings clear but you never said I... I actually turned you on."

She smiled at this and kissed the center of his chest. He sighed deeply.

"My dirty little secret, I guess," she breathed, looking at his face once more. "I didn't want to have to explain I had always had a thing for robots."

"Always?" he gasped. Her hand was resting on his chest and she was placing little kisses near it...

"Yeah, even as a kid. I had such a crush on Mr. Data!" she laughed, looking up.

He stared into space. Her father had hinted as much, but he hadn't explained. It was all growing clear. He slid his hand along the softness of her neck.

"You're... attracted to automatons," he said slowly as the robe slipped further.

"Yes, I am," she purred.
"Physically."

"Very," she breathed. She placed a soft kiss on his shoulder before settling into his arms. "Especially one in particular."

"Oh..."

"And it sinks in! Yes, I have wanted to be with you, and I mean be with you, almost since that first day. I just... I didn't want you to think I just wanted you for sex so I didn't ask the pertinent questions. And there are no handbooks about robot sexuality. You're a unique case. So even though I wanted to walk in all sexy and seduce you I just didn't know how to do that."

She was doing just fine now! His sensors were going nuts... He kissed her on the head and sighed.

"All you had to do was walk into the room," he murmured, sliding his fingers along her back.

"Smooth, baby," she purred. "But I want to do more. I know you're used to doing things a certain way. But I want to bring you up to date. Women take action in the bedroom. This isn't the 1950s."

He could have been insulted by that, but he didn't want to interrupt their current progress with a sulk. She'd resumed placing those little kisses, working her way down his stomach. There were an awful lot of access panels in that area...

"And since we've found out what one little touch does to you, it's time to find out how far I can take it. Ready?" she whispered.

She untied the black silk robe and continued where she left off. His only response, as the shivers coursed through him, was to close his eyes and breathe a long, steamy sigh.

Waves reflected morning light on the ceiling of their hotel room. The Spine lay, hands folded behind his head, next to a beautiful woman who was still sleeping off a long, busy day and an intense, passionate night.

She had done all she'd promised and more. He would once have said he'd never felt so human. But she loved him, body and soul, the way he was.

He didn't feel human. He felt like himself. The Spine, metal man, Bree's husband and lover. He'd never felt so fulfilled, so content.

Even with Marie, there had been doubt, worry, fear. Because she loved him as he was but... he'd always wondered if she wished he was still human. He felt guilty for putting so little faith in her but the fear had never fully gone away. He'd been afraid to ask her... Did she ever fantasize about him while they were making love? Did she ever close her eyes and imagine he was human?

And he would never know. But it didn't matter now. Because his wife, his lovely Breanna, loved him down to the last rivet. After last night, after that glorious, passionate night, he no longer doubted anything she said. She had caressed and cherished every inch of his chassis and her desire was real.

He still loved Marie and always would... in the same way he loved all those who were now gone. But he almost felt he had never made love before, not as other lovers did. Not until Bree.

She woke at last and smiled at him sleepily. "Hey, baby. You rest well?"
"Very. I'm surprised I didn't stay in stasis longer."

"Me, too. I thought that power surge would send you into full shut down."

He smiled at the ceiling, embarrassed. "I, uh... was surprised at your reaction, too."

She giggled and snuggled close. "You were incredible," she breathed. "I expected you to be but, holy crap."

He felt the now familiar tingling along the surface of his chassis and the longing that came with it. The flattery along with the feel of her against him was a potent combination.

"Are you hungry?" he forced himself to ask.

Bree slid her fingers along his core and the tingling intensified.

"Don't start something unless you're willing to finish it," he murmured, pulling her close.

"Oh? What would you do if I did?"

He kissed her softly and said, "If you didn't want to make love again, I guess I'd have to power down for a while and let my sensors settle. And if you do want to, I'd have to give you a morning of passion to match last night."

"Ah."

"So which should I do?" he asked, stroking her cheek.

She smiled. "Well... don't power down," she whispered, kissing his throat.

The Spine grinned helplessly.

He would almost have been just as happy to stay in their room for the rest of the week. He was all at once less human and more of a man. He'd enjoyed sex before but now he began to understand why people craved it.

But he was still able to dial back his sensors, and Bree wanted to see the sights. So he made himself up, braved the grins of the desk staff (who had done a lot of whispering the night before that they thought he couldn't hear), and went out.

The Queen Mary was a beautiful but well worn vessel. He felt a deep nostalgia walking its decks, seeing photos of famous people that had once been popular, some of whom he had met at the time. He told Bree stories about a USO tour with Bob Hope and she, not for the first time, was impressed.

"It must have been fun to travel with him," she laughed.

"He was a very nice guy. I can't believe it's been ten years since he died. Sometimes I can't believe he's dead at all. You get that as you get older, though. The whole gang is gone now except for us. I remember the last time I saw Francis Langford... She didn't even know me anymore. But when we first met, she and some of the girls kinda had a thing for me, if you can believe that."

"Of course I can! Don't forget who you're talking to."

"Of course." He smiled. He never got tired of being reminded. "But a lot of the guys thought it was
weird. In fact, there was one time... Well, Bob was up on stage one afternoon and was introducing
the Steam Man Band. Francis was just putting on her lipstick when..."

"Been reading up on your history, hm?"

"What?" asked The Spine, startled.

He had failed to notice an elderly couple sitting at a table near the photo they were admiring. Oops!
How much had they heard?

"About Bob Hope and the USO tours," said the old man. "My wife was with the USO..."

"You mean I'd dance with the soldiers and sometimes serve lemonade," the old woman said with a
smile.

"Well, that's enough for me! I was one of the soldiers!"

Bree beamed up at The Spine and he grinned back.

"Did those singing robots go on the tours, then?" the old woman asked.

"Oh! Yes, they did. I'm afraid... they weren't popular at some of the more isolated camps. All the
men wanted to see was pretty girls and Bob."

The man chortled. "Can't say that I blame them." He gave Breanna a wink.

She smiled. "I do. I'd want to see the robots!"

"Well, for that matter, so would I," said the woman wistfully.

"I did get to see 'em about fifty years ago," the old man interrupted. "They were a wonder, let me tell
you. Lot of people said they weren't really robots but you could tell. Suppose they're sold for scrap
by now."

"No!" Bree gasped. He could feel her grip on his hand tighten. "I mean... no, they're still
performing..."

"Are they?" the old woman asked, perking up.

"Yes! They'll be performing here in January."

The couple looked at each other. The woman smiled.

"Well, we'll have to come out and see them."

"Please do," The Spine said pleasantly. "We'll be here for it, too."

He almost laughed aloud at his little joke. But the old woman was giving him a strange look.

"Well, that's nice. Maybe we'll see you," said the old man.

"Pretty sure we will," said the old woman.

"We'll be at the Halloween Ball tomorrow," Bree said.

"Oh! Lovely! So will we," said the old woman.
She was still looking him over. The Spine said a hasty farewell and turned with Bree as casually as he could to continue their walk.

He tuned his audioreceptors in on the old couple.

"Funny... one of those robots was really tall."

"That's right, and one had a fluffy wig on."

"Well, yeah, but... just look at that boy."

"And his little wife," he replied, missing the implications. "Cute kids. Remember when we were that young?"

The woman chuckled. "I remember when we were younger."

The Spine walked slightly faster. He'd been made! He was sure of it!

Bree trotted to keep up. "You okay?" she asked breathlessly. "I thought they were nice."

"Oh, they were..."

"But you don't feel like conversation?"

"No, it's just... I think the old woman recognized me!"

"Oh, dear. Well... I mean, it's not a crime, is it? For you to wear makeup and take a trip with your tech?"

"Wearing wedding rings? Sleeping in the same room?"

She smiled slyly. He couldn't help grinning sheepishly.

"Yeah," she crooned. "And in the same bed..."

"I know, I know..." he murmured, trying to stop grinning. This could be serious, and here he was stuck in honeymoon mode! "But what if she... I don't know... tells someone?"

"Well, that Halloween ball is tomorrow so when you wear your 'costume' and cosplay as The Spine..."

"Oh, no! I can't wear that now! That'll expose me completely!"

"Nuh-uh. You only expose yourself to me, baby."

"Bree..." he pleaded.

"Alright, chill. What I'm saying is that you chose that costume for a reason. You'll be hiding in plain sight, just like you did at ComicCon. Once you added the pocketwatch and tied your tie in a different knot, no one figured out it was really you. So you do that again and the old lady thinks you're just some guy who looks enough like The Spine that you cosplayed as him and chalks it down to coincidence."

"Or she knows she was right..."

"Sounds like she already thinks she is so you have nothing to lose. Besides... I want to dance with
my husband in public and I can only do that on Halloween."

"Alright... I guess... it could be fun."

"It will! Let's go get some food... I'm starving and the ghost tours start in a couple of hours."

"You really believe in that stuff?"

"You never know," she replied. "But no, if I really believed, I'd be too scared to sleep on this boat!"

The Spine dressed for the Halloween Ball the following night in a state of deep disquiet... not because of the ghost tour, but because he'd tried to contact Rabbit several times and gotten no response. He had expected a rebuke, possibly, for trying to call home on his honeymoon, but not silence. And while Bree was eating, he had nothing to do anyway, so why not call home?

But Rabbit might also have put off apologizing to Peter and Bunny, and despite David's arguments The Spine thought Rabbit should get it over with sooner rather than later. She surely would prefer to take David's advice and might prefer to avoid conversation with The Spine on the subject.

But he'd have thought she'd at least want to know they'd arrived safely! And Hatchworth hadn't done much better. He'd sent a short message telling him everything was fine and to go back to bed. Clearly Hatchworth thought sex was going to be the only activity for the entire week.

If only that were true... tonight, at least. He trusted Bree's judgment but... things had escalated somewhat since they first met the older couple.

First of all, there was the suspicious old woman. Second, there was an entire event surrounding the Halloween Ball, with activities and vendors available throughout the day. It had a bit of a Steampunk theme to it* and he had already seen at least one Rabbit cosplayer, and two Spines. This was actually helpful... the trouble was, these fans thought he was David! It didn't help that he'd signed the guest register as his old pseudonym, David Walter, so that when he and Bree ordered drinks, the name called was David. Bree suggested they try their best to avoid mentioning his "name" after that.

In the end, though, he and Breanna had been obliged to slip back to their room separately and stay there until evening. Of course, that had meant they had indeed spent a little more time in bed, so he had no complaints. Bree had told him, as they lay embraced afterward, not to get used to making love this often. After the honeymoon, they each had to get back to work.

The Spine had at last dragged himself reluctantly from the joy of her embrace and put on a shirt, vest and slacks with a carefully knotted tie and trademark fedora. In addition, he'd brought a little box to fasten to his belt just below his steam vents. If he had a build-up of steam, he could direct it to vent just above the box... and onlookers wouldn't know it wasn't a special effect. He straightened it carefully, slipped into his shoes, and stared into the mirror.

"Best Spine cosplayer ever," Bree said as she wriggled into a flapper costume.

"I should think so. Is that going to fit?" The Spine asked, turning. "The flappers taped their breasts and yours are..."

She laughed, to his relief. He wasn't sure how he'd intended to end that sentence.

"Mine are what?" she asked.
He smiled sheepishly and gave in. "Spectacular."

She beamed and tugged the dress up over them. "Well, I'm not binding them. I could tell how much you enjoy them and I'll be taking extra special care of them for you."

He stared at her, sighing. "Are you sure you want to go to the ball?"

She laughed brightly and straightened the dress. It did fit, and while she was rather more shapely than the style required, it meant she had a cleavage that pleased him considerably.

"See?" she said at last. "It works. I'm not flat chested like a flapper, but they didn't have blue hair either."

"True," he admitted.

"You're not looking at my hair, though, are you?" she asked coyly.

"Nope."

"Put on your gloves, you dirty old man," she giggled.

The Spine sighed happily and tore his gaze away from her décolletage. They finished dressing and strolled to the ballroom hand in hand. Bree was cheerful and talkative, but The Spine's smile was brittle. He couldn't help eyeing passersby and wondering whether any of them were fans, and whether they would be fooled.

Certainly enough people stopped to gawk up at his gleaming chrome face. He nodded to each and sometimes received a compliment on his "makeup." It was encouraging.

Near the ballroom doors, they found their first genuine fans. Two young girls in Steampunk costumes were gaping and whispering to each other. The Spine straightened his back, remembered he was supposed to be human, and hastily affected a slouch. He nodded to the girls and braced for the response.

"Awesome Spine cosplay!" on of them crowed.

"Yeah, you look awesome!" said the other.

Bree beamed and thanked them; The Spine tipped his hat once more.

"You two know the band, then?" he asked, trying to sound like Matter Master David. Bree glanced up at him with a look of mingled amusement and discomfort.

"Oh, yeah! I found their Diamonds video and I was hooked! Then I dragged her into it with me!"

He clenched his teeth, still smiling the best he could. *Diamonds*. Bree was giggling.

"Oh, I love that one, too!" Bree crowed. "I think that was the one that really made me fall in love with them."

He looked at her sidelong, wondering if she was just playing along. She had enjoyed the video...

"Oh, me too!" one girl crooned. "The Spine is gorgeous!"

He felt a terrible urge to turn tail and run.
"We should be getting inside..." he said weakly.

"Can we take a photo?" the girls asked.

"Oh... sure..." he murmured, bemused.

"Here, hand me your phones and I'll take one for each of you," Bree suggested.

The Spine stood, wearing a pasted on grin, as she took the first. The second phone gave her a little trouble but she soon managed it.

"Sorry," said the girl as she took her phone back. "My android is kind of touchy sometimes."

The Spine sighed inwardly. Android indeed. It was just a rectangle...

"I can understand that!" Bree responded. "So is mine."

He stood very still, unsure how to respond.

"Oh, you have one, too?" the girl asked.

"Oh, yes!" Bree said blithely.

"Does your act up, too?"

"All the time. It gave me a hell of a time just this afternoon. No matter what I touched, it made these weird sounds..."

"Bree..." he pleaded, trying to keep smiling.

"Oh! Did you get it fixed?" the girl asked.

"Oh, yeah! I just needed to plug it in for a while! Once it got some electricity surging through it, it calmed right down."

He couldn't help it. He was so perturbed that he vented steam, only managing at the last second to direct it to the lowest vent.

"That is so cool!" one of the girls cried. "It's like you're really running on steam!"

The Spine, nodding rapidly, grabbed Bree's hand, tipped his hat to the confused pair of ladies, and hurried into the ballroom just as Bree burst out laughing.

"Really?" he said, as they found a table.

She was wiping tears. "Oh, that was the best!" she wheezed, sitting.

"That was the dirtiest thing I've ever heard come from your lips," he sighed as he joined her. "And they never even had a clue that you were talking about..."

"About having sex with their idol?"

He shook his head. "You can't talk like that or I might get another one of those surprise... y'know..."

"Boners?"

"Seriously? Yes, I guess so." He groaned softly. "I've got to get Peter to fix that when we get back."
"But you have control over it now that you know, though, right?"

"If I'm paying attention!"

"It was so cute the way those girls were crushing on you, though!"

"Cute? I don't know about that. I should be used to it by now, though. I don't think I ever want to understand why women find me attractive, but I should at least be used to it."

"Well, don't beat yourself up. It's endearing to see how surprised you are when a girl says you're hot."

"I think the word she used was 'gorgeous' actually..."

Bree laughed. "I agree with her."

He smiled sheepishly. She meant it. He knew she did. And it made him want yet again to head right back to their room. Hopeful, he took her hand and kissed it, his eyes on hers. She pinked and smiled back.

"Bree..." he murmured, stroking her fingers.

"I know," she purred. "But after the ball, okay?"

"Of course," he replied smoothly. "Fortunately, I've come to see dancing as the first stage of foreplay."

"Holy crap," she breathed as he winked and smiled. "Where's the humble robot now?"

He leaned in close to her ear and whispered, "In bed, waiting."

She let out a little scream of laughter and kissed him. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad... an hour or so of flirting and dirty jokes and it would be that much sweeter when they finally...

"Oops... bad timing I guess!"

The Spine turned very reluctantly from Bree's lips and looked. It was the elderly couple from the day before.

"Oh, hi!" Bree saidly a trifle too loudly. "How are you?"

"Oh, wonderful!" said the man. "They got a great band, didn't they?"

"Well..." The Spine faltered.

"May we join you?" the woman asked.

No. Nope. No, no, no. The Spine forced a smile despite the objections repeating in his mind.

"Of course," he said cordially.

But inside, the dismay was rising. He'd been making a solid attempt to seduce his wife right back to bed and now they had company. And to make matters worse, here was the woman he was pretty sure was onto him, looking right at his actual chassis. He knew it was smooth and convincing enough to be painted skin, but she was looking so closely at him that she might notice the occasional slight gap in the plates as he moved.
He turned to Bree, who gave him a sly head shake as the couple sat. He slumped slightly. Denied, without even speaking a word.

"I'm sorry... we never got your names," the old man said. "Well, we'll go first. I'm Bill and this is Margie."

"Oh... how do you do..." The Spine said slowly. "I'm... David."

Bree gave him a startled look and he shrugged apologetically. It was the name the hotel was expecting. It would only be suspicious if he started giving out different ones!

"And... and I'm Breanna. Walter. David and Breanna Walter..." she said hastily.

"Pleased to meet you officially," Margie said. "Well, we don't propose to dominate your evening. I can tell right off that you two are honeymooning."

Bree smiled. "Is it that obvious?"

"Well, it's a guess, but I'm a pretty good guesser."

The Spine smiled weakly as she turned to him. Bill was looking over at the stage.

"So you're a bigger fan of the Steam Man Band than I thought!" Margie said.

"Oh... yes, I'm told I look just like The Spine!" he said quickly.

"You certainly do! I don't think they're called that anymore, though..."

"Called what?" The Spine asked blankly.

"The Steam Man Band."

"Oh... no, they're called Steam Powered Giraffe."

"But you know the old name, being such a fan."

"It's not that old..." he said faintly.

"But they are. My goodness, they're older than I am!"

"Well, yes..."

"I'm just surprised they're not falling apart!"

"They're very well maintained!" he said shortly.

"I heard they do have some malfunctions but they're in great shape," Bree interrupted. "I mean, from what I've seen. They look fantastic on stage."

The Spine took advantage of her interruption to try and cool down a little. He could swear the woman was trying to bait him...

The song changed and he saw his chance. "Bree, would you like to dance?" he said.

"Alright, baby," she murmured. "See you two in a few minutes."

Once on the dance floor, The Spine grew calmer.
"She knows something, Bree. She's being way too pointed not to."

"I think you might be right," she sighed. "But I don't think she's planning to out us or anything. I just think she's a nosy old lady."

"Yes, she is! The idea was that people wouldn't notice I'm not really in costume, but she's watching me like a hawk! And what happens if you eat and I don't?"

"I ate before we came and I can eat again later. And we'll both have water. Okay?"

"Can't we just sit somewhere else?"

"I don't see any graceful way to change tables and still stay at the ball."

He was usually a stickler for decorum but just now felt it was overrated. He raised one eyebrow and flicked his eyes in the general direction of their hotel room.

"Yes, you'd be just as glad, I know. I thought you wanted to come to the ball, baby. Now all you want to do is leave it."

"Well..." he said, giggling in spite of himself. "Specifically I want to go back to our room and..."

"Yes, dork, I know what you want to do there! I swear... I know you have experience in the bedroom but I didn't expect you to be quite so..."

"Seductive?" he offered.

"Horny. You were before we got here but after the first night, just... dude."

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked uneasily, carefully releasing a little nervous steam from the appropriate vent.

"No, just dial it back a little for tonight."

"I'll try," he sighed. She clearly didn't understand just how good she was in bed...

"I mean, you love dancing too, and you don't often get to go out just as yourself."

"I know. I guess back when we were planning this trip, I pictured something like the reception... us alone, among other dancers, snuggled close together and not noticing a thing but each other."

She smiled up at him. "Then let's do that," she purred.

He leaned down and kissed her. "Alright," he sighed after a moment. "That at least is one way to handle it."

Their plan lasted about three songs before The Spine felt a tap on his shoulder. The band had just started playing, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," and he had really wanted to dance to it. He closed his eyes briefly and felt Bree squeeze his hand.

"Be a big boy," she whispered.

"May I cut in?" Bill crowed.

The Spine didn't trust himself to speak. He nodded and gracefully if reluctantly handed off his beautiful bride to the nice old man before returning even more reluctantly to the table.
"Hello, dear," said Margie. "Don't worry; he won't have the energy for more than one dance! I'm just not up to it and he likes this song."


"She's just lovely. You're a lucky boy."

"I am."

"How did you meet?"

Oops... he really should have expected someone to ask that! He and Marie had gotten it from time to time, but it was easy for them. They just told everyone they'd met while he was traveling in Louisiana and it was love at first sight. Even if the asker had wanted more details, it was easy to tell them without revealing too much, all while telling the truth.

But he'd met Bree in his own house when she came to work as his mechanic! How could he make that sound normal? And if Margie really was onto him, saying anything about Walter Robotics could serve to confirm her suspicions.

"Oh... um... we work together."

"Oh, how interesting! A workplace romance."

"Yes. It was awkward at first but our employer was very understanding. He even provided the venue for the wedding and reception."

This might work after all...

"That's so nice! Are you still going to work there, together?"

"Oh, yes, I think we can manage it."

"What kind of work is it?"

His momentum screeched to a halt. What could he say now? If he started making things up cold, Bree wouldn't know anything about it when she came back to the table and he couldn't bring her up to date with them sitting there!

She watched him, smiling gently. "Maybe music?" she asked softly. "Or one of you might work in robotics."

"Ma'am... um... Margie... I..."

"It's alright, sweetie. I won't tell anyone."

He sighed, unsure whether to be relieved or even more distressed. He could keep denying it, but he was in deep enough as it was.

"Tell anyone what?" he asked faintly, stalling.

"Well, you can tell me if I'm just a silly old lady with an overactive imagination. But I couldn't help noticing the steam coming out of your back."

"That's... a special effect. There's a little box on my belt..."
"Oh, well... I hate to tell you this, but that box isn't centered."

"What?" he squeaked, hastily reaching behind him. The box had slipped several inches to the left.

"I don't think anyone else noticed..."

He groaned and put his face in his hands. Margie reached over and patted his arm reassuringly, or so he thought. She gave his "muscle" a gentle tweak and nodded.

"It's a very convincing costume," she said kindly.

"It's supposed to keep anyone from finding out," he said, emerging. "How did you guess? And yes, I know you've been onto me since you saw us on deck yesterday."

She chuckled. "Oh, sweetheart. I used to have such a crush on you three when I was a girl."

"Oh..."

"Now, don't worry. I grew out of it! But I did keep up with you from time to time. I know the kids today think you're not really robots, but I did get to meet you once back before the war and I know they're wrong. I shook your hand, did you know?"

"I'm sorry... I know I should remember every single person I meet, but I have to clean the files out from time to time..."

"That's fine! I don't look the same anyway! But I remember. I got a hug from Rabbit, too, and just about fainted! He was always my favorite. So mysterious and forward and the way he looks you in the eye when he sings those creepy songs... My friends always laughed at me for it but I just love a spooky man!"

She chortled and he forced a smile. Rabbit had always had her share of fans who were attracted to her strangeness. But maybe it was best that he didn't update Margie on Rabbit's approaching retrofit.

"Well... Margie. You say you won't tell anyone but then... why admit that you know? Just to warn me about the box?"

"Because I've always wanted to meet you again, some time when I wasn't so nervous! I couldn't manage a word when I met you before. You offered a hand and Rabbit offered a hug and The Jon copied him. And then I moved on down the line with an autographed photo and then it was time to go home. By the time I moved out here, I was busy with family and kids and it felt a little naughty to go see my old high school crush again.

"So when I saw you yesterday and you looked so handsome, I started to wonder, but you know, I thought I must be imagining things. Until we saw you two tonight and there you were, in the silver! Once you made your little slip with the steam I was sure. So I egged Bill on when he wanted to dance so that I could talk with you."

"Margie... you're a sneaky woman."

She laughed heartily. "And you're a metal man! I have to ask... are you really married to that girl?"

He hesitated. She seemed friendly, but this was dangerous talk...

"It's alright, I promise. There were rumors years ago that you were married and even had children. I think that's why so many people decided you were a human after all. I always said why not, why
shouldn't they be happy? But folks acted like it wasn't right. Well, I think it's lovely. You two are so in love and I think it's absolutely precious."

He sighed. "Thank you. Yes. Bree is my wife and I do love her very much. And yes, I was married before, and had children. We, uh... adopted. And now maybe some federal agents will jump out and hit me with a tazer and cart us away, but dammit, it's good to be able to just say it."

She laughed again and patted his hand. "Sweetie, your secret is safe with me. I promise. And I'll bet you were a wonderful father."

"I did my best," he said.

Margie worked her way out of her chair as Bree and Bill returned. "Well, let's leave this honeymoon couple alone, hon," she told her husband. "I'm starving and they look like they just want to gaze into each others' eyes."

Bill chortled and Bree grinned. Bill kissed Bree's hand and turned to walk toward the restaurant. Margie patted The Spine's hand once more and murmured, "Give Rabbit my love, okay?"

The Spine laughed, surprised. "I'll do my best. Sh... He refuses to respond to calls while I'm on my honeymoon."

She laughed and walked away. Bree sat beside him and he pulled her into his arms.

"See? Everything turned out just fine," Bree said.

He kissed her gently and murmured, "It did. I'll tell you all about it while we dance."

Their evening, from that point on, went much as he had imagined. They visited from time to time with "fellow fans" who admired his costume and spent a bit more time later talking Bill and Margie, but for the most part, they danced together. He savored every moment he could hold her close. He'd learned from his marriage to Marie. He intended to cherish every second.

And when the dance was done, he expected her to be too tired for anything but sleep... and he was right. He woke instead the next morning to the caress of soft fingers on a particularly sensitive panel...

The day after the ball, a lot of the guests had gone. There was a smaller Dia de los Muertos celebration, which they attended, and the rest of their stay was quiet. The Spine got his wish and spent a lot of the remaining time either strolling the decks, looking at shops, or in the room... sometimes making love, yes. Sometimes just talking, or reading side by side. It was heaven as far as he was concerned... Perusing an article only to have to wife roll over and slip her arm around him, sometimes just to be close and sometimes to initiate something more intimate.

But at last it was time to pack and go home. He was sorry it had to end, but he was also eager. They had a very lovely room waiting at home, and he was worried about the family. He'd been the protector as far back as he could remember, and no one had seen fit to send them any messages except to say that everything was just fine. He understood why, but it bothered him all the same. It wasn't that they said the same old things were going on. They just said things were fine. They offered no details.

As they were getting into the car, he made one more attempt to contact Rabbit.
We're heading back. You can make contact again. You aren't interrupting anything dirty.

Still no response. He said nothing to Bree, but he was growing downright scared. But he had always been a worrier... yes, Rabbit would have a good laugh at this when they returned. She was just playing with him. Of course.

After they'd been driving for about half an hour, he got a reply.

Oh, heyas tha Spine! Sorry, bro! I was j-j-just makin' sure ya didn't get distracted from yehr pretty wife! See ya when ya get b-b-back!

The Spine stared at the road ahead and tried not to panic. Bree stopped singing along with the radio and glanced sidelong at him.

"I love this song... Are you okay?"

"Bree... how soon will we be home?"

"About an hour and a half, baby. You know how long it takes. What's up?"

He closed his eyes and willed himself to remain calm.

"I just sent Rabbit a message. And someone answered. But that someone was definitely not Rabbit."

Chapter End Notes

*very much a thing here. It only takes a bit of a theme to bring out the Steampunks and the SPG fans are well mixed with them.
Too Many Worries

Chapter Summary

The worries about Rabbit hang over the heads of the Walters... but Peter and Bunny manage to find one night to forget for just a little while before the hard work begins.

Chapter Notes

In which we ricochet among science, sex, and neurosis. It's been said that the brain is the most important sex organ... because if it's not cooperating, good luck, bro.

Note: I am continuing to retroactively edit some of these chapters... It hit me recently that my kids know I write this and I've even told them some of the sillier stories from it. If one gets the notion to look this story up, honestly, I want to cut back on the titillating details. Yeah, there's way worse fics out there, but the one written by their mom ought to meet a higher standard. Sorry if I take out any lines you liked but there it is. I'll keep the basic concept the same, though. I think it's important to portray a healthy romantic relationship in a fic. I just wanna pull back on the sensory descriptions.

Peter sat back and mopped his forehead with his sleeve. His back ached, but he had so much more to do! And they'd already been working for almost a week.

Bunny was looking at him out of the corner of her eye while David catalogued the chip he had just removed from Rabbit's skull compartment. No one said anything about how charred it was. Not since Peter's last outburst. He'd been having them at intervals since somewhere around the third charred and melted chip. He was still angry every time he found another, but he kept it suppressed after seeing the identical looks of sudden primal terror both twins had given him the last time he had started yelling. He didn't feel great about that. Bunny had told him about their past.

Now the two worked in nervous silence and Peter worked in even deeper guilt than he'd already had. Because he wasn't angry at them. He was angry at the same person as always... Peter Alexander Walter VI.

He had plenty of extra rage left over for others, though. Two days into the all-consuming process of damage control, Bunny had started her period. It wasn't her fault, but that was at least a week of waiting, by his reckoning, before they could even think of taking their wedding trip to Kazooland, assuming they could even get away then. And assuming he could relax with so much on his mind. On top of that, he had found out just how many people had been hiding things from him and despite their motives it didn't give him a warm feeling.

Surprisingly, he couldn't seem to feel angry at Rabbit. Not anymore. He'd finally told Bunny the truth and she hadn't been mad at all. She'd said Rabbit hadn't made it any worse than they had themselves. And she was right... but that only added to his anger at the staff for lying to him. Because if they hadn't, maybe he wouldn't have scared Rabbit so that she ran away and had an attack that was best compared to a massive stroke.
David had expressed remorse for doing much the same thing. Hatchworth had blamed himself, too. Half the household was blaming themselves. But Peter... Peter had been the last one to speak to her, and was the one who was supposed to know how she worked. He was furthermore a genius who was personally responsible for Rabbit and finally and most damning, he was the one who should have had her not just running as well as she ever had, but a damned sight better.

He sighed, grabbed a rag and wiped another small smear of the coolant that had leaked into her processor. It was a volatile substance but the most efficient for the job, if it was kept away from sensitive parts. The stuff was meant to circulate around the braincase in sealed tubing, keeping the compartment and all of its important bits cooled... but the tube had popped off, interrupting the flow, and the coolant instead had poured itself directly into the functional part of her "brain" and snap, crackle, pop... the rest was history. They'd found all the signs of a very small chemical fire that had gone out quickly... but it didn't take much fire or much time to do a hell of a lot of damage.

He didn't even know for sure how long the coolant had been leaking. It couldn't have gone on long once the tube detached completely, but maybe it had been a little loose before that; maybe there had been a slow leak into the compartment for longer. It could serve to explain some of the strange things she'd done in the last year. It was hard to tell; Rabbit was just as likely to have pulled all that crap just for the hell of it.

Maybe she'd just had a slow leak all her life.

At least the constant stream of family and staff had slowed. Dave and Sunshine had been there for a while, observing but not interfering... except that Sunshine had cried softly the whole time, which didn't help. Upgrade had wailed for a good hour before becoming silent and leaving with Jon. She had later come down to tell Peter she believed he could save her Pappy. It only added to the pressure.

But Louise, who had come to the wedding but been obliged to sit out the reception, had later managed to making her slow and creaking way down to the labs to tear him a new one, which he almost preferred to the strained support and suppressed tears of the others.

But Louise, very much in keeping with his self-accusations, ranted for a solid ten minutes about hot shot baby geniuses whose pride wouldn't let them ask for help and how Rabbit was her best friend but now she might die before she spoke to her again properly and whose fault was that? The answer was, of course, hot shot baby geniuses.

Although she left him with just a grain of hope. She said, as she finished shouting at Peter's very deflated form, that if he'd needed money to retrofit Rabbit, he'd only needed to ask. That there were people in the Cavalcadium who would cheerfully pay to see Rabbit restored. He understood that. The Cavalcadium had a puppet board and President who were mostly male, but the real power was the underground female board of governors. Every time he hired a new full time Walter Girl, she was promptly inducted into the Cavalcadium. Except Bunny. He quietly seethed about that... Peter, as a Walter, was inducted at birth, but most males had a much longer wait and both David and Bunny had not been noticed. Neither mentioned it and when asked, Bunny had dismissed it.

She peered up now from her clipboard and looked away just as quickly. Guilt stabbed him once more and he reached out and put his hand on her back, stroking it ineffectually. Or so he thought; she looked up again and smiled, and he could see in it a deep relief, a sparkling of tears in her eyes, quickly blinked away.

*I'm sorry I hurt you again... I'm not angry at you, Bunny...* He sighed. He'd do his best to make sure she knew it, every day she allowed him to remain by her side.

He glanced at David self-consciously. David looked away quickly, but he was smiling. Peter could
see the slightest of nods and had a feeling he'd passed another of what was bound to be a lifetime of tests. He was expected to treat Bunny right, or her "big brother" would have something to say about it. As if Bunny couldn't take care of herself.

But Peter didn't mind. He wanted to treat her right. He wanted to be a better husband, not that he'd been one for long. But he was old enough to learn to relate better to others, especially the woman he loved. He wouldn't say Rabbit had done him a favor, but he had to admit that Bunny was right in thinking it hadn't been any worse. He and Bunny had been building to a showdown. They couldn't go on working as two completely independent people. They had to connect and talk to each other and reach agreements. And if they did, they could make this work.

But mostly he wanted to hold her and show her how he felt without having something hanging over his head. As such, he couldn't help wondering... how long did periods last, usually?

"Are you alright?" Bunny whispered.

"Hm?"

"You're distracted. We could have Wanda take over for a while..."

"Oh! Um... yes." He'd been alternating with Wanda all week. "This part is nearly done anyway. Once all the chips are out, we can install the new processor while the they're being tested and reintegrate her into the wifi... once we find out why she was disconnected."

"Right."

She pulled out her phone and started typing. He had the feeling she wanted to say something else... but again, he had startled the pair into silence.

"And you're wondering whether there's any point, right?" Peter sighed as she lowered the phone.

"Well..."

"Yeah, we are," David said softly. "Whether you can handle discussing it, is the question."

"I can, I guess... Look, I'm sorry, okay? Both of you... I'm sorry I yelled."

David looked surprised but Bunny sighed. "We understand..." she began.

"I know, but... I'm still sorry. It's just that this is frustrating and I wish I had been on top of things. So even if there's just a chance we might at least be able to transfer some data, I have to try. A lot of what Rabbit is, is in her core. But there's never been any definitive answer as to how much. Past experiments have suggested the stuff can hold memories, but others have indicated that it can be lost without the automaton changing in personality significantly. And since the automatons are sentient beings, I can't justify experimenting on them. That leaves us drawing on what we already have.

"And what we already have is the fact that Rabbit has chips for the purpose of storing memory, but no guarantee that those memories might also be contained in her Blue Matter. Even if we can identify the primary chip in all this mess and find it functional, we could activate her with just that one and find her almost the same, or we could find her blank except for her famous petulant personality and earliest memories."

"Aw, hell. A giant metal baby..." David groaned.

Bunny smiled weakly.
"Yeah," Peter mumbled. "Clean slate. And if that happens I confidently expect the other automatons to fight over who gets to break me in half."

"Peter," the twins said as one.

"I know, don't go twinning on me. I just... I should have caught it, especially after her last crash. I should have sealed the hose better, anchored it right. I should have... I should have been a better caretaker. A better doctor, so to speak. They rely on me..."

Bunny took his hand. "They can rely on you. Everyone makes mistakes. And yeah, this one is extra special but it was still an honest mistake. If she hadn't slammed her head into Hatchy's chest..."


They all looked over at Hatchworth, who hadn't left the room since bringing his sister into it. For the first few days he'd stood, refusing to speak, glaring at the floor, arms folded... but with one hand pressed against his chest as if it hurt. Eventually The Jon and Upgrade had come in and stood, presumably communicating by wifi. Hatchy had begun to cry and went into stasis soon after.

And hadn't come out. Peter had seized the opportunity to look at Hatchworth's chassis in the spot where his hand had rested and wasn't terribly surprised to see a dent there: the place where Rabbit had struck her head. Hatchworth had always been exceptionally durable, inside and out, since his repairs. But Peter had seen how tender he could be and wasn't surprised at his response. She'd struck her head bickering with him... and yet he was the one she called for help. Peter could only guess, but no doubt Rabbit had been very frightened when she called. Hatchworth would have felt it deeply.

"He really loves her," Peter murmured.

"Like a brother, though, right?" David said uneasily. "He always calls her his sister..."

"Yeah. There's no reason to read too much into it. He blames himself for what happened to her, that's all. I think you especially would be able to relate."

David looked at him sharply and Peter cringed a little. That might have been a little tactless...

"Sorry..."

"No," David sighed. "I guess I understand better than anyone."

Bunny was staring at her brother intently. "Don't you dare," she whispered.

"What, beat myself up again? I'll do my best."

"Dumbass," she sighed, smiling.

David smiled back. Peter had long since learned this was how the two related.

"Speaking of brothers, though... Spine is gonna be mad as hell that no one told him sooner," David said.

"I know... I've had my doubts about that but I guess... I just wanted to let them have this week, y'know?"

David looked between Peter and Bunny, who was blushing, and Peter suspected they were all thinking the same thing. Peter and Bunny hadn't had a honeymoon either.
"We all did," Bunny agreed quickly. "But if David was sick while I was away and no one told me, things would get ugly when I found out."

"Well... maybe if we work fast enough we'll have some good news for him," Peter offered.

"Not f***ing likely. They're coming back tomorrow, and you need to get some rest," David argued. "Look, we'll just have to tell them when they get here, take the tongue-lashing, and then at least they'll be here to help."

"Yeah," Peter sighed. "No offense but this would have been way easier with them here."

"No worries," Bunny whispered. "Bree has a freaking degree in this crap, and The Spine is basically the most experienced Walter tech and a robot all on one. We never aspired to their level."

"Fair enough. I don't either."

He yawned and eased himself off of the lab stool, groaning as his stiff limbs pinged with displeasure. Wanda walked into the lab.

"Poor baby. Tired, huh?"

"Very."

"Well, you two go on, then..."

"Two?" Bunny whispered.

David snickered and Wanda grinned at him.

"Two," Wanda said firmly, turning to Bunny. "The Spine is coming back tomorrow and you'll want to give Rabbit your undivided attention after that because he is going to be literally steaming mad that we didn't tell him and Breanna will be madder because her husband is. So you have until about noon tomorrow. Go on."

"But..." Bunny faltered, looking at David.

"Oh, no. Don't look at me!" David snorted. "You can be responsible adults later. Rabbit's not getting any worse and she needs you two relaxed and rested when the hard stuff comes up. Get the hell out of this lab and go be a husband and wife for a while."

"It's not a bad idea, Bunny," Peter said soothingly. "You need to rest, too. Before we go, though... we have most of the chips in the left sectors and half of the right. We're cataloguing them..."

"I know, sweetie," Wanda said.

"Right... of course. David, once the chips are cleared from both sectors, find the old wifi connector and check it for damage. Then just get the new one ready and plug it in and get her signed in so we'll be ready when..."

"I know, Peter! We know. Get moving!"

Bunny hesitated, glancing around at all of them, before clumsily climbing from her own stool and walking stiffly out beside Peter.

"I feel so attacked..." she whispered.
"Yeah."

"They meant well, though."

"Yeah, they do. I guess they don't know you're on your period," he said nonchalantly.

"Dude... my period is over," Bunny murmured.

A chill shot right up his spine. She jumped as his hand contracted over hers.

"Sorry..." he said quickly. "So, then..."

"Yeah." She tweaked his bottom and he shivered. "Kazooland?"

"What if they need us here...?"

"They can message us there."

"Yeah... yeah, sure. Let's go there, then."

They hurried to their room to gather a few things. He tried to think about the joys of the lovely bedroom that waited for them. But Peter found, to his dismay, that all he could seem to think about was how to pull data from melted memory chips.

He couldn't let her down, though. While she showered, he went to the kitchen to gather some food, sending a hasty text on the way.

Half an hour later, they stood in the lab together. Peter put down the basket and activated the portal. But Bunny could see a slight tremble in his hands and suspected he was far more eager than he let on. She swallowed. She'd was ready, too. She thought she was, anyway...

He walked back over to join her and sighed deeply. "Look at you. You're so beautiful."

She smiled. "You said something like that the last time we came here."

"Good. I'm glad I wasn't completely useless."

He picked up the basket and they hurried through together... and stopped short. Peter set the basket down and took off his mask while Bunny gaped.

"Someone's been here!" she gasped.

White tiny lights hung from the walls. The bedsheets were clean and smooth and looked an awful lot like silk, and there were rose petals loosely scattered over them and the floor. There was a single red rose on the bed, and on the bedside table was a box of expensive chocolates.

"What the hell?" she gasped.

Peter looked at her in surprise. "What? Is it... don't you like it?"

She blinked up at him. "You did this?"

How old was that chocolate?

"No... well... I couldn't personally, but when you said your period was done, I texted The Jon and
Auntie Upgrade as quickly as possible."

"But... how? This stuff is so expensive..."

Peter rubbed his neck and frowned. Clearly he'd hoped for a more positive response. "I already had
the silk sheets... mom got them for us. They were meant for that trip we never took. She said satin
ones were too slippery and I refused to let her go into detail. And the chocolates... well... David
suggested those not long after our fight so I asked Wanda to pick some up. And the garden is full of
roses. It's not like it's too cold for them in San Diego. Look... did I miss the mark or something? I,
uh... I kinda figured this would be romantic..."

She swallowed. It was. It was awfully romantic... So why was she having a tidy little panic attack?

"Isn't it?" he begged.

"Yes," she said abruptly. "It's so romantic, Peter. I just... I'm really hungry..."

"Oh!" he laughed. She could hear the relief in his voice.

"Well," he murmured, lifting the basket. "Let's eat downstairs and then..."

"Right. Don't want crumbs in that pretty bed."

They ate their packed sandwiches in the little kitchen. Peter seemed distracted and she caught him
more than once glancing in the direction of the stairs. Maybe he wasn't quite as nervous as she was.
He could probably tune out the fact that each thing in that room now had a significance... the white
lights hung by Jon, the sheets given by her mother-in-law, the chocolates offered by her own brother.
It felt so antiquated, like they were offering her up as a virgin sacrifice.

Sort of. And that was a whole other psychological roller coaster. As usual, she was thinking her way
into a breakdown and couldn't seem to stop it.

"Well, I'm full," Peter murmured.

Bunny's hair stood on end. "Oh?" she said, taking a big bite of her sandwich.


Bunny sagged a little. "Aren't you?"

"Well, yeah. I barely remember last time and it didn't even go that great. And I'm worried. I can't stop
running technical scenarios in my head."

"Peter... it's okay. I can only be deflowered once."

"Oh! No... I didn't mean that! I meant about the repairs!"

Oops. "About Rabbit?" she asked, blushing.

"Yeah. How to work out which is her primary chip. We could spend days scanning them..."

"What about Upgrade?"

"I don't want her to have to do it. She's been very calm so far, but I know Auntie Upgrade. She has
two really serious vulnerabilities and one of those is Rabbit. She'd been so afraid of doing damage
that it would slow her down more and I just can't speak for the emotional toll of sifting through your
parent's insides. I figured if we could identify the first set of chips installed by Col. Walter we might be able to return them in order, maybe figure out which parts have been lost. Maybe it's not too much for her to at least reclaim her identity. But so many chips have been burned... I just... I can't give up but it looks worse with every chip we pull out," he said thickly.

"Look... I know we were basically sent here to have sex but maybe this isn't the best time."

"Sent here to have sex?" he spluttered.

"Weren't we?"

"Is that why you were so uncomfortable with the room?"

"That was part of it..."

"I thought maybe I'd just screwed up. I'm new to romance, really."

Idiot, she thought. The thing she had discovered about Peter was that among all his gifts he had a natural romantic streak. But he wouldn't have thought so, of course; his old confidence had shattered with the years' accidents and never really recovered.

"You didn't," she assured him. "The room was perfect."

"Then... I don't understand. So the family helped us get some time to ourselves. Is that really enough to get in the way?"

Bunny swallowed, hard. There was already so much on his plate, but... she'd resolved to be honest! And since it didn't look like they'd be making love tonight anyway, well... what the hell.

"It's not just that. Peter... I'm scared!" she blurted. "I know I was pressuring you before but... I've had a week to think..."

"Not sure I like where this is going..."

"No! It's not... I don't want out, okay? I love you. I just... Look... I know it isn't rational but that whole room feels like an operating theater right now and... and... do you have any idea what it feels like to have a new opening appear in your body?"

Peter's face was blank. "What?"

"You pass out and when you wake up, you have a damned vagina. And you think you're used to it once you've dealt with periods until you have sex the first time and you used to have a penis on the outside but now, well, there's one on the inside and it isn't yours... um, thank goodness... and...well, it's hitting spots you never knew you had which is great but it's still alien and weird and new and... and... oh, hell, I sound like an incompetent slash fic..."

"And... everyone's watching! I mean, they aren't but they sent us here smirking and they have their mark all over that room and it was my room but now... I was so horrible to you there and they've been in it and I just need to feel private and safe and then maybe..."

She sobbed softly and looked down, head on her hands. "I'm sorry..." she whispered.

"Bunny..." Peter breathed. "Damn... I don't want it to be that way for you. It's okay. If it freaks you out that much, we can wait..."

She nodded and swallowed hard, wiping tears. "Again," she sighed. "I don't want to wait long,
though! I need to get used to being this way! And you're stressed and I'm stressed and sex is a great fix for that... and I want to, too, really... I want to be with you and be a woman and make love like a woman and not be freaked out by it. But I'm just so nervous..."

She fell silent. Had she overdone it? She meant it; she'd been blindsided by how much it weirded her out. But she knew that as soon as the really complex repairs began and they had no time to come back here together, she'd regret missing this chance. She didn't want him to be afraid to make love to her, too, just because she was having trouble adjusting.

Peter squeezed her hand. She looked up, sniffling.

"It's okay," he said gently. "There's no pressure to do it just because people tell us we should. You're right... that's damned creepy. Let's just go for a walk. We can maybe snuggle in bed later and if we don't feel it, we don't do anything but sleep. Alright? I just want to be near you."

Her heart pounded. That was so sweet...

"Alright," she said thickly. "That sounds nice."

They strolled along the same dusty street, admiring the inexplicable green of the countryside beyond. To Bunny's relief, Peter seemed to grow more and more relaxed as they talked. She hoped he had managed to put the repairs out of his mind for a little while, but she suspected there was a whole program running in the background for it. She wondered whether he'd even be able to sleep later... as such, any trivial topic of conversation that came up was one she readily encouraged. Maybe sooner or later they would just manage to get their minds off of their problems.

She didn't dare hope for more. Between them, they'd built up an awe-inspiring psychological wall. Again.

"Which of us thought that one up, do you think?" Peter asked, looking toward the lush fields.

"Maybe it's natural," she suggested. "This isn't just some kind of dreamland, right? Goodness knows it has bodies of water and indigenous species. Marshmallow was born here and his mother must be around someplace."

"Hopefully far away! I'm not interested in meeting a feral cat the size of a pachyderm."

"No... I can't see that ending well. You have enough trouble with Marshmallow."

"He's a good cat..."

"I know! But that litter box... dayum."

"We're just lucky he uses it and that the robots aren't that bothered by cleaning it. I asked Hatchworth once and he said fecal matter doesn't bother him half as much as dirty oil."

The town had returned this time, as had the museum. They stood in front of it in silence.

"Do you think this place really does tell about our future?" Bunny asked softly.

"What? No, not for a second."

"Yeah... I mean, you said it was a self-fulfilling prophecy when Rabbit broke down but... you also said they had pictures you never took of The Spine's accident..."
"Well, if it's something I saw, then it could appear here in a visual form."

"That's true... right. Silly of me..."

"No, it isn't silly. This whole place is one big unanswered question. You start to wonder what's real, coming here. I think it took a place like this to bring us together after all our crap."

She chuckled. "Think so. Do you want to look inside here, then? Apparently the other halls are complete."

"Yeah... but if this really came from my exploded head, there won't be any surprises."

"Not for you, no. But I'd like to know more about the Walters and here it is with pictures you could never show me."

He smiled. "Alright. This is the easy way to tell you about my family, I guess. Where should we start?"

"Well, I've always been curious about Peter IV, but maybe we should start at the beginning and see everything."

"I dunno about Dad's... He and Mom both have too many stories that they refused to tell in detail."

Bunny laughed as they walked inside.

Peter hadn't thought there could be any surprises in the museum. But from the first dim baby picture of Peter Walter I, she could tell that Peter Walter VI was growing more uncertain with every passing exhibit.

At first, he remained confident in his theories. "Huh, I don't remember Dad telling me about that... must have been when I was little."

Bunny politely refrained from pointing out that he had a photographic memory. And as it happened, she had no need. The more he saw, the clearer it became.

Peter had never heard some of these stories. Bunny wasn't sure even Wanda knew about them. She felt his hand trembling as they reached the creation of the first automatons.

"That's G.G..." he breathed. "She's the prototype for Delilah... he was testing the method of locomotion and stumbled upon Blue Matter AI... no... no, this can't be historically accurate! It appears here because I always wondered about it. Yes. That's why it says that."

"Peter?"

"But... this all makes perfect sense and I never heard of it!" he gasped.

"Maybe..." she murmured uneasily, "you came up with it in your subconscious or something..."

"Yes!" he cried, looking at her. "That's it, of course! I... I worked it out. I do that sometimes..."

He turned back to the spec sheet for G.G. and Bunny looked on worriedly. Was he cracking up? She had figured it was straight out of Peter's head, but she could also believe this place was more than it seemed. She had always been able to accept things like that. But Peter needed that toehold in reality, or what he saw as accepted scientific truth. He had imagination... but he also had barriers. And they'd been strained to bursting for a while...
"Blue matter!" he cried.

Bunny jumped.

"Sorry..." He kissed her hand and she shivered. "I have it. Col. Walter was in a Blue Matter blast, too. The Jon. So he has the same bleed-over as we do. Do you see? This data could be authentic!"

Bunny smiled with deep relief. Science had reestablished itself and her husband wouldn't end up on the floor in a fetal position. Even if his theory was utter bull, it was enough for him.

"That's wicked," she said enthusiastically. "So maybe..."

"Rabbit!" he cried, turning. "There may be information Col. Walter's records don't have!"

"Oh... sweet," she murmured. "That could help."

Peter hurried through the next few exhibits, scanning every word and, she knew, recording every syllable. She glanced at the photos but wasn't able to take in much more and still keep up.

"Here it is! Oh, man... it's all here! Bunny... look at this!"

She trotted to his side and gaped. "The original brain structure!"

"Yeah! It's roughly sketched in the journals but here it is in full color photos!"

"Oh. Awesome. Then you know what to do now?"

Peter was absorbed in the photos and didn't answer.

"Peter?"

"Hm?"

"Do you know what to do now? To fix Rabbit?"

"Hm... I need to study these for a few minutes. I think I might have some ideas..."

"Oh... Should I just go look around?"

He continued in silence. Bunny felt oddly dismissed, even though he was just trying to figure out how to repair Rabbit. She knew the robots would always be high priority, and Peter really needed this information... but this was supposed to be a special trip and he was ignoring her. Well, he'd tuned her out, at least.

She sighed softly. "Yeah, I'll go look around," she murmured.

"Okay..."

She strolled away, barely noticing the other exhibits. She knew it wasn't fair to be angry with him and the only solution she knew was to take a few minutes to cool off.

She reached the hexagonal lobby in the center of the museum. She looked up at the numbers, considering. She really wanted to find out if this museum could in fact tell more about what had happened to Peter IV. But she'd meant to look at each hall in order, with Peter. Except, maybe, for Hall Five. He was right; she could learn more about her father-in-law, but she didn't want to have the mental image of whatever Peter V and Annie had seen fit to conceal from a child.
She gave up and walked into Hall Six. Seeing the exhibits now was more meaningful. That was the man she loved as a baby, as a boy, and an awkward tween. He really was adorable... She hadn't been entirely teasing when she'd cooed over them before. He was such a little moppet when he was young... all bones and hair.

And at last, here was full grown Peter, stooping over a monitor and trying to write the program to fix Upgrade. He knew robotics and programming but convinced them that he was useless with a PC. It made no sense at all, unless you considered the fact that Peter had been in desperate need of more workers. She'd always admired him for that little con. She and David had worked it out after Peter wrote an entire next level defragmenting program for a pint-sized supercomputer automaton and then connected her by network to every other automaton in the manor.

Next up was Peter repairing Hatchworth, helping him learn to fit into modern society, like a father. The Spine's accident came after. Peter slaved day and night to fix the damage, and more after they got back.

Then the exhibit that had sent her running last time. She swallowed hard but was able to look this time without panicking. David's grief had hurt, but not as much as she'd let on. What had truly sent her fleeing the scene was that she had been terrified to see the images of her accident... and embarrassed at how viscerally it had affected her.

She just didn't want to give Peter the satisfaction of knowing that since he'd been trying to shield her from it, so she played up her worries about David. They weren't lies, just... not as severe as all that. It seemed so silly now, especially since she'd turned around and allowed Peter to comfort her. She just needed someone to hold her after seeing that, and there he was with his arms outstretched, and all at once she felt she'd never seen anyone so open and welcoming and attractive and sweet and...

And here they were. That was one way to start a marriage...

She saw, now, Peter among the photos, talking to doctors, making plans to help her. The worry in his face.

Heart in her throat, she walked to the next display and found tears starting almost instantly. This was Peter's accident.

His notes were displayed. She couldn't miss certain important lines... "Open rift and establish portal. Possibility of reversal of damage from previous implosion... minimal." Below that, underlined three times: "Have to try."

Beside that, a photo of Peter looking in through a doorway at her... early days, sitting in the library, a soft fuzz of hair all over her head like a baby's first growth, reading a book and smiling weakly at it. She remembered this... she'd looked up and saw him and thought he was glaring at her. After all, she'd messed up big time. Unless he was staring at her because she was a freak... Self-conscious, she glared right back. And he had opened his mouth and walked away quickly.

She saw in the photo that he was troubled, sad, and even hurt. And she knew, she could just feel, that he was blaming himself and planning to fix it.

The next photos showed him moving forward into a blue light.

Bunny sobbed softly, her hand over her mouth. He'd told her this but she hadn't taken it in. He'd been all science talk... wondering what was on the other side, eyes shining with nerdy joy at finding out. When he turned around and said later he was trying to help her, she'd sorta figured he was just trying to impress her. He was kinda dumb that way.
After that, there was a photo of Peter curled in his bed at home, Hatchworth sitting by like a statue. Other photos showed Hatchworth and Annie trying to calm Peter as he panicked. He'd spent a whole month like that, hiding away having panic attacks. She'd only seen the milder ones he'd had since, times he'd stepped back from work softly murmuring mantras under his breath, words to calm himself... nothing mystical, but repeated again and again while she looked on, worried. She'd had her share of depression but this... this seemed so much more crippling sometimes.

She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and moved on. She couldn't stop here. It hurt. She needed a happy ending on this one, so she moved on to the next exhibit... the journey to Kazooland.

Oh.

Bunny slipped past the images of her saving his life. She was still haunted by that. She wanted to get straight to the good part.

Pictures of them sitting on the train avoiding eye contact... which made her laugh. Pictures of them walking through this very museum. And a photo of Peter embracing her with tears in his eyes after she ran from the building.

Tears in his eyes? Why? But she could imagine any number of causes... he'd only just gotten out of bed recently, after all. No doubt he'd needed that hug, too.

Then she saw one of those inexplicable, impossible shots Peter had complained about... Bunny handing over the kitten, her lips close to Peter's but not touching. It took her breath away. She'd fought a deep inner struggle during that moment. It made her angry at the time. I'm just overtired or something, she'd thought. He's a pushy nerdy blowhard...

With a sweet side. Who was dealing with depression. And who was cute as hell. And his lips looked so much like they needed kissing...

She smiled and moved on to the big treat. Yes... there, the photo Rabbit had mentioned that Bunny had wanted to see. Or at least, the real photo that existed now. She wondered about that... if Peter was right, anything in that museum that hadn't happened yet was just one of his projections; a theory she agreed with. So Peter had been fantasizing about having her tongue down his throat? Ooo... so filthy!

And so was the photo! She and Peter stood, locked in a passionate embrace, lips almost touching... a pause in the kiss that revealed just how deep it had been. Only in this shot, things were flipped... Peter was the one delivering. She remembered that and her hair stood on end... she'd never had asked him how an asexual knew how to French kiss...

The museum suddenly felt much too warm. She stared at the photo... Peter had one hand curled into her hair... her hand was on his butt. He was pressing against her... she'd liked it. She'd felt the burning feminine impulses, the desire to make love like a woman, the old instincts all but forgotten. It had been building all day, from the moment she'd fallen into his lap. Curiosity and need and latent attraction all stirred in one moment of release and for a heartbeat, she'd wanted it so much. She'd come close to wrapping a leg around him and whispering her wishes in his ear...

And the comm had buzzed and broken the spell. And she wasn't sorry. It would have been all kinds of awkward if they'd actually let go and done it there and then...

She took a deep breath. It was weird and different to be this way. But it was what it was. She wanted to be with Peter. She loved him and wanted him inside her... bed. She could do this.
She needed to find him... but he hadn't turned up. That was odd. Ah, but he was probably just lost in thought.

Bunny turned and hurried back the the first wing.

Peter had it. He could reconstruct Rabbit's brain and get it functioning. A lot would depend on how much memory was salvageable but he had at least some idea how to begin.

"This is awesome," he said, turning.

She was gone.

"Bunny?"

Oh, wait... she'd said she was going to go look around. He felt a nasty pricking of guilt for not noticing. She must have felt he'd forgotten her entirely. He needed to find her...

But where had she gone?

He walked on, skimming the exhibits while he could, and entered the lobby. Which one...?

"Bunny?"

Silence. Creepy...

She'd mentioned wanting to see Peter IV, but then she'd said she was going in order. Either way, it seemed likely at this point that she would be in Hall Four.

He marched into the hall and hoped for the best.

Ten minutes later, out in the lobby, Bunny hurried from Hall Six to Hall One.

Peter strolled from Hall Four thirty seconds later. That had been a roller coaster ride. Clearly his dreams had been taken as historical fact by whatever had crafted this museum because there was just no way Peter IV had turned into a blue crystal superhero. Not to mention the space giant, the killer star, the apple planet, and the green leatherclad Pokemon trainer with a robot sidekick... He must have dreamed all that back when he'd had strep throat or something. He'd have to bring Bunny back to see it sometime.

Speaking of whom... he glanced around. No Bunny. He peered into Hall Three... no sign of her at this end. Maybe she'd gotten further. He walked reluctantly into Hall Five.

Bunny walked out of Hall One, frowning. She sighed and walked into Hall Two.

Peter hurried out of Hall Five two minutes later. Ugh. He didn't know how or why there was an exhibit about his dad sleeping with some Cajun woman he'd just met, and he had no intention of
examining it for answers. He'd taken one look at a photo of her kissing his dad on the chest and legged it out of there.

He hurried into Hall Six. This, at least, would have no surprises. It would hopefully, at least, be clear of the fairy tale dream nonsense his unconscious mind had poured into the other halls.

Bunny, close to tears, walked from Hall Two into Hall Three.

Peter strolled past the photos of his childhood, his thoughts mixed. It was nice to be able to see the photos without Bunny cracking jokes. It also made him smile, now, to remember her doing it. And he was worried... was she lost in this place? Had she gotten angry and left? What if she was hurt?

He noticed he had reached the exhibit about his accident. He squeaked in alarm and looked away, heart pounding.

"Ugh..." he sighed, hand over his eyes. "Grow the hell up, Peter..." he muttered, turning to look once more.

But he couldn't. He wiped tears from his eyes and walked past, sighing tremulously.

"Bunny..." he whispered.

And looked up to see a photo of the two of them, embraced. He put his hand on the glass and devoured it with his eyes. So beautiful... and the next photo... a deep, passionate kiss. The clasped his hands and swallowed. Yes.

Peter looked past the exhibit and saw Rabbit's meltdown. The photo of her leaking on the lab floor may have been a projection before, but now it was solid fact. Beyond it, he saw photos of a wedding and hurried to see.

She'd been stunning in that dress. His bride... though it seemed primitive to put it that way. But it said something to him. She had chosen him. She had made herself his, and he was hers, body and soul...

He knew the Spine's wedding was the next exhibit, maybe after that was one about repairing Rabbit... but what could it possibly show? The future? Peter's plans to repair Rabbit? And if it did... if it somehow really did show the future... was there a moral dilemma in taking a look?

But it couldn't. Could it?

He turned and saw it from a distance. "Restoring What Was Lost: Rabbit's Reclamation." That sounded... hopeful. But then, Peter was currently optimistic about his chances of success...

Past that, he saw an exhibit labeled, "A Real Woman."

He gaped. It had to be about Bunny... but which part of womanhood did it show? She was uneasy about making love as a woman. Was this about her overcoming that, or about her having a baby?

Causality be damned, he thought, striding past the other exhibits.

Bunny, now crying freely, walked out of Hall Five and stared at the exit. She'd gone through the last
three halls without even seeing the displays.

Where was Peter? Had he left? Had he walked out without her? But... surely he'd only do that because he thought she'd left herself. Of course. He wouldn't just... abandon her...

She sobbed into her hand. She couldn't help it. She was so scared!

The sound of footsteps cut through the silence. "Bunny!"

She was swept up in his arms almost before she could recognize it was him. He held her tightly, stroking her hair, whispering apologies for not noticing she'd walked out and saying how relieved he was to find her. Bunny clung to him with trembling arms and he kissed her cheek.

"Bunny... Bunny, it's okay now..." he whispered.

"I... I th-thought y-you'd l-l-left with-thout m-me!" she sobbed.

"Never," he breathed. "I'm so sorry... I know how much that freaks you out. I'm here..."

"I know..."

They stood embraced for a long time before they walked out, together, hand in hand. Bunny laughed sheepishly but Peter never hinted at amusement over her panic. She felt as though she couldn't bear it, he was so gentle and kind. He must have always been so, deep down... His mother was. His father, too. It was in him, once his ego was no longer in the way...

She loved him so much. The desire stirred by that photo resurfaced as she grew calmer and she debated how to approach him. She wanted it to be romantic... he'd been so patient and undemanding and kind. He deserved something romantic.

She turned from staring at his smile and saw the train station. The train was sitting at it, humming softly and steaming as it waited.

Hello! It was almost as though it came when called... because, of course, this was the answer.

Ride the train. Seduce Peter. Yes! It sounded so...

Problematic. She had no idea how to do that. The last time, he'd been hammered and horny and it had taken no more than a suggestion to get him into bed. Now he was worried and tense and trying to be a good guy by giving her plenty of space because he knew she was worried, too. It wasn't one bit sexy.

Well, they could sit and talk, too. Maybe she could lead the conversation to something titillating.

"Train ride?" she suggested.

"Just what I was thinking," he purred.

Her hair stood on end. Maybe he was thinking the same thing she was...

"Right..." she breathed. "So who's paying for the tickets?"

"Y'know, we didn't even need them last time."

"Yeah... weird."
Bunny hurried to the ticket counter. "Are tickets required for this train?" she asked the man.

"Sure are. Would you like a couple?"

"Oh, yes. Two."

"That'll be one song."

Bunny sang, "Mr. Blue Sky," the best she could. The man slipped her the tickets and she handed one to Peter.

As he was walking toward the train, however, she hung back. If she did manage to seduce him on the train, why stop to head back to the house? Unless the train only had regular seats... but this was a very old-fashioned train. Maybe...

"Excuse me," she said. "Does this train have sleeper cars?"

"Certainly. Would you like a berth?"

"Is it extra?" she asked anxiously. She could sing another song, but Peter was waiting by the steps, looking back quizzically.

"No, ma'am. We don't get many overnight passengers."

Her hair stood on end as she said breathlessly, "Yes, please. One berth."

"For two?"

"Oh, yeah..." she breathed.

She took the tickets and turned to join him, feeling suddenly lighter than air. This was gonna be so sexy...

Peter held out his hand, smiling. "Your face is red. You okay?"

"Oh, just out of shape, and we've been running around."

She debated telling him about the berth, but it seemed so abrupt. He led the way to the seat they'd taken before and sat. She settled beside him, debating approaches and making no progress.

Oh, well... she was sure she'd think of something.

Peter sat beside Bunny. She snuggled a little closer and he felt a gentle stirring inside, a quiet pleasure at being near her. He had his course of action set for Rabbit's repair. He could take some time to be with his wife.

But after what he'd seen in that museum, he felt a renewed desire for more. He'd seen her, her hair grown longer and pulled into a rough ponytail, her face sweaty and strained, clearly exhausted, tears flowing... and holding a newborn baby. Their child, even if it was his imagination, just born, still not quite clean, bundled in a pink blanket.

And Bunny had been so lovely... like a goddess... smiling down at her child. With that image, Peter understood. Everything had changed and he was a man and she was a woman and he loved her so much it hurt sometimes... because he couldn't begin to express it with words or even kisses.
It would take more. Even if he had to wait.

"I seem to recall the last time we were here there was a tickle war," he commented, hopeful.

She chuckled. "We could start another campaign, see who wins."

No... now it seemed too contrived. He sighed.

"We could. But... right now I just want to sit and hold you for a while."

"That's sounds perfect," she breathed, resting against him as his arm slipped around her back.

Yes, very nice.

"Remember last time we were here?" she murmured. "We got nice and cozy and just talked. That was awesome."

"It was."

"You talked about how you felt about me..."

"You talked about Monty Python," he replied, grinning.

She chuckled. Her hand rested on his leg. He felt a tiny shiver of anticipation, but she made no further move. He considered trying it himself... but no. She needed to let him know when she was ready. He didn't want to push her.

Bunny sighed deeply and stretched a little. Her bust pressed against him and he tipped sideways. Peter gasped and grabbed onto the seat; he'd nearly fallen off.

"Sorry!" she cried, sitting up.

"No... no problem. These seats are just tiny."

"Oh, well, then..." she began.

Silence. Bunny was staring into space.

"Hm?"

She shook her head slightly. "Nothing." She settled in once more.

Weird. He supposed it was too much to hope that she'd been considering suggesting moving to a larger location... with pillows and sheets...

"So... um..." she murmured.

"Hm?"

"What's your... um... kink? Like what kinks do you have?"

"In my neck?" he asked, confused.

"What? I thought everyone called that a crick."

"That's not a word, is it?"
"The genie used it in Aladdin..."

"Yeah, but I mean I don't think it's a word so I always said kink. Like getting a kink in a hose. It seemed to fit."

"I... guess..." she faltered. She sighed roughly.

"Something wrong?" he asked delicately.

"Peter," she sighed, "have you ever had a plan in mind but just couldn't get it off the ground?"

He snorted. She had to ask? But he thought he knew what this was about.

"Constantly," he replied.

"Yeah."

"Don't worry, though," he murmured. He took her hand and kissed it.

"Hm?"

"We'll get past this. The bed isn't going anywhere. We can wait and do it when you're ready, okay?"

"Oh... I didn't mean... well, I kinda did. Yeah. Y'know, I had a little fantasy of walking into that bedroom and kissing you passionately and slipping into the bathroom to change into something slinky. Y'know, so I could walk out and see your face..."

"You brought something slinky?" he said breathlessly.

What a time to make this conversation... kissing passionately... That sounded pretty good. Maybe she'd be willing to just make out on the train? That might be enough for now...

"A pink silk nightgown, actually."

"Oh..." he breathed.

No, making out would not be enough... not now that he was picturing Bunny in a pink silk nightgown. Better not to begin at all...

"Does it feel nice?" he asked softly. "The silk, I mean?"

"Sure. Didn't you feel those sheets your mom got?"

"No, they were in the package still. Jon and Upgrade put them on the bed..."

"Oh." She sighed. "You could have felt all of it for yourself if I hadn't flipped out."

Oh... "That's okay, though," he choked, swallowing. "I guess... that nightgown would probably feel nice against bare skin..."

"Yours or mine?" she chuckled.

He giggled nervously. "Both. I mean, I could feel the silk with my hands but it would feel nicer against my chest..."

He shuddered slightly at the mental image.
"You okay?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah... sorry, we've just kind of wandered onto a subject that... well... It's pretty... y'know, seductive. Probably ought to change the subject."

There was a pause.

"Bunny?"

"Oh..." she breathed, as if coming to a realization.

"What?"

"Well... y'know, that nightgown would feel very nice against your chest."

"Okay..."

"I mean..." She sighed deeply and breathed, "It feels good against mine, after all."

Sweet mother of science... "Y-yes... does it?" he squeaked.

"Mm-hm. So... I guess I'd have to give you the chance to find out for yourself..." she breathed.

She nonchalantly opened the top button of his shirt with one fumbling hand.

"What are you..."

"Just want you to be comfortable," she murmured, starting on the next one.

"Oh... it seemed like you might have been doing something else..."

"Don't worry about it. Where were we? Ah, yes. So I'd unbutton your shirt and hold you close. And then the silk would be right against you..."

The silk... and her... "That... that would be really nice..." he choked.

"Then I probably would kiss your neck... then your chest."

He closed his eyes and tried to think of algorithms. She opened another button and his eyes popped open again. He couldn't believe she was just trying to make him comfortable. She was making him uncomfortable, in fact. She understood the effect she was having, surely...

"Oh... interesting..." he breathed.

"What would you do, Peter? In a moment like that?" she prompted.

"Me?" he gasped.

He wanted to reciprocate but his moves were extremely limited. He only had a few little fantasies and nothing in them seemed really unique.

"Hm?" she purred. "What would you do to me?"

She managed to open yet another button. Yes, this had a very intentional quality... He was starting to get a glimmer but he kinda wished she'd told him sooner.

"Oh..." he gasped. "Well, I dunno if this sounds weird, but I'd kinda imagined feeding you one of
those chocolates."

"Mm... I do like chocolate... but you got the fancy stuff that melts really easily. I wouldn't want that to get on my pink nightie."

Oops. "So you wouldn't want me to..."

"No, I do want you to."

"Ah," he murmured, relieved. He didn't have any other ideas that weren't incredibly graphic.

"I'd just make sure there was no chocolate left."

"Oh... how would you...?"

"By slowly licking your fingers..."

Peter shuddered from head to toe, abruptly wishing he'd brought the chocolate.

"You okay?" she murmured.

He sighed deeply and closed his eyes. "Yeah, I'm good," he rasped. For now... "Bunny... please tell me this is leading somewhere..."

"Why? Do you want it to lead somewhere?" she asked, her voice low and sultry.

"Yes, for the love of all things science... this is torture!"

She sat up and murmured, lips close to his, "Sounds like it's time to take it to the next level, then."

She pulled him to her. Peter's heart hammered against his ribs as they melted together in a passionate kiss.

"Bunny!" he gasped. Another kiss... "I know you can't stand the thought of being with me right now but..."

"No... oh... " Kiss. "No, Peter. I want to be with you."

"You do?" he gasped.

"Yes! And... Th-there's a bed waiting on the train..." she managed between kisses.

"Oh... mmph... really?" he faltered.

There was silence except for the rhythm of the train as kiss led to kiss and Peter's hair seemed to float above his head.

"Let's go find it, Peter," she managed at last.

She stood, her sweater off-kilter, and pulled him to his feet. He just had to kiss her again.

"Come on," she said hoarsely, pushing him away and taking his hand. "It's back there somewhere."

She started down the aisle of the train.

"Bunny!" he cried. "Wait..."
She stopped and looked at him. "What?" she asked worriedly.

"You're... you're sure you want to do this?" he panted.

She laughed and he grinned. He was pretty sure that was a yes.

"Oh... yes, Peter..." she said to his delight, leading him forward once more. "Here and now. I did just seduce you so it wouldn't be fair to stop now."

"You can still say no, though," he told her reluctantly. "I mean... If you wanted. Right up to the act. In the middle of the act. Pretty much any time. That's more or less the rules."

They'd entered the next car. Bunny examined the ticket and smiled.

"It's this one," she breathed, pressing against him as she fumbled for the door handle behind him. "And I don't want to say no. I want to say yes. A lot."

"Oh, Bunny..." he choked, wrapping his arms around her as the door came open.

They fell into the room... literally. The bed was opened, the coverlet turned down. They landed on it in a heap, laughing.

Peter looked up at her and stroked her cheek. "I love you, Bunny," he whispered.

"I love you..."

Another kiss... longing caresses... the sweater was too much in the way of his hands so he tugged at it and Bunny, laughing, rose and yanked it over her head.

"I've had a fantasy about this for a while," she murmured. "Making love on a moving train. Let's see if it's as good as everyone says."

Peter smiled. Bunny shut and locked the door before sinking once more into his arms.

Soft sighs and whispers drifted into the darkness, scarcely audible over the rattling of the rails. The whistle sounded as the train rocketed into a tunnel without slowing.

She'd been dreaming. She wasn't sure about what but she had.

"Mmm..." she mumbled.

There was light on her eyelids. She was warm... so warm! Someone was laying against her back. His arm was over her waist and his breathing, soft and regular, tickled her ear. Bunny opened her eyes and twisted her head to look.

Peter. Bunny smiled.

This was better. This was so much more like it. She closed her eyes again.

She felt the train come to a stop. Peter groaned softly and began to stir.

"We... we've stopped..." he muttered.

Bunny snuggled back against him, unwilling to have it end. He held her close.
"Mmm... This is what should have happened last time," he whispered sleepily.

"Yeah."

"Waking up warm in bed snuggled together and remembering... mmm... yes..." He giggled softly. "You seduced me."

"I did!" she said proudly.

"That was amazing, Bunny..."

"Good."

He nodded. "I also couldn't help noticing that you seemed to reach... another level of existence."

"A what?"

"You know what..."

"Oh. One of those."

"Did you?"

"I did," she purred.

She shivered with delight, remembering. Peter kissed her neck.

"Let's see if we can manage it again," he breathed. "I want to pay better attention this time."

It was tempting. He had just a little razor stubble and the feel of it on her neck was making her crazy...

"We have to get back..." she sighed, twisting to gently push him away.

"Ugh... It won't be the same there..."

She laughed softly. "We do, though..." she pressed.

With deep reluctance, Bunny disentangled herself from his arms and rose to dress. She could feel his eyes on her as she slipped into her panties and bra.

"You, too, stud," she sighed.

"I know. But you can't blame me for taking in the sights," he said as he climbed out of bed.

Me, neither, she thought, watching him sidelong as he scoured the room for his underwear.

They dressed slowly, with many playful interruptions, and hurried back to the house. Halfway up the stairs, the comm pinged.

"Honeymoon's over," he murmured sadly, opening the device as they entered the room.

"Peter?" David said hesitantly. "This a good time?"

No, thought Bunny, looking longingly at the bed.

"Yeah, it's fine," said Peter. "What's up?"
"The Spine is trying to contact Rabbit! They're heading back!"

"Oh! How do you know?"

"You wanted me to get her connected again to the wifi, right? So I logged her in on my monitor and checked her messages. The Spine sent one half an hour ago. They're on their way back and he's trying to get a response. What should I tell him?"

"Oh... Stall. Just... tell him something, and try to sound like Rabbit, okay? We'll be back soon. It's another lie but I just think we should tell them in person."

"Okay. Sorry to interrupt your trip..."

"David... it's okay," Bunny breathed, leaning in toward the comm. "We had to come back sometime."

"Okay, well, they'll be about an hour and a half so..."

"Great. Then we'll be there in about an hour," Peter said, turning it off.

"An hour?" she breathed as he set it aside.

"I think that should be enough," he murmured, pulling her into his arms. "If you're interested."

She sighed with relief. "I am," she whispered, pressing against him.

They kissed and she felt chills all over. The best kind.

"I don't want to leave this room tainted," he breathed. He kissed her softly. "I want to come back to a room where we last made love, not a room where we last fought."

"Oh..." she gasped as he returned to kissing her throat, his fingers sliding into her hair as he pulled it aside. "Oh, Peter... you... oh... you pick things up fast..."

"I do my best..." he said humbly.

"I'm counting on it..." she choked.

Peter released her and started unbuttoning his shirt, his eyes on hers. Bunny watched for a moment and turned to reach into her bag for a pink silk nightgown. He saw it and smiled.

"I'll get the chocolates," he whispered.
But... Rabbit!!!

Chapter Summary

The couples return home from their trips to find things not at all well with the oldest Walter automaton. Hurt/comfort setup for a complicated step by step reconstruction of a robotic brain...

Chapter Notes

Just an intro, really... the procedure required to fix Rabbit is a pioneering one and Peter isn't going to rush it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In Walter Manor, people waited.

Annie Walter waited in a lab to intercept her son and daughter-in-law before they attempted to speak to The Spine and Breanna. She didn't think anyone would get hurt, as such. But she definitely felt the job could be placed into better hands. Neither one was exactly a master of diplomacy. And while Breanna was a sweetheart and The Spine gentle as a lamb... well, she'd seen each of them riled up from time to time.

Her job was to make sure that her son and his wife got breakfast and got to work. It would look better to have them busy over the repairs and besides, David had told her with great discomfort that Peter had promised to be back in an hour. The reason for the delay seemed fairly obvious... especially considering all the obstacles they'd encountered in trying to get some time alone... and she suspected the silly things might not have thought of breakfast.

Annie smiled over her book. David thought it would bother her. Not so. She'd grown up in the 60s. She'd always figured that someday her son would fall in love, and sex, to her, was a natural way to express it.

Bother her? The idea. No, she thought it was about time.

"Be happy, sweetheart," she whispered, turning the page.

In the entrance hall, The Jon waited. Upgrade had wanted to come along, but he could sense the strain on her systems. It was hard enough for her to cope with what was going on. He was struggling himself.

He remembered when Peter II and Peter III had gotten diphtheria. It was the first time he'd understood that humans could break down, that they might not be able to be repaired. Diphtheria had
killed so many children and Iris had slaved to tend her boys, weeping even as she labored. The odds, so The Spine had explained (in the very robotic manner they had all shared then), were that even if one boy rallied, the other would die. When both ultimately lived, the humans had described it as a miracle. The Spine had looked very skeptical. To him, the odds had simply been in their favor.

The Jon was praying, to whatever might be listening, for a miracle now. Upgrade, like The Spine, didn't believe in miracles. It hurt him to know it, but that meant it would be a lot harder for them if Rabbit died.

So he asked Upgrade to go be with Rabbit. He would talk to The Spine.

For extra support, he'd brought Dave, Sunshine, and Louise. Breanna would be a big help, but at first she would be very angry. Because it was going to hurt her husband so much... both Rabbit's condition, and the lies he'd been told.

Jon wasn't sorry... and he was awfully sorry. But he could do this. He could tell him...

He hoped.

Peter and Bunny shared a lingering kiss as they lay together, each still buzzing with fading pulses.

"Everything feels different now," she sighed, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Yeah," he murmured, pulling her closer.

They didn't need to clarify. They both felt it. From the built up passions the night before to the sleepy, gentle morning lovemaking they'd just experienced, they had drawn together and become one. Even if they sometimes fought, they would make up. And when they didn't fight, they would share times like these, even on Earth with no face and no voice. Husband and wife.

He'd always thought sex was about drives and impulses. It had struck him as raw primal selfishness. He understood now that didn't have to be. It could be two people sharing a trust in each other so deep that nothing was too intimate to be shared. The idea of casual sex had always puzzled him. He knew now it was a concept he would never understand.

He felt as though he could stay there forever with her. How much had changed in a single year! But for now... other matters clamored for attention, ones he refused to ignore any longer.

"We have to go back," he sighed.

"I know."

They rose and dressed, once again admiring each other in the process. Peter couldn't help thinking the pleasure was all his, but he caught her looking several times at everything from his rear to his skinny chest to... the obvious. Always smiling and pink-faced.

"Peter?" she said as she found her bra.

"Hm?" he asked, looking up from buttoning his jeans.

"We can make love there, too. I know that's obvious but I want to point it out now. I don't care if your face is covered or if I can't scream..."

Peter grinned involuntarily and she blushed.
"Yeah, I know," she said sheepishly. "I sounded like a madwoman..."

"Not to me," he said, turning to find his shirt. "I loved every second of it."

She slipped her arms around him from behind. Her bra wasn't on yet...

"That's because I was screaming your name," she whispered in his ear, her fingers softly stroking his stomach.

"Bunny..." he groaned, grinning from ear to ear. "Don't..."

She giggled and released him. "I just love that I can," she murmured, slipping into her bra.

Once dressed, they kissed and activated the portal.

"Has it been an hour?" Bunny murmured, still in his arms.

Peter checked the comm. "Fifty-seven minutes..."

She kissed him again. "Now?" she breathed.

He grinned. "Still fifty... no, fifty-eight now."

Another kiss. He could see she intended to take this joke all the way to the finish line. He had no intention of stopping her.

"Fifty-nine," Peter whispered, lips brushing hers.

Quiet except for their soft breathing. Life was good.

"Time?" she asked a little sleepily as their lips parted at last.

Peter sighed, "Yeah. It is. No more excuses, I guess."

She smiled and gave him one last kiss before he put on his mask and took her hand.

"I love you, Bunny," he murmured.

"I love you, Peter," she said, smiling.

They walked through.

It was a few minutes after twelve. Bree turned off the car in front of Walter Manor and sat, looking at The Spine, who had made no move to go inside.

"You okay?" she murmured.

"I'm afraid, Bree. Something's happened. I know it seems like a little thing, just a little hiccup in communication..."

"No. I agree with you. If Rabbit was just having trouble with her messaging, someone else would have told us not to worry about it. But if there was really something to worry about, they'd keep their mouths shut and act like nothing was wrong. You know it and I know it. So it's time we got in there and kicked their butts around until they tell us the truth."
He smiled weakly. "Bree... I think I want to go inside alone. Just for a couple of minutes."

"Why?" she cried.

"Because... you're going to be angry."

"I'm already angry."

"I know. I just want to find out what's going on first. Then..."

She shook her head. "You can tell me gently? Hm? So you can feel protective of the little woman? You're such an old fart sometimes."

He wanted to kiss her and comment that she hadn't had any complaints in bed. That would have been delicious. But he was too worried to even try. He took her hand and kissed it instead.

"Alright," he murmured. "I admit, it's my old safety net. I deal by protecting others."

"Well, if it helps that much," she said, waverer.

"No," he sighed. "It's a new century and I'm a new man. Come on. We face this together."

They slowly walked into the house and looked at the assembled people. Jon, Dave, Sunshine, Louise... They all looked so serious. The Jon stepped forward, opened his mouth, and closed it again.

"Jon?" The Spine said, frowning.

Jon's chin trembled.

"Jon! What's happened?" he demanded, alarmed.

"I can tell him, Jon..." Dave offered.

"No!" Jon squeaked. "I promised..."

"Will someone please..." The Spine began, frustrated.

I'm sorry, Jon sent. We couldn't tell you sooner.

"Tell me wha-"

The Jon burst into tears and hugged him.

"Jon!" cried Dave. "Did you tell him?"

But Jon was beside himself. Even by wifi, he said nothing. Louise rolled her eyes and groaned.

"He was supposed to tell you..." Dave sighed. "Rabbit's had an accident. A malfunction... she's damaged, Dad."

This much was no surprise. But it felt as though something was missing. A malfunction wouldn't keep her offline for a week, or have other people answering her messages. He was being handled and he hated it.

"Is Peter fixing her?" he demanded. "Can she communicate?"
They exchanged looks and he seethed. No, this was not acceptable.

"Just tell me what the hell has happened, dammit!" he barked.

The humans, Bree included, jumped.

"Sorry," he growled. "But I won't be handled! Knowing is better than being left to worry. It can't be as bad as my fears at this point..."

Sunshine wiped her eyes as Dave stepped forward and The Jon stepped back, hands over his mouth. The Spine watched his son approach with a sinking feeling.

Maybe it could.

"Alright, here it is," Dave said softly. "Rabbit had a coolant leak. Yeah, I know, big deal... only it leaked into her processor. There was a fire and... it wasn't a big one but a lot of her memory chips are melted. Gone. I've seen them myself and I won't sugarcoat it. We don't know how much is lost but part of her life has been erased."

He'd expected to be furious with whatever he was told, to roar and stamp and terrify everyone. He'd been preparing to control himself when the impulse struck. Instead he stood dumbfounded.

He'd had a lot of cause to worry about Rabbit over the years. She'd been through more physical and emotional torment than the rest of them put together. But this? Only once, a very long time ago, had he run into this problem... back in France during World War I. And from what he was hearing, it was even worse than last time.

Because this time, it was entirely possible that Rabbit was dead!

"I'm sorry, Dad. We thought of telling you sooner, but... we wanted you to have your honeymoon," Dave murmured. "It's what Rabbit would have wanted, too. You know it."

Would have wanted...

"Rabbit!" he gasped.

He hung forward, struggling with grief. They'd let him spend a week in bliss while Rabbit was dying? He cried, softly at first... the thought of Rabbit with her chips pulled out and spread on a sheet struck him and he choked with sobs.

*I'm so sorry, Spine!* Jon sent.

He made no response. He had no words. No one attempted to stem the flow, how could they? Dave reached out as if to embrace him but he pushed his son away... He could hurt one of them like this... even Jon was too small to cope alone...

"Spine?" Jon sobbed.

He shook his head. He just needed a minute. He could handle this...

There was a thunder of footfalls and Hatchworth, still in his Halloween costume, ran to his brother and threw his arms around him. The Spine clung to him, relieved, as The Jon carefully embraced them both.

*I called him up. He hasn't been taking it well either,* Jon explained. *He needs a hug just like you, but he wasn't ready yet...*
"It is my fault, brother!" Hatchworth sent. "It is all my fault!"

"Hatchworth!" Jon whispered. "We told you it was an accident."

The Spine didn't ask. He doubted it could be all Hatchworth's fault, but he wasn't ready to delve. The hug was doing its work, and he did his best to patiently allow it to do so. Of course Jon had known.

With all the people he'd lost over the years, he would have expected to be used to it. But this wasn't just anyone. Not even a wife, or child... This was Rabbit. His older sibling, his war buddy, his stage partner... his best friend. When family had all passed away, he'd expected Rabbit, glitches and all, to be there.

But his fears from the last time cycled through his thoughts without ceasing. Even if she survived this... would she still be Rabbit? Would she be a she, even? Or even a he? Would Rabbit go back to the beginning, forgetting everything they'd shared? Would there be someone walking around looking like Rabbit, making new memories... while Rabbit herself was passed away?

Fresh sobs burst forth and Hatchworth sighed.

"He is taking it even worse than we did, The Jon. I suspect he is thinking of the last time."

"You mean... Oh, Hatchy!" Jon sent. He began to wail aloud.

"Dammit," Hatchworth replied. "I am filled with guilt and shame and sorrow, to be sure, but our Rabbit needs us, brothers. We don't have to fix her alone on a battlefield. We have a genius scientist to help her now."

"Yeah..." Jon responded.

The Spine nodded and stood straight, trying to calm himself. He looked around at the humans and saw that every last one had tears in their eyes... even Louise. Even Louise! She almost never cried!

He grimaced and his jaw shook. Hatchworth put his hand over his eyes and sighed.

Bree stepped forward, gently easing her way past The Jon and Hatchworth, who stepped aside. She put her arms around him and held him. He rested his head lightly on hers.

"Maybe I should have let you protect me," she whispered. "If that makes you able to cope."

He sighed a trembling sigh and she rubbed his back soothingly.

"Alright," Bree sighed, turning to the others. "I have this. Now you're all going to tell me what in the hell Peter is doing right now to fix Rabbit, and then we're going to that lab so I can assist."

"We have the new communications connected already. It's essential that we have a link while reinserting the chips. Rabbit will have to read them and then one of the other automatons can access her memory and check the contents. Upgrade is the best equipped to scan but after the first chip, I think, identifying salvageable memory is probably best left to the older robots."

"I can do it just fine!" Upgrade roared rebelliously.

There was a crowd gathered in the lab. Fortunately it was a roomy one and much of its contents had been long since removed so that they had the space to bring in sofas, tables, chairs and cots. It had become something of an apartment so that staff could alternate shifts without having to go far to
attend to eating and sleeping.

The Spine sat, numb, listening to Peter explaining the fact that his sister may or may not have lost much of her life to a chemical fire. Breanna had held him close but in the end, her place was at the work table, preparing to help assess the full extent of the damage. Dave and Sunshine now stood on either side of him, their arms clasped behind him. It did help, just a little.

"We know you can, sweetie," The Jon said gently, his voice still a bit gummy from his own grief. "But Rabbit has some pretty upsetting memories. We already know a lot of them. And plus there's your mom..."

Upgrade stuck out her lip but didn't argue. She knew she was beaten.

Peter nodded. "You've made it clear how you feel about seeing your parents... um... being intimate," he said.

More talk. He considered telling them to get to work, but he didn't trust himself to speak. Jon had told him about the night Peter and Bunny had taken to be together, explaining that Wanda had done the work while they were gone or they never would have taken the time. Jon understood very well how he would feel about them taking time off while Rabbit was in pieces.

He tried to understand why they hid the truth from him. They'd meant well but he wondered if they'd only made it worse. Yes, he'd had a week of marital bliss, but now he'd have to remember that he'd had it while Rabbit was... like this. And it meant that he first seethed knowing Peter had taken the night off, and then felt guilty because a week ago he would have given him every encouragement. He knew they hadn't even had a honeymoon. How could he be angry with them for taking a single night when he'd had a week, especially considering the work had gone on uninterrupted?

But he was angry. He was angry at everyone and everything.

"So once the new cooling array is finished we can begin with the first chip," Peter continued. "I would like Upgrade to assist with that one since she originally located it and has seen the contents. The first war may also be there, though..."

"I'll join her," Jon said softly. "Just in case."

She sighed irritably but allowed Jon to take her hand. The Spine nodded. Upgrade would have resisted help from anyone else and they all knew it. But she was not so determined that she would turn down Jon's company... seeing her Pappy at war would be distressing.

"Thanks to the information I found in that museum in Kazooland, I have a solid idea where to begin."

"Which museum?" Dave asked.

"Oh..." Peter turned toward Bunny for a moment then back to his work. "Well... there's this weird museum there... it's hard to explain, but it supposedly tells about all the Peter Walters since Peter I."

"Really? How...?"

"My question exactly. My best theory is that it's supplied with brainwave memory storage through Blue Matter saturation. So those Walters who were heavily exposed to Blue Matter at some point in their lives have their life stories illustrated as museum exhibits."

Dave shook his head. The Spine had to appreciate his refusal to ask any further. The fear of Blue
Matter exposure had kept them apart for nearly thirty years and now was not a good time to poke old wounds.

"It's weird, I know... dream nonsense," Peter said. "There's things in there that couldn't possibly be real so I assume a lot of it is made up. I mean, not every Peter had heavy Blue Matter exposure, right?"

The Jon looked at The Spine and back at Peter. Dave whistled nonchalantly. Peter looked up.

"Wait..." he breathed. "They did, didn't they?"

"Every last one," Jon murmured.

Peter fell silent.

"You okay?"

"I... I think I'd rather stay focused on the present. If I follow that thought process too far I may crack. So here's the first sequence of chips..."

What do you think he saw in the museum? Jon sent.

Now is not the time, brother. But if Peter's theory is correct, there is much to think about.

Spine? Do you know what he's talking about? Jon asked.

We only saw Hall Six, remember? I was in no mood to relive painful memories, and all the other Halls had them.

Oh, yeah. I would have liked to see Hall One...

Maybe someday, The Spine sent. He really didn't want to be having this or any other conversation right now.

"How can I help, Peter?" he begged. "When are you getting started?"

"Oh! Well... David and I were assembling the cooling system I designed based upon yours. I couldn't fit one into her braincase before because..."

He trailed off. The answer lay on a lint free sheet, one table over. Rabbit's rather inefficient memory chips, inserted haphazardly over time, had left no room for the insertion of proper tubing.

"Well, I just can now. It's more efficient so we can use a safer coolant and avoid things like this in the future."

"Well, do it, then. I'm ready to assist at any time," The Spine said.

"We all are, Peter," Dave said.

"Oh... I just thought I should explain thoroughly since everyone here is going to be helping at one point or another."

"Let's get the cooling system installed and then you can explain as you go, Peter," Bree said, tugging her gloves into place with Bunny's help. "Watching you work will help clarify things and we're all too worried to discuss this in detail."
By which she meant that her husband was too worried. And she was right.

"Alright. I should have it within the hour. Everyone get rested, especially Upgrade and Jon. Bree, maybe you should..."

"Stay here and assist. I've had a lovely rest and this is top priority. Our bags are in our room and I know damned well that my husband isn't leaving this lab until Rabbit is repaired. So let's get to work. Baby, you wait over there, we need the space."

The Spine sighed. She wasn't dismissing him. Even though he knew as much as anyone about the systems they described, his fingers, while nimble on guitar, were not suited to fine tubes and wiring. He nodded and rose from his stool as family and staff scattered slowly to various parts of the house.

"Oh, one thing," Bree said.

She was wearing gloves so she couldn't pull him down to her, but she looked up and he took the hint. The kiss was as sweet as ever and it was a relief. She seemed to harbor no bitterness about the week they'd been given and he realized it would be unfair to her to act as though it hadn't been worth his time. On the contrary, it had brought him new life.

They were right. Rabbit was no worse off. What Peter had shown him was that the week had been well used to meticulously prepare for the work ahead. The parts were numbered and set aside and the foundation for the next stage was almost done. It would have been achieved not one second faster with them there because Peter and Wanda had alternated removing and examining chips, and staff and family had cycled out as support.

He managed a smile. "I leave Rabbit in your capable hands," he murmured. "All of you."

Peter looked up abruptly and he realized the man hadn't expected anything like praise from The Spine.

"I mean it, Peter. You've done incredibly well."

He could see Peter gulp. He tipped his mask quickly down to his work with a shuddering sigh. Of course. Peter had been beating himself up the whole week. He always did.

"Peter..." he murmured. "This wasn't your fault."

"I... I know..." Peter murmured.

"You say that, but you don't own it. I can't force you to recognize it, but... sometimes things just happen. I don't blame you. None of us do."

"Thank you..."

He clasped Peter's shoulder briefly. Bree smiled at him as he walked away and settled on one of the sofas to do a quick scan of his memory files. He'd had an idea once he'd calmed down that might help... if Rabbit lost her memories, he might be able to share some of his own to fill in the blanks.

He sent messages to the other automatons.

Already prepared, Upgrade responded.

I'm working on it, Jon sent.

I don't have many she would want, Hatchworth told him. But I shall gather what I can.
Thank you all, The Spine sent. *It won’t be quite the same as remembering it all herself, but if we find that she remembers enough, we can fill in the gaps.*

*I just hope the gaps aren’t too big,* Upgrade replied.

Chapter End Notes

And now we see how much Matter Master David really looks like Colonel Peter Walter I.
Rabbit, Inside and Out, pt 1

Chapter Summary

The work begins... chip by chip.

Chapter Notes

Don't assume anything at first. Rabbit's gender terms will shift around, based upon the situation, as they work through her chips to assess damage, since she was "male" for so many years.

Oh, and trigger warning... she has a raging episode right off the bat. Panic, screaming, trauma, confusion, and what can best be described as "flash body dysphoria" in the same sense you'd say "flash flood" that is. It's quickly resolved but I know y'all are soft-hearted characters and it might be upsetting to some to "see" Rabbit so distressed, especially if you're trans or a victim of child abuse or just really love Rabbit. It only lasts for the first section of this installment... just skip to "What the hell, Peter?" after the dashes if you're worried about reading it. The section following it will give a brief rundown of what you missed.

Walter Manor, lab one:

Apparatus softly blipped and pinged in the dimness of the lab. Familiar... it was always a little different, but there were always the blips.

Light could be seen through the seams of her photoreceptors. Different than usual... Pappy must have... no... wait...

Something wasn't right.

Rabbit nervously opened her eyes. A man looked down at her. She flinched and closed them again.

"Rabbit? Do you know who I am?" he asked.

"P-P-Pappy..." she gasped, terrified.

"Good... are you feeling alright, Rabbit?" he asked faintly.

Rabbit didn't know what to say... her memories were so jumbled! At first things had seemed fine... she was used to this, she was a Walter automaton, the first of five primary units still in operation, made for music but sent to war but now... it made no sense. She'd been a girl, he'd made her a girl... now she was the big brother of the family?

Why had she been living as a boy? And what were these other memories? They were her life... but
they couldn't be! Where was Miss Delilah? Where was GG? Why had Pappy broken her? He'd been so angry... he wasn't himself... and then he'd made her a boy... but he'd promised! He'd promised to make her pretty!

How could this have happened? How could she have been content this way?

"Rabbit? What's wrong?" Pappy asked firmly.

"No!" she gasped, cringing. Her head was strapped to the table. She struggled against it.

"Rabbit, stop!" Pappy shouted.

"No!" she howled, limbs flailing. "Do-Don't hurt me! I'm sorry, Pappy! I'm sorry!"

She heard Pappy cry out in alarm. Strong hands grabbed her. She sobbed in terror and opened her eyes. Pappy was gone and a huge silver automaton, sleek and powerful, was holding her fast.

Rabbit screamed and fought back. What was this monster? Why was it attacking her? Did Pappy hate her? Why was he doing this?

"Rabbit, stop!" the monster cried. "You're going to..."

"Who are you? Let me go! Pappy! Pappy, where did you go? What did I d-d-do? Why did you make me a boy? I'm s-s-s-s-sorry! I'm s-s-s-s-sorry, P-Pappy! Let me go! L-L-Let me go! Please, Pappy! I'm s-s-so so-so-so-sorry!"

Another robot appeared and caught her by one flailing arm. It reminded her of Three, but... no, it was almost human... then another, catching her free arm... it had a mustache? And it was crying...

Rabbit screamed in grief and panic.

"Please calm down..." whispered a soft voice.

"Let me go! Stop it!" Rabbit screamed.

"Please... look at me..." breathed the voice. "Up here. It's alright, sweetheart... no one is going to hurt you... sshhh... Please, look at me, look at my face..."

Rabbit looked up reluctantly, rattling like a broken flywheel, and glimpsed a lovely pink robot, its expression sad but sweet, oily tears on its cheeks. Its gentle hands lovingly touched Rabbit's face.

"It's alright, Pa- it's... it's... it's alright. Please don't cry, sweetheart..." it breathed.

"Who-who are you?" Rabbit gasped, staring.

Everything went dark.

---

"What the hell, Peter?" David shouted, his voice breaking.

He sank into a chair. Bunny brought him his water bottle and he took it with trembling hands as she sank down beside him and glared at her husband. The Spine, Jon and Hatchworth stood at last, releasing the now limp Rabbit as one. Upgrade continued to stroke Rabbit's cheek, crying softly in little gasps.
"Upgrade..." Jon whispered, putting a trembling arm around her shoulders.

"Poor Pappy... Oh, Jonny!" she wailed, melting into his arms.

"Good work, everyone," Peter said breathlessly, approaching the table. "David... I am so sorry. Okay?"

"Remind me why her arms aren't strapped down?" David demanded.

"You know why... having her head and chest strapped down is weird enough. I don't want her to freak out when she wakes up."

"That wasn't freaking out?"

"Well, yeah... Look, I think I have a bead on the problem but it's up to you whether to continue, alright? Upgrade, thanks for stepping in... I didn't want to just shut her off mid-fight. Any damage to the other restraints?"

"Looks fine, Peter," The Spine murmured.

"Good. Ugh... Dammit to hell, I should have seen that coming," Peter spat. "The block was cleared before the accident so there's no reason to think the data would be locked now."

"She remembered everything?" David demanded. "Good lord... So basically she thought I'd beaten the hell out of her and randomly made her into a man?"

"Um... yeah, pretty much," Peter said faintly.

"Holy crap. My life just flashed before my eyes a second time."

"Like I said, if you don't want to continue..."

"I... I don't know..." David faltered. "You said no one else could do the first interviews..."

"You've done an excellent job, David," The Spine assured him.

"Gee, thanks..." David droned. "Seriously. You may have saved my life."

"No... well... she wouldn't have hurt you deliberately if that's any comfort."

"It's not."

"She was scared of Pappy, but she wouldn't lay a finger on him."

"Unless she was so scared she fought back. Like she did with you. Just saying."

The Spine sighed. He wasn't wrong. It had taken all his strength to restrain her without doing damage.

The first chip they'd inserted was from very early in Rabbit's life. As such, they'd agreed that their best chance of presenting Rabbit with a familiar face during this stage, short of GG who all agreed wasn't up to the task, was to suit up Matter Master David as Col. Peter Walter I. And with a little work, he truly was the spitting image of Col. Walter. He'd matured since coming to the manor, and his thinning hair was nearly the same shade of blue black. Chelsea had helped him style it so that he had much the same wild curl to the top. Once they had procured an old style lab uniform and David had shaved his beard, which had grown somewhat during the busy week of preparations, into a soul
patch and sideburns, he was ready to impersonate the person Rabbit trusted the most. And that was good, because the other automatons had looked dramatically different when they were all young together and, as they'd just confirmed, Rabbit wouldn't know them as they were now.

He looked toward the back of the lab, where the makeshift living area was. A crowd was gathered of family, friends, and staff; the family and friends out of worry, the staff to observe. Peter had apologetically pointed out that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for them to see the reconstruction of the brain of a Walter automaton. The Spine had readily agreed. He wanted them to be as knowledgeable as possible after all the nonsense of the last year.

They'd been ranged around the table moments before, placed just close enough to watch and just far enough that Rabbit, with her head strapped firmly in place and the light dimmed outside of the work area, couldn't see them. But now they huddled with the family, some in tears after Rabbit's panicked outburst. And reassuring them, as he'd expected, was his daughter-in-law.

"Sunshine?" The Spine called. "We need some advice."

An hour later, they were ready for the next attempt. The blank chip Peter had inserted to store additional data was wiped clean. Her first chip, detailing her first year of life, was copied to a new one, with the necessary data encrypted by Upgrade and set to become accessible at the time of Rabbit's accident, according to her chronometer. They could only hope it would work properly since all the events had technically already occurred. What was certain was that it would only distress and confuse Rabbit to know those things too soon, as Sunshine had pointed out. Not that they hadn't worked that out by observation.

But Sunshine had gone on to add that even if they wanted to let Rabbit understand who she was from the start, it would be irresponsible to try. She looked then at Bunny, who had tears in her eyes. Bunny nodded and explained that she was who she was, and to go back and make her a girl from the beginning would mean she was a different person. Rabbit was the same way.

And so they prepared to insert the copied chip, with the original carefully stored in case of need. Peter was already kicking himself for not making a back-up in the first place, but it had promised to be a lengthy process and he had procrastinated. No longer... once Rabbit was on her feet, each of the bots would be coming in for regular sessions to save their memories. It would take a few weeks for the lot of them, but it wasn't worth risking going through this again. And once it was done, subsequent memories would take less time.

"I feel like a time traveler," Upgrade mused as she handed the chip to Peter. "We're in Pappy's past."

"More like a guardian angel," Sunshine said, smiling. "You get to watch over Rabbit throughout her life."

"Oooh!" Upgrade trilled.

"You copied it so quickly, though," Sunshine said admiringly.

"Oh, it's only a year long. The later chips would take a few hours each. There's a lot of detail in memories... ours, at least."

"Alright," Peter said as it clicked into position. "It's in. Upgrade has made sure the data is intact but I'd prefer to do the interview and scan it as planned just to make sure before moving to the next one. This is too important not to check it twice. Places, people."
They moved away from the table, and David resumed his position at Rabbit's head. His hands were visibly trembling.

"You sure about this?" The Spine asked as he stepped back out of range of Rabbit's peripheral vision.

"Yeah... there's no one else who even looks familiar to her at this point. If the old memories are locked, I'll be fine. Right?"

He sounded pleading instead of confident. The Spine smiled as reassuringly as he could. He knew damned well David, like so many others in the household, was struggling with a feeling of responsibility for Rabbit's meltdown. For once, The Spine himself was not similarly burdened. He was worried about her, to be sure. But there was no one step in the series of events that had led to this moment, no single factor, that stood out from the rest to lay blame more prominently on any one participant. No one had set out to harm her. No one had done her more harm than she'd done herself. No one had, in fact, behaved more recklessly than anyone else. And absolutely no one had seen this coming. It was what it was.

"Right," he said firmly. "And I'm here, alright? Just like last time. If she gets upset, just get away and let us handle it."

"Got it," David gulped.

"And thank you, David, for doing this."

"No problem. I mean... y'know." He shrugged. "Ready, Peter."

Peter clicked the switch.

Gears whirred into motion, steam hissed from facial vents. Blue and green light flickered beneath shuttered photoreceptors.

Rabbit was awake.

Apparatus softly blipped and pinged in the dimness of the lab. Familiar... it was always a little different, but there were always the blips.

He could see light through the seams of his eyelids. A different pattern than before... Pappy must have installed new ones. Rabbit was used to adjustments by now, but he usually had some warning. Oh, well. Pappy knew best.

He opened his eyes.

"Rabbit... um... do you..."

"Hi, Pappy."

"Oh!" He smiled. "Good. How are you feeling, Rabbit?"

"I'm... okay..." He felt a little different; not bad, but different.

"Just okay?"

"Sure... how are you, Pappy?" he asked quickly. Ma had taught him that this was polite.
"Oh... I'm fine, Rabbit," Pappy said softly. "I'd like you to tell me something..."

"You sure sound funny, though, Pappy... kinda shaky an' yehr voice is deeper..."

"Oh, I... have a cold."

"P-P-Poor Pappy. Did Ma m-make ya some soup?"

"Soup?" Pappy looked up. "Yes, Rabbit. She made me some soup."

"You should go to b-b-bed or ya might get punamonia..."

"I might get what? Oh! No, I'm feeling much better. My voice just sounds different."

"Yes, real different. Ya don't even have a accent anymore."

"Accent?"

He looked up again. Rabbit tried to look, too.

"Why's my head stuck, Pappy?" Rabbit asked, wriggling.

"Rabbit, stop!" Pappy barked, gripping the restraints.

Rabbit gasped. His chin trembled. "I'm sorry, P-P-Pappy!" he squeaked.

Pappy took a step backward. "Oh... oh, crap..."

Rabbit gasped. Pappy had said a bad word!

He looked up again and returned to Rabbit's side. "No... I'm sorry, Rabbit," he said, sounding a little nervous. "I shouldn't have yelled. You just need to hold still, okay? It's very important that you not move your head."

"Am I sick?" Rabbit asked tremulously.

"No... no, but you've had an accident."

"Did I break my eyes?"

"What?"

"Ya put in new shutters..."

"Oh! Um, no... those are just upgrades."

"Upgrades?" Rabbit asked, confused.

"Yeah... y'know, newer ones."

He was confused. They'd up-graded the driveway last month with cement to make it easier for the carriage to get up the hill from the street. It didn't compute and he didn't know what to say.

"They're better shutters, okay?" Pappy said when he didn't respond.

"But... what's wrong with me, Pappy?" Rabbit begged.
Pappy looked up again. He took a deep breath. "Some time has passed and you've lost some memories. I can't tell you more yet. Okay? Just do as I ask and you'll be alright."

"I'm scared, Pappy..." Rabbit whispered, his hands twitching.

Pappy took Rabbit's hand and held it firmly. "I know, Rabbit. It's alright to be scared. It's going to be okay, though. Do you understand?"

"Uh-huh..."

"Now I need to to tell me what you last remember. What's your most recent memory before you woke up?"

"I, uh... did some gardening... an' M-Ma said I shoulda left tha roses alone 'cause they're p-pretty an' she likes 'em," Rabbit said faintly. "Then she said she wasn't mad an' to-to-told me to go to my room and think about what I'd done but I was tired..."

"Oh. That's alright, Rabbit. Can you tell me the date?"

"Sure... it's May 8, 1897."

"Good. Thank you. Now, I'm going to put you into a kind of stasis. You'll be sort of awake but you won't remember it later. It's so I can fix your memories. Alright?"

"Alright, Pappy," he whispered. "Will ya hold my hand while I'm asleep?"

"Oh... um... yes, Rabbit. I will."

"Thanks, Pappy. I love you."

Pappy pinked slightly. "I... um... love you, too, Rabbit. Powering down now..."

"What's..."

Everything went dark.

"Nicely done," Wanda said.

David swabbed his brow with his sleeve. "Accent?" he asked as Upgrade stepped forward with The Jon to begin scanning the chip.

"It was subtle," Wanda said. "I didn't even remember it, but now that I think of it, some of his vowels were a bit broad. Like something in New England. Think of those old newsreels. I think it was the showman in him, honestly."

"Ah. Well, if there's a recording of it, I'd like to at least try to imitate it next time."

"I think I heard something like it in a movie recently... I'll go look it up."

"I could imitate it for you, if it would help," The Spine murmured. His mouth twitched into a smile. "You don't have to keep holding her hand, David."

"I know but... I promised..."
Wanda chuckled and patted his shoulder before leaving the lab. Bunny looked at The Spine and grinned. David liked to give the impression of being made of tough stuff but in truth he was as soft as he looked.

"The lock is holding fine, but... I... I'd like you to scan the rest, Jonny," Upgrade whispered. "The last one I saw was Col. Walter reading a telegram about Thaddeus Becile."

"Of course," he murmured.

Jon sat on the lab stool by Rabbit's head. The Spine assumed at first that he was scanning the chip.

"Jonny?" Upgrade whispered.

Jon trembled. Oil trickled from his eyes as he grimaced and breathed, "I'm sorry..."

"He's afraid," Upgrade murmured.

The Spine and Hatchworth stepped forward at the same time. They looked at each other.

"I have this one," Hatchworth said placidly. "I'm the only one who has already seen the elephant trample Rabbit. I do not wish for anyone else to have to see it."

"But you'll be seeing it from the inside, Hatchy!" Jon gasped.

"I know. If the memories are intact, and I almost hope they are not, I will see my dear sister hurt and feel her pain." He sighed and looked down. "As I deserve."

"Hatchy... No, you don't..." The Spine faltered. "And you know you can scan it without reliving it..."

Hatchworth looked up, staring him in the eye. Let me do this.

The Spine sighed. "Of course. I can see you're determined and I know you can handle it. But you don't deserve it and you damned well know it."

A brief look of pain crossed Hatchworth's face. He touched his chest as though in salute and The Spine raised an eyebrow, looking at Jon.

Jon, what's going on here? I know he blames himself, but why?

She hit her head on his chest. Peter thinks that's when the coolant tube popped loose.

Oh, dear. But of course, Hatchworth couldn't be held responsible for that.

He shouldn't be. But he thinks he was too hard on her all day. Even though she did a bad thing. That's Hatchy.

Weird.

Hatchworth stepped up to the table, placed one hand on Rabbit's shoulder, and began the scan. As his eyes dimmed, The Spine shook his head and walked over to sit with Sunshine and Dave, who were having a snack at the far end of the lab. Bree strolled over to join them.

"Jon tells me Rabbit hit her head on Hatchworth? When did that happen?"

"Remember when they were fighting over the microphone?" Dave said.
"Well, yeah. They were being idiots. I expect nothing less."

"Yeah, well, while they were being idiots she headbutted him in the chest. Peter said there's actually a dent in the brass."

"But wasn't she wearing that big hat?" Bree asked.

"No. She left it at the table when she went to sing," The Spine sighed. "It doesn't fit as well over a wig, apparently."

"But why does Hatchworth blame himself?" she asked. "It was an accident!"

"I know. She was being typical Rabbit," The Spine agreed.

"Yeah."

"Hatchworth is fascinating," Sunshine said. "He seems so stoic, enough so that he got through all those years in the vault. But from what I keep hearing, his feelings run incredibly deep."

"I guess..." The Spine murmured. "I can't get the measure of Hatchy. I never could. Sure, he has feelings. But why does he hide it so much?"

"Well, for that matter, why do you, Dad?" Dave chuckled.

"Now really..."


The humans laughed. The Spine sighed.

"You have self-control, both of you," she said. "And I know both of you are adjusting to a modern world where men can express their feelings."

"I express my feelings..." The Spine grumbled.

"I know, baby. But Hatchy is still struggling with his. I've seen a few incidents when he seemed to be at a loss."

"What? Like what?" Dave asked.

"Well..." she breathed, leaning in and lowering her voice, "pretty sure he's in love."

"Oh, come on..." The Spine groaned.

"Oh, stop. I mean it."

"With whom?" he asked incredulously.

"Have you seen Chelsea's sister? The new intern?"

"That tiny girl?"

"She's small, yes. So anyway, yeah. They've been flirting a little bit and I even heard Hatchy sigh like a Disney prince once when she smiled at him from across the room."

"Oh, how cute!" Sunshine cooed.
The Spine shook his head. He wasn't willing to call out his wife publicly, but he was sure she was just being a romantic. The idea of Hatchy being in love!

"So yeah... the two of you are just more reserved than the others. It doesn't mean you don't have feelings. They just aren't worn on your sleeve."

"I just think it's best to project an air of outward calm, that's all," The Spine murmured, feeling rather attacked.

"I know, baby." Bree leaned down and kissed him. "Just don't ever hide your feelings from me," she whispered before returning to the work table.

He grinned as he watched her walk away.

"Good choice, Dad," Dave chuckled.

"Yeah..." he breathed.

Half an hour later, they put in the second chip. Rabbit powered on and looked up at David.

"Heya, Pappy... how'd I get in here?"

"Oh, um..."

"'Cause I was playin' jacks with Tha Jon an' I was winnin' and That Spine he came outside and said that was a little girls' game an-an-an' I says ta him I says-"

"Rabbit?" David interrupted loudly.

"Huh?"

"Do you remember once I asked you what your last memory was?"

"Yeah, Pappy. A long time ago."

"Well, what is it now?"

"I... I came in from winnin' at jacks 'cause Tha Spine kept botherin' us and it was time to learn ta p-p-p-play the accordion with Jimmy... That swell new big one..."

"Oh. What year is it?"

"Oh, I know that one! It's aught-two! That's ho-ho-how ya say it, huh, Pappy?"

David, clearly perplexed, looked at Wanda. After she nodded, he murmured, "Yes, that's exactly right, Rabbit. Very good."

Rabbit grinned.

"I need you to go into stasis now, Rabbit. So I can finish checking things."

"Okay."

Peter triggered the program. "Alright," he said. "She's five years old and her core personality is intact, providing the scan clears this chip."
"Who's Jimmy?" David asked.

"One of our old teachers," Jon said. "Pappy may have programmed us to play music, but that didn't mean we were good. Jimmy taught me to dance, too!"

"Oh... I didn't know you all needed to be taught. I thought it was programmed into you or something."

"There's a lot you don't know," Hatchworth commented. "I've noticed. You're remarkably ignorant for your age. But you are learning rapidly, my good man."

He clapped David on the shoulder and beamed with the air of one certain he had said precisely the right thing.

"Gee. Thanks," David said dryly.

Jon snickered and scanned the chip.

"Sure, I remember ya askin' me about tha la-la-last thing I remember," Rabbit said. "Say... am I sick again?"

They were on the third chip. David smiled down at her and Peter was impressed at his resemblance to Col. Walter... or his portrait, at least. Indeed, David was doing a stellar job acting the part and had even adopted the inflection The Spine had demonstrated for him.

"You're still having some trouble with your memories. So I need to check from time to time. Alright?" David said.

"Sure, Pappy. So ya wa-wa-wanna know my last memory before ya woke me up? Well, that's funny because Spine, he was g-gonna ask ya if he could get a ne-ne-ne-new hat, an' I told him I wanted his old one, an' he says to me, he says I can't have it because my head is too small so I told him..."

"Could you tell me what year it is, maybe?" David asked desperately.

"Sure! 1908. I know 'cause Jonny, he p-p-painted it on the wall in tha hallway! Remember, Pappy?" Rabbit snickered. "Remember how Ma yelled and-and-and Jon tried ta run and he ran into Tha Spine and got paint all over him an' ya had ta scrub it off his eyes with a toothbrush? What a b-b-bonehead!"

"Oh... yeah, that was..."

"He looked so funny! An' then while you was down in tha lab doin' that, Pappy... Jon hid in tha bathtub an' Ma couldn't find him but then I figured out where he was only he wouldn't come out so we pretended tha house was on fire... well, I pretended anyhow..."

"You pretended the house was on fire..." David said blankly.

"Yeah, but it wasn't. An' he didn't believe me so I had ta burn so-so-somethin' small ta trick him. We didn't even need them guest towels anyhow... So Tha Jon, he got scared an' ran outside only his clothes was on fire 'cause of all tha p-p-p-paint and he ran around screamin' an' I tried ta tell him he was ma-ma-makin' it worse but I couldn't stop la-la-laughin' 'cause his wig burned an' he was bald like me! Don't you remember?"
"Um... yeah, so... Rabbit, I'm going to put you into stasis again. Just like last time."

"Sure, Papps!" Rabbit snorted, still giggling.

Peter triggered stasis. Jon, walking up beside Upgrade, was wearing a rare scowl.

"Little shi-" David began.

Wanda cleared her throat. "It's tasteless to kick someone when she's down, David..."

David shook his head.

"We were just as obnoxious at eleven," Bunny whispered.

"Obnoxious, yeah. But we never set the bathroom on fire. Or each other!"

Jon stuck out his lip and sighed. Upgrade scanned the chip and came out of it with her eyes wide.

"Pappy hasn't told me half of the nonsense she pulled as a child..." she breathed.

"Any damage?" Peter asked.

"No interruptions in the chronology, no. But damage? Honestly, I don't know how Col. Walter could afford all the repairs."

Peter chuckled softly. Upgrade put her arm around The Jon and rested her head on his shoulder. He still appeared to be fairly angry... as far as anyone could tell, considering his usually placid nature.

"Why power Rabbit on each time if you're just going to scan?" Chelsea asked, handing Peter the tweezers holding the next chip.

"I want to make sure she's able to reintegrate the data in order and that it links with previous chips in the correct order. And the easiest way to do that is to ask her."

"And it's fun," Bunny whispered, grinning.

"I'm finding out so many dirty secrets," Upgrade agreed. "I don't want any after Pappy meets Mama. But the childhood memories are delightful. Oh, except when Pappy picked on Jonny. Oh, and... it was awful sad when Uncle Spine hurt the kitten."

"The what?"

"It was in the journals, too..." Peter said. "He hurt a kitten when he was new. Didn't understand, like a toddler. Only way too strong to be holding kittens. So I he hurt it accidentally and Iris screamed and scared him."

"He was crying," sighed Upgrade sadly. "He hid under the shed and cried for the first time ever."

"Oh!" gasped Chelsea, her hand on her throat. "Poor thing!"

Peter glanced at The Spine, who was still sitting with Dave and Sunshine. He was looking at them sidelong.

"Sorry, Spine," he called.

The Spine waved his hand casually and looked back at his son.
"Oops... sometimes I forget about that hearing," Peter mumbled.
Rabbit, Inside and Out, pt 2

Chapter Summary

Rabbit's early adulthood emerges as the chips are restored. Most of the memories are intact so far... but it turns out that they aren't all pretty ones. Sibling robots clash as they look back on the struggles of the past through Rabbit's eyes.

Chapter Notes

This is remarkably fun.

When it came time to insert the fourth chip, The Spine said it was his turn to scan and sat on the stool close to Rabbit's head. His facial hardware hadn't changed so very much since the Great War that he couldn't let Rabbit see him now. Col. Walter had refined them all considerably for military service.

"If I remember right, Rabbit will have one chip with previous damage from a chemical attack," he told Peter reluctantly.

"Ah... that explains this one," Bree said, holding up a slightly melted chip with the tweezers. "You can tell the damage isn't new. Did you get any chemical damage, baby?"

"No... I was built more securely, and I was further up the line. Rabbit got the worst of everything because she was sort of experimental and Pappy didn't expect chemical warfare, and the bomb contained phosgene. Worse than mustard gas."

"History pisses me off," she murmured. "So is this one next?"

"The gas attack happened in 1915... I assume so..." he said uncertainly. "Most likely."

"Col. Walter must have improved at creating the chips," Peter said. "These hold a lot more information than the first."

"They were up to about seven or eight years at that point. She never accepted anything longer than ten years, and only then because Qwerty... I mean, Upgrade... created them to be compatible with the old ones. Pappy gave me a set of compact thirty year chips before he passed on, but he said they wouldn't work for Rabbit."

"If I can, Spine, I'll see if I can come up with better ones and transfer her data. If she lets me. Or she won't have room for more before long. Maybe once I point that out she'll cooperate."

"Good luck. You know the success your father had in making us compatible with modern technology."

"I'll just use Col. Walter's tech. I understand it well enough. Alright... reluctantly putting this one in. What is she likely to remember at the point that this one was damaged, Spine?"
"I don't know exactly... I had Hatchworth pull one of my spares and put it into her head to keep her running because her working chip was melted at the top and her backup chip was half-dissolved. We were in a field hospital with our men, just trying to get back to active duty. Rabbit didn't give an exact date when we powered him... um, her, on. She gave me to believe she'd lost about six months, though."

"Alright. Well... no more putting it off. You're in for the entire first world war, I assume?"

"I think I should scan all of it, yes."

He didn't want to. Not at all. But he didn't want Jon to have to do it, and Hatchworth would probably make sure he felt every blow. He'd already asked Sunshine if she could speak with Hatchy...

The chip was in. Rabbit opened her eyes, took one look at David, and gasped, "What the f***!"

There was a muffled snort of laughter somewhere on the far side of the lab.

"Oh!" she cried. "Sorry, Pappy!"

David's cheek twitched but he didn't smile. The Spine nodded. Soldier Rabbit. Of course she'd talk that way. Rabbit would be about eighteen years old, thoroughly masculine, and have already been at war for a year, since they had been sent over to join British forces as soon as the fighting began... along with the always impetuous Peter III, who had snuck out one night, worked his way across the country and the Atlantic Ocean, and enlisted in the British Army. And all of them had come back with some very colorful vocabularies, but Rabbit's had been especially amusing... besides the massive amounts of vulgarity, they'd all started using British soldier slang, but when Rabbit had done so, her usual New Jersey twang was briefly replaced with an unmistakable British accent.

"It's alright, Rabbit. I'm an adult," David assured her.

"But Pappy! How'd I get back here? Spine?" Her eyes rolled to the side. "Yehr outta uniform!"

"Rabbit, it's okay," Spine murmured, heart, figuratively, in his throat. "It's not what you think..."

"And Pappy looks so young..." she said, looking up at David.

The Spine sighed. They'd have to explain, sooner or later.


"Oh, yeah..."

"So what do you last remember?"

"Well... I think it was... yeah... we got hit by a whizzbang.... right in the trench, dead center... I got blown straight to blazes. Landed... landed in no man's land and had ta crawl back in tha dark... Got a laugh, though... Ginger said I flew like a bird but George said it was more like a clay pigeon."

David was clearly fighting laughter once more... she had been fading in and out of a British accent through the entire account. Rabbit, oblivious as usual, snickered cautiously and stopped. She moved her leg experimentally.

"Huh... would ye take a dekko at that... Did ya fix my leg, Pappy?"

"Dekko?" David asked, looking at The Spine. "I mean... was your leg hurt?"
"Yeah! It was off, startin' at tha kn-kn-knee... dragged it back by tha bootlaces... took all night an' 'urt like bleedin' 'ell... oh, sorry..."

David did chuckle this time... even as he nonchalantly rubbed at his eye. "It's alright."

"Thought laughin' wou-wou-would make it hurt... turns out I'm in tha pink. Guess I did hit the ground pretty hard."

"What year is it, Rabbit?"

"Don't you know?"

"I want to make sure you do. What year?"

"1914... no wait... 1915... sorry... I think... yeah, 1914. My clock got smacked around a little."

"What day, Rabbit?"

"Oh, uh... November 14th."

"That's consistent with what I remember," The Spine murmured.


"Do I get ta stay now, Pappy?"

"What?" David asked, startled.

"An' the others? Is tha wa-wa-war over?"

David looked at The Spine, who closed his eyes and sighed.

"Rabbit," The Spine said gently. "We have to go back. The war is still on."

Rabbit blinked rapidly up at the ceiling. "Bugger," she muttered in a low voice.

"I know. But Jon and Hatchworth are still there and people are getting hurt... all your mates, civilians, kids... Innocent people copping a packet every day. They need us. Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember," Rabbit whispered, voice thick with emotion. "We won't fail 'em, Spine."

"Good man," The Spine said as sincerely as he could manage, considering.

"F*** Kaiser Bill," Rabbit said stoutly.

She didn't even try to apologize this time.

The Spine smiled sadly. "F*** Kaiser Bill," he replied, and he was sure he heard a gasp and a giggle from somewhere behind him. "See you in the trenches."

Rabbit reached for The Spine. They clasped hands.

"In the trenches, brother," Rabbit said fervently.

Peter activated the utility and Rabbit's eyes fixed in place.

"I don't get it. Every time she puts on a British accent on stage, it's ridiculously bad," David said.
"But right then she sounded like freaking Doctor Who."

"Which one?" asked Breanna.

A muffled sob sounded beside The Spine.

"Poor Pappy..." whispered Upgrade.

The Spine put his arm around her and activated the scan.

He didn't waste time. He set the sequences at their fastest setting and watched the chronometer, looking for gaps.

"Clean, Peter. No new damage," he said after a few minutes.

"Good. Alright, the next one. You scanning that, too?"

"Yes. I still think I should."

"Got it." Peter snapped the chip into place. "Oh, David? You can go change. Rabbit's already noticed how young you are so I think the Col. Walter act is done."

"I could wear some makeup or something..." David said hesitantly.

"It's okay. She accepted The Spine last time so he can do the interviews."

"Alright."

"Powering on," Peter said as David walked away, unbuttoning his high collar.

There was a soft hum from Rabbit's systems.

"Oh, hey, Spine. Y-y-you gettin' oiled, too?" she said almost immediately.

"No, I just got..."

"Yeah, right. Yehr always oiled."

Rabbit snickered softly.

"What is it?"

"It sounded like I said you we-we-were always boiled."

"Thank you," he said dryly. "Boiled" was old slang for drunk, which made exactly no sense. "Rabbit, Pappy asked me to check your chronometer."

"Check yehr own, Ethel!" Rabbit snickered. "And while y-yehr at it, check yehr own ethyl."

"We don't run off of..."

Rabbit was roaring with laughter. The Spine rolled his eyes. Yes, it was all coming back to him.

Of course, he hadn't exactly forgotten... but he'd become so accustomed to the status quo that he'd let slip the recollection that there was ever a time that Rabbit hadn't been trying to get his goat. But there had been, long ago, before the first world war. After the war was another story.
And here it was, just as he remembered; a particular part of their lives when Rabbit went from protective playmate to thoroughly obnoxious older brother. The whole world had gotten silly, and Rabbit had gotten sillier, especially after performing for several months in the same theaters as the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, and Eddie Cantor.

At the time, he'd considered it disgraceful for Rabbit to be so flip after such a grim war. In retrospect, he saw that she needed the escape after all she'd seen... and done.

"Say... ya go-go-gonna see that Harold Lloyd show with us tomorrow?" Rabbit asked abruptly. "It's one of them long ones! Looks like a s-swell picture, though."

The Spine thought quickly. Rabbit had refused to ever give him a straight answer at this point in her life. The more he tried to get her to tell him the date, the more elaborately she would dodge the question. But she also had the attention span of a wind sock, so his failure to push for the information had resulted in her handing him the opportunity to get it without her cooperation.

"Harold Lloyd show?" The Spine asked casually.

"Yeah... it's... wha-what's it called... Mr. Jack or somethin'."

"Dr. Jack?"

"Yeah, sure. Sounds right."

"You sure it's a long picture?"

"Y-Y-Yeah, I'm sure it's a long p-p-p-picture!" Rabbit snapped.

"Oh."

If it was "Dr. Jack" then he knew what year it was. But he had to be sure.

"I'll go if you promise to behave better than last time."

"Last time? I was a l-l-little angel last time!"

"I mean when we saw that Chaplin picture."

"What? Which one?"

"The Kid."

"What? You talkin' about when they had that crummy pi-pi-pianah player? She shouldn't even work in a movie house!"

"Still, throwing peanuts off the balcony at her just because she played 'Waltz Me Around Again, Willie' while they were taking the boy away..."

"Hey, that's why they call it tha pe-pe-peanut gallery!"

"That's no excuse. You made her cry..."

"Yeah, ancient history. Wa-water under that bridge. Whole year ago," Rabbit grumbled. "And she was-was ruinin' tha mood."

"Uh-huh. Well, Pappy's coming in to do your maintenance so I'm shutting you off."
"What?" Rabbit cried indignantly.

Peter activated the scan and Rabbit went still, mid-shout. Bunny, snickering faintly, closed Rabbit's mouth.

"1922," The Spine said calmly. "That's the end date."

"Thanks," Peter said. "By the way... Was it a swell picture?"

"Yes... well, it was alright."

Bunny raised an eyebrow and signed, "I don't know about the Harold Lloyd movie, but The Kid is a classic. It's considered one of the best films ever made."

"Oh, you've seen his movies?" Peter asked.

"Well, yeah. You haven't?"

"I... no. I haven't."

"Damn, Peter. We need to attend to that. Also Buster Keaton. He's my favorite..."

They launched into a conversation in sign, since there was a hum of conversation from the other side of the room. The Spine smiled just a little. It was good to know people still watched those films.

"Scanning now," he murmured.

He started before he could change his mind. The end of the chip might have seen Rabbit excited to go to the movies, but the first day in that sequence was one The Spine would never forget... the day they'd managed to reactivate her in a field hospital near Ypres, Belgium.

They'd been in different regiments for the first time. Just a few weeks into their separation, he'd been called in with The Jon to haul wounded from the trenches at Ypres, Rabbit among them. The difference was that the humans were incapacitated, but Rabbit was completely shut down.

He'd done his best to blot it out, even going so far as to put a few of the memories in his special file. But he hadn't allowed himself to forget the sight of Rabbit, laid out as though dead by her mates, among their scattered forms. The phosgene gas had a delayed effect on humans... many would later die. But Rabbit? She'd collapsed directly after the battle while trying to assist a soldier struggling for air.

When they couldn't power her back on, they had folded her hands over her chest and gone on with trying to catch their breath. Most were unconscious by the time he and Jon arrived. But while they showed burns and damage from the caustic chemicals, Rabbit appeared undamaged outside of a bit of corrosion on her plating... until they cleaned off the chemicals in the field hospital and opened her head to determine the cause... and found the damage.

He'd feared for just a little while that she was lost, but Rabbit, by her reckoning after the fact, had only lost about six months. He'd been so afraid at the time, though... sure that Rabbit was gone. When they'd inserted the fresh chip and Rabbit had woken, barely having forgotten anything, his relief had been overwhelming. He didn't grudge the wounded soldiers on their cots around them the chuckle they got from seeing a robot sink into a chair and sob like a child. It wasn't a cruel chuckle. Many of them had been watching their efforts, and some knew them from the trenches.
And so it was that when they had told him, that very day, that Rabbit had lost some of her memory... he'd barely managed to keep from locking it away, too. What if this time, his fears were true?

But the chip was complete, as he'd suspected. It was almost a shame. Rabbit was lucky to have forgotten at least some of the time she spent in the desperation of the trenches at Ypres.

"All clear, Peter," he said at last.

"Good... look, I think we all need a rest, okay? She'll remain in stasis as long as we need. I'm sure I can get a few people to stay here and keep an eye on things."

"I will," David said sleepily from one of the cots, waving one long arm.

"How can you keep watch if you're asleep?" Peter murmured.

David grunted something unintelligible. Bunny shook her head.

"I was thinking more of automatons, actually," Peter clarified.

"I could..." The Spine began.

"Nope. You and Bree just got back," Wanda said, looking up from her lab notes. "Go to your room."

"Now, really..." The Spine objected.

"Or at least find some food or a sofa or walk in the garden or something. Just get out of this lab, you've been in here all afternoon."

"Very right," Peter said.

"You too, boy," Wanda added sternly.

"Oh! You don't have to tell me, Aunt Wanda," Peter chuckled. He was already holding Bunny's hand.

The Spine sighed. He'd intended to stay in the lab until the work was done, as Bree had said. But he looked at her now and saw the strain in her face. It had been only a few chips so far, but it had taken hours to complete the work they'd done.

He stood and held out his hand and she smiled and took it. As they walked out, he whispered, "I don't think I can... y'know... I don't think I can relax enough to make love."

"I never mentioned it."

"I know. But I was thinking it."

"Oh!" she chuckled. "Well, you're right. Not right now. I just need to eat something and get some sleep."

"Soon, though..."

"Damn right."
"By my reckoning, this chip should go to around 1930 at the latest," Peter said the next morning.

Bunny brushed past him after handing him the tweezers. The Spine saw them exchange a significant look. Bunny's cheeks were pink, but then, they had been since she'd arrived with Peter. They'd both come in just a little late, slightly disheveled, and he had to assume that they had... well, that unlike The Spine, they hadn't had any trouble relaxing.

He was glad, but he was also wanted them to stay focused on the work.

"Spine? You got this one?" Peter asked.

"Hm? Yes."

Rabbit was activated.

"Huh. Where's Pappy?" she grunted.

"He'll be in soon."

"Fine. Every time I wake up like this, ya ask me what y-y-year it is. Well, it's 1929. G'night."

Rabbit shut down. The Spine sighed.

"Was this after the Honeybee?" Peter asked, bewildered. "I thought..."

"That was 1933. Yes. But before that, she and I had grown apart somewhat."

"Sorry to hear that. Any particular reason? Or would you rather not talk about it?"

"I... think it was because she was getting more and more silly, where I was more and more serious..."

"You were too perfect."

"What?"

Jon, who had strolled up during the conversation, smiled kindly. "You were too perfect, Spine. Always right, all tall and handsome and all tha girls liked you."

"I wasn't always right... Oh. That kind of always right..." The Spine huffed. "I just... felt like I had everything figured out at that age. Okay? I was sure I had all the answers."

"I know. And it pissed Rabbit off."

"Oh."

"You were pretty smart. But Rabbit had to do things her own way. You know that."

"Yeah."

"Well, this is all very friendly but we need her in stasis, not shut down," Peter said. "Powering her on. Talk fast, Spine."

"Rabbit, we need you in stasis for the scan!" he said abruptly.


She promptly went into stasis.
"Oh..." Peter said. "Good."

The Spine rose and turned away.

"I think I changed my mind about scanning this one," he muttered.

"Got it," Jon said pleasantly, taking his seat.

Of course, The Spine thought as he walked away. Jon doubtless had that in mind when he walked up in the first place.

"What about this one, Spine? Are you up for scanning it?" Peter asked as they prepared the next chip.

"I think I should. There's going to be some issues toward the end of the time range."

"The Honeybee demonstration, I assume. Yeah. You think she'll shut herself off or has it been long enough?"

"I think it's a toss up," The Spine murmured. "We have a good chance, though. And it's not like we have a choice."

"Technically we could put in two chips this time. But I feel more secure knowing each one is connecting and if something glitches we'd have to figure out which one..."

"And that's the problem. Yes. So let's go ahead and do this."

Hatchworth stepped forward. "I could scan this one, The Spine..."

"You sure?"

"Yes, indeed. I would like to sit by her for one more time before she enters the period when I am gone. And as I recall, Rabbit was still not very fond of you at the time, as The Jon has indicated."

"We had some bad patches but we got along just fine, Hatchy!" he grumbled.

Hatchworth gave him a very skeptical look.

"Sometimes!" The Spine added irritably.

"And sometimes Rabbit punched and kicked walls because you didn't know when to shut the f*** up."

"Hatchy!" The Jon cried from across the lab.

"More than once," Hatchworth said to no one in particular.

The Spine scowled at the far wall.

"So I remember, that is," Hatchworth said benignly.

Silence.

"I also seem to recall once that you shot your mouth off and she hauled off and socked you in the jaw..."
"And broke her hand," The Spine muttered.

"Scarcely the point since she is the one on that table and requires the tenderest of care at this fragile time and so does not need you pissing her off..."

"Fine!" The Spine snapped, walking away. "What the hell is wrong with everyone all of a sudden?"

"Excellent choice, my brother," Hatchworth called after him. "You have learned a lot since then..."

"Shut the f*** up, Hatchworth."

Hatchworth, apparently unperturbed by The Spine's simmering rage, turned back to Rabbit.

"Dammit to hell..." The Spine growled, sinking into a sofa in the back.

The Jon, not far away and reading a magazine, snickered down at the page. The Walter Workers and family members exchanged awkward smiles but remained prudently silent. No one was terribly surprised at The Spine's fury or even at his swearing. Siblings had that effect on each other.

"Ready, Peter," Hatchworth murmured.

Rabbit's eyes lit. She looked at Hatchworth, sighed, and looked away.

"Good morning, brother," Hatchworth murmured, adjusting his terms to Rabbit's expectations.

Rabbit looked back at him, one eyebrow raised.

"What is it? Are you feeling well?" Hatchy asked worriedly.

"Ya called me brother..."

"Yes I... oh, of course." He had adjusted for the gender but neglected to recall that he had resisted familial terms before going into the vault. "Yes, well... The Jon is so very attached to the idea that I thought I would try it a little."

"Oh... That's nice of ya..." Rabbit murmured dully. "I, uh... need a little more stasis. Tell Pappy ta wake me if he needs anything."

"But I have to ask you..."

Rabbit was in stasis.

"I should not have shilly-shallied about..."

"She was so full of life the last time we powered her on," Bree sighed.

"No longer. At least, not before I entered the vault. She improved but she was not the same."

"So try again?" Peter asked.

"Please."

Rabbit's eyes lit. She looked up at Hatchworth.

"Oh, hello. Pappy need something?"
"Information. What is the last thing you remember?"

Rabbit blinked. "Oh, no... it happened again..."

"What did?"

"I glitched again, didn't I? My memory. Pappy checked me in 1902, an' 1908, an' 1915, an' 1922... and 1929..." Rabbit's eyes widened. "Am I still broke?"

"Broke?"

"Y'know, from... f-f-f-from..."

Rabbit twitched sharply.

"Damn..." Hatchworth murmured.

"From the... the..." Rabbit grimaced as if in terrible pain. "It's... it's 1936, okay?" she rasped, her voice breaking on the last word. "I g-g-gotta sleep now..."

"Rabbit..." Hatchworth breathed.

"Honeybee..." Rabbit wheezed miserably, clenching her teeth as if in acute pain.

She let out one last agonized whimper and shut down. Hatchworth sighed and looked up. Matter Mistress Bunny was casually rubbing her eye.

"I know," Hatchworth breathed. "It is safe to assume her memories are, sadly, intact. I only wish I could tell her that she will see Honeybee again. But for all we know, she has forgotten that, too. Poor Rabbit... Honeybee was the love of her life. I dearly hope all memory of their marriage has not been lost."

Bunny gaped at him, her eyes suddenly welling with tears, and put her hand over her mouth. Hatchworth smiled sadly at her, but her response pleased him. So in love... that her heart breaks to think of love lost!

To Hatchworth's satisfaction, Peter pulled his wife into his arms to comfort her. How heartbroken the lad had been just a short time ago, and here he was at last, being the husband he was meant to be. No wonder Mistress Bunny's face had been slightly more florid than usual when she had entered the lab that morning, hand in hand with her husband. Clearly they had managed to work out how to properly engage in the sex.

He looked at Rabbit, and then glanced back at the sheet. Several chips remained, and many of these were the ones that showed visible damage. He hoped once more that not too much was lost.

"I'll take the next one, Peter."

The Jon sat beside Rabbit and braced himself. World War I had been a little too much for him, but he was determined to face World War II. Each other older automaton had handled scanning a war. It was his turn now.

"Are you sure, Jon?" The Spine asked. "I can handle this one..."

"No, Spine. I want to. You rest."
"But..." The Spine sighed and put his hand on Jon's shoulder. "You know there's a good chance this chip includes 1942," he finished softly.

"I know..." Jon whispered, looking at Rabbit. "I... I can do it, though. Okay?"

The Spine sighed and walked away as Jon straightened his hat and waited. Jon knew The Spine didn't want to do it, either.

The second Rabbit was powered on, she started to sing.

"Hitler has only got one ball, Göring has two and they're small..."

Rabbit trailed off and looked up at him.

"Huh. Wha-wha-whaddya know about that?" she muttered. "Let me guess. Ya wanna know what year it is."

"Say... that's a good guess!" Jon replied, beaming.

"Uh-huh. Are we back in San Diego? This look-looks like the same lab..."

"No! We're not..."

"Then where the hell are we?"

"Um... secret."

"Secret."

"Yeah, top secret! Like code breakers an' stuff! Underground lab! Totally secret!"

"What, like that place Churchill has he thinks n-n-n-nobody knows about?"

"The walk in humidor?"

"No, dummins... skip it. It's 1943."

"Oh!" gasped The Jon.

"Shouldn't it be?" Rabbit asked. "Ya seem surprised."

"Oh, I..."

"'Cause I got curious this time around. Don't want nobody playin' me for a sucker, see? So I checked to make sure everything was where it's supposed ta be. An' surprise, there's a new memory chip with all these little hospital stays recorded all in a pretty little row. They ain't in the chronology, see? An' if they ain't in tha chronology, may-may-maybe they're in a lab somewhere like maybe Berlin. Like maybe in someone else's secret underground bunker. An' maybe someone's gonna try an' learn a few military secrets by workin' their way into my trust!"

"Rabbit!" The Jon gasped.

"I wasn't activated yesterday, laughing boy! I dunno if you're really Tha Jon an' they caught ya an' reprogrammed ya or if yehr a look-alike tryin' to get me off my guard, but either way yehr barkin' up tha wrong t-t-t-tree! 'Cause I ain't talkin', see? "
"I... I'm not..."

"So you can go tell ye-ye-yehr buddy Adolph-"

Rabbit went into stasis.

"What?" gasped Jon.

Peter had switched on the scanning program. He patted The Jon on the shoulder.

"We got the year from her. No need to let her keep going when I could see she was upsetting you."

"Thanks!" squeaked The Jon, biting his lip.

She certainly had been! He sighed softly and scanned the chip. Nothing was missing, but it took all his courage to view the year their pappy had died. Rabbit had taken it very hard indeed, unsurprisingly. But by the time she'd gone back to the war, she was all business, keeping her pain to be let out when they arrived home later.

The Spine, on the other hand, had turned inside himself and refused to come out from the second Col. Walter had breathed his last breath until he fell in love with Marie in 1950. They could tell he hadn't locked the memories this time, and Rabbit had told Jon she couldn't help resenting the fact that even though The Spine remembered Pappy was dead, he refused to grieve. She and The Spine had once again developed a certain brotherly camaraderie in the war, but after their pappy's death, they were further apart than ever... or so The Spine had thought.

Little had he known of the times when his memories broke forth and Rabbit, with the others, had gathered around and held him as he sobbed over the memories of murdered human beings piled like firewood outside of the liberated concentration camps... which had often led to tears, at long last, over the loss of Col. Walter. Then the memories would be locked again, and they would all resume life as though nothing had happened... because, to The Spine, it hadn't.

And it had hurt.

It hurt now, too, but Jon had decided it would be easier for him than for The Spine, because The Spine had received too many reminders lately that once upon a time he and Rabbit had engaged in a sibling rivalry lasting over three decades. And despite or perhaps because of the fact that both sides had been at fault, Jon could see how much it hurt him. But it would be a painful shock at a time like this for him to find out how much Rabbit had felt it.

"Spine?" Jon murmured.

The Spine rose and walked back to the table. "Are you alright, Jon?"

"Yeah... she's okay... I mean this chip is, but... I need ta do tha next one, too."

"But, Jon... You know what happens in 1950..."

"I know! But you don't know what happens before that!"

"What?"

"Ya gotta trust me, Spine. Okay? An' when Rabbit's all better an' we get some time... ya gotta go back to reassimilating your memories. You stopped, right?"

"Well, yes... with Rabbit's depression and the wedding..."
"Yeah. You need ta remember some things. Just not right now."

"Alright... well, at least let me be the one she sees when she wakes. I can spare you that much."

"Aw, Spine..."

"I need to help, Jon. I can't keep sitting on the sidelines... I just can't!"

"But you know how she's gonna act..."

"I know. I was present when Two fitted the chip, and it was before the attack. I know what to expect."

"But that don't mean the chip started then! You don't even know..."

"I'd still rather do this, even if she does sneer at me. And you know Rabbit thought you weren't all there at the time, either..."

Jon frowned hard.

"...so it stands to reason that she might not take you very seriously, considering she didn't then."

"Neither did you!"

"Well, what else could we think?"

"You coulda thought something nice. You coulda given me the benefit of the doubt!"

"I know now, but how could we have known then? We didn't have the sophisticated wifi we have these days. And you acted like a six-year-old! Come to think of it..."

"Yeah, I know, I still do!" Jon grumbled. "Fine, you go ahead an' sit with her for a minute an' see how you like it!"

He stomped away a short distance and folded his arms, sulking. But he felt awful already. He'd been trying so hard to help and he didn't want to be angry, but he had to go and remind him of that! All the times they would sneak in and shut him down without even asking, and he always fell for it! But Rabbit was probably going to be mean to The Spine, unless it was after her core had been stolen, and then she'd cry...

The Jon heaved a deep sigh and waited.

"Spine?" Rabbit gasped upon waking. "Dammit ta hell... Ya know, last time... last time this happened I was in the middle of singin' a song in a bombed out bar in Sicily an' I thought I'd gotten captured an' it was a Nazi interrogation. Great. I yelled at Tha Jon..."

"I know..."

"You know?" Rabbit's expression hardened. "Huh. Of course you do. What don't you know?"

It was not a compliment. The sarcasm made that clear.

"You know the drill. What year is it?" The Spine said shortly.
"You ain't my boss, square."

The Spine sighed. "I really need to know, alright?"

"Where's Two?"

He clenched his teeth. Maybe he should have let Jon handle this after all...

"He's not here right now. He asked me to take care of it."

"The hell he did. He never asks you ta take care of anything 'cause yehr always hidin' in yehr closet playin' with yehr broom."

"I didn't even... don't even... Rabbit, what... ugh! I wouldn't need to lock myself in there if you didn't keep playing jokes on me in stasis!"

"Stasis? What happened to sleep? That's your latest fad, ain't it? Sayin' yehr goin' ta sleep?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Robuts don't sleep is what, ya dumb dodo!"

"You call it sleep, sometimes, too! And they would sleep if you didn't keep pranking them in the middle of the night!"

"Maybe you should quit askin' for it by squirtin' me with that spray bottle! 'Cause if ya do it again, I'm gonna set ya on fire!"

"Spine! Can ya help me get something down from tha top shelf?" called a voice.

The Spine, literally seething with rage, forced himself to get up and walk away. Jon stood at the far side of the room, outside of range of Rabbit's limited vision.

"Alright, you handle him! I mean her!" The Spine hissed. "I swear it's like no time has passed at all!"

"I know..." Jon sighed. "But Spine... After this, ya gotta open those memories. The ones from World War II and after that. They're important."

"What's so special about these, Jon?" he gritted.

"Because you tried to handle things alone, but we didn't let you. It's just like the others... it'll hurt at first but it'll be better in the end. Because Rabbit didn't hate ya like ya think she did. She was rude an' ya set each other off, but she loves you 'cause you're her little brother."

The Spine stared at him, his lips pressed together. Jon hopped up and gave him a big hug.

"Thank you, Jon," The Spine whispered. "I think I understand now. And... I'm sorry we treated you like an idiot for so long. Okay?"

Jon nodded, sniffling a little, and walked over to reason with Rabbit. The Spine remained where he was, listening absently.

"1950, of course. Say, where is Two, anyway?" Rabbit was saying.

"Oh... he had ta do some stuff. He'll be back later."
"Okay..."
"You can go back ta sleep now."

Silence.

"Rabbit?"

"Oh... yeah. Sleep..."

Silence. The Spine turned and looked. Rabbit's fists were clenched but her eyes were still lit.

"Are you okay?" Jon asked.

"Jonny... ya ever dream when ya go into stasis?"

"Sometimes..."

"Ya ever have a nightmare?"

"Yeah," Jon whispered.

Rabbit opened her mouth and closed it a couple of times before saying, "But... did ya ever ki-ki-kinda want to have it because it starts with something ya never thought you'd ever..."

She fell silent once more. The Spine stood, his boiler almost silent with apprehension. He wouldn't have even needed Rabbit to say what year it was, now. He knew down to the month, maybe the week.

The chip had filled up right after Rabbit had started having nightmares about Honeybee.

"Ever what?" Jon prompted gently.


Peter switched on the scan at a gesture from The Jon. The Spine at last dared to approach the table.

"It gets better for you after this," Jon said. "Ya both started to get along once you fell in love."

"Maybe it was because we were both hurting and I finally started say so," The Spine murmured.

The Jon looked up, surprised.

"You think I didn't realize how much she hated that? That I didn't seem to feel anything?" The Spine murmured. "Rabbit's passionate. I felt like I needed to balance that out. I think that's why I remember as much as I do of the war. I kept it in its place whenever I could manage it, and locked away what I couldn't handle. I do have access to the dates on the locked folder... I know there's a string of incidents during the 1940s. I know you all had to help me cope. But it still hurts to fight with her... and she has a knack for pushing every button until I do!"

"I know." Jon looked at his hands for a moment. "Spine, when you unlock some of tha stuff from tha war... some of it is pretty bad..."

"I know. I saw Auschwitz... and I tremble to think what else. I haven't been eager to re-assimilate those. But I will, alright? As soon as I dare."
"Okay."

Jon hugged him once more and turned to scan the chip.
"Who's up?" Peter asked after lunch.

"Me," The Spine said, approaching from the back of the room. Bree was just finishing her lunch and he'd enjoyed spending some time with her. But now... now he would see some of the highest and lowest points in Walter history. If the chip was intact...

For as anyone could see, there was visible damage.

"The connectors are intact, so hopefully all important parts are, too," Peter said as he inserted it. "The melting all appears to be at the top edge."

Rabbit powered on and looked up.

"Right on schedule, buddy! Guess I'm lucky it don't happen more often. Any particular reason this keeps happening?"

"Still trying to figure that out," The Spine lied as casually as possible. "Guess you're just falling apart, Rabbit."

Rabbit chuckled. "Yeah, I'm just a bag of nuts and bolts, ain't I?"

The Spine smiled, relieved. She was like a whole different person. It had only been a few years, really, but they'd made all the difference.

Rabbit's smile faded. "Oh... I hope Honey ain't too worried... let her know I came back online okay. Don't wanna scare her."

"She's not. So, what year is it?"

"I think it's 1956."

"You think?" he asked uneasily.

"Yeah... I kinda remember new year's for 1957 but maybe it was part of 1956? It's kinda choppy..."

"Oh... any other choppy memories?"

"Um... yeah... you have a baby... Yeah. Lily. Baby Lily. Right. Mary loves her but she's been kinda..."
down. And ya went to that fair and..."

Rabbit snickered.

"Yes, I know. I was the amazing mechanical marvel and posed in wrestling shorts," The Spine sighed.

"So that really happened? Holy cats, that's the best!" Rabbit crowed.

There was a sinking feeling somewhere in the vicinity of his boiler. "You weren't sure?"

"Well... I have this kinda picture of you in funny drawers in a big tent, and I remember Wanda sayin' w-w-we was gonna go there, but... huh... that's odd. Where's the rest?"

The Spine didn't know what to say. So here it was. Here it began...

"Funny..." Rabbit went on. "Musta had a little glitch in there. I don't even remember traveling to get there. Did we stay long?"

"A month," The Spine said weakly.

"You wore those for a month?" Rabbit laughed. "Now yehr pulling my le-le-le-leg..."

The Spine couldn't share her glee for multiple reasons. It wasn't the happiest memory for him anyway since Marie had gotten very jealous over the female attention... later admitting that she felt terribly unattractive post-birth and because he hadn't made love to her since the baby was born. He hadn't honestly known whether he should since there was no way of knowing whether she could become pregnant again. They later found out Lily had been a fluke and Marie was truly unable to carry another child to term. Neither much minded this, in the long run.

But more than that, hearing Rabbit delightedly reveling in memories she could barely recover mingled with moments of confusion had brought home to him why they were doing this. This moment had seemed unreal but had always been coming. Up until now, it had been relatively pleasant, reliving the past through Rabbit... even the hard times.

But now... things she once would have never let him live down were things she could barely recall... didn't even believe. And it was only going to get worse.

"Peter..." he whispered. "Please... I can't..."

"Can't what?" Rabbit asked blankly one second before the scan activated.

The Spine put his hands over his face for a moment, filling and emptying his bellows and trying to regain his composure. Bree put her arms around him and rested her head against his. He sighed and held her.

"It's started," he murmured thickly. "How can I do this? How will I tell her?"

"She didn't lose it entirely, Spine," Peter murmured. "Sounds like the memories are corrupted but she was able to recover them with prompting. They're still there but the connections are bad. I have some workarounds that might help. Then I can copy the data onto another chip and she'll remember the rest. Most likely. We should do it before we proceed, though."

"How long will that take?"

"Long enough for all of you to go and take some time to rest. Scan, send me your data, and leave the
The Spine was summoned three hours later to make sure the data was intact.

"Rabbit?" he murmured as she powered on. "How's that memory now?"

"It's..." She blinked. "It's back. Nice w-work, buddy."

"Oh..." he murmured.

She thought he'd done it! He'd almost forgotten that, for a while, he had been the Walter tech while he trained Wanda and Four. He'd needed their nimble fingers for certain tasks but The Spine had been the one to make sure everyone got their maintenance. Three was a big help for a while, but when it became clear that the mini-strokes were going to keep coming, he finally gave up and handed things over to people who wouldn't periodically forget how to speak and have to work just to get their faculties back.

"Spine?" Rabbit murmured.

"Hm?"

"Why didn't I remember? That ain't right. I forgot months and months of stuff. Pappy kept tellin' me I had trouble with my memories but that never happened before."

He'd expected this. Sooner or later, she was going to ask.

"That was different..." he responded.

"Is it getting worse?"

"What? No! No, it's not getting worse..."

"Is everything gonna be okay, though?"

"Sure it is!"

Rabbit stared him down.

"Well..." he faltered.

She looked up at him with a sober expression. He could hear her fear as she whispered, "You'd tell me if I was si-si-sick, right? You'd tell me if I was b-broken and couldn't be fixed?"

He took her twitching hand. "I'd tell you whatever I thought would keep you calm and you damned well know it," he replied. "I wouldn't lie... you know that, too. But I'd tell you what I thought was best for you."

"I know... so... tell me this. Am I gonna die?"

The Spine smiled his crooked smile and said sincerely, "No, Rabbit. You're going to be better than ever."

Rabbit's chin trembled. "Honest?"
The Spine smiled reassuringly. "I swear it."

"Okay..." Rabbit choked. "Ya don't l-l-lie s-so I'm gonna hold ya to that, Spine. But... Spine... if I'm sick... where's Honey?"

It just didn't let up. He thought longingly of being on the Queen Mary with his wife, completely ignorant of the current situation, and felt a sudden gratitude toward everyone who had lied to him for one precious week.

"She can't come in right now. Okay?" he said firmly.

Rabbit gave him the briefest look of terror and closed her eyes. "Okay," she whispered.

She suspected. She wasn't saying what exactly she feared or how she knew it, but he could guess.

Peter powered her off and inserted the next damaged chip. "The entry point is intact on this one but the next several chips were on the top of the side that got the most damage. Fortunately the newest one was inserted on the opposite side, so I'm hoping at least the most recent memories are there. That would make a huge difference. If she's forgotten she wanted a retrograde to female we're gonna have a huge dilemma to address."

"Will we? If it goes back far enough, she can just stay male," The Spine said. "At least, until she's well enough to learn the truth in a calmer manner..."

"She's still on female settings, baby," Bree reminded him as she handed over the chip. "She'll notice sooner or later."

"Ah..." he murmured.

"Exactly. She'll have dysphoria if we don't fix it, but we can't fix it because Rabbit needs to make the choice," Peter said. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We may never have to worry about it. Ready?"

Rabbit powered on. She stared at The Spine.

"What... what's... Spine... Sh-shouldn't it be later?"

"What?" The Spine asked worriedly.

"I'm here... I'm in this lab... that one chip is active, the one with all these on it! That means it ha-ha-happened again! You u-usually power me on after about seven or eight years but it's only b-b-been a coupla years! Spine! Is it happening more now?"

"What year is it now, Rabbit? You know how this works..." he stammered, fear rising.

"Oh... oh, okay... yeah, it's, uh... I think it's... 1961?"

He gave Peter the signal to put her into stasis. He preferred to warn her first, but he couldn't handle another round of panic as Rabbit once again asked why she was losing memories.

"Four put in a memory chip right before he'd left to train for his space flight and that was in 1962," he said quickly. "And it wasn't due to activate until 1964."

"Damn," Peter muttered. "Alright, take a breather. We'll see if we can pull any more data from the chip and try again in the morning."
Peter and the others had managed to pull a lot of data from the damaged chip and copy it to a fresh one, but not all. And he had gone on to do the same with the next few, which showed considerably more damage. Almost no data was salvageable from a few of them.

They put in the first restored chip the next morning and powered Rabbit on. She stared up at The Spine and grimaced.

"Spine... somethin' ain't right! I still can't remember that much..."

"I know," he breathed unhappily.

"It didn't work, did it?" she whispered. "Ya tried to fix me an' you couldn't..."

"Rabbit... it isn't quite like that. We haven't given up, alright?"

"That don't sound real hopeful..." she said tremulously.

"Look... let's just try and figure out what's missing. What is the latest year you can remember?"

"I... I remember some of 1964... We met some singers and... and Ho-Honey's been sick... I went and f-f-found her real father... Oh, man, am I glad I remember that! I re-remember Petes was gonna go-go-go into space, but..."

Uh-oh. He was almost getting used to the sudden sinking feeling. Almost.

"Spine..." she breathed, "there's a headstone in the c-c-cemetery for him! No, that can't be! That was his dream..."

"I'm sorry, but it's true," he sighed.

"What?"

"He was lost during the flight. He never came home."

"Oh..." Rabbit gasped. She blinked rapidly. "Well..." she quavered, "he... he's wh-where he wa-wa-wanted to be, r-r-right, Spine?"

"That's right," The Spine murmured, aching.

"What-about his girlfriend?"

"His what?"

"You didn't know he had a g-g-girlfriend? Y'know, Holly? Real pretty girl..."

"Oh! Holly... She, uh... she stayed away after that. Couldn't bear the reminders I guess."

"Poor kid," Rabbit sighed.

The Spine forced himself back onto the matter at hand. Rabbit had thrown him for a loop with her questions and he'd almost forgotten what he was supposed to do.

"Spine?" Rabbit asked, before he'd decided how to proceed.

"Hm?" The Spine asked blankly.
"What year is it really? I know it ain't 1964."

"Oh... Well..."

"Please... I know ya don't wanna scare me but I'm already pretty terrified. I need to know."

"Alright. Well... brace yourself for a shock." The Spine inhaled slowly and said, "It's 2013, Rabbit."

Rabbit was silent, eyes wide.

"I know. It's hard to take in..."

"Did I forget all-all of that?" cried Rabbit. "Everything since 1964?"

"No! We aren't done yet..."

"Oh!" she gasped. "Who's we? Wanda? Is Wanda helping?"

"Oh! Yes, Wanda is helping."

"Oh, but you said it was 2013, so there's another Walter maybe..."

"Peter VI actually... son of Peter V."

"Wow... Holy mackerel... Pete's just a kid now... I mean..."

"I know."

"Right. Well... Can't wait ta meet the new guy. And did Pete grow up alright?"

"Oh, well he's... Yeah, he grew up fine."

"Great. Good. So let's get this d-d-d-done. Yeah. Let's get this figured out. I wanna get back to Honey as s-soon as possible."

The Spine couldn't speak. Surely she remembered what Armand had told her about Honeybee? Then again, she remembered finding him, but was the memory complete?

"So what do we do?" Rabbit asked. "How do we f-f-f-fix it?"

"Rabbit..." he said hoarsely. "I... I don't know yet. Okay? We have to get more information first. Let's look at the next few memory chips and discuss it then."

"Okay bro. See you then."

Peter activated the scan mode and they looked at Rabbit in silence... Peter, Bunny, and Breanna standing near, The Spine on the lab stool, still, his hands over his face, not sure what to do now. Friends and family all around the lab shared their silence from where they sat, out of Rabbit's view, but close enough to hear the terrible hope in her voice, the blind trust she'd had in her brother, and in whatever Walter was alive, that everything would be okay.

"She thinks we can fix everything, Peter," The Spine whispered. "She thinks she's getting it all back. We can all share our memories but they won't be hers. It's like a human losing a limb and getting a fake one... We can't bring it back. She'll never be the same."

"But she's alive, Spine. She's herself, she knows you and the others and the ones who are dead. And
the most recent chip has no trace of damage. That one kicked in around 2007. So she's getting a lot back, and she'll remember what happened recently. All the really important things like your wedding and Hatchworth coming out of the vault and Upgrade's download and her transition.

"I know. But in between... more than forty years, Peter. Half of Lily's life, and her death. Armand, too, and Marie... All the good and bad times that made us all who we are now. She won't remember how many great things she's done, how much she's meant to us all... all the crap she's pulled... And... she'd want to... not to mention that she can't even remember Honeybee's death, or that she has a daughter. Yes, she'll remember it once the last chip is installed, but her own child's life... the part she had of it... is gone. She can only see it as an old film someone else recorded."

Upgrade had come up as he spoke and put her little arm around his shoulders the best she could.

"I think I have a little more help with that than you know, Unkie Spine," she whispered. "Some old files Mama left."

"That only goes so far, though..."

"I know. It hurts to know Pappy won't remember all those years after. She'll remember that I'm her baby, and that she loves me. But she won't remember the time we spent together.

"But she's still herself, like Peter said. And we can do this. We managed to save some of the memories from a couple of those chips, just a few. And maybe that will be enough. If not, then we'll have to make new memories."

The Spine put his hand over hers where it rested on his shoulder and looked down at Rabbit, sighing. "I know, sweetheart. I wasn't giving up. But for a moment, I just didn't see how I could face it."

"Well, maybe we should all rest up before taking on the final stages," Peter said. "It will mean inserting the chips I filled with the few intact memories and sorting through the contents, with and without Rabbit's help. It may not take long but it will take energy."

"Alright, Peter," The Spine murmured.

They wandered out of the lab in twos and threes. Dave and Sunshine were walking with Louise, matching her halting pace.

"Annie sent word that she hopes everything is going okay. Peter V has been under the weather lately so she hasn't been able to get away and see how we're doing," Louise told him as he fell into step beside her.

Breanna took his hand as he walked; he smiled down at her and kissed her fingers.

"What's wrong with him, Louise?" Breanna asked.

"She says it's a little flu but honestly... I think he's winding down."

"I hope not," The Spine sighed. "I can't say I haven't been expecting him to fade, considering his health, but I don't think I can face losing family right now, and Rabbit would be hurt if she couldn't say goodbye."

"But his memory has been on the blink for a while now, hasn't it?" Louise asked. "Would you want him to have to soldier on and suffer?"

"Not at all, Louise. I'm just going to miss him and I don't look forward to saying goodbye."

"Yeah. I hear ya, big guy. It's always hard when the old folks move on."

The darkly amusing part was that considering Louise's advanced years, he had been thinking the same thing about her.

The next day, they gathered in the lab for the final chips. Rabbit lay just as peaceful as ever, waiting for the news The Spine had been too afraid to give her. The Spine, in turn, waited to find out how bad the news would be.

There had been a little good news, however. Peter had come back to the lab for a few hours and managed to copy the data from the chips following the three worst ones. While much was lost from these as well, according to Peter they yielded far more data than the ones leading up to 1985. It would still be patchy, but she might remember enough that she wouldn't feel too lost.

"Did ya check the chips?" Rabbit asked upon waking.

"Don't you remember anything new?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh... um..." Rabbit fell silent.

"Rabbit?"

"A little... it's kind of a mess. Guess there wasn't much on that chip, huh? Only... Spine... that's weird... I remember this girl. A little blonde. I remember her bein' pregnant. An' then... she wasn't, she was gettin' m-m-married to some tall guy with a lot of hair. An' then she was pregnant again. Weird. An' there's this little dark haired girl... wait... that's gotta be Lily! She's grown up! When did that happen? Only... Spine... last time I was in tha cemetery..."

Her voice choked off. She looked up at The Spine with an expression that tore him up inside.

"Spine... oh, no... it can't be... Spine... How many more? How m-m-m-many m-more are gonna die, Spine?" she pleaded.

That did it. He saw that there was no more shielding her from the worst. She'd seen some of it already. Prolonging it was cruel, forcing her to wake to freshly restored half-memories that told her everyone she loved had died. It was time to tell all he knew.

"Rabbit..." he murmured, taking her hand, "you're going to find a lot of your memories confusing. I don't know if they even have dates on them anymore. A lot was lost. What you're remembering was all that Peter could preserve from 1965 through 1985."

"What?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Spine..." Rabbit whispered. "It's gone? It's all gone?"

"A lot of it. Yes. And the next twenty will have gaps as well. Not as bad, but at least half is gone. I'm so sorry..."

"It ain't yehr fault, is it?" Rabbit choked.

"No... but I'm sorry all the same."
"And they're... the names on the headstones... Lily... Marie... Honey?"

"Rabbit... Yes. They're gone."

"Spine..." she gasped, tightening her grip on his hand.

"Rabbit," he whispered, "I know this is hard to face all at once, but in order to help you, I need to find out what you do remember, or try to find out."

"O-Okay..." Rabbit said, grimacing.

But before he could ask a question, Rabbit began to sob. The Spine held her hand and cried silently with her. There wasn't much else he could do.

Once Rabbit grew calmer, The Spine was able, through a series of questions, to work out that she had a few sparse memories of just about everyone, but not necessarily ones that were up to date. She was aware, in a vague sort of way, that Honey, Armand, Lily, and Marie had died. Of the four, she remembered most clearly the deaths of Marie and Lily; as such, The Spine resolved to allow one of the others to scan the chip.

She also knew Dave had alienated himself from the family even though she hadn't recognized him as an adult. She wasn't sure who Sunshine was. She was mercifully free of any memory of Vietnam, but that also meant that she was still entirely at a loss as to how she came to have a daughter. And Honey's letter was entirely obliterated... not the worst news since Upgrade had saved a copy.

But it would have to wait. They had agreed to reserve all memory augmentation and restoration until they had determined what was missing.

"I'm scared, Spine," Rabbit murmured at last. "I don't know what's coming next or what I am or who I was. Do I turn out okay?"

"You turn out great, Rabbit. Just as crazy as ever and just as Pappy meant you to be."

"That's good... And my baby? Qwerty? Is she okay?"

"She is. She's wonderful."

"That's great. I'm glad..."

"Rabbit, it's going to be okay. Understand? I know how it feels to have missing memories and I'm here to help you through this."

Rabbit stared. "You... you know? You remember...?"

"I do. I found out this last year and I've been re-assimilating the memories."

"No kiddin'? Pappy thought you'd n-n-ever be ready after the first twenty years!"

"Well, I guess I finally grew up. I got married again, too."

"Really? Who is she?"

"I've already talked too long. We really should start on the next few chips..."
"Come on, ya can't leave me in suspense!"

He could have pointed out that it wouldn't be suspense considering the memories in between wouldn't be affected, but he refrained. If this was all it took to distract her from her fear and grief, he was willing to use it.

"Well... this might sound a little unethical, but I married a Walter Girl..."

"What?" Rabbit gasped.

This threw The Spine a bit; he'd hesitated over the ethics of it himself, but he expected Rabbit to dismiss such things. "Yes..."

"But I thought Wanda fired her!"

"I'm sorry? How could you even... Fired who?"

"We are ta-ta-talkin' about Barbara, right?"

"Uh... no... who?"

"Ohhhh..." Rabbit breathed.

"Barbara who, Rabbit?" he demanded. "Wait... Wanda's old assistant? You don't mean her, surely?"

Rabbit giggled nervously. The Spine counted to one hundred rapidly. This was no time to be losing his temper at her.

"Rabbit?" he said as patiently as he could.

"Wh-wh-when didja get married?" Rabbit asked very softly.

"Last week..."

"Oh, hell. Um... yeah... ya said it was 2013. Well. Not likely to be her, then! Silly me. Forget I mentioned it."

"Rabbit... come on," he groaned. "It's not going to upset me..."

"Sure, sure... yehr a big robut... yeah. I, uh... wish you'd just go ahead and switch me off for now... Before Wanda finds out and takes me apart."

"Wait... you can't just..."

Rabbit went into stasis of her own accord.

"Wanda?" The Spine demanded. "You want to tell me what the hell that was all about?"

She walked up to the table sheepishly. Breanna stepped up beside her, looking much the same way he felt.

"Spine... I'll tell you all about it, but not here. Okay?"

"Did something happen between me and this Barbara?" he whispered.

She let out a sigh that could have become a groan with a little more effort. "Yeah, yeah, something did. And I think you'd be happier not restoring that particular memory at all, even when you get to
"You may be right..." he said softly.

"How about we knock off for lunch, okay?" Peter said a little too briskly.

"But it's only..." The Spine began. Bree caught his eye for just a second and he understood. "Right. Yes, let's take a break."
Rabbit, Inside and Out, pt 4 - A Slight Detour

Chapter Summary

What Barbara did.

Chapter Notes

Whoops! The Spine is traumatized by the strangest things and once again proves to secretly be a tower of jello in the face of difficulties.

Hope this isn't a let-down after all the suspense. He just got kinda lazy after a while and blocked anything that stressed him out too much.

And I didn't have Wanda mention Madame Renoir because I figure that would have been classified and those who did hear about it might have seen fit to keep it quiet so she'd only have a small amount of information about it because Rabbit would shoo her away any time The Spine was having a meltdown.

"Alright, Wanda. Out with it," The Spine muttered. "We really don't have time for this right now."

They were in a storage room down the hall from the lab. Wanda settled herself on a box of petri dishes and sighed.

"I know, sweetie. But I didn't want you to mope about it..."

"Mope?" he gasped. "I wasn't going to mope!"

"You know what I mean. It would eat at you. You're a worrier and you'd brood about it until you gave in and looked at the file. And we don't have time for that, either."

"I... guess," he grumbled.

"You sure you want to hear this without Breanna, though?" she asked as he carefully pulled up a crate of copper bars and sat facing her.

"No. But she thinks I should find out on my own. Does she know what it is?"

"She couldn't, unless someone told her. I think she's just respecting your privacy."

He sighed. Sweet Bree. Surely she knew he'd just turn around and tell her the whole thing, whatever it was.

"Well, go on, then," he murmured.

"Alright, sweetie. Look... you remember Barbara, right?"
"Well, I remember you hiring a girl named Barbara. Seemed like a nice enough girl, but one morning you'd told me she quit. I didn't notice much in between." He hesitated. "Come to think of it, I don't actually remember anything in between..." He put his hand over his eyes as it sank in. "Oh, good grief."

"Yeah. She was only here for a couple of months. And, uh... you two had a thing going on."

"A thing?"

"Well... I don't actually know how much of a thing. She flirted with you and then Qwerty saw you two kissing..."

"Kissing?" he cried.

"Yes. You'd started dating again after Marie died and..."

"I started dating again?" he gasped. "But you hired Barbara in 1984!"

"I know. We all thought it was too soon, y'know. We thought you thought so, too. Then you started putting on makeup and going out to clubs again."

"I don't remember any of this!"

"Yeah, because you didn't do it until after she came to work! She was the one you were taking to the clubs. You found her attractive. It's not a crime. But you were hiding it from all of us. Well, I mean, we figured out you were sneaking out and Peter shrugged and called it growing pains. But we didn't know you and Barbara had a thing going on."

"Could you stop calling it that?"

"You'd prefer it if I said you were having an affair?"

"No! I mean... were we having an affair?"

"Well, that's what you called it when you told Peter about it."

"But... but... did I sleep with her, then?"

"I don't actually know for sure..."

"We lived in the same house! You never had any hint? Qwerty never saw us go into a bedroom together or something to suggest we'd... y'know..."

"She didn't say. I'm sorry. Does it really matter, though? You kissed, that counts at least as a physical relationship."

"I guess... I just..." He sighed deeply. It mattered to him, but there was no time to argue about it. "Look, go on and tell me the rest. I just need to know why I locked the memory."

"Alright. Well, one day you told Peter you were having an affair and wanted to break it off but whenever you tried it, she would start to cry and you couldn't. So he told me. Since she was honestly kind of useless around the lab, we called her in and told her she was fired for fraternizing with one of the automatons."

"What?" he gasped. "Just like that?"
Wanda nodded. "I knew you'd say that. She wouldn't let you break it off, sweetie. We couldn't just leave you to it! You may have had experience with one woman, but with different kinds of women? And she was a different kind of woman, alright. The manipulative, needy kind."

"But... if she cried, maybe she was just heartbroken... I mean, if she had feelings for me..."

"And that's why you needed help. Because you're a softie."

The Spine frowned.

"Yes, you are. Don't give me the skunk eye. You'd tried to tell her straight out that you wanted to end the affair, and she would cry and threaten to kill herself."

The Spine gasped.

"And it was a lie!" Wanda said firmly. "She's still alive as far as I know. I kept track of her for years and she eventually got married and divorced."

"Oh..."

"So anyway, yes, we fired her and sure enough, she made an awful scene and screamed and yelled and... ugh.

"You just sat there with your head down. At least, until she came over and started screaming at you, too. You had to tell her the truth, with us as support, before she'd leave."

"What was the truth?" The Spine murmured, eyes wide.

"That you'd never loved her. That it had been a mistake to enter into a relationship with her and you'd only done it because you were so lonely and since she was so nice to you, you didn't want to lead her on anymore. She actually slapped you. We had to ice her hand."

"Oh... how... how ugly..." he whispered.

"But like I said, she didn't run off and do anything rash. She went back home to her parents where she kept her mouth shut... because we told her if she said anything we'd show them pictures of her making out with a robot."

"Really?" he said irritably.

"Yes, really. She was a manipulative little trollop and we did what we had to do. And you know damned well you needed help so stop giving me that judging look. I swear, you're like a little old grandfather with those faces you pull."

The Spine shook his head. "I just... I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

"You can settle somewhere in the middle, then," she sighed. "At least you don't seem too broken up about it."

"Do I seem that way? Huh. I just... I can't take it in."

"Well, I'm sorry if it was a shock, sweetie," she said gently. "I didn't want you to have to find out at all."

"Thank you, Wanda," he sighed, staring dully at the steam swirling toward the ceiling. "How could I do something like that? How could I start dating again so soon, when I wasn't ready, when I didn't
even really care about her?"

"It was more than a year later, you know. And you aren't necessarily in love before you start dating, I hope you realize. Well, you always are but most people date to see if they hit it off. And I figure she reeled you in the second she got you alone so I guess you wouldn't have had the chance to figure that out, either.

"But as you suggest, it isn't like you to get so involved with someone you don't care about. Well, I've had a lot of time to think about this and discuss it with Peter and Rabbit. I think Peter was right. You were in the middle of a major readjustment. I mean, it was hard enough for me to move on after Guy passed on. But we'd only been married a few years. You'd lived with Marie for over thirty, and you'd become a different person. And now you were having to find out who that person was with Marie out of the picture.

"So when another lovely girl came along who liked you, somewhere in your logical mind she fit the void left behind and you tried your best to make her fill it. And she just didn't, because there was no love there. You liked her, sure, but you didn't love her. You thought you were using reason, but in fact you were as confused as any man ever was. And I guess one day you realized it and couldn't endure the guilt anymore and tried to tell her.

"So... I have to tell you... at the time, you felt the same way you do now. You thought we were cold and cruel and that we broke her heart in your behalf. That you'd put us up to it and so you were responsible."

The Spine put one hand over his eyes and groaned softly. He'd blamed himself. Again. Why was he even surprised anymore?

"Sweetie..." she breathed, "this is why you wiped it. You were heartbroken about what had happened. I felt so sorry for you! You've had to let people down before, y'know, fans and such, but this time you had genuinely led her to believe you wanted to be with her and the guilt was too much for you."

"Did I tell you that?" he asked softly, lowering his hand.

"No, I more or less inferred it from what you did tell me and, well... a few days after she left, you came downstairs and said hello and seemed more cheerful, and when I was walking out to get to work in the lab I said that I might need you to come and help later, and you asked whatever had become of that new assistant I hired... turns out you meant Barbara. So I figured that sometime in the night you must have become so distraught about it that the panic folder opened and you chose to bury it. I was just as glad, especially thinking of how distressed you must have been, all alone in the dark, that it triggered the folder to open."

She patted his hand and he saw that she was crying.

"Wanda..."

"Sorry... I just... wish you didn't have to remember this. I knew it would worry you, but I also knew that telling you would hurt you. Because you've been through all kinds of loss and moved on, but Hell for you is thinking something bad happened that was genuinely your fault. I knew you still secretly blamed yourself for Marie's cancer..."

He opened his mouth to argue and she put one hand over it.

"Don't try to lie and say you didn't. You know you did."
He sighed. He knew.

She shifted her hand to his cheek plate and smiled sadly. "And even though you never meant to hurt Barbara, you were convinced that you broke her heart. So when the guilt finally broke you, you gave up and blocked it. And I told the others never to tell you what had happened... so of course Rabbit thought she was in trouble for letting the cat out of the bag."

"Well... you're right. It's doesn't matter whether I slept with her, not now. I guess I just thought it would make it that much more awful if I made love to her and then rejected her."

"And I know that upsets you as well. But as I said, I don't know whether you did. She had her own apartment and it's possible that you two went there to be alone. She didn't say and neither did you. Considering how you feel about casual sex, I would ordinarily say that there's no way that someone with your values would have slept with a woman until you were married, or at least until you were sure that you loved her, but as I said... you weren't really yourself yet."

He nodded and wiped oil from under his eyes. Wanda impulsively leaned in and hugged him.

"Thanks..." he whispered. "I guess I should have expected that some of those blocked memories would come as a complete surprise."

"I suppose so."

She was still crying. He couldn't have that.

"So," he said, forcing a smile. "Were there any other times where I surprised everyone and turned out to be a womanizing bastard?"

"Oh, Spine, really..." she scolded, but the tension broke at last, as he'd hoped, and she started to giggle. "This really isn't funny!" she cried helplessly.

He grinned. "No... but something had to give. I don't want you crying over me, not with everything else that's going on."

"Oh, honestly. I'm a big girl. I can cry if I feel like it."

"I know."

"You ready to head back?" she asked.

"I don't know. I need to think for a few minutes."

"I understand. I'm sorry..."

"You said that already. Don't be. You did the best you could. Besides," he added with a weak smile, "this will make an interesting story for Bree..."

He stopped, staring blankly at the far wall. Bree! Of course!

"Spine?" she asked worriedly.

"Wanda... how is it that I didn't notice the gap at the time? I've blocked longer memories before but there was usually an explanation. I was told once that I'd been offline for months, so that I never wondered why there was a void in my memory file. But to get up one morning, not noticing entire months were lost? And if I thought that I was ready to date and learned otherwise and then forgot it all, what was there to prevent it happening again?"
"That's a good question... I always just figured Grandpappy must have made the panic folder deflect your notice somehow. Y'know, so that once it was locked, you wouldn't know it was there and maybe that also meant you wouldn't question the gaps in your memory."

"That makes sense for a few hours or a day, but... I would surely have noticed something was missing from a large enough span. Also, I remember feeling decidedly unready to date for decades after losing Marie. If I thought I was ready then...

"When you were still broken up from the loss. Maybe you remembered a little somehow? Left yourself a note or something? I'd say you were older and wiser but if you can't remember the lesson, well... I don't really know. I'm sorry..."

"No more apologies, sweetheart," The Spine murmured, patting her hand gently. "Look... you should get back and help Peter."

She rose and looked at him. "You're going to open the file, aren't you?"

He sighed. "I don't know."

"Don't, okay? Not all by yourself. Don't face it alone when you have a sweet wife and loving family all around to comfort you, okay?"

He said nothing. She heaved a shuddering sigh and walked out. As her footfalls moved further away, he slumped, giving way at last to the weight of what he had learned.

So there was yet another ugly memory he'd seen fit to hide from himself instead of being a grown man about it. How many more ugly shocks did life hold for him? How many more could he absorb in a single year?

The panic folder. Maybe it had saved his life, but it had also stolen it! For one ugly, terrifying moment, he considered opening the whole damned thing, disgorging every last horror into his memory, though there be hell to pay. It hadn't spared him at all. It had sentenced him to suffer everything twice and to carry on through life thinking he was a different person! He'd lived a quiet life, he'd thought, outside of a few adventures. In reality, he'd been to hell and back again and again. What he'd feared with Madame Renoir, he had actually done to Barbara, and it tore at him despite Wanda's disdain for the woman. It was simplistic to just assume any woman he hurt was a horrible person who deserved it. He couldn't accept that, and he couldn't so blindly trust her account and absolve himself of responsibility.

But he also couldn't risk destroying himself, or making himself a burden on the already overtaxed family. Rabbit was the one in trouble. Rabbit's need was far greater. And then there was Bree. Even in this dark moment, he couldn't deny that she loved him dearly. His boiler hiccuped a little as he thought of it. How he loved her, too... more than he had ever hoped to love again. Not more or less than Marie, but equally, and yet differently. It was a revelation to know he could and he was grateful.

And he wanted to get back to her. But first he needed to see just enough to understand.

He accessed the folder and carefully selected the file. Peter had helped him to construct a screening program over the summer. He could view the file at high speed, gleaning the essentials, before allowing full access, much like the scan he had made of Rabbit's chips. That would help.

For now, however, he just needed to check the settings. What had he done to prevent himself from fraternizing with staff again in the future? Because he knew himself. Faced with so much guilt, he would have diligently tried to prevent future indiscretions, even if it meant he'd remain alone forever.
He had blamed lingering, unassigned guilt over Madame Renoir for his struggles with romance. But that hadn't been an emotional attachment. Maybe there was another reason why kissing Breanna had brought almost instant panic.

He examined the actions listed under the chip's sub-heading and saw a piece of code... an image. He opened it and saw a picture of Marie smiling at him. A very familiar picture. He'd seen that exact one the night he'd kissed Breanna in the hallway.

The image was linked to a folder, outside the panic folder, which had been deactivated. He checked the date of deactivation and recognized it as the day after he had fallen from the cliff... the day Peter had altered the panic folder commands and given him limited access to it. He opened the deactivated folder and examined the contents.

There it was. A simple command had been integrated into the folder's security net, connected to the image of Marie. Also inside the code were commands. The first was a suggestion to avoid discussion of romantic subjects with Walter employees. That explained his inept approach to courtship with Breanna. The second command was a specific directive to stop what he was doing immediately in the event of prolonged or intimate physical contact with any Walter employee.

When Peter had shut down the original security net and replaced it, the connected folder had been shut down as well. And so it was that when he lay flat on his back in the laboratory, looking into Breanna's eyes, he had been able to whisper that he loved her. It was a few days later that they had managed to steal a few minutes alone and at last sealed it with careful kiss... one he remembered fondly because there had been no trace of fear. He'd thought he'd managed to overcome the dread of moving forward. And in a way, he had.

He had a terrible urge to punch himself in the head. Of all the stupid, melodramatic, childish things to do! He might as well had thrown a massive tantrum and howled that he was running away from home. Instead, he had committed a kind of suicide, a huge drop into massive self-pity, martyring himself just to assuage his guilt about breaking Barbara's heart, instead of letting himself lock it away or learning to forgive himself for it. And after all those years as a father, too. He should have recognized the response for what it was... his children had done their share of that sort of thing after being scolded for one thing or another. Back in the day they would have called it "eating worms."

And he'd done it. He'd been bad, and he'd punished himself. For a first offense, too. Almost thirty years sulking alone rather than at least trying to meet someone new. And while he had no regrets about the woman who had at last come his way, it could just as easily have gone on... he could have missed his chance to be with her, too.

He closed the folder. He didn't need to look at it now. Maybe he had made love to Barbara. It was no worse than leading her to believe he loved her in order to stop feeling empty inside. He couldn't fix it now either way.

But as he rose and went back to the lab to take his wife in his arms and to get back to work, he resolved that if he could, he would find Barbara and apologize. It didn't much matter to him whether she had been predatory, as Wanda seemed to believe. He still felt she deserved that much.
Rabbit, Inside and Out pt 5

Chapter Summary

Bringing the old girl up to date. Hurt and comfort all over the place.

In the lab, Peter waited with the others. Breanna was looking at her phone but he suspected she wasn't fully absorbed by whatever she saw there. Upgrade stood by Rabbit, holding her hand. Jon, as usual, stood by Upgrade. The others had moved off to distant tables and sofas.

He glanced at his wife and she raised an eyebrow.

"Any guesses?" Bunny whispered.

"I don't have to guess," he breathed. "He must have had a fling with some woman named Barbara."

"I always thought he was so straitlaced, though..."

"You also think I'm sexy. You're not to be trusted."

She grinned and kissed him on the ear. He put one arm around her.

"He did, you know," Upgrade murmured, looking at the ceiling.

Breanna looked up from her phone. "What?"

"I was doin' security sweeps and saw them in lab four one night, back in 1985. She had him come in late but there wasn't anything about it in the maintenance schedule. When the camera sweep cycled back, there they were..."

"Please don't go into detail!" Peter begged. Bunny snickered.

"Well, there they were, anyway," Upgrade muttered. "Right on tha worktable. I turned tha camera off as fast as I could. Ugh."

"Sweet mother of science..." Peter gasped. He had a terrible desire to disinfect lab four.

Breanna giggled, her cheeks bright red. "That dog! Why would he block that memory, though?"

"Because he was ashamed, of course," Jon said. "Spine's a good boy."

"That's what you think," Breanna said coyly.

Peter was blushing everywhere and wishing he'd sent them to their rooms.

"I never saw that coming, though," Bunny whispered. "Guess it's always the quiet ones."

She slipped her hand around and tweaked Peter's bottom. He squeaked involuntarily.

"You okay, Peter?" Breanna giggled.
"Fine. I'm fine," he choked, wondering what Bunny was trying to convey, or whether she just wanted to tease him...

"Sorry," Bunny whispered, close to his ear. He suspected, however, that she wasn't.

"We'll stop, okay?" Breanna said soothingly.

"Oh, it wasn't... yeah. Thank you," Peter said weakly.

She leaned in and peered into Rabbit's head.

"There's a lot more room."

"Good thing, too," he replied, settling with relief into a more comfortable topic. He already knew far more than he wanted about The Spine's sex life. "Part of it is that the replacement processor is a lot smaller. Unfortunately a lot of the space is due to the chips being consolidated. I just hope the last one is fully functional like I projected and that she can cope with the change. I know the robots have some files to share so she can fill in the gaps, but it's still going to be an adjustment. I really don't know what to expect at this point."

Wanda walked twenty minutes later in without looking at anyone. She sniffled and went straight to where Norman sat dozing at the back of the lab. Peter looked at Bunny, who shrugged.

The Spine came in ten minutes after that. He looked at Wanda and smiled reassuringly, then walked to Bree and embraced her. Bree looked up at him questioningly. He smiled.

"We'll talk about it later," he said softly. "It's nothing too earth-rattling, but I do think you'll want to know."

"Alright, baby," she murmured, as though she hadn't just been gleefully gossiping about his sordid love affair.

They kissed briefly and she walked away to get her gloves on. The Spine turned to Peter.

"Peter..."

"Look... if you're not telling Bree yet, I don't want to..."

"No, I was just going to ask how many chips are left to scan."

"Ah..." Peter said blandly. "Um... well, just two. This one is another transfer of salvaged files. It has the collected data from the end of the last one through the current one. We have to walk her through that so that we can put in the final chip and hopefully she'll at least be herself, with some memory lapses. I estimate a twenty to twenty-two year range with maybe 50% recovery."

"Oh, boy... that's a lot of memories..." Upgrade whispered.

"I know. Hopefully the salvaged parts are evenly spaced," Peter commented. "That wouldn't be quite so bad, I think. Alright, next to last chip. Who's up?"

"I'll do this one," The Jon said. "Rabbit doesn't hate me yet in this one."

The room was silent except for Upgrade, who cried, "Jonny! Pappy does not hate you!"

"Well..." Jon murmured, looking down, "she's better now but she still doesn't treat me the same. I understand why though. It's been kinda nice, havin' her talk to me the way she used to."
"Oh, Jonny," she sighed.

"Well... fine," Peter said awkwardly. "Get ready for the interview. Remember, she's still going to have some pretty big gaps in her memory. Take it easy."

"Do you even have to tell him that?" Bunny whispered as Jon opened his mouth.

Peter chuckled. "No, of course not. Not Jon. But I'm fussy so I do it anyway."

"I'll be gentle with her," Jon murmured.

He settled on the lab stool as the others drifted out of range. Peter, sighing, powered Rabbit on.

"Heya, Jon!" Rabbit said when she activated. "You f-f-feelin' alright, buddy?"

"What?" Jon asked, blinking.

She was so cheerful all of a sudden! He'd expected her to cry or something...

"That soda sittin' okay? We had to water it a little this time..."

"Oh!" Still figuring out what year it was. Darn. He'd sorta hoped she was taking it well and braced himself for the oncoming storm. "Yeah, I'm great. How are you?"

"Well..." She paused, her smile fading.

There it was. "Rabbit?" he prompted.

"Things are..."

Silence. Rabbit's face twisted slightly as though she was trying to get her photoreceptors to work properly.

"Things are what?" Jon asked gently.

"I'm not... n-n-n-not sure..."

"Do you need help with... um... something?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, no... that's right... Spine said..."

"Hm?"

"I have damage," Rabbit said stiffly. "I'm-I'm damaged... my memory's gone... I'm ba-back here... So that means I forgot some stuff."

She sounded calm and yet he could see the trembling in her frame, the barest hint of a break in her voice. Jon put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's gonna be okay, Rabbit," he whispered.

"Sure, yeah. So... gosh, how long has it been, Jonny?" she pleaded. "I know he said it's 2013 every time I wa-wa-wake up here, but how long has it been ta me?"

Jon sighed. "I don't know. What's the last thing you remember?"
"Oh, right... I just... I j-j-just remember... that we're havin' a harder time f-findin' soda for ya. Sorry... I know that's scary..."

"Yeah. It's okay, Rabbit. What year do you last remember, though?"

"2006. I think. An' yeah, I see all the holes in my memory. Pretty, um.. pretty damn big ones. An' I ain't g-g-gonna panic, alright? Because I know Qwerty needs me. An' Petes has that new b-baby... no, wait... he's... He's older, right?"

"Oh, yeah. He's older. That was twenty years ago. To you, I mean."

"Hot damn," she squeaked, blinking rapidly. Her voice was strained as she said, a little too brightly, "That's older, alright. Funny, I remember the soda but not the kid. Oh, and Annie. Yeah, she's a cutie. How did they meet, anyway? I, uh... seem to have l-lost that one..."

"Oh... Don't you remember any of it?" Jon breathed.

"I remember she came from New York City. Pretty ritzy, huh?"

"I think so?"

"She musta been real surprised to meet a bunch of robuts when he brought her back here!" Rabbit chuckled weakly. Her laughter slowly faded. "R-right?"

"Yeah," Jon whispered. He smiled awkwardly. "We should scan your chip now, okay? So you can go ahead an' go into stasis."

"Alrighty," Rabbit said thickly.

Rabbit went into stasis and The Jon sagged with relief. She had been trying entirely too hard to stay cheerful and he had been finding it harder and harder not to cry.

"She doesn't remember helping my dad bring my mom back," Peter murmured.

"No. I don't think she does," Jon said brokenly.

Upgrade stepped up and embraced him. It felt much better. He let himself cry just a little against her neck.

"So she doesn't remember the first time she was switched back to being a woman."

"She never believed it anyway," Jon said thickly. "It was just play acting to her."

"I know. Well, this is it. We scanned that chip, so there's just one left." He paused, his mask angled toward Jon. "Take five minutes, everyone, and we'll finish this," he said eventually.

The others broke off into various smaller conversations but Jon stayed where he was, nestled against Upgrade, grateful for the brief intermission. He hadn't realized just how much that one was going to hurt.

Peter gathered everyone around after a few minutes.

"Alrighty. Grand finale, should be completely intact. I don't know whether it starts in 2006, considering. But it shouldn't be far off. Who's doing the interview?"
Upgrade smiled nervously. "I think we should all do it."

"No!"

They turned as one to see Hatchworth. His hands were clasped and he was looking at the floor.

"Hatchy..." gasped The Jon.

"I think she will not want to see me," he whispered in a trembling voice. "So I must excuse myself..."

"Hatchy, you carried her into the lab! You came to her rescue!" The Spine cried.

Hatchworth shook his head and wiped his eyes fitfully. "I engaged in a plot to cause her the guilt and remorse that broke her! I deliberately studied to harm my sister! She... she will hate me!"

"Well, I don't believe it. Not for a second," The Spine insisted. "Rabbit may go too far but she'd recognized it this time. If anything, she'll be afraid you're mad at her."

Hatchworth shook his head again and sighed deeply. He sent a brief section of video to The Spine, who managed to keep from gasping aloud. It was of Rabbit, glitching and collapsing in the hallway. He heard Rabbit crying out in agony and flinched in spite of himself.

*Do you see, my brother? Do you understand now?*

*Hatchy...* he began.

All I could do was hold her! I could not stop her pain with apologies! What would they mean now?

Everything, Hatchy. You did nothing wrong. Yes, even after seeing this, I swear to you that this is not your fault alone. And I'm going to tell Rabbit so, dammit, so help me. I promise you, she won't be angry. If she remembers this at all, even if she was angry before, she'll forgive you with all her heart. Do you read me?

Hatchworth sent a soft buzz of static in response. It amounted to a sigh, whether of frustration or sorrow, he didn't know. Hatchworth walked away and sat on a sofa, his eyes cast down.

"I think you both make good points..." Bree said carefully, looking sidelong after him. "I don't think she'd be angry at Hatchworth, either, but we don't know where exactly Rabbit stopped recording incoming data. She could wake up thinking she's still at the party. She may have been functioning during the party and right up until she powered down, but we don't know how much of that data was successfully saved. So for all she knows, it's the day after the reception and everyone's still mad about that stupid prank."

"Oh..." Peter said slowly. "Yeah... okay. I guess a lot of us are likely to upset her. Alright, then... Upgrade and Jon, you stay. Everyone else clear out except for Wanda and Bree. We can approach gradually once we have a better idea where she's at in her chronology."

There was a general murmur of assent as they all drifted away from the work area. The Spine glanced over at Peter and Bunny, who had settled on a loveseat together. He clasped her hand in both of his and she rested against him.

"Stop blaming yourself," she whispered.

"Stop reading my mind," he sighed, stroking her fingers.
The Spine smiled and turned back toward his wife, who gave him a thumbs up.

"The chip is in," Bree said. "Alright, Upgrade... you ready?"

Upgrade nodded. The others did the same.

"Powering on," Wanda murmured.

Rabbit woke with a violent start.

"Hatchy!" she cried, throwing her arms forward in panic.

She'd been sick... hurt... dying maybe. But... where was she now? She'd been in a dark hallway. The static... it had screamed in her head, blotting out everything but a faint voice... Hatchworth. There had been so much pain. She couldn't remember a time when she had hurt so much...

But she had a feeling she should remember a time like that. Several of them. She had a vague recollection of thinking it was almost as bad as... something. Something that wasn't there anymore.

This, unsurprisingly, did nothing to calm her down. Someone caught both of her hands and held them tightly.

"Pappy, stop! It's alright! Calm... calm, Pappy... shh..."

Her photoreceptors came into focus at last.

"Right..." Rabbit gasped, looking into her daughter's face. "Oh... baby... it's good to s-s-see ya... I... I th-thought I was a g-g-goner!"

Upgrade smiled, but there was pain in it. Her eyes welled with oily tears.

"So did we, Pappy," she whispered.

"Rabbit... What's the last thing you remember?" Wanda asked.

"Oh..." breathed Rabbit. "Oh! This... this is tha lab! This is where I wa-was all those times!" Rabbit cried.

"That's right," said The Jon. "When you were little, an' when you went to war, an' when you thought I was a Nazi spy..."

"Oh... so-so-sorry buddy... I, uh... didn't know. I... that was really... hey, Jonny, I'm a little confused..."

Jon looked surprised.

"Looks like I ain't tha only one..." Rabbit breathed.

"Oh... sorry... I just haven't heard ya call me Jonny in a long time..." The Jon rubbed at his eye. "I mean... sort of. Yeah, ya had a problem, remember? So all those times ya woke up here, those were just from the last few days."

"But how? They were decades ago! Pappy would wa-wa-wake me and ask what I remembered, then you an' Hatchy an' Spine... wait..."
"What?" Jon asked blankly. "Oh! Yeah, we took turns talkin' to ya. To make sure you could access the chips."

"That can't be... if that all happened here... how-how the hell d-d-did I talk to Pappy?" she demanded.

"Oh..."

"That was David," Upgrade said quickly.

"What?" gasped Rabbit. "I... I d-d-d-d-don't understand..."

"David dressed up as Pappy. So ya wouldn't be scared!" Jon said, beaming.

Rabbit gaped at him. "B-But he s-s-said he l-l-l-loved me..." she whispered, horrified.

"It's okay," Jon said soothingly. "He didn't mean it."

"Thank g-goodness..." she breathed. She thought she heard a snort of laughter from somewhere nearby. She ignored it. "That was real nice of him, though... but... where are they all now?"

"They're stayin' away for now. 'Cause of what happened. Y'know. With the champagne."

Upgrade put her hand over her face.

"What is it?" Jon whispered, apparently confused.

Rabbit blinked at them, her chin trembling. "Oh. I-is that wh-why Petes and Bunny ain't here, too?"

"Yeah," Jon said slowly, as Upgrade futilely shushed him, "an' David an' Chelsea..."

Rabbit looked away the best she could with her head restrained. "Of cOURSE. I don't blame them," she whispered hoarsely. She closed her eyes. "Not sure... not sure why they even s-s-saved my sorry chassis... Not sure why any of you are even here... ya shoulda let me die."

"No!" cried The Jon and Upgrade as one.

"Pappy, they're not mad!" Upgrade continued. "None of us are! Bunny never was! And Peter has forgiven you, Pappy! It's alright now."

"Really?" whispered Rabbit, opening her eyes. "Only ev-everyone was-was mad. Peter... Peter found out an'... I had ta g-g-get away. I was an idiot. I thought it was f-f-funny but... I didn't understand. Sounds so stupid."

"But you know now, Pappy. And they're gonna be fine. Just don't do anything like that ever again, okay?"

Rabbit blinked rapidly. "Okay, baby. I'm sorry..."

"So am I," Jon whispered shakily.

"I know," she murmured, hugging each of them in turn. "Can they come over now, Pappy? Are ya ready?"

"I don't know..."
The Spine stepped up to the table. "Are you ready to see me, at least?" he murmured, smiling down at her.

"Buddy! Why are ya ba-ba-back so soon?"

"Check your chronometer, Rabbit..." The Spine said dryly.

"I g-g-got this new one in my h-head but it's flashin' twelve o'clock..."

The Spine looked at Wanda, frowning. Rabbit sighed softly, surprisingly pleased at a familiar concept in the middle of all this strangeness. Wanda knew Walter tech inside and out but anything else? Not so much.

"Sorry. That was my shift. Peter will set it later," she murmured.

"The old clockwork one, then," The Spine suggested.

She checked it... and gasped. "Oh... right. B-Been a few days then... So... ya have a g-g-good time?"

The Spine beamed. "Very. I met an old fan of yours. She sends her love."

"Aw, that's sweet..." Rabbit murmured. "So... I may be re-re-remembering wrong, but... did I, m-maybe, say something about an old g-g-girlfriend? Last time, I mean? Did I possibly..."

"You spilled the beans about Barbara, yes."

"Oh! Oh, hell..."

"Wanda told me about her, alright? It's okay. I'd have had to remember eventually anyway, since I'm restoring the memories."

"Right," Rabbit gasped, trying to calm down. Wanda had been serious about them keeping that a secret.

"Rabbit... we still want to know what you last remember."

"Oh! I, uh... I was upset... I ran away... sorry, I didn't see ya leave... then... I was gettin' these sta-static bursts all night an' then I talked to... so-some people and then they started ge-ge-gettin' worse. The static bursts, I mean. I was scared... I thought everyone hated me so I was afraid ta ca-ca-call for help, but it hurt so much an'... I panicked an' called Hatchy only the wifi hurt so I tried radio signals... my eyes shut off... I heard him but I couldn't talk anymore..." She sobbed fitfully. "I was so scared, Spine! I just thought no one would wanna help me..."

"Rabbit..." he breathed, resting his hand on her shoulder.

"But he did, Spine. I heard him. He got-got there so fast... He musta run all tha way, too. Even after what I d-d-did. I heard him crying. An' that was pretty much it. I l-l-let go... didn't have any fight left. I felt him catch me. I couldn't understand him anymore but he was still talkin' to me when I shut down."

"Alright. I'm just sorry you have to remember hurting like that," The Spine said hoarsely as Upgrade quietly wept and The Jon rubbed at his eyes.

"No... It's good, Spine. I remember Hatchy comin' ta save me! Where is he, Spine?"

"He... he was afraid you hated him."
"What?"

The Spine paused as though listening to something. "The damage you received happened because you struck your head against his chest," he explained. "He feels responsible."

"That was an accident..."

"I know." Another pause. "But... he also helped prank you, Rabbit. To get back at you."

Was Hatchy using The Spine to speak to her? "Well, yeah! That's what ya do! Besides, I looked good in that outfit!"

"Nevertheless, he isn't used to it and thought you would be angry. I mean," here The Spine's mouth quirked into a crooked smirk, "you did kiss Michael Reed."

So she hadn't imagined it... "He ki-ki-ki-kissed me! An' so what? A bot's entitled ta try new things..."


"Can you tell him I wanna see him?" she pleaded.

"Who? Michael Reed?"

Wise guy... "You know who I mean. Hatchy."

"Why don't you tell him? Your wifi is back online."

She activated her wifi. Hatchy! she sent. There was no response.

"Spine, he won't answer..." she said worriedly.

"I'm here, Rabbit," Hatchworth said softly.

She strained against the strap holding her head steady and saw him, standing beside The Spine. He was looking down, his hands clutched against his chest.

"Hatchy..." she whispered. "Thank you."

Hatchworth's chin quivered.

"Ya saved me, buddy..." she whispered.

"I broke you!" Hatchworth cried, covering his face.

"Hatchy... dammit, enough already!" she cried.

He looked at her in shock.

"I remember that much! I was tryin' ta f-f-fight for tha microphone an' I ran into yehr chest like an idiot! We do stupid stuff like that all tha time! I bet ya b-beat yehrself up tha whole time I was out, too. But when I called my little brother to save me, he ran like anything to come to my rescue! So stop beatin' yehrself up, ya hear me? Or am I gonna hafta get tough with ya?"

Hatchworth swabbed his eyes with his sleeve. "You cannot get tough strapped to a table, Rabbit."

"Good thing I d-don't wanna, then," she said gently, holding out her hand. "I loves ya ta pieces, buddy. So stop hurtin' yehrself. I asked for everything I got an' I l-learned my lesson."
Hatchworth took her hand and kissed it. Rabbit gasped, embarrassed.

"You certainly did cross the line, dear sister. But I see that you exhibit proper remorse," he murmured, his abrupt words contrasted by his tender tone.


But even as Hatchworth released her hand, a keyhole mask appeared in her limited range of vision and her smile faded. Bunny stepped up beside him.

"Petes... Bunny..." Rabbit whispered almost inaudibly.

"Rabbit," Peter said shortly.

"Guys... I'm s-so sorry!" Rabbit cried. "I... I wa-wa-was an idiot an-an' I oughta b-be s-s-s-scrapped b-because I..."

Bunny held her hands up as if to deflect Rabbit's apology. Peter snorted.

"Rabbit!" he laughed. "What were you just telling Hatchworth? Cut yourself some slack! We forgive you. Alright? I never want to see a repeat of that kind of crap but we're not mad now. And Bunny... well, she never really thought it was a big deal.

"There's a lot of complicated personal reasons why you really didn't make anything worse, but just trust that things wouldn't have been all that different if you hadn't done it... lucky for you," he added firmly. "But yeah. It ended up okay."

"Al-alright..." Rabbit whispered. "Bunny..."

"I know," she breathed. "We'll talk later. Privately. Girl talk."

Rabbit smiled weakly. That didn't sound like a threat. And if Peter's forgiveness sounded highly conditional, she couldn't really blame him. She was very lucky things had worked out. Had they broken up, she couldn't really have expected him to be able to get past it.

She felt oddly weary. A timer buzzed in her processor.

"I... I think... think I'm goin' into stasis," she mumbled. "What the hell..."

"This is the longest you've been online since we started this," Peter explained. "I set the processor to take it slowly. Get some rest, okay? Once you have some stasis, we'll start installing the memory files prepared by the other automatons."

"Huh?" Rabbit asked dully.

"I'll tell you in the morning. Goodnight, Rabbit."

She smiled weakly up at them all. "N-n-nighty-n-n-n-night... everyb-b-body..." she drawled.

Upgrade kissed her forehead. The timer pinged and Rabbit went into stasis.
Memories

Chapter Summary

Restoring as much as possible, both old and new.

Chapter Notes

A rather long sleepy chapter where Rabbit talks to everyone about stuff she forgot but that I'm just gonna put in anyway because this would have to happen and this time we really are nearing the end of the main story. I mean, maybe an arc or two left, gotta wrap up a few loose ends, anything else will be told in a comment chapter or in the supplemental fic. But yeah, this is a talky chapter but there's a few tiny surprises tucked away inside, and some call backs to the fic as a whole.

Let me know if you catch any pronouns that don't match the context. Rabbit should have female pronouns throughout but telling the memories sometimes makes it confusing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Don't open it yet, okay, Pappy?"

"But..."

"None of that, now. I know you want to but the last time you opened it, you were out for two days!"

"I was?"

"Yes! And I was scared to death that I'd gotten the code wrong and trapped you in a loop and you'd never talk to me again!"

"Oh... I'm sorry..." Rabbit said faintly.

She felt oddly guilty despite the fact that Upgrade had, inadvertently, paid her back a hundred-fold for her worry after her download into her body.

 Upgrade sighed heavily. "You didn't do anything," she replied.

"I know..." Rabbit said meekly.

"Pappy, it's gonna be okay," Upgrade said.

It almost felt like a scolding, but it was one of the sweetest scoldings she'd ever had... her third so far in the last couple of days. Rabbit gripped her daughter's hand and smiled.
She'd been up and about for a few days and the company was all that was keeping her going.

The first day had been the hardest. At least, it felt like the first day. They had explained that the memories she had of waking in that lab, the ones of being asked what day it was and that seemed to be in sequence with the events of her life, were in fact all from the past week. She had figured that out herself early on... That they were all from the same chip. Pappy had designed them to store memories chronologically except in the event of a memory malfunction.

And boy had she had one of those! If it weren't for the solid memory of her first fifty or so years and her most recent and intact chip, she would have been a complete disaster. From those things she could recall that she was Rabbit, that she had an established identity that had held up well through last year, and that this very year she'd suffered a violent accident that had knocked her right back to specs. And now that she remembered her childhood, she had decided to follow through and try being the girl her Pappy had initially designed.

And that she had been stalling the process because she didn't want to admit that the male persona was a security blanket. It was like there were two Rabbits... a sensitive girl who had been hiding for years under the protection of an assertive, masculine counterpart. She hadn't been able to merge those two personas.

Now, though... everything in her head seemed to be melting together. There was too much change and it was terrifying. But... maybe since she was already scared, now was the time to face all the fears at once and get it over with. She certainly didn't want to have to face them back to back. So she determined that she would tough it out and make as much progress as possible as fast as she could.

Peter had gotten most of the work done and closed Rabbit's cranial cap so that he could remove her straps and let her sit on one of the sofas in the back of the lab. After that, people started coming over to bring Rabbit up to date. The Spine had been first, with a collection of somewhat lateral memories that Rabbit had found very informative. It was weird seeing herself from the outside, especially from The Spine's height, but the information still filled in a lot of gaps.

"Let's see... your wedding? Spine, I didn't forget that!"

"I didn't think so, but the first memories that showed signs of damage were from the 1950s. I decided to start there just in case."

"Yeah, alright." Rabbit observed the next portion. "Dave... he sure was a cute lil guy. Then... oh, you findin' out Marie was pregnant. I always figured that must've been a shock!"

The Spine looked surprised.

"What did I say?" she murmured.

"You called her Marie."

"That's her name."

"You used to call her Mary. Like you couldn't get your head around pronouncing it right."

"Oh, that. Yeah... I got it wrong the first time and I was embarrassed so I acted like I didn't understand. Then I had ta keep it up."

"For sixty years?" The Spine gasped.

"You know me. I hate admitting I'm wrong."
"But... you just did!"

"Yeah..."

"Alright..."

There was a brief silence. Rabbit felt the anxiety rising. He was right. That wasn't how she used to be. The anxiety was flirting with panic... nope... can't let that happen, need a distraction...

She checked the next memory and burst out laughing, maybe a little too hard.

"What?"

"Oh... nothing..." she giggled.

It was The Spine hearing a scream in the night... which Rabbit knew perfectly well had happened the first time she and Honey had fooled around with current. Rawrr! Talk about distractions!

"Fine," The Spine said dryly. "I'm probably happier not knowing. Is it all coming through, though?"

"So far it's uploading fine."

"What do you see next?" The Spine asked eagerly. "I just... I want to make sure it's enough. That it's really helping."

"Spine, buddy! It's great, everything's here."

"Well... it's just that... some of it is painful."

"I know..." Rabbit murmured. Maybe she should stop it... but no. No more waiting. "But I need it, right? It's m-my life. It's who I am."

"Yes, it is. But just... tell me what comes up. In case you have any questions."

Rabbit smiled. She knew what he meant. He was being a worry-wart, same as always. And she couldn't have been more pleased. She didn't want to look at it alone, either.

"Well, apparently I found rock and roll and you didn't."

"I just needed to warm up to it!"

"Oh... and I was good! Dayum! Lookit them hips."

"Rabbit," The Spine intoned. "You remembered all of that already, didn't you?"

"Maybe. Never had such a good view of it before, though. No wonder the ladies used ta show up in crowds!"

The Spine sighed and Rabbit grinned. Now that was more familiar!

"And now... you're singing some rock and roll of your own. And it's damned good."

"Really?" The Spine asked, with a surprisingly childlike smile.

Rabbit chuckled. "'Course it is." She checked the next memory and felt a twinge of nerves. "Oh... you never told me that..."
"What?"

"You saw Wanda blushing because Norman gave her flowers..."

"Oh! Well, at the time, I figured you weren't ready and might interfere."

"Still can't believe she fell for that mook."

"Exactly. But... you have at least forgiven him, right?"

Rabbit was silent. She had, and yet sometimes she would think of the whole thing when she was already in a mood and... she got angry all over again. Still, anger was easier to live with than fear...

"I'm doin' my best. I know he ain't like he was."

"He never meant it to happen."

"I know." Rabbit returned to the memory upload. "Hm... Lily's bigger... Petes is goin' into space..."

"Oh! Rabbit, that's..."

Rabbit watched the rapidly unpacking memory and gulped. She'd expected that to be more pleasant. Calm... calm...

"I, uh... I sure took it well, huh?" she faltered.

"Because you knew Wanda wouldn't. But I think you and Honey cried about it together later."

"Bet we did..." Rabbit said hoarsely. She had been strong to help Wanda cope. She could be strong now. "They, uh... ever find out what happened?"

"It was the early days of space flight. I suppose some numbers were off. They never really said, just told us it was a technical malfunction and paid us a lot of money to placate us."

"Huh... but we ran out I guess? 'Cause here we are goin' ta w-w-war an' yehr sayin' it's because we need money."

"We had a lot of expenses."

"But we were doin' concerts..."

"People got uncomfortable after the incident. That year was one of our worst. Then the government called us to war, so we went. They had me over a barrel anyway but they were glad to get all three of us."

"There ain't much here about the war," she said with relief. "Guess it wasn't very long?"

The Spine smiled faintly down at his hands. "I'll tell you more about that later. Alright? When you're ready."

Oh. He wasn't wrong. She didn't need any more to cope with just yet.

"Was it that bad?" Rabbit cried.

He nodded.

"Hell..."
The rest of the memories went much the same way. When it was all uploaded, Rabbit frowned.

"Wait a minute... I hate to say this, but... what about Honey?"

"Hm?"

"She, well... she died. But it ain't in here!"

The Spine sighed deeply. "That's about the only thing I had in my memory that I thought could hurt you more than Vietnam."

"I know, buddy. You c-c-can keep back tha war for now, but please... I wanna see about Honey. I can take it."

"Are you sure, Rabbit?" he asked.

There was an unusual pleading tone to his voice and she dreaded the memories she was begging to receive. But she was sure. Get it over now. Just get it over with.

"I really am. Show me."

He nodded and connected to her processor, at first downloading Honey's decline at rapid speed, then slowing the process to show her death in real time. He watched her anxiously throughout, and she realized he'd slowed it down to that speed so that he could comfort her as it went.

Rabbit took his hand and gripped it with both of hers as she saw herself, from the doorway of their old room, pulling Honey into an embrace and singing to her, with help, as she faded away. The Spine left soon after.

She thought it would make her more anxious. Instead, while it hurt terribly, she felt strangely strengthened by it. She'd been so brave, so strong and comforting. No wonder it was so hard to let go of that part of her.

But she didn't have to let go. Women were strong, too. That was part of her and she wasn't giving it up.

She wiped her eyes at last and whispered, "Spine... why'd ya leave me so soon?"

"Oh, Rabbit! I knew there was nothing I could do and I had something very important to take care of. I had to do it while everyone was distracted helping you."

"Something important to take care of?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. It really was. Here."

And through the link, he gave her one of his personal memories. Filling a pendant with Blue Matter, fainting... being caught. Speaking to the wires before leaving, explaining he'd done it for Lily.

"Oh..." she breathed. "Sorry..."

"No, I understand."

"But... that was my baby... up there all alone! And we didn't know..."

"No. But I still sometimes feel like I should have. Even though there was no possible way."
"Spine... do you think she saw her mama die?"

"You'll have to ask her. She'll be in after Jon."

She could tell he was eager to avoid the question. The session had been painful enough. But it had told her huge amounts of what she had lost.

What it hadn't told her, however, was how Upgrade could have been born in the first place. She had a few memories in her most recent set of conversations and thoughts about the events, but they were confusing. None really got into detail, and The Spine's packet had only confused her more. It confirmed the sketchy memories of her own that told her she'd had no idea of ever having conceived a child... until one day, she just had one who was at least fourteen years old. It was like some guy having an affair and not seeing the girl for years only to have a kid show up on his doorstep. Of course, if Rabbit known at the time she was really female, it would have been a lot more confusing now. She'd have begun to wonder which of them had been pregnant.

Not that it made sense for either of them to have managed it anyway.

"Spine..." she said quickly as he rose to leave.

"Hm?"

"You didn't mention how I managed to have a kid."

The Spine laughed nervously and unnecessarily rubbed his neck. "That seemed kind of private..."

"Yeah, only the one person who was close enough who could tell me is... y'know..."

"Don't forget the kid herself. She knows more about it so I figured I'd rather skip it entirely. If there's any questions she can't answer, I'll do my best. Peter V had a lot of information on the processes and he told me all about it."

She chuckled. She wasn't sure why but she did.

The Spine smiled. "Everything's going to be alright, Rabbit."

"I didn't..." she began.

He sat beside her and pulled her into a firm hug. She wanted to stay there. There was no one else in the manor who could hug quite like The Spine and it almost was enough to make the fear go away.

"You didn't have to," he said in his reassuring, rumbling baritone. "You laugh for no reason when you don't know what to say. You don't know what to say when you're worried. And it's going to be alright. Got that?"

Just as Upgrade would tell her later. Rabbit nodded.

"I'll check on you in a little while," The Spine murmured, giving her one last squeeze before he rose and walked away.

Rabbit could have cried with gratitude. She didn't know how she felt about that. She was trying to be tough, dammit!

The Jon had been next. His memories were a lot weirder.

"Why are so many of yehr me-me-memories of rabbits and squirrels, Jonny?" she asked, bemused, as
the file unpacked in her mind.

"I love them!" Jon replied, beaming.

"I mean, there's the family, an' some guys in a war... not much there..."

"No," Jon said softly. "I didn't think you were ready for much of Vietnam. I can tell ya more later, okay? If ya want.

Just like The Spine. It was honestly very worrying. She'd had plenty of war experience and it was always hell on Earth. Why was this one so particularly distressing? But if they both thought so, she could hardly dispute it. It did make her ache for each of them, however.

"Thanks, buddy," she said gently. "Let's see... oh, the war is over... Ugh!"

"What?"

"I sure was ugly without my chassis!"

"I thought you looked cool."

"Yeah, well, you're weird."

Jon giggled.

"Let's see... Oh, yeah, ya wandered off. Figured this might explain why but nope. You tellin' me you just felt like leavin' so you did?"

Jon shrugged, smiling weakly.

"Hm... lots of hippies... oh, here's a girl..."

"Sunshine?"

"No... there was a little blond earlier, but yehr at some camp site in that desert..."

"Oh... um... there's... there's not much of that, right? Just some girl out in the desert..." Jon asked tremulously.

"Well, yeah, this real pretty girl. She's holding your hand and walking toward a camper... oh..." Rabbit trailed off.

"What is it?" Jon gasped.

"She took off her clothes, buddy..."

"What?" Jon shrieked. "Close the file, Rabbit! I'll..."

"I take it back... she's still wearin' an afro full of daisies. Say, that's clever, they just sit right in tha fluff..."

"Rabbit, please!"

"Where'd she even get 'em in tha desert?"

"Let me fix tha file, Rabbit!"
"Got a necklace of 'em, too, but ya can still see her-"

"Oh, f***, no!" Jon swore.

Bree had been standing nearby, pretending to examine a tablet despite having become engrossed in the exchange. Rabbit heard her gasp. Jon hadn't sworn like that since she'd been in the manor! Rabbit startled simultaneously, as the file snapped shut and was deleted abruptly.

"Hey!" she barked. "You d-d-d-don't just go into a girl's brain an'..."

Jon giggled nervously. "Right, sorry... here ya go..."

The file uploaded once more and Rabbit triggered installation. The memory was gone. Rabbit gave him a raised eyebrow.

"What the hell have you been up to, Jon?" she asked coolly as Bree slunk away.

"I don't think I have to answer that," Jon muttered, looking down.

"Just this, then..." she said, sounding more like her old self than she had in months. "Ya ain't been up to anything like that since then, right? Like maybe... after ya got together with my baby?"

Jon looked up sharply. "Oh! No, no Rabbit! The only time I ever did anything like that with a human girl was the sixties!"

Rabbit relaxed and switched off the threatening baritone. The Spine had indicated as much, but he hadn't known many details.

"And at a couple of conventions..."

"What?"

"Just in tha seventies though! Then Peter caught me with a girl an' said I had ta stop!"

"Holy crap..."

The Spine had left her a couple of notes about Jon, indicating he had discovered sex at some point, but as she would have expected, he'd glossed over the details. She could understand why.

"I'm sorry!" Jon whimpered.

Rabbit sighed. "Why, buddy? Ya ain't gotta say sorry ta m-m-me, especially if ya stopped before ya got close to my baby. They were all willing an' over age, right?"

"Of course!" Jon gasped. "They usually suggested it actually..."

"Huh." The silence felt awkward after a few seconds, so she added, "First time, I suppose? That one ya just erased?"

"Oh... yeah," Jon confirmed quietly. "First time ever."

"Um... she was pretty," Rabbit said slowly. "Can't blame ya..."

"Her name was Dusty. She was really sweet. I mean, when we weren't... um... although she was sweet then, too, but what I'm trying to say is..."
Rabbit snickered. The tension was too much and she just had to break it up somehow. And he was so flustered! She should have been angry, considering he was effectively married to Upgrade and it turned out sown some epic level wild oats. Rabbit would have been angry once but things were different now... and she couldn't afford to lose control.

"It's okay, buddy. Ya d-d-don't hafta tell me more. It ain't my business and I ain't mad. I know you."

Jon looked at her in blank surprise. "Alright..." he whispered.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I was gonna ask you that."

"Because I'm not mad?"

"Well..." Jon seemed to be grappling with the concept. "Yeah. Kinda."

"Weird, huh?"

Jon stared at her, then startled her by holding out his arms.

"It's gonna be okay, Rabbit," he said gently.

Just as The Spine had told her. Just as Upgrade, soon after, would repeat. Rabbit accepted her hug, then patted Jon on the back as he got up to leave. He smiled and put one hand on her smooth head plate before walking away.

That wasn't so bad. A bit shocking, but not bad. She did her best to re-assimilate the information he'd provided. She could do this... if she could just keep calm. Just keep calm and let it happen, or she'd start having panic attacks.

She'd had them before, when things hit too hard. Every past Walter had said the same thing... a robot can't have panic attacks. But The Spine and the other robots had just held her and told her, as they were now, that it was going to be alright. They weren't usually the screamy kind of panic... usually she sank into the same inertia that Peter VI had after his accident.

So it made sense that she might do the same now. And she had to Just. Keep. Calm. Because change was one of her greatest fears in the past. And now her whole existence was in flux. But she wanted to embrace this change... to seize this moment of limbo and turn it around. The entire fixed sequence of her past had been compromised, with a good half of it now a sea of barely connected events. She remembered the last several years, and her youth, but the history between... She almost felt as though her male years had been a dream, or someone else's memories.

And the person who was emerging from the fog of her past didn't really mind a lot of things that she once had. Other things still bothered her, frightened her. The future, what she was, what she was going to be. But where she had been Rabbit, former big brother of the family now reclaiming her original programming (with a great deal of hesitation), now she was Rabbit, Col. Walter's first automaton, in the process of completing her interrupted construction. Once a new chassis was ready, anyhow.

She was a new woman. Well, a new Robut, anyway. And the world was not what it had been. It was time to rewrite some of the things that had been holding her back from completing the transformation. To become that new woman... Robut. Woman Robut.

As such, she felt now that Upgrade's life was her own to live. She loved her dearly but she could
take care of herself. And Jon... just seemed like the weird guy her daughter fell in love with. She knew him and knew he was good at heart. But he didn't feel like a brother anymore. She'd once had a brother just like him, she knew technically he was that person, but even with the restored memories she just saw him as Jon, Upgrade's boyfriend. It was a lot like the strange detachment she felt for that other Rabbit that had once been her.

The Spine felt like a brother, though. And a little like a father. Which was weird. But he had been acting so much like Pappy had later in his life that she couldn't help seeing him as the continuing embodiment of that fatherly tenderness.

Hatchworth... she wasn't sure about. She was touched at the care he'd shown her. And he understood what it was like to lose the middle of your life... or to never have it in the first place. She'd never felt closer to him.

But while she'd had a couple of days of wondering what kind of closeness that was, she was drifting back toward fraternal closeness. It would be too weird to let it get romantic now. And romance wasn't really her specialty. After all, she'd failed the last one spectacularly. Paige had danced the night away with Sam at the reception and both had looked utterly twitterpated the whole time. And Rabbit had to be happy for her, even while she was sorry for herself.

Although she was still not sure what to think about that kiss from Michael on the dance floor. She'd never felt any specific attraction to him outside of recognizing that he was handsome by human standards. And she had no reason to assume he'd wanted more than what he said... to see what it was like. She'd already known he was weird.

Sure, the kiss had been interesting, even a little exciting. But one thing was certain... she'd never been into guys before. She wasn't sure what she was into now. She mostly just needed to figure out who she was. And then if a romance came her way, she might know what to do about it.

But before she'd had the chance to ponder this further, Upgrade's turn had come up. And she'd thrown her a curveball by bringing her a special packet of memories of her first love... who she'd loved as another person, in another time. And who had borne her child.

And the curiosity about that was eating at her. Even as Upgrade scolded her for her worry, she slyly accessed the file just enough to scrutinize the heading on the file containing the letter.

"Pappy..." Upgrade said sternly.

"I was just lookin'! How can you even tell..."

"I'm still logged in! Are you gonna be good or am I gonna hafta stay logged in?"

"I'll be good. Just... please ask Petes when I can look at it, okay? The suspense is ki-ki-ki-killin' me."

Upgrade's expression was pained and Rabbit realized with a sudden ache that she'd chosen her words poorly. Poor kid... it wasn't right to worry her more...

"Sorry..." Rabbit whispered.

"I know."

"Hey... I'm okay, baby. I'm tough."
"Not as tough as you think, Pappy!" she wailed.

Rabbit pulled her close and held her tight. "Yeah, but tougher'n you think. An' Petes it takin' real good care of me, see? An' you know how smart he is."

Upgrade was silent.

"Baby..."

"Yeah, he's real smart, only... only he let you get this broken!" she choked.

"I wouldn't let him near me for months, remember? He had that tube nice an' tight but tha mounting was cracked where he couldn't see..."

"He could have used a mirror!"

"Baby!" Rabbit gasped. "Please... don't hold it against him. He didn't do it on purpose."

She sobbed for a minute before whispering, "I know, Pappy. But if you had died... I don't know if I could have forgiven him!"

"I know. And I know he never would have forgiven himself."

Upgrade cried silently.

"So just let it go, okay?" Rabbit pressed. "Be his Auntie Upgrade and take care of him. Because I'm still tickin' but someday who knows? An' tha Walters will still have you because he built you tha way me and yehr mama would have if we could."

"Oh, Pappy!" she choked.

They sat for a while, cuddled, until she was calm.

"I gotta go," she murmured. "Hatchy's heading in."

She kissed Rabbit's brow, logged out of her processor, and walked out.

Hatchworth approached a few minutes later, beaming, and hugged her. Rabbit smiled as he sat.

"Hey, there's my little hero," she chuckled.

"Hello, sister Rabbit. You had us terribly worried."

"Sorry, buddy... I had myself pretty worried too."

"Until you lost consciousness," Hatchworth whispered.

"Yeah. An' I can't th-th-thank ya enough."

"Yes. You can. I am endeavoring to forgive myself, but I assure you, you have thanked me sufficiently."

Rabbit chuckled. "Good to see ya an' all but... You don't have any memory files for me, right? You an' me... we remember a lot of the same things."

"Yes, I suppose you could share more with me than I with you."
"Ya want me to?"

Hatchworth opened his mouth and froze briefly. "Possibly. But not now. I could, however, share with you some of my stories from the vault."

Rabbit snickered. "No offense, buddy, but I don't think I need to hear tha gripping tale of tha day a piece of dust floated around fer three hours an' then landed on yehr leg."

"Rabbit," Hatchworth chided. "Let us not be insensitive to the plight of others."

"Oh. Sorry."

"You scoff at it but I wholed away many an hour watching dust motes. But in this instance, I meant the stories I told myself to pass the time. They are elaborate and fantastical."

"Are they really?" Rabbit asked, intrigued.

"Indeed. Worlds beyond our own."

"Oh! You said that back when..."

"When I was locked away, yes. And while there were times near the end of my containment that I began to despair I would ever be reclaimed, these stories were an immense comfort to me."

Rabbit smiled. "I'm glad yehr out, buddy. An' someday I wanna hear all yehr adventures. But today... I got my hands full just hearing about my own. So another time, okay?"

Hatchworth smiled warmly and patted her hand. "Absolutely."

"So... I hear ya might have a little romance goin' on..." she hinted softly.

Hatchworth's smile dropped and his eyes double-blinked... notable since they usually kept a regular pattern.

"Who... who has been saying such things?" he asked squeakily.

"Um... sorry, I kinda overheard it from tha workers..."

"Which ones?" he asked eagerly.

"Then it's true?" Rabbit gasped. "Yehr sweet on..."

"Shush!" Hatchworth hissed, looking around frantically.

Rabbit glanced around, too. Chelsea and Camille were at the far end of the lab, eating lunch with David and Bunny. Hatchworth was staring at them while trying not to look like he was staring. It was rather hilarious.

Okay, then, Rabbit sent. Yehr sweet on Camille?

Hatchworth jumped.

You okay?

I am still getting used to communicating this way again. I tried it that night and it no doubt caused you terrible pain.
"Oh, Hatchy..." she sighed. She blinked away oily tears.

And what is worse... had I not stopped to admire her lovely, luminescent eyes and the delicate flush of her dimpled cheeks, I would have been at your side that much sooner.

Rabbit giggled softly. *Oh yeah, you've got it bad.*

*I have what, now?*

*Yehr in love, buddy!*

Hatchworth glanced toward Camille nervously.

*Am I? Is that what it is?*

*Yeah! Sure sounds like it! It's weird, though... Don't take this tha wrong way, but I never saw you as a Casanova type.*

*I am not! I would not use a young lady for the sex only to discard her for another as soon as the wicked fancy took me!*

This was the best conversation she'd had all day.

*So you're thinking about sex with her, too?*

*No! I was thinking about not having the sex with her!*

*I don't follow...*

*I am not interesting in fleshy desires! I simply wish to woo her, charm her, chat with her, gaze into her eyes, speak sweet nothings into her shell-like ears... hold her soft, dainty hand under the moon and stars...*

Hatchworth's expression had shifted into something Rabbit had never seen. He looked positively giddy and sighed delicately as he continued.

*Yes... that would be heavenly! And I would not say no to kisses and embraces, no indeed... but the sex? Whatever for?*

Well, whaddya know, she thought. Hatchworth was an asexual romantic. From what she'd heard, some girls loved that type. She'd been that type herself before Honey had introduced her to power surges and she'd been as content as Hatchy was.

*Well, what about her? Is she interested in the... is she interested in sex?*

*I... I do not know...*

*Is she interested in romance, even?*

*I think so. She smiles at me a great deal and I could swear she has blushed when I held her in my arms...*

*Oh, blushing in yehr arms! That's a good sign.*

Well... she had just collided with my back at the time. She... may have simply been embarrassed.
Oops. He had a point. She wanted to help, though. She hadn't known about it for long but she already shipped it with all her heart. That said, she wasn't sure how to advise anyone on romance just now, much less a robot shaped like a dapper pear.

Well, good luck, big guy. I'm not sure what to tell ya but I do know that sometimes a guy... or a girl... just has to take a chance and say something.

Hatchworth shook.

If you want to have a romance, anyhow. You could just be friends.

We could. We are. But then... I would not get to romance her. I would like to do so. If I thought that she was amenable and I had missed the chance for such tender moments due to my own cowardice, it would haunt me indeed. So I must at some point confess to her.

Let me know how it goes, then. Or ask The Spine...

Oh, no. He is good at domesticity and politeness. He is not so impressive at romance.

Rabbit snickered. She'd watched The Spine for years and she knew that he was actually wonderful at romance, in a deeper and more meaningful sense. He was the kind to carry his tired wife to bed just to sleep, to take out the trash unasked, to watch the kids so she could take a break or to wash and rub her sore feet. The Spine as a devoted husband and father was adorable, but Hatchworth clearly didn't comprehend romance on that level. To her astonishment, he was a roses and poetry kind of guy. Who knew?

Hatchworth rose, gave her another quick hug, and left.

Sunshine approached hesitantly soon after, carrying a photo album. Rabbit blinked at her.

She could just remember her, now. She'd been told by The Spine's memory upload that this sweet little woman had come to the manor with Jon decades ago as a confused and very pregnant teenager, that Rabbit had been protective of her, that she had lost that baby, and that she was married to Dave and had more kids with him. Oh, and that she was sweet as honey and that her kids had seen Rabbit as a grandparent. Jon's upload had shown her as a hippie, and Upgrade's fleshed out the memories and brought them together. What she remembered from the last few years confirmed that this one was special. It chafed to be unable to remember their friendship first hand, but at least she did remember something.

Rabbit saw Dave following his wife closely and looked at him askance. Recent memory also told her Dave had been trying to atone for years away from his father, but she now had access to countless memories of The Spine worrying about his son as well as the memory of their parting. Topping that off was The Jon's memories of seeing The Spine missing his child even after he at last got up from his bed and started living again. Seeing as how Rabbit had still been struggling to forgive him for abandoning his father, she wasn't sure how to speak to him now. Some things that had once bothered her no longer did. The memory of the hurt Dave had caused The Spine now bothered her a great deal more.

"I know that look," Sunshine said warmly.

"And I know that you don't have a death ray anymore so you can glare all you want," Dave added.

Rabbit stuck out her lip. "Do ya blame me?"

"No," Dave said softly. "I don't blame you at all. I never did. I blame myself like I'm supposed to."
And I'm so sorry about it, Rabbit. I may never forgive myself for letting it happen much less for
letting it go on so long. But I'm doing my best, okay? You have to remember that much, right?"
Rabbit sighed and looked down. "Yeah, I do. So... uh... ya got any memories The Spine don't?"
"None we can share the way he did, of course," Sunshine murmured. "But we have plenty to tell
you that he didn't hear or see. Are you up to a long talk, Grandpappy Rabbit? Oh... or would you
rather be called something else?"
"How about just Rabbit, baby?" she said softly, looking up once more.
Sunshine beamed. "Alright."
"Yeah, I can talk for a while. Upgrade won't let me look at Honey's letter yet so I gotta distract
myself."
"Ah. Well, then we'll do our best. And Louise will be down soon. She's having a rest."
"Louise..." Rabbit breathed, delighted. "Resting? She okay?"
"Just old," Dave chuckled.
"But... look, she's what, 98? I mean it... how is she, really? And y-y-yeah, I remember her, but you
see her more."
They glanced at each other and back at Rabbit. "She's declining, yes," Sunshine said. "Slowly,
considering her age. But yeah. Make all the memories you can, sweetheart. I know that's what helps
you the most. Getting some time before it's too late."
Rabbit smiled sadly. "Thanks, baby. One thing I do remember... I can c-count on you to tell me what
I really wanna know. The others would have just t-t-t-told me not to worry myself right now."
"And they're right. But you'll just worry more if we lie to you."
"So where do we start?" Rabbit asked.
"Well..." Sunshine said, opening the photo album. "Since you can't see Honey's letter yet, I guess we
start with Grandma."
"Grandma?" Rabbit asked, surprised.
Sunshine smiled.

Rabbit was laughing. It was lovely to laugh again.

Annie's turn had come up, and she had brought Peter V with her. Peter VI had wandered in after a
few minutes and sank onto the couch beside his mother, where he now sat chuckling in disbelief.
Apparently he'd heard the story but some details had been glossed over. Until now.
"I threatened to kill him?" Rabbit crowed.
"Not in so many words, but you didn't appreciate his tone and you let him know it!" Annie replied.
"And after threatening to throw that other guy into traffic! Honestly, I've never seen you so violent
since! I hope it doesn't go with the chest plate."

"You always used to warn me about grabbing girls' butts," Peter VI snorted. "I couldn't understand it as a kid but you ground it into me. I even hesitate when I..." His mask angled toward his parents briefly. "Never mind."

Rabbit grinned. "Don't hesitate with her, dummins. That's whose butt yehr supposed ta grab."

"Rabbit..." he groaned.

Annie laughed brightly. Peter V chuckled and patted her knee.

"You sure were a pretty girl," Peter V said faintly.

"Was I, buddy?" Rabbit asked gently.

"You were. So pretty the cops thought you were a whore."

Annie and Peter VI gasped but Rabbit roared. Peter had no filters these days.

"An expensive one, I hope," she snickered.

Peter V beamed and began to rise from the couch. Their laughter faded as Annie carefully tugged him back down. Rabbit blinked at him. He seemed blithely unaware that humans weren't supposed to randomly levitate.

"Annie, baby... I remember Petes doin' that, but I guess I forgot why?" Rabbit murmured uncomfortably. "Could you tell me that story? It ain't in the memory packets tha others gave me."

Peter VI turned to her eagerly but Annie was shaking her head.

"Is it a secret or something?" Peter asked.

"No," Annie said with an uneasy chuckle. "It's just that I don't know how he does it. I'm not even sure when he started."

Peter V smiled at each of them.

"I remember him doing it when I was a kid, though. Well, I thought I did. It's part of that recurring dream, though, so maybe not. When's the first time you remember him doing it?"

"Let me see," Annie murmured. "In New York, actually. It was..." She blushed. "Oh... You don't want to know when but... well, I thought I was imagining it at the time."

"What happened, exactly?" Peter asked, puzzled.

"Oh," she tittered, "I just thought he seemed a little weightless, is all. I don't think you want to know the details."

"Well, yeah I do. I can't work with just New York..." He froze. "Oh..."

Rabbit was flailing a hand at him beside her leg, trying and failing to be subtle. He'd finally noticed.

"Sorry..." Peter said weakly. "So, so very sorry... ugh..."
"I know, baby," she said soothingly. "It's not easy thinking of your parents as having a sex life."

"More like something I completely avoid, Mom."

"Y'know, though..." She giggled. "I just realized... that's when you were conceived, sweetie!"

"Mom..." Peter groaned, leaning back against the couch.

"So what do you remember, then?" she asked with a sigh.

"I hate to even say it now..." he moaned.

"Go on, we can take it," Rabbit said eagerly.

"Well... he told me... ugh... He said you could do it if you seduce gravity."

Rabbit snickered and Annie pinked again.

"Oh, I hope that was a dream!" Annie chortled. "What an idea..."

"Worked, too," Peter V said.

They all looked at him.

"Real pretty girl," Peter V continued blithely. "Not at first, of course. Not until she approved of you. After that, though..." He whistled weakly. "But you expect that from a goddess..."

Now they looked at each other.

"I felt kind of funny sleeping with a woman I didn't know, but she could fog your mind so you didn't worry so much. That was nice."

Annie's mouth opened and shut twice.

He snickered softly. "I always wished I'd gotten her cornbread recipe, though."

They sat in stunned silence.

"Mom," Peter VI began at last.

"Y'know, we've been talking all afternoon. I think your father needs a nap," Annie said firmly, scooting toward the edge of the couch.

Before she could get far, Upgrade trotted into the room. "Pappy! I have some more memories for you!"

"What? How?"

"I picked out some from Lily's files. Just the ones I thought would help."

"Oh! But how?" Rabbit asked again, bewildered.

"I uploaded her and..."

"I know... but I thought... didn't you say you left her memories in tha HoW?"

Upgrade showed the barest flash of startled surprise before continuing, "Oh, I went in and accessed
them. Are you all done? I want to go ahead and transfer the file."

"Alright," Rabbit said. "Yeah... I think we're gonna break it up now..."

Everyone needed a few minutes after that story about Peter V seducing someone. She didn't know whether he had imagined it all, or confessed something very awkward and thoroughly impossible. Although... what was impossible for a man that could fly?

She waved to the others as they left. To add to Rabbit's confusion, she saw Annie cast a lingering look at Upgrade as they rounded the corner.

What was that all about?

Louise came to visit her the next day. Rabbit had seen her recently and remembered her well, and even danced with her at the reception. Still, it the light of day, seeing her was a shock.

She was almost ninety-eight years old. That was an impressive age for a human. Rabbit remembered what Sunshine had said about Louise... that she was fading. But she smiled as wickedly as ever as they sat together in the lab.

"So, you finally gonna do it?" Louise asked sternly.

"Yeah. I think I'm ready. Got a lot to get used to so I'm gonna do it all at once."

"Huh. I'd think most people would want to spread it out a little."

"Well, I ain't mo-mo-most people."

"That's for damned sure." They both chuckled. "I suppose you know that I talked to the girls in the Cavalcadium and it's all paid for."

"Petes told me. Thanks, baby."

"Hey, you wanna do it, so I wanna help. Plus you know how many of those nerds probably knew all along you were designed female and have just been waiting to see you completed. I swear they'd take over the world if they could, and just keep a few men around as breeding stock."

Rabbit, who had spent enough decades living as a man to see both sides of the question, didn't laugh at this a heartily as Louise did.

"Baby... you scare me sometimes," she said.

Louise winked. "I do my best. And don't you worry. You were the most masculine sonuvabitch I ever knew, but you're gonna be more feminine than me, just you wait."

"Armand was more feminine than you, baby."

They both laughed uproariously at this. When she calmed, Louise had tears in her eyes; whether from amusement or something else, Rabbit wasn't sure.

"Adorable French bastard. I sure miss him, Rabbit," she said, answering the question.

"He was a nice fella, baby. I... don't remember him like I should anymore..."
"Well, then... I guess I'll just have to tell you all about him."

Rabbit patted her hand and smiled.

At long last, Rabbit found some quiet time. She hadn't wanted any at first. It felt oddly lonely inside her own head, knowing how much was missing. That was the trouble with retaining recent memories... She remembered remembering, but not what those memories were.

But now she needed solitude. Peter had given her the okay to open Honey's letter, if she wanted. He'd also suggested she might want to skip it. He said that she might find it easier to transition her hardware without her most compelling memories of being a husband and father. She'd considered it and chose to do it anyway. Honey had been the love of her life. This letter was hers. But Rabbit had also wanted to do so before they began the process of replacing her parts, while she still at least looked like she had when Honey was alive. She didn't feel male from day to day, but for Honey, she had been all man.

And she had been warned by those who had been there the last time, those that were still living and lucid, at least, about certain things. One was that she'd be reliving part of her life over again, as a man. So for just a little while, she would pretend. And then she would have some of her life returned to her, and carry on restoring herself to design. The second was what Upgrade had said... that it took a couple of days.

The good news was, everyone knew what to expect when Rabbit opened it. So she was settled comfortably in her own bed, propped up with pillows. Upgrade made sure to top up her water and oil and left her to it.

Rabbit blew out a plume of steam. She was stalling and she knew it.

She looked through her files, found the one labeled "Honebe," snickered and opened it.

"Rabbit..."

Honeybee stood before her. Rabbit gasped with joy and pain.

"Honeybee!" she choked.

And there was her old persona... the vest, sash and topper, the masculine frame. Rabbit smiled. She had looked pretty damned good.

She stepped forward. It felt weird going full 1960s Rabbit again... and it felt familiar. For now, it would be alright. For just a little longer.

"Rabbit, beloved..." Honeybee murmured, making Rabbit's boiler run doubletime, "If you're seeing this, then I am gone..."

Rabbit sighed. "I know, baby."

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is wondering where I pulled the Hatchworth/Camille ship from, there's
actually a real life stage inspiration for it. I tried to find a video that captured it, because I saw it myself more than once, but couldn't seem to find one.

When the girls were on stage during Brass Goggles, toward the end of Sam's run, Hatchworth would sometimes turn and sing right to Camille, and she would smile right back at him. Now, that's just Sam mugging at Camille because she was on his side of the stage, and her smiling about it because Sam's a likable guy. But at the time it was so cute that I thought it would make a good ship. As a ship, I think it makes the moment sweeter and more adorable, so I regret not being able to find a video that shows it.

Also, it occurs to me that I once mentioned Dusty, but never mentioned she was a poc. I just always saw her that way. I like to think that Jon was the one who filled her hair with daisies and they always had a special place in her heart. And she always had a special place in... whatever he has.
Well, I Knew a Girl, and Her Name Was...

Chapter Summary

Opening a very difficult file... but not the one you think.

Chapter Notes

A little curveball in the middle of the final chapters. It's more of a set-up for things than an actual story.

Music for the unpacking of the memory at the end. It's a strange mix of emotion and digital coldness.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYAsje5bRYE&index=33&list=PLcWJDQvqlrV0kLnAo3TT0K_MZqzD6ZYD6&t=0s

Upgrade peered through the doorway. Rabbit was in quiet stasis, re-living one of the few memories that had been designed to be re-integrated as her own.

Her Pappy would remember her as she once had. That would be something. Then she could get her chassis changed and they could discuss whether she still wanted to be called "Pappy." It was technically accurate, but starting to feel a little weird.

She headed toward her room, passing Peter V's, and stopped as she usually did to peek inside. He was dozing next to Annie, who was reading a book.

Upgrade stared placidly at his face. He'd grown so much older, but she could still see the man he once was, from his days of being almost as skinny and confused as Peter VI was now, to the years he'd spent working his way around the world, growing mature and sophisticated and... sexy.

She wasn't in love with him anymore. But she still remembered. She remembered her own crush on him that had blossomed into admiration. She even remembered, just a little, what it was like to be his loving wife.

Not that she'd hung onto the memories... not where she could see them all the time, as she once had. But she had a little file, just one special, zipped file, carefully stored as if with lavender in a small corner of her memory. Only Peter VI knew about it, by necessity. And she should have told him sooner.

It was labeled simply, "Lily." It was the most dangerous thing she owned. She couldn't leave the complete file behind because of the danger of Qwerty Beta opening it and acquiring Lily's personality. She couldn't bring herself to delete it, but she had painstakingly removed it from her own personality files and had no intention of letting it back in.

She was Upgrade Walter, an automaton who was once simply an AI, Rabbit and Honeybee's
daughter, The Jon's lover. Lily Walter had gone into the light. And she intended to keep her there, for the good of everyone.

Annie glanced up and she waved, hurrying away to find Jon and wondering if she had imagined that Annie had looked as though she wanted to speak to her.

Annie returned to her book, sighing. She read through another chapter, only partially taking it in.

Peter's head dipped and she patted his arm, rousing him. He'd get a kink in his neck if he slept that way. His head bobbed up slowly, as if it was too heavy to lift.

"Lily..." he murmured.

"Annie, sweetheart," she said gently.

"Oh..."

He fell silent, gently patting her hand. She read her book and blinked back tears.

She'd gotten used to it, for a while. It had been the expected turn. There was a chance that, that sooner or later, he'd forget her. But she still couldn't quite let him settle in calling her Lily.

And it grew more and more clear that soon, he wouldn't be calling her anything at all.

"Where's Lily?" he asked at last.

She looked at him, startled. He usually accepted that she was Annie, sometimes even remembering her for a little while. He hadn't asked before where Lily was.

"She's... she's gone, Peter."

"Gone...?"

"She passed away," she said gently. "Years ago."

"Oh," he murmured.

She watched him, trying to gauge his response. He looked at his hands, his face tense. She'd seen that look. He was trying to remember something. He would probably fail.

Tears slowly descended his cheeks. Her heart was in her throat as she grappled with what to tell him. But he didn't ask. He squeezed her hand and looked out the window, crying silently.

Annie waited until he dozed again, kissed his hand and set it gently on the arm of the chair. She quietly asked the nurse to tuck a pillow around his neck so he could nap comfortably, and slipped out of the room.

She'd put this off for too long. She didn't know how much time he had left and she needed help only one person could give her.

The door opened before she knocked. The Jon was looking at her with wide eyes.
"You know why I'm here?" she asked.

He nodded. "Just... don't push her, okay?"

"I wouldn't dream of it. That's not how I want this to be," she replied.

The Jon nodded, hugged her, and slipped out, leaving her to talk to Upgrade alone.

"Annie, what's going on?" Upgrade asked as Annie walked into the room. "Why'd Jonny leave?"

"I need a favor," Annie murmured, sitting. She sighed deeply. "How's Rabbit doing?"

Upgrade looked at her blankly. "Much better. But that can't be what you came to ask me..."

"No, sweetie..." Annie sighed.

"It's about Peter, isn't it? Your husband..."

Annie nodded.

"Is he...?" Upgrade faltered. "Is he... dying?"

"Sweetie... he's okay for now, but... he keeps asking for her. Lily."

"Oh..."

"And... and you once had all that was left of her."

"Yes," Upgrade whispered, looking at her hands.

"Honey... I know it hurts to remember her, but I just need to know if there's any files left in the HoW that I could show him. He cries sometimes after asking for her, and I think he realizes she's dead but... I don't know. Maybe he doesn't anymore. Maybe he thinks she's still here!"

Upgrade looked away, wringing her hands. "Isn't he better off not hoping she'll come back?"

"If he was lucid, sure. But he isn't anymore. Upgrade... You know how it hurts me to say this, but I don't think he has that long." Her voice broke but she pressed on. "He misses her. This is all I can do for him now! Just... just help me get the files, okay?"

Upgrade put her hands over her mouth for a moment. Oil trickled from her eyes.

"Annie..." she breathed, "they aren't in the HoW."

"They're gone?" Annie cried.

Upgrade shook her head. "I lied to everyone. I said I was leaving them behind, but I couldn't. I left copies of the basic files and brought all of her files with me."

"What? How many?"

"All of them," Upgrade repeated. "Memories, personality, everything. Peter VI was expecting less data and... oh, Annie, I'm so sorry! I was stuck inside my own head for years because I lied and brought extra data and messed up the transfer!"

"But whatever for? Couldn't they just be stored in memory?"
"No, Annie..." Upgrade whispered. "They... they're not just data. They're her memories, but also her thoughts and feelings and personality. And when I first had them, they were part of me. They were blended with my own personality so much that I didn't know who I was anymore."

Annie was thunderstruck. "But... you aren't her anymore? You don't still have them in your matrix..."

"No! When I realized I was in love with Jonny, I started pulling her files out and storing them. It took years but I had to do it because I loved him and even though I thought he felt the same way Lily did, I wanted to be able to just love him and not feel guilty! So I took them out, but I kept them in storage. I'm just me now. Lily is just a set of files in my processor."

"Is there some way to download them?"

"That's the trouble. Like I said... Lily didn't just upload as memories. She uploaded as Lily! Her spirit left, or at least, I thought I saw her go. I don't know where but my calculations do support the idea of a higher state of consciousness, so I do believe she had a spirit and that it moved on. But what's left remembers being a living woman. It has to be handled with care. You can't just view it like a video."

"But... you were able to access it..."

"Yes. I can access it, if I'm careful. But Lily had a very strong will..."

Annie couldn't bring herself to say it. She felt a horrible pain inside at the very thought of what she meant to suggest... pain at losing Peter inside and out, pain at putting Upgrade through it.

"You want me to be Lily for him, don't you?" Upgrade whispered.

"Not really..." Annie breathed. "Not in every way. Just when he asks for her. He might forget her, too. I don't know how long he'll remember any of us, honestly."

She stopped, overcome. Upgrade was staring at the floor.

"Will you?" Annie managed. "Can you at least try, without blending with her again? Can you just be her when he needs her?"

Upgrade looked her in the eye and rubbed her hand across her nose. "I shouldn't, Annie. If Unkie Spine knew..."

"I know, sweetheart. But... I'm begging you..."

"Annie, don't..."

"I'm sorry. I'll face The Spine. I just... Peter's so afraid sometimes. He seems calm but you can see it in his eyes. He doesn't understand and..."

She couldn't say anymore. She looked pleadingly at Upgrade, who put her hand on Annie's shoulder and smiled sadly.

"Alright," she whispered. "I think I can figure out a way. Just for Peter."

"What's wrong, baby?" Rabbit asked two days later.

She'd completed the letter Honey had left her, and was still reeling. It had hurt terribly to lose her,
but... what memories she'd given back! Honey's odd obsession with bedroom activities had been very well represented and Rabbit still tingled a little at the thought of it. She hadn't even remembered some of those nights... and Honey had gotten very, very good at it by the time she couldn't do it anymore. She didn't suppose she'd ever get sex like that again... but then, she'd always associate it with Honey. The occasional little attempts she'd made at mechto amore since being widowed just didn't hold a candle to making love to Honeybee. Her little flings with the toaster and the blender hadn't meant a thing. And the nightstand just had great legs.

Another great thing about the letter was that now she remembered her baby... as a baby! What an adorable little signal she'd been... but now she was giving off a few signals of a different sort.

"Nothing, Pappy," Upgrade murmured.

"It is, though. Pappy can tell. Is it because of tha letter? You still feel kinda bad about tha f-f-first time I read it?"

"No, Pappy. I'm glad you remember me!"

"Oh. What is it, then?"

"Will you promise not to tell Unkie Spine?"

"You ki-ki-kiddin'? Hidin' stuff from The Spine is one of my greatest skills!"

Upgrade giggled. "Annie asked me to act like Lily sometimes, when Peter V misses her."

Rabbit's smile faded and Upgrade wilted.

"I knew you'd be upset..." she whispered.

"No!" Rabbit said suddenly. "No, I just... didn't expect that. I'm a little worried, but I ain't mad. Baby... does that mean Petes is dyin'?"

Rabbit sounded calm but her hands had begun to twitch. She didn't need any more changes right now.

"No, Pappy! He's just forgetting more things and sometimes he wants to know where Lily went. An' when Annie tells him, it makes him cry!"

Rabbit leaned back against the sofa and whistled softly. "Well, that explains why ya didn't want me ta tell. That's a doozy."

"I know. But I can do it. I have her personality files stored away."

"Well... just be careful, alright? Because Pete five is a hot mess an' he needs all the help he can get... but Six can only fix so much at once an' I don't want you gettin' virused up with Lily's personality again."

She was afraid Upgrade might take offense at the idea of Lily being a virus, but she just said, "Okay, Pappy."

"Just one other thing, baby... Did ya tell Jonny?"

Upgrade said nothing. She hadn't.

"Uh-huh. Ya gotta tell him. It ain't right not to tell him."
"I know," she whispered.

"He'll understand. Ya know he will. Yehr not havin' some sick affair. You're just playin' a p-p-p-part. Helpin' a friend."

"I guess. But I'm just afraid he'll be hurt. You can understand and still be hurt."

"Jonny ain't jealous, baby. It ain't in his nature."

Upgrade snorted.

"Is he?" Rabbit asked uncertainly.

"Pappy... Jonny is the sweetest guy ever. But I'll tell ya a secret... He does get jealous. He won't admit it, he feels awful about it, an' he gets over it fast. But you bet he gets jealous. Sometimes I think falling in love was bad for him."

"Aw, fallin' in love is great, baby..."

"Yeah... but he used to always be nice, and now... If anyone gives me a hard time or acts too fresh with me, he gets upset. Like he wants to fight them but his programming won't let him."

Rabbit chuckled. "Baby, if that's the worst he does, he's as good as you think. 'Cause I felt the same way about yehr Mama. Anyone looked at her crossways an' I was ready ta put up my dukes. An' the one time I saw Jon act that way about you was when Six was startin' tha download. Jon looked at him like he was the devil. Never seen him look so angry in my life. Didn't realize at the time what it was, but now I understand. An' I wouldn't have it any other way."

"You'd want him to hurt someone over me?" she scoffed.

"No. But I want him to protect ya. After all that's happened, I wanna make sure you have people who love you and protect you even if something happens ta me."

"He does do that."

"Good. You get different when ya have a kid. Ya want to be a better bot and ya want them to have all tha best things in life. An' I w-w-want that for you, baby. You're one of the best things that ever happened to me."

Upgrade sighed and nestled against Rabbit. Rabbit held her close, anxiety creeping over her. Maybe she shouldn't have mentioned having kids...

"I guess... sometimes I kinda wish you had the chance to have your own," Rabbit sighed.

"I have GG," Upgrade said softly.

"I know. An' I know bein' adopted is just as good as being born into a family. Dave was the best kid ever til he turned into a punk."

Upgrade giggled.

"I guess he came out alright, though," Rabbit chuckled. "But I know you an' Jonny kinda wanted your own baby."

"Yeah. But we're alright. I promise."
Rabbit wasn't so sure. But there wasn't a thing she could do about it, so she just held her instead.

The next day, Upgrade sat down with Jon to tell him what Annie had asked. He smiled knowingly before she even began.

"You know," Upgrade murmured.

"Of course. I know ya don't wanna go back to remembering, but I understand."

"It's like a lie, though, Jonny! I'm not her, she's not here! She moved on!"

"Kinda. And she kinda stayed, huh? Besides, pain medicines are a lie, too. They just trick people into thinking it doesn't hurt. An' they give those to people who need them. An' Peter needs to talk to Lily. He lost her too soon."

Upgrade's lip trembled. Jon sometimes spoke too much truth in one sitting and it could really hurt when he did. Jon bent low and peered up into her downcast eyes with a surprised expression, then slid close and pulled her into his arms, nestling her head close against his neck and resting his head on top of hers.

"I know ya thought it was a secret that you kept her, sweetie," he murmured. "Even though I know stuff sometimes. But now ya know I don't mind... so you can go ahead and wake her up whenever you're ready."

"Jonny..." she sobbed. "What if... she really does wake up? What if she thinks she's still here, trapped in my body? She was so strong last time... I thought I was just integrating files into my memory but she blended with me instead, she almost took over entirely! I was happy for a while but when I realized I wanted to just be me again it took years and so much struggle to pull her out! I love Lily but... I don't wanna be her again! An' if I just wake her up on her own, all at once, she might know, she might be self-aware and freak out because she thinks I didn't let her die!"

Jon was silent for a long time as Upgrade cried. He rocked gently and stroked her back and she knew he was considering the problem. Other people didn't understand The Jon. Some thought he was an idiot and others thought he knew everything before it happened.

The truth was, he sometimes sensed things, but he couldn't read minds. And he was sometimes simple, but not stupid. Not at all.

"Let me talk to her, sweetie," he whispered.

"What?"

"Plug me in an' I'll talk to her. Wake her up carefully an' I'll explain what's going on. She has moved on, but the stuff you saved thinks like Lily, an' Lily was smart. If we're careful an' take it easy, we can tell her what she needs to do. If it's just data, you can use it any way you want to. But if she is self-aware, she'll want to help Peter."

"But... it would mean that someday I'd hafta shut her off again!"

Jon sighed. "An' you were afraid you killed her once."

Upgrade nodded. "And technically... I did, Jonny. She asked me to, an' she was dying, but I ended her life."
"I know. But she really wouldn't have gone on more than a day or two. You could see it. It was like Pappy..."

Jon's voice broke and Upgrade squeezed him.

"And like Marie, and Three..." Jon said thickly. "You knew. Everyone knew. Even The Spine did, even though he didn't wanna admit it. Lily was like ink floating on water. She couldn't last, so you took an impression of all she was even though that meant that the ink was ruined. An' Lily faded an' her impression stayed. She wanted that, right? It was her plan all along."

"Yeah..."

"Then she should understand when I tell her that."

"Alright," Upgrade breathed. "In the morning, though. I'm so tired."

He stroked her hair. "Worried. About everyone."

"Yeah."

Jon slipped an arm under her legs, rose, and carried her to bed.

"If ya need anything, I'll be in tha lab," Rabbit said the next day.

She'd checked on Upgrade and found out what they were planning. Upgrade was glad. Rabbit couldn't do a thing to help, but she felt comforted knowing her Pappy... her parent... was aware of her struggles and was thinking of her.

Jon smiled at Rabbit. "Thank you. We can't let a lot of people know what's up."

"Because of Spine. I got ya. Tell me how it g-g-g-goes."

Rabbit walked out, closing the door behind her. Jon looked at Upgrade, who smiled.

"She seems to think we can handle things now," Jon murmured.

"She's been through so much. Her confidence is kinda mushed up. I guess she figures we know about as much as anybody anymore."

Jon kissed her softly and snuggled in beside her.

"Ready, sweetie."

Upgrade linked to his mind. Jon stood before her in an early robotic avatar. Upgrade wore the one Lily had last seen.

"You look so young," Jon said, smiling.

"So do you. Jonny... if anything happens an' I end up mixed with Lily again... don't make love to me until she's separated."

Jon embraced her and chuckled softly. "Sweetie... I wouldn't even try. An' even if I did, Lily wouldn't let me, would she?"
"No... she'd be furious."

"There you go."

"Alright. Limiting available memory, locking connecting sectors. Here we go."

Upgrade steeled herself and activated the necessary files. After a moment, a shape flickered to life before them, resolving into a familiar figure. It stood rigid for a little while... then a ping sounded and Lily blinked at them both.

They watched anxiously. She looked back and forth between them slowly.

"Data files incomplete," she said blankly.

Upgrade deflated slightly. "Just a minute."

She scoured the sector, got the code straightened out, and restarted Lily.

"What..." Lily whispered when she was back online. "Qwerty? Unkie Jon?"

Jon glanced at Upgrade and gave a little nod. "Lily?" he asked tremulously.

"Yes. At least, that's my name. I... don't feel as though I'm really here..."

She sounded stiff and mechanical, at least, for Lily. Her lively nature was missing entirely.

"You're a memory, Lily. A file," Jon said sadly. "Your soul moved on a long time ago."

Upgrade gasped.

Lily nodded. "Yes. Of course. Data is present that says I am Lily Walter, but Lily Walter expired thirty-six years ago. There is stored data from the interval that suggests these files were in use for several years before storage. Do you wish to use them again?"

"Not in the way they were last used," Jon said calmly. "We want to have access to the contents of the personality and data files without reintegrating. Can you make yourself available strictly as that without reintegrating with the host?"

"Of course. In what capacity will they be used?"

Jon nodded to Upgrade, and she took courage and spoke. "I need to be able to assume the mannerisms and tone of Lily Walter, while accessing the memories, without being merged with them again. I need a Lily Walter simulation that is fully under my control."

"For what purpose, though?" the figure asked, sounding more like Lily.

Upgrade shook as she murmured, "Lily... if you remember being Lily at all... look... Peter is ill and afraid. He's getting old and he misses Lily Walter. I want to be able to reassure him during his last few years of life."

The figure blinked twice. "Peter... Peter is dying?"

Jon and Upgrade stared. She had seemed so mechanical and aloof until they mentioned him...

"Not yet... but he doesn't have much time left," Jon murmured.
"He's old..." it continued softly. "Did he marry again?"

"Yes... he married and they have a son," Jon replied.

"Oh..."

The figure said nothing more at first. Jon and Upgrade looked at each other.

"Are they happy?" Lily asked.

Upgrade ached. But she knew what Lily, or the essence of Lily, would want to know.

"Yes. She made him very happy. She still does. And they love their son, who has also married and is very happy."

"Qwerty..." Lily whispered, "the data also contains a date for my mother's death."

Jon took Upgrade's hand. She squeezed his and braced herself.

"How is my father?" Lily asked slowly.

"Oh..." That wasn't so bad... "He just remarried, sweetie. Just recently. It took a long time to meet a girl as wonderful as Marie."

To their shock, the figure smiled, just a little.

"Thank you. Since they are only to be used to help Peter, the files will be made available without commands to reintegrate with the host. I would like to... to sleep now."

"Sleep?"

"To return to dormancy. To no longer be self-aware. I... I'm not alive anymore. I prefer not to be aware of it."

"Of course," Upgrade whispered tearfully.

She stepped forward as if to embrace Lily, and stopped. No. It didn't feel right. "Lily" stared at her blankly. It was everything Lily was... and yet not Lily at all.

"Goodnight, Lily," Jon breathed. "We miss you."

"Thank you, Unkie Jon," the figure said in stilted tones. "Goodnight to you both. Tell Pappy... no. Tell him nothing. It would hurt him too much. But please watch over him. I miss him... but I won't for long."

"Goodnight," Upgrade whispered.

Lily's avatar faded away. The files remained unlocked, ready for the day Annie eventually told her they were needed.

They had done it.

Upgrade switched them both to human avatars and embraced Jon for a good cry.
Yulemas

Chapter Summary

Last Yulemas was a dumpster fire. Much has changed and the specters of the past still linger. But there's a lot of promise in the future.

Four tales... approaching Yulemas through the new year.

Chapter Notes

The last chapter was very sad, so enjoy this one. Only a little hurt and a lot of comfort. Also, I apologize in advance for getting a particular song stuck in your head.

Happy various holidays.

Note: If you read the story before and notice a change in the date of Bunny's picnic, that's because I screwed up while writing the next installment and forgot that I wrote past the date of said picnic alreadt and some important events got out of order. So it was easiest to come back and change the date in this story to match the next couple of chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Tale 1: An Event to Bond Over**

Bunny sat down with the last piece of chocolate pie, smiling in anticipation. She'd been afraid David might have gotten to it first.

Peter was in the lab with Rabbit and Gabi, so she had a little break. Bunny had done her best on the chassis, but once she'd gotten the sketches done, she realized she was in over her head. But David's last girlfriend before the current one had broken up with him on the friendliest of terms... fortunately, because she was a master sculptor. And now that Rabbit was feeling a bit more stable, she was suddenly very eager to get on with things.

The pie was exactly as good today as it had been on Thanksgiving. Bunny made a whispery yummy sound.

"Oh, no..."

She looked up. David smiled sheepishly in the doorway.

"We can split it..." she whispered.

"No, that's okay. I horked down enough on Thanksgiving. I was gonna do everyone a favor and eat it before it went bad."
Bunny grinned. "Guess I'll be the hero today."

"You're an inspiration to us all," he said with a smirk.

"Hey, sexy," Gabi said, slapping his bottom as she walked in.

David squeaked and then relaxed. "Oh, hey... so how'd it go?"

"Great! This is going to be so much fun. I haven't sculpted anything normal in ages. She wanted huge breasts!" Gabi giggled madly. "I talked her down, though. They'll fit her and she'll look good, but if she got the size she wanted, she'd end up looking like a Valkyrie."

"She probably wanted that," Bunny whispered.

"Probably! Oo, chocolate pie. Lucky!" Gabi said cheerfully.

Bunny smiled.

"My mom said she craved chocolate pie non-stop while she was pregnant with my brother. I always thought you craved pickles but apparently not because with me it was barbecue chicken and raspberries and with him it was chocolate pie and cheese!"

"Well, with me it's just delicious pie," Bunny whispered. "Oh... I mean..."

They were both staring at her. David had turned bright red.

"I mean... I'm not pregnant! I... I like pie!"

Gabi exploded with laughter and David exhaled as though he hadn't been breathing at all, before joining in.

"Must be pretty good pie!" Gabi giggled.

"Wanna bite?" Bunny breathed, shaking a little.

Gabi accepted a taste and put a hand to her cheek. "Oh, wow! Yeah, I'd crave that any day!"

"We'll have to get Hatchy to make it for Christmas, then you can come have some," David said.

Bunny sighed softly. That had been weird. Was everyone just waiting for the word that she was pregnant? Was this what it was like to be a married girl?*

"Oh, thanks! I better go get to work so I have something to bring with me next time. Rabbit's really impatient about this."

"Yeah, she wasn't too happy about the delay, was she?" David asked. "But she'll just have to do the Yulemas show in her old outfit."

"And the one after that. This is a big order. It might take months."

Bunny raised her eyebrows. Well. Good thing they'd gotten sponsors to help with costs or it would have taken longer as Bunny struggled to get the structure right. They'd considered Gabi before but David refused to ask unless they could pay her full price.

David walked Gabi to the door and Bunny savored the pie. Huh. Pregnancy craving... as if. Wouldn't that be some Christmas gift, though? Besides, she was on the pill... though she had missed
one during all the work on Rabbit. She was due for the next period, though...

Wait.

She started a new pill packet tonight! She was due for her period last week!

Bunny popped the last of the pie into her mouth and hurried to find Peter.

"Are you sure?" he hissed.

They were squeezed into a small space between cupboards in the back of the lab. Peter held her in his arms. He was trembling.

"I'm four days late!" she whispered. "We gotta get one of those test thingies!"

"Oh, wow... Bunny... holy crap, Mom will freak!"

"Don't get excited now! Maybe it's a fluke..."

"Maybe... but I mean... you missed one, right?"

"Yeah, but is that enough? Like leaving an opening in your defenses and the enemy breaks through?"

"Gamers," he chuckled. "Any you miss increases the chance that ovulation will occur in the normal way. After that, well... that's where I come in."

Bunny blushed and rested her head against his. "That was a pun," she whispered, feeling warm all over.

Peter giggled. She enjoyed it. She might be pregnant!

"I can't go to the store right now, though," he whispered. "I have maintenance today and The Spine is coming in next. Coincidentally, I'll be taking measurements for the sample containment unit."

"Fun," she said sarcastically. "But yeah, I have a boatload of stuff to do too, and if anyone hears we're going to the store, you know at least three people will want to come pick up a few things." She thought for a moment. "Maybe this evening we say we're going out to eat or something? And we get it then. Oh, no... they won't believe that."

"Why?"

"Well, your mask..."

"So we tell them we're getting take out. Better yet, we buy the test, then get some take out and go walk on the beach. It's chilly but we can keep each other warm. The test can wait until we get back."

"Sounds good," she breathed.

She kissed his neck and sighed contentedly. How had she ever not loved Peter Walter?

Twenty-four hours later, they sat on the front porch of their Kazooland house. Bunny had been on
call for maintenance but Peter had arranged for Chelsea to switch days with her. She and David were
the only other people who knew why.

Bunny leaned against Peter, sniffling softly. She shouldn't be crying. It was just stupid to cry. She'd
never been pregnant in the first place! But... she swore it felt as though she had, and it was gone.

She'd gotten so excited by the time she used the test... and it came up negative. Her period had
started the next day.

"I'm sorry," she murmured thickly.

"Bunny... you don't need to apologize!"

"I got your hopes up and I was just late!" she moaned.

He swung the porch swing and held her close. "I love you," he whispered. "We'll have that baby
someday, okay? We're young. We've just started. We don't need to rush. We can have some time
getting used to being married and being together."

"I know..."

"Think about it. No one to cry in the night and interrupt sex..."

She sniffled. "No one to rock to sleep," she choked.

"Yeah, but no kink in your neck from dozing off in the old rocking chair. Or was it a crick?"

Bunny laughed weakly. "Plus childbirth, right?"

"Absolutely. And breastfeeding."

She wasn't actually bothered by that, but she didn't feel like saying so. "Sure. Better to wait."

"Wise woman."

He made no further attempt to cheer her up when she started sobbing. He just sat with his head on
hers and swung the porch swing.

Peter sighed.

He'd wanted that baby. There was no baby, but still he'd wanted it.

But he also believed what he'd said. It was best to wait. In the last year, he'd been through a boatload
of traumatic experiences... and Bunny had been completely transformed, fallen in love, and gotten
married. It was too soon for her to get pregnant. She needed time to adjust. They both did.

It had been awfully exciting, though. He looked forward to the day when she would discover she
was really pregnant. Although childbirth did sound terrifying...

He realized in time that she'd fallen asleep. He considered calling someone to carry her or going to
get someone, but either might wake her.

Well... he wasn't completely without muscles and he could just open a portal right there on the porch,
couldn't he? She needed him right now. And he hadn't been able to spare her the heartbreak, but he
could at least be the man who carried her to bed when she needed it, dammit!

Peter triggered the portal, carefully strapped his mask back on, and worked his arms under the legs of his exhausted and grief-stricken wife. Poor thing... the look on her face when she saw the single line on that test!

He blinked back tears of his own and carefully stood, nestling her head against his shoulder. He eased through the portal and felt her shift in her sleep as her vocal cords simply vanished.

There. Now he just had to get her into the bed.

"Spine?"

The Spine was reading his paper while Bree pored over technical specs for Rabbit's internals. Both looked up. Peter grinned weakly.

"I need you to activate that chiropractic protocol I installed..." Peter rasped, clutching the doorway.

"What the hell...?" The Spine muttered, hastily rising.

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**Tale 2: Yulemas Special Show**

Yulemas was approaching, though few in the household called it that. Peter had grown up with the term, presumably coined by some past Walter. But the rest had taken it up since then despite celebrating Christmas as well.

It was a running household joke, but Peter had always called it Yulemas, even outside the house. It annoyed and amused people alternately and as a child he'd enjoyed both.

But no one was amused when it came time to travel north to perform the yearly Yulemas concert. Instead, everyone was on pins and needles, watching The Spine to see whether he looked nervous.

The Spine was weary of it. They just needed to back off! He was old enough to know that facing down a fear was the only way to get past it.

He knew that. And he also knew that he'd faced down his fears up until last year by locking the worst ones away. He had resolved never to lock another... as if saying it was the entire battle.

The folder had opened at least three dozen times since the end of Thanksgiving, asking whether he wanted to lock away any memory of having agreed to attend.

He was terrified.

"Baby... are you sure about this?" Bree murmured, resting her head against his chest.

"I should ask you the same thing," The Spine replied. "Everyone keeps acting like I'm the only one who went through anything last year."
"I meant the mustache..."

"Really?" he asked, surprised.

"No, silly. I meant the whole thing. And yes, we're nervous, too. Steve has refused to be the one to drive back even if we stay overnight."

That had been Peter's suggestion, but The Spine didn't want to spend the money. They had funding for Rabbit's upgrade, but not for household expenses, which were still high most of the time. He wanted to save money now because someday he and Bree wanted children, not to mention Peter and Bunny. And he knew well how expensive that was.

"You really don't think I should wear it?" he asked, stroking it self-consciously.

"Well..."

"Alright, I made the post," David said, chuckling as he walked in. "I'll shave it off after you go."

"I really don't understand the joke, David," Bree said, squinting up at him.

David stroked his facial hair exactly like The Spine had with his own. "I grow hair out of my face, Bree. It's a man thing."

"You say that, but you've seen my Grandma."

David and the Spine snickered almost as one. They both had. Her grandma had thought they were both David, though...

"Spine saw that Col. Walter caterpillar beard thing I grew and thought it would be fun to mess with people a little, that's all. And I agreed. So since they think he's me... or I'm him... we went in on it together. His looks like it's made of plastic, though..."

"Well, yes. It is made of plastic," The Spine commented.

David chuckled. "Makes sense, I guess, for a robot."

"It does. But it also itches," Bree sighed.

"He can feel it?" David asked blankly. "Oh! Right."

Bree laughed and kissed her husband, then rubbed her mouth and sighed again. The Spine smiled.

"I'll take it off after the show, alright?"

"I'll help," she purred.

"I'll, uh... see what's taking so long..." David said, hurrying out as the two embraced once more.

The journey through the Grapevine was tense on the way there. Steve drove, chattering almost non-stop as they passed through Los Angeles, but grew noticeably quiet as they reached the highest elevations. Once they descended into the flat lands beyond, his chattering resumed, growing almost frantic, as he came down from the tension.

And he wasn't alone. Almost the entire group had sat silent through the pass, trying to avoid eyeing
The Spine, who sat stock still until they were clear. Bree had suggested he go into stasis for that part but he refused. He needed to do this.

For while the voices in the bus were silent, inside his head was a constant stream of sibling reassurance coming from Rabbit and Hatchworth.

_Okay, buddy... going up in altitude. You got this, big guy._

_He's driving far more safely this time, brother. And it has not been snowing._

_It's supposed to later, though..._  

_Rabbit! We are trying to help!_

_You are helping, Spine responded. I don't care what you say, just keep going until we're past this, okay? I don't want to worry Breanna any more than she already is. She nearly died last time._

_She is more worried about you, brother Spine._

_She says that, but I think it's just to hide her own fear._

_Yeah, but that ain't such a bad thing. A lot of humans deal with fear better if they got someone to fuss over. Like Ma. She was worried when Pappy was sick but she kept busy taking care of him. After he was gone, she didn't last long._

_Perhaps that is not the best subject to calm brother Spine, Rabbit._

_Anything is good, Hatchy, The Spine insisted. Please just keep me distracted._

_How the hell are you gonna make it home tonight, buddy? Rabbit asked worriedly. This ain't even where you got hurt, that was on the other side!_

_Rabbit!_

_Hatchy, it's okay, The Spine sent._

_The hell it is! The absolute hell!_  

Rabbit snickered aloud and everyone looked at her. She blinked.

"Just... thought of something funny..." she said weakly.

The show went well, however. The Spine sailed out on stage as though nothing was unusual about his face and heard the giggles in the audience. Clearly they hadn't believed he'd really do it.

Rabbit had put her foam cowboy hat on Michael Reed. The audience had just chuckled but The Spine had watched with bemusement. She said she wasn't interested in men, much less human, but she'd been curiously flirty with Michael ever since they'd gotten her back on her feet.

It came time to play the last round of their Yulemas carol. After that would be autographs and then the drive home.

_The drive home._
Isolate and store memory?

Close folder, he directed.

He could only stall for so long... but the song still ran rather longer than they'd rehearsed.

He got through autographs. He smiled, fielded comments about the beard, spoke with everyone from little children to elderly fans who had been so since they were little themselves. At last, it was time to load the bus and head back.

The elephant in the room was almost visible. Everyone nursed their own fears as they bundled up the equipment. The Spine refused to even hint at his. He was too big and strong to be the weak link. When he broke, people got hurt.

But when he strode from the building into the icy air, carrying a box of wires from the equipment, he stopped short.

It was snowing.

Fat flakes drifted through darkness past his photoreceptors. The box slipped from his slack fingers to the ground with a deafening thud. He couldn't move. He was flat on his back, snowflakes accumulating on his eyes...

Isolate and store memory?

"No!" he choked, clamping his eyes shut.

"Spine?" came Rabbit's voice from far away.

Not anymore! I can do this... It's just a memory...

Spine? Spine, buddy, open your eyes... Look at Rabbit...

Rabbit...

It finally registered. Rabbit. Of course. She'd been right behind him.

I can't... Rabbit... the snow... I can't move, it's covering me...

Dammit... come on, Spine. Open them eyes for old Rabbit... Lemme see that sickly green glow. Come on. Just a crack, okay?

He tried. He sincerely tried.

"I can't..." he choked, grimacing. "I'm sorry... I thought I could do this..."

He heard soft human footsteps. He'd have known them anywhere.

"Baby? What's wrong... oh, no. Rabbit, how is he?"

"As bad as he looks. It's the snow. He's ge-ge-gettin' a flashback or somethin'."

He expected Bree to join right in trying to talk him down. Instead, he felt soft little arms slip around him.
"Bree, honey, I dunno if that's such a good idea..." Rabbit said nervously.

"Then you hug him, too," she said, her face against his chest.

He wanted to hold her but he couldn't move...

Rabbit put her arms around him now, carefully reaching over Bree.

"It's okay, buddy," she whispered. "You're safe..."

"That's right," Bree agreed, muffled.

"We having a group hug?" came Michael Reed's voice.

You wish, hot lips,
Rabbit sent.

He couldn't bring himself to laugh, but the tiny sliver of amusement helped just a little.

"Spine's crackin' up. Tell everyone we're stayin' overnight an' see if Steve can find a coupla r-rooms somewhere."

"Agreed," Bree said.

"Got it."

He heard Michael jogging back into the building, telling Steve what they had told him. He heard Steve's tremulous sigh of relief. The Spine wanted to object, but he couldn't find the motivation anymore. He managed to move his arms enough to put one around Bree and one around Rabbit.

"That's what I thought," Rabbit murmured. "That calmed ya down, didn't it? Ya know Peter offered ta le-le-le-let us stay overnight, buddy!"

"I know..." he whispered.

"Let's get you into the bus," Bree murmured. "Hatchy can get the box."

"So can I!" Rabbit said indignantly.

"Technically... but you're helping Spine."

"Oh, right..."

They found a budget hotel near the freeway and took two rooms to share among them to save money. The Spine walked inside with Bree, expecting her to leave soon after so that the men could be in one room and the women in the other. But when he turned from stripping off his vest, she had closed the door and was locking it.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

"They said they were going to watch movies in the other room."

"But there's seven of them and only two beds!"

"Queen sized, though..."
"But..."

She pressed a finger to his lips. "Ssh. They also think you need some time alone."

"I don't. I need company..."

"That's why I'm here, baby. And once we get that carpet off your face, I have an interesting fantasy about a cheap hotel I've wanted to try out with you."

He smiled. Well... he did have to burn off some of that nervous energy...

Rabbit cut off her link with The Spine and told Hatchy to do the same.

*Oh, they are having the sex?*

*Probably. Hope it helps him calm down.*

*It can do that?*

*Well, it's distracting, yeah. And kinda relaxing, even for a robut.*

*But I thought it was all about the rumpy-pumpy, and the British say.*

Rabbit grinned. They were all piled together like puppies, watching a Christmas movie someone had found on TV and munching snacks they'd picked up on the way. Hatchy was sitting by Camille and Rabbit could read a slight rise in the girl's temperature. She wasn't entirely surprised that yet another girl on the staff might have feelings for a robot; that went way back. The work naturally attracted people of both sexes who had an affinity for artificial life forms.

Which might explain a certain one man band still seeming kind of interested...

*It's how humans get to tha finish line, sure, she explained. That an' a few other little tricks. Don't you remember them guys in the Great War, talkin' about gettin' handsy with girls?*

*I do. It puzzled me then as it does now.*

*Yeah, we ain't got a sex drive...*

*Which is also puzzling. Apparently The Spine had one installed...*

*It ain't that kind of drive. An' yeah, he always wanted to feel like a human but now he really does.*

*But why do it if you do not?*

*Say what?*

*Why have the sex if you do not have the drive?*

*Well... say, why are you so curious all of a sudden?*

She fought a snicker. Like she didn't know... Although she wasn't even sure he'd made any kind of connection to Camille, just that he was sweet on her. Now Hatchy was thinking about sex? But he'd seemed completely opposed to it!

*You were very right. I am in love.*
Aww... Rabbit wriggled with delight. So adorable!

I thought I simply wanted to experience the romance of it, but then I realized I would die for her. I wish to know how to express such emotion.

Ye gods...

Hatchy, buddy... slow down!

You... were... very... right...

She couldn't help it. She snickered aloud. Camille, dabbing tears, looked at her sidelong... it was the part of the movie where the boy was having his ears slapped back by the druggist.

"Nervous laugh..." Rabbit explained.

I... am... in... love...

Hatchy... come on... she sent, trying not to giggle more.

"Oh, yeah! This part always gets to me, too."

Rabbit nodded, though it had never bothered her. It was just a movie. She glanced at the other humans. Michael Reed sniffled and Steve Negrete nonchalantly wiped his eyes.

Humans.

I... thought... I...

No, Hatchy, she sent, interrupting him. I mean... ya haven't even kissed her, and now you're thinking of taking her to bed?

I just... want to be prepared. In case she suggests it.

But if you don't want to...

I explained this. I merely lack the urge for the sensations of the sex. I do not lack the desire to share intimacy. I am interesting in knowing how to be close to her and to express my overwhelming affection. My pleasure would be derived from hers.

Even though you don't got a... ya know...

Indeed, I see no need for one. You have never had one, yet you made love to your wife.

Now it was getting personal. But Rabbit wanted to help.

Yeah, but she was a robust.

But how did you do it?

Rabbit stared at the movie, unseeing. How had she gotten into this conversation?

Spine, she thought. I sure hope you're having fun swinging from the chandeliers, because you owe me big.

She decided to just come out with it. That was really the only way with Hatchy. She didn't have the heart to tell him no after the way he'd explained it.
We created an electrical circuit and cycled it through our bodies until my core overloaded, she sent before she could think too deeply about it.

My word. How filthy...

Don't make me say it again. I don't like talkin' dirty to my little brother.

I appreciate your assistance, dear sister. But if I do this to my little angel, she will be cooked like a...

Stop... I get the picture.

Apologies. But... if it is not all about the pumping, what else is there?

Dammit to... Hatchy, google it! You're a big boy, look it up! And don't look at none of that cheap porno crap. Spine says real girls don't act like that. Just look up... what was it... Oh, yeah. Erroneous zones.

Look up what, now?

Erroneous zones. I think that was it... Humans got a sweet spot somewhere. They like all kinds of cuddles but ya gotta find the sweet spot if ya wanna get to tha finish.

To her relief, Hatchworth went silent. Rabbit watched George Bailey singing with a girl in the moonlight. She loved this part.

And now the girl was naked in the bushes. Oops... that was a little awkward all things considered. She looked sidelong at Hatchy. He appeared to be watching, but his face was expressionless.

Oh, boy. She looked back at the movie. What had she done?

Errogenous zones.

She almost jumped.

They are called that, my dear. Places on the human body with amplified sensation. And apparently proper application of touch can...

Stop right there... no. Just no. I think I got that part already. Just make sure ya don't hurt her. Pretend she's fragile as a kitten. And never speak of this to me again. Oh, and... wait until you're both somewhere private. And ask first! she added hastily. And make sure she says yes!

Rabbit! I am hurt that you think I would force unwanted sexual advances on...

Sorry... sorry, you're right. I just never know with you. Just... yeah.

Thank you, Rabbit. I mean this sincerely. I considered asking The Spine, but I feel he would advise me against it.

He might be right, she thought.

You're welcome. And... honestly, good luck. I hope you two are happy together.

How very kind, my dear.
They dozed off where they sat. The next day there was a lot of grumbling about stiffness from the humans as they headed out for breakfast.

Well, all the humans except one. Breanna was all smiles at first, and The Spine looked as though he had a secret. Rabbit was glad they’d at least had a relaxing night.

Because, by the end of breakfast, neither looked very happy.

"At least, the snow’s stopped, right?” Matt said as he fastened in to the driver’s seat.

"Mm-hm…” Steve mumbled from the back.

Even though it was only ten in the morning, he’d taken something to make him sleep, and they couldn’t really blame him. Michael had said, half-joking, that he should face his fear, and Steve had replied that he faced plenty of fear on a regular basis and this one could go straight to hell.

The Spine sat between Rabbit and Hatchworth, with Breanna's blessing. Each of them was facing fears of their own, and both knew that if he panicked, she could be hurt, and that would make everything worse. She, in turn, sat surrounded by concerned humans, clinging to her seatbelt. The Spine looked over at her and tried to smile. He failed.

Matt turned on the radio as they ascended into the pass, but couldn't pick up a clear signal. There was visible snow on either side of the road, and the traffic was slow. The Spine had mixed feelings about that; he wanted it over with but also appreciated a safer pace.

They passed an opening in the sheer walls that flanked the road. He caught a glimpse of the chasm beyond and steam shot from every vent.

*Isolate and store memory?*

*Close folder.*

*Close your eyes, buddy...* Rabbit advised, handing him a bottled water. *And try to take it easy on tha steam... don't wanna fog up them windows.*

He complied, and took a long drink to replace what he'd already lost. But he could still see it in his mind... the darkness, the snowflakes illuminated by his eyes as he fell, the cliff wall coming rapidly closer...

Rabbit had taken the water bottle. She and Hatchworth were holding his hands. He wasn't sure when they had started...

*Just a couple of minutes, buddy. I'll let ya know once we're past the spot, okay?*

So they were near the place where it had happening. He gripped their hands tightly.

*Alright. Thank you, Rabbit.*

*Don't mention it. I'm not real comfortable passing the place myself but it's like I said yesterday. I can deal because I'm helping you. Gives me something to focus on.*

*I guess I understand that pretty well...* he sent.

He heard a whimper... he knew the voice. Despite his fear, his eyes popped open. He looked over at Bree. She was crying.
The Spine ached. He should have suggested she stay home! He had to try and help her deal with this. If her experience was anything like his, she must be thinking about that terrifying moment when she was flying toward the windshield! Or... the moment when he had saved her and flown through it himself. She had twice as much reason to be terrified as he did.

He looked down to avoid any further glimpses of the outside, wracking his brain for a way to help her from where he was.

_She's okay, buddy! She's got Mike and Camille hugging her and it'll be over soon._

_We may pass the spot but we'll still be in the Grapevine for a while... _he argued.

_I know... look, I can only do so much about that..._

_Rabbit... you're doing more than enough, _Hatchworth _sent. It is alright. We know you are also afraid to see the place._

Rabbit looked down, her jaw set. The Spine thought back to when his spine had cracked and she had lost her composure entirely. Of course.

_He's right, _The Spine _agreed, squeezing her hand, which had started to shake. It's okay for you to be scared, too. You don't have to fix everything._

_I'm just... trying to be a good sister..._

_I know. And we love you. But The Spine also needs to tend to his sweet wife._

_Well... any ideas? _she _asked. _She's cryin' harder..._

The Spine blinked at the floor. He knew they must be very close to the spot where the accident happened. He glanced up.

There it was... He startled and Rabbit gasped.

_Spine, buddy... no! Close yehr eyes again!_

He grimaced and looked away. They were trundling toward a section of road with extra high barriers... the government response to such a shocking accident occurring there.

But Bree was still crying.

He sometimes had stage fright. Not much, not for long. Just a bit at the start of a show. And if always trickled away when he broke into the first song.

And that was the answer. At least, it was worth a try.

"It's Yulemas Eve... and we're all here..." he sang in a trembling voice.

Everyone turned and stared at him.

_Ah, I see, brother... _Hatchworth _sent. "St. Papper's Claus is drawing near..." he sang.

Rabbit joined in. "Our boilers warm the entire place..." they sang together. "And there's a smile on every robot face..."

As they launched into the chorus, Michael and Matt sang along.
"It's a very Steam Powered Giraffe Yulemas Special Show..." they all sang.

The girls were looking at them in surprise. Camille began to sing, too, and Breanna, in a trembling voice, joined in at last.

They sang it through, and again, and again... over and over as they went. As the traffic trundled through the pass along salted roads. As they worked their way past the traffic jam and picked up speed. Some stopped for a while and resumed as others took a break, but The Spine never paused except to take a drink. Eventually Rabbit managed to change songs, but they kept singing. The humans were hoarse and the robots had to force oil through their pipes in order to keep going, but no one suggested they stop until they entered the Los Angeles valley.

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Tale 4: The Day Itself

Bunny woke early Christmas morning. Peter found out when she snuggled into his arms and woke him from a dead sleep.

"Excited, hm?" he mumbled, holding her close.

"Oh, yeah... I mean, I guess so..."

Peter chuckled. "It's okay to be excited."

"I... know..." she faltered.

He could feel her trembling just a little. "Cold?" he asked.

"A little..."

He tugged the blankets up around her shoulders. He could stay like this all day... if he didn't need to pee.

"Thanks... but I wanna go see who's up," she whispered.

Within a few minutes they were up and heading for the library, where a large tree stood across from a larger fireplace, with stockings for everyone from robots to family to staff all crammed in together. They could hear the sounds of chattering and found Rabbit and Hatchworth sitting together, examining their stockings.

"Oh... I thought you'd run around and wake us all up just like every year," Peter said, surprised.

"Huh?" Rabbit asked. "Oh, yeah, well, I ain't knockin' on any do-doors this year. Too many newlyweds. Someone might be doin' it."

Bunny snickered softly and Peter shook his head. He'd considered it, sure...

"Where's The Spine?" he asked.

"I sent him ta bed. Dunno why he still stands guard. Hatchy was the only one who ever put soup in
tha stockings and he learned his lesson pretty quick."

"Yes, but you keep saying you'll do it, Rabbit," Hatchworth remarked. "And he never has been able to tell when you're joking."

"No one can. I'm life's greatest mystery," she said, putting a headband with a pair of antlers onto her head.

Hatchworth smiled down at a plush hoagie but said nothing. He and Rabbit snickered and Peter assumed they were cracking jokes over wifi.

"Well, alright..." he said faintly. "Let's see what we got."

He retrieved their stockings and Bunny smiled a half-smile at hers.

"Did your mom fill these?" she asked.

"Officially, it was St. Papper's Claus. Actually... yeah, mom did, probably with The Spine's help. She really gets into Christmas."

They sat together and examined the collection of small amusements and snacks she had selected for them. Nothing big or expensive, given the number of stockings there were to fill, but a nice little surprise to find on Christmas morning. Peter knew that Annie, like Bunny, hadn't had a lot of treats growing up. Her parents had done their best, and had certainly been better than Bunny's. Still, Annie felt the lack of extras sometimes and it was clear that she meant to make up for the lean years by spreading Christmas joy wherever she could.

Bunny unwrapped a small globe of chocolate and nibbled at it. Her eyes seemed to mist over and her face grew rapturous. Peter's hair stood on end as he watched her.

"I love these truffles," she whispered. "Annie's really got a good memory. We talked about it last year and I told her these were my favorites."

"Save a few," he whispered, leaning in close.

"Holy crap, Peter..."

"Sorry... I swear, chocolate just has a whole new connotation for me."

"You two got a room, ya know," Rabbit commented while twiddling the knobs on a tiny etch-a-sketch.

"Turn down the ears, Rabbit," Peter muttered.

"Yeah, alright. Don't wanna hear ya talkin' dirty anyway."

Peter sighed and Bunny grinned.

"Oh... you're all up..."

David walked in, drinking coffee from an enormous mug. He was still in his pajamas and his thinning blue-black hair pointed every which way. Bunny smiled up at him.

"Not all. Just a few of us."

"Ah." David sank to the couch. "Where's everybody else?"
"Still in bed."

"Okay..." he murmured.

"Go get your stocking," Bunny whispered. "Before you fall back asleep."

"Oh... I want to wait for Chelsea..."

Bunny smiled. "Okay. Want a chocky?"

David accepted it and nodded. "The good ones. Nice."

"When's Chelsea coming back?"

"Dunno. She and Camille usually celebrate at home, apparently. She may be gone the whole day."

"Then go ahead and get your stocking!" Bunny urged. "You can wait and open gifts to each other when she gets back."

David sighed and rose to retrieve his. Bunny winked at Peter.

"He misses her. She's only been gone since last night but he misses her."

"At least he has you..." Peter murmured.

"Yeah, but I can only fill so much space. He needs his chick."

"I guess I understand that. I need mine, too."

Bunny kissed him firmly on the ear and smiled.

The rest of the household trickled in slowly. Most workers had gone home for the holiday but turned up around mid day to celebrate. The Spine came in with Bree around ten in the morning, looking very much like he hadn't had nearly enough stasis. Bree went to fetch their stockings and returned to find him already in stasis in his favorite easy chair.

But after a few hours of recharging while the household played games and watched movies and had fun around him, he woke ready to join in. There was almost a collective sigh of relief when he did. There would be singing later and The Spine was considered essential for singing the Christmas standards. He specialized in songs from Bing Crosby's repertoire and Annie particularly insisted on having him sing "White Christmas" every year.

They saved most of the gift giving for that evening as well, since more people would be in attendance. They had done a gift exchange due to the large number of people participating. Camille got Rabbit, and Hatchworth got Bunny, Bunny got Annie, etc.

Once everyone had arrived, they sat down to dinner... a thick cream soup with crackers, which Hatchworth explained was a Yulemas tradition.

"Why soup, though? Why Yulemas, even?" Steve asked, dropping a handful of the little crackers into his bowl.

The robots chuckled and The Spine said, "That's a loaded question, Mr. Negrete."

"Oh... well, maybe tell us over the Yulemas soup?"
"Sure," Rabbit said pleasantly, setting down her water glass. "No one's asked about that in ages..."

"Well... not since the eighties, anyway," The Spine prompted.

Rabbit looked momentarily disoriented before beaming and saying, "I guess we explained it to someone then, too..."

"Me," Annie said. "You told me all about it when I came here. Are you telling me no one has asked in all that time?"

"They tend to think we're just kidding," The Spine said.

"Aren't you?" Michael asked, perplexed.

"Yes and no. It's not an established holiday like we make it out to be. There is an event called Yule that was the basis for the length of it, but it was really just a misunderstanding that gave Rabbit the name."

"Oh, so Rabbit thought of it, then..." Steve said.

"Nah," Rabbit said casually. "I was a kid. Kids are stupid. See, Pappy and Ma gave us a nice big traditional Christmas right after the th-th-three day war. We didn't do much that year before 'cause of D-D-Delilah passin' away.

"An' so they got a Yule log an' lit it in the fireplace. An' they said it was for Christmas. Then they got in a debate about whether they should call it Yule or Christmas.

"So ya s-s-see where that's g-goin'. I up and say, 'Yulemas!' an' they both start la-laughin'. So like a typical kid, of course, I call it that for the rest of the season because it ma-makes 'em giggle. Then the next year, and the next year after... and then it's just what I call it. The others started joinin' in the first year an' we'd make up rules for it... ya know... like how instead of reindeer we got a Yulemas mule."

The humans laughed and the robots glanced around at each other, grinning. It might have been a nonsense holiday, but it had become their yearly tradition and it was good to share it.

"Okay, but you haven't explained the soup..." Steve persisted.

"Right... well... Hatchy, you okay if I tell 'em?"

Everyone looked at Hatchworth, some with a smirk, some with curiosity. Every Walter worker had the same unframed question. Why ask him specifically?

"Go ahead. I have stopped being embarrassed by now, I think. If I have not, it is about time I did."

"Alright, buddy. I'll give 'em tha nice version. So that same year, Hatchy made soup on Christmas Eve, an' he remembered I said the stockings were supposed ta be f-f-filled with delicious treats, so he filled 'em with soup."

There was a round of gasps, knowing nods, and awkward giggles. Camille cried, "Oh, no!" and Hatchworth gave her a sheepish glance.

"So he caught it pretty good from Ma and Pappy until they wormed the explanation from him. Poor guy was pretty upset and hid until halfway through Christmas Day."

Camille let out a pained little sigh and Hatchworth glanced at her in surprise.
"It was terribly distressing..." he said slowly. "I did my best to launder the stockings but I'm afraid they were ruined."

"Poor baby," she whispered.

"Like I said," Rabbit commented with a nod, "kids are stupid. But ya grew up real g-g-g-good, Hatchy boy."

Camille nodded and smiled at Hatchworth. Rabbit grinned, hoping Hatchworth had the sense to make a move soon. She definitely had the look.

Once dinner was done and cleared away, they gathered in the spacious library for the gift exchange. Some gifts were thoughtful, like Bree's gift of a foot bath to Chelsea, who was working on a dance routine for the concerts in between her shifts in the lab, or Camille's gift of a jeweled dragon pendant to Rabbit, who had very little feminine jewelry. Some were amusing, like David giving Peter a tie and a book about how to tie it, or Steve giving David two whole chocolate cakes. But two gifts in particular stood out that night.

The first was from Hatchworth. He had drawn Bunny's name, but when his turn rolled around, there was no package under the tree.

"Aw, Hatchy... if ya ne-ne-needed help ya coulda asked!" Rabbit scoffed.

"Nonsense, my dear. Some gifts defy wrapping. Rather aggressively, in fact. If you'll excuse me, I must retrieve it."

They speculated about what could be so difficult to wrap as they waited for his return. Several of the younger humans started taking bets.

Hatchworth walked into the room carrying the gift, making no effort to hide it. And no one could blame him when they saw her.

She looked about half grown, a juvenile but no longer quite a kitten. She certainly was a great deal smaller than the last one Hatchworth had brought them... just an ordinary housecat. Her fur was grey with stripes and patches of white, and she had the biggest eyes any of them had seen on a cat.

The kitten, purring loud enough to be heard throughout the room, was gently lowered onto Bunny's lap. She raised her little head and Bunny, transfixed, leaned in closer so that their noses touched briefly. The kitten, apparently satisfied, worked her paws a few times and settled down on her haunches, looking around warily.

"Oo, she likes you, my dear! How auspicious!" Hatchworth breathed.

"Where'd she come from, Hatchy?" Peter asked, as Bunny began to stroke the cat's soft fur.

"She walked in one day after Rabbit did. Just padded in and started mewling at me. So I have been feeding her in my room in anticipation of making you a present of her."

Bunny grinned. She loved it when Hatchworth sounded like an old book. And she loved, absolutely loved the cat, instantly, irrevocably, fiercely. She'd never seen or felt anything so soft! It turned its huge eyes on her as though surprised to see her. But it looked at everything that way. She loved that, too. Everything seemed to excite its attention as though the whole world was a thrilling surprise.**

"But will she get along with Marshmallow?" Peter asked worriedly.
Bunny snickered. He sounded like a worried parent, wondering if his firstborn would accept the new baby. She still felt a little twinge of pain at the thought. *Soon, Bunny,* she thought. *Before you know it, you'll have a baby of your own to hold and love.*

And for now, this little baby, whose eyes had begun to close and whose head was slowly drooping, had filled much of the emptiness she'd grappled with for the last few weeks, all with one touch of her pink nose.

"It's your turn, Bunny," David said around a mouthful of cake.

"Oh! Um, can someone..."

"Hold the kitten?" Michael offered brightly.

"No, grab the present for me..."

The entire room seemed to deflate slightly, especially The Spine, who deflected notice by reaching over and scooping up a basket from under the tree. He scanned the tag and handed it to Annie.

"Oh! You drew my name, hm?" Annie said cheerfully. She reached into the basket and pulled out a card. "One picnic in Kazooland, January 3rd, 2014, 11 am," she read. "Oh, that sounds nice..."

She trailed off, blinking rapidly. It seemed to have finally sunk in.

"Kazooland?" Annie breathed.

"You okay, Mom?" Peter asked, amused.

"I thought you might like to see Peter's face again, Annie," Bunny whispered, feeling choked up herself.

"Oh, sweetheart... I really would! Thank you so much!"

Bunny beamed and accepted Annie's careful hug as the kitten snored softly on her lap.

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Tale 4: And a Hatchy New Year

The party wound down eventually. Chelsea and Camille said goodbye to the group, having plans to spend more time with their family. David rose to walk Chelsea to the car but Camille lingered by the library door.

Hatchworth noticed. He couldn't really help it. He noticed everything she did, and he knew it was creepy, so he made sure to conceal how much he noticed.

Just as he noticed how often she looked his way. He scarcely dared to hope... but what else could explain it?

Then again... many things could explain it. She might have been thinking of other things and her eyes flicked to shiny objects of their own accord due to her advanced primate brain. Or she might
have wanted to ask him whether Michael Reed was available. The list went on.

*Go on, dummins. She's givin' ya tha stare!*

*But Rabbit... suppose she is not?*

*I been around tha block way more'n you, bro. She's hoping. I can see it.*

*But... which stare is that, then?*

*You know which stare! She's sweet on ya!*

*Is she really?*

*Sure! I heard her tellin' her sister all about it!*

*Did you really?*

*Just yesterday.*

Hatchworth looked over at Rabbit who gave the barest of nods and resumed her card game.

"I saw that, Rabbit... You're trying to signal your partner!" Steve crowed.

Rabbit grinned wickedly. Hatchworth tuned out the good natured bickering that broke out as a result and looked at Camille. She was already looking at him. He smiled and she positively beamed in response.

He was on his feet before he knew it.

"May I walk you to your car, my dear?" he asked as calmly as he could manage.

She took the elbow he extended. "Thanks, Hatchy."

He composed his thoughts into tidy sectors as they strolled. This needed to be done right.

"I hope you had an enjoyable day," he said in a carefully warm tone.

"I really did. This has been a wonderful Christmas."

"And a delightful Yulemas," he agreed.

She giggled softly. "That, too. Did you get what you wanted?"

Not yet... "The moustache kit was a most thoughtful gift. As one would expect of your dear sister."

"I thought it was cute. It has such a tiny comb."

"Indeed. Very useful for a moustache."

They were talking comfortably but it wasn't very romantic. How to broach the subject?

As they neared the front door, he could see that David and Chelsea were at the car, sharing a goodnight kiss. That could be useful.

"Why'd we stop?" Camille asked when he hesitated.
"Your sister is having a romantic moment with the Matter Master. I thought it wise to give them some space."

"Oh, yeah. They may be a few minutes, though. They like to linger over goodbyes."

"Ah. Well, then I can take my time saying goodbye as well. I... will miss you while you're away visiting, you see."

"Will you?" she breathed as he turned toward her.

Very good, very promising! He smiled just a little.

"Of course, my dear. I miss you whenever you are away."

"That's so sweet."

Yes, good... "You see, you have become... well... I mean to say that... you are most agreeable to me."

"I'm agreeable?" she replied with a little giggle.

I am an idiot. He tried again. "I find it difficult to put to words without saying too much, I'm afraid," he sighed. "I wish to be truthful, but I also fear harming our amiable relationship."

And this did it. This tipped the scales. He could see it in her expression in the dimness of the entry hall. A curious brightness to her eyes, a slight rise in temperature. But possibly that was worry and not eagerness...

"What is it?" she whispered, and his core sank. She did sound fearful. "Are you trying to tell me something bad?"

"I couldn't say..." he faltered. "Perhaps it is bad to you, even though it is life to me."

"I don't understand..."

One more try... he couldn't take another misfire. Time to be blunt.

"May I speak freely, then? Though there be Hell to pay?"

She chuckled nervously. "I can't imagine you saying anything that awful, Hatchy. And of course you can speak freely. You don't have to ask."

"I suppose not. My dear... I only wish to tell you how far you have risen in my regard since you came here to stay. I have only known you a little while in the terms of my life span and yet I feel as though I had known you always, and... I was hoping you might feel some regard for me, too."

She smiled gently. "Of course I do, Hatchy."

"Ah, yes, but when I say it I do not mean..."

"Camille? What's the hold-up... oh..."

Chelsea and David stood in the doorway, staring. He could detect increased heat in both faces.

"Sorry... we'll just..."
"No," Hatchworth said abruptly, shaking a little. "Miss Camille must be very weary. Goodnight, my dear."

Camille opened her mouth and closed it again.

"We can wait at the car..." Chelsea insisted.

Camille turned abruptly toward the door. "Coming."

"But..."

She turned as she reached her sister. "See you on New Year's Eve," she said firmly.

Hatchworth stared after her, his core aching. "See you then," he responded.

The three walked out and Hatchworth, miserable, turned to go to his room. David caught up with him at a jog a minute later.

"Dude! What the hell happened back there?"

"Nothing! I was a perfect gentleman!"

"Well, yeah! Hatchy... I'm just gonna guess you've never had a girlfriend before."

"My, how did you ever guess?" Hatchworth grumbled.

David snorted. "Sarcasm! You hardly ever do that."

"You're welcome. I would like to be alone with my thoughts, if you please."

"In a minute. You need to understand..."

"I understand. I had ideas but I seem to be unable to execute them as planned. Rabbit must have been mistaken."

"I don't know what the crap you're talking about but just so you know, Camille likes you, okay?"

"So she said. She's a nice girl."

"Yeah, a nice girl you're totally in love with."

Hatchworth glared at him and David stepped back and held up his hands.

"Am I wrong?" the man asked.

Hatchworth slumped. "No."

"Then tell her, dummins!"

"I was going to..."

"...And we screwed it up. I'm sorry, dude. But we tried to back off and let you..."

"It was too late! The spell was shattered!" Hatchworth snapped.

"Spell?"
"These things must be done right, boy!"

"Seriously?" David snickered.

"You would not understand! You have the romantic sensibilities of a turkey sandwich! I was trying to create a moment to remember!"

He stomped on, steaming irritably.

"That's adorable, Hatchy," David called after him.

He ignored him.

"So try New Year's Eve."

Hatchworth stopped and turned. "Explain yourself."

"New Year's Eve. You can kiss her at midnight. You can kiss, right? Bunny kissed you once..."

"I can, a little. My lip formations can angle slightly and much of it is in the angle of the head, from what I have seen in Cary Grant pictures."

David snickered silently for a moment. "Awesome. Okay, so we'll have non-alcoholic champagne... Peter just flat out refused the other kind... and candles and fireworks, the whole deal. Maybe you get her some roses from the garden, too. You want to be romantic, there's a lot to work with. You're right, I suck at it, but if you wanna do it right, that's your best bet."

Hatchworth at last dared to hope. "Are you sure she wishes me to do so, though?"

David pinked slightly. "I, uh... kind of assumed it more than anything..."

Hatchworth sighed.

"But she acts like she likes you!"

"How reassuring."

"Up to you, man."

Hatchworth nodded. "Thank you. I will consider your suggestions."

He went to his room to brood in his charging dock. Well, Rabbit, at least, had heard her talking about it. That was promising. That would have to be his hope.

New Year's Eve, 2013:

"I hafta change before tha next concert, Petes! I ri-ri-ri-ripped my stripey trousers!"

"But she said it would be a couple of months and then we have to have the molds made and cast the pieces and fine tune your flexibility so you can do the... y'know... plus the headpiece you wanted and then the tailor..."

"Then get tha one Pappy made! An' I can wear a wig or somethin'!"
"There's a risk of fire. We need a custom wig so that..."

"Okay, so I'll ma-ma-make somethin' tougher! But there ain't no way to fix tha pants, Petes!"

Peter finally looked up from his work and looked. Rabbit shoved her hand through the hole.

"See?"

"Damn..." Peter swore. "What did you do to them?"

"Just bent over. They're pretty old."

"Guess so. Well, alright, before the Queen Mary concert we'll get the breastplate out and see if we can get your hips re-positioned."

"Ya have to, from what Wanda said. The plate won't fit otherwise."

"True. Alright. Are you going to be able to do Captain in that, though?"

"I'll do my best."

Rabbit strolled out and Peter turned back to Hatchworth.

"Sorry, Hatchy. I'm almost done."

"Of course, my boy," Hatchy said as calmly as he could manage.

Peter finished cleaning and oiling Hatchy's face plates and carefully wiped each with a cloth before placing each back into position.

"You were right... they were pretty dirty," he commented as he screwed them back on with a tiny screwdriver.

"Thank you," Hatchworth murmured, when he had finished.

He rose and buttoned his collar, heading out to the rose garden. Rabbit was waiting by the door.

"You got this, buddy," she said softly.

"Got what?"

"You know what! You struck out last week so yehr gonna try again tonight, right?"

Hatchworth clenched his fists and sighed. David had a very big mouth.

"Amirite?"

"Do I need to answer?" he asked, opening the door.

"Nah. But am I?"

Hatchworth walked outside, leaving her behind.

Well?

Of course, you... of course, you are, Rabbit.
Knew it.

Rabbit... when you said you heard her saying she was interested in me... what did she say, exactly?

Silence. That didn't bode well.

Rabbit?

To be honest, buddy... she just said you were nice.

Dammit to all hells, Rabbit!

But she's into you! I'd swear it on Ma's grave!

How uncouth...

I'm serious! Look... you're in love with the girl. You said so. You hafta try!

He stopped, staring at the roses. There was an absolutely perfect one right at the top of the bush.

I will... but if you're wrong...

You'll never forgive me, right?

No. I'll forgive you. But... it will break my heart.

Then I guess I'll never forgive myself.

Oh, Rabbit... Hatchy sent, anguish.

No, buddy. Don't be like that. I know she wants you to make a move. She's too shy to do it herself but she likes ya. An' I want you to be happy, okay? You helped me an' I wanna help you.

But what about you, Rabbit?

What about me?

Paige will be here tonight as well.

And Sam, you mean. It's okay, buddy. I can take it.

But does that not taint your perceptions? Possibly you see affection where it is not because you...

He stopped. That was cruel. He might just as well suggest she was sweet on Michael and that was affecting her as well, or that it was her jumbled memories of Honeybee...

I know, buddy. Look, I still love her, but... I'm glad she's happy, okay? And I'm not imagining things. Trust Rabbit.

She always said that. Well, right or wrong, he intended to follow through. Because seeing Rabbit had reminded him that it was better to try than to back away and let a good thing get away.

Alright. I trust you. I will try tonight.

Great, buddy!

He pulled out the clippers and began selecting the loveliest of the roses.
Camille arrived with her sister in time for dinner. The meal was merry and the dining room bright and cheerful. Hatchworth found no obstacles to sitting with Camille. The Spine and Rabbit had insisted on taking over serving duties for the evening. Indeed, it was painfully obvious that the entire household was conspiring to bring them together. It was rather ridiculous. How could he be romantic in such circumstances?

The roses sat in a vase in the kitchen. He wasn't sure how he could give them to her when everyone was around them all the time.

"Are you enjoying the meal, my dear?" he asked as she ate.

"Very much! I'm glad they let you sit down for this one."

"Are you, my dear?"

She pinked and murmured, "Of course. We never get a chance to talk."

"No. We don't. And we should, should we not? I am very interested in hearing what you have to say."

"Aw, how nice!"

"No, indeed... I am not simply being kind. I think you're very bright, my dear. You always say such intelligent things and show great insight."

"You're making me blush!" she said, grinning helplessly.

"Do you wish me to stop?" he asked gently.

She smiled down at her soup. "No. I like everything you said."

"I could say many more such things," he whispered. "But there are too many people here."

She looked at him and he almost felt electricity spark between them.

"I'd like that," she breathed.

That's more like it, he thought.

Christmas crackers were pulled and soon the group migrated to the library. On the way there, Hatchworth walked with Camille, chatting about whatever happened to come up... the holidays, the decorations, plans for the new year. It was all good to him. She seemed to grow more charming with every passing moment as she relaxed and spoke freely.

Their hands brushed together as they paused in the doorway behind a cluster of people. He took her hand in his and she looked up at him. He felt her squeeze his fingers as she smiled, and he felt as though he could want for nothing more.

They settled in a couple of soft chairs a little away from the group, who were playing games and nibbling on various snacks and treats. Matt Smith opened his gift since he hadn't been there the week before... wrist warmers from The Spine, who had carefully researched the hazards of professional drumming.

But Hatchworth and Camille sat, sometimes talking, sometimes smiling at the others. And for one
sweet moment, their eyes locked and he almost felt he could hear her very thoughts.

It was too perfect. He wanted to hope, but he had grown wary after the last time. But what more could he want than this?

"Ten minutes, everyone!" Annie called. "Should we head outside? You can see the fireworks from the park out by the fountain."

They walked in a cheerful mob through the ballroom and out the back. The night was crisp; no marine layer blocked the few stars that showed through the lights of the city around them. The group stood in little clusters... Annie and Peter V with their son and daughter-in-law... The Spine and Breanna chuckling with Dave and Sunshine. Matt, Mike and Steve snickering together with Sam and Paige. A group of Walter Workers stood nearby, talking with Norman and Wanda, who were sharing family secrets. Rabbit, Upgrade and The Jon sitting by the fountain with GG, who couldn't stay still for excitement.

Hatchworth stood near the Walter Workers... one in particular. She shivered and moved closer to him.

"Are you chilly, my dear?" he asked.

"It's a little cool out."

"Would you like me to fetch you a sweater?"

"Oh! No... it's almost time."

"Then... my boiler is very warm. If I not presuming..."

She smiled. "Presuming what?" she asked shyly.

"If you stand closer to me, I'm sure you will be quite warm," he breathed.

She inched a little closer. Chelsea, laughing at something David was saying, bumped into Camille and knocked her off-balance. Hatchworth hastily caught her.

"Oopsy!" Chelsea said. "Sorry, Cam! Good catch, though, Hatchy!"

He smiled. How clever of her! Camille, her cheeks burning, started to pull away. But she looked up at him and stopped.

"It is very warm here," she whispered.

"Then you should stay," he responded. "I'm delighted to keep you warm, my dear."

She sighed and snuggled in a little. Hatchworth could barely contain his joy.

"Here we go!" Annie called. "Ten... nine... eight..."

They all joined in the countdown. Fireworks burst in the sky. Couples all around them kissed in the new year. Rabbit grinned at Michael Reed and kissed Matt Smith, who flailed himself free and wiped his mouth while Steve guffawed and Mike winked. She then headed around the crowd and kissed everyone who wasn't already spoken for, and a few who were.

Hatchworth looked down at Camille. She looked up. It couldn't have been more perfect. Now he could do it. Everything was in place. Maybe he was wrong, but everything this evening had come
together to suggest he was right.

He leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips. Her eyes closed and she melted against him.

Yes.

There was a soft whooping sound nearby. He dismissed it. It was not part of his romantic ideal, but he wasn't going to let that interfere.

When he at last pulled away, she looked at him with an expression that filled every corner of his core with visions of rose petals. It was all true. He held her close, smiling into her hair.

They walked back apart from the others, by way of the kitchen, where he at last gave her the roses he had picked for her.

"Oh, Hatchy... they smell so sweet!"

"They are mere weeds in comparison to you, my dear," he murmured.

"Wow..." she whispered. "Hatchy... I never realized you had this side to you."

"Do you... you do like it, I hope? Romance?"

She smiled. "I do. A lot. But... can we still be friends, too? Sometimes... sometimes you just want a friend."

"Ah..."

"But I do still want the romance, okay?" she added quickly. She inhaled the scent of the roses once more and giggled softly. "I really, really like that, too!"

"I am delighted to hear it. I want very much to make romantic gestures to you. I am very much attached to you."

She hugged him and he sighed contentedly.

"I'm attached to you, too. Literally!"

He smiled indulgently. "So you are."

"Let's put these in my room and go back to the party, okay?" she suggested.

They walked to her room and he stood at the door while she set the roses beside her bed. She turned and smiled at him as she walked back, then shyly tipped her head up and kissed him. He was pleased... for a moment. But they were alone in her room, with no one around in that part of the house. He might have done his research on how to perform sex, but he didn't quite know how one approached the act.

"My dear," he murmured as she snuggled against him. "I am concerned about something."

"What is it?"

"Are you initiating an act of intimacy?"

She pulled away and stared at him.
"Oh, dear... I have been uncouth."

"What?"

"I should have been more subtle..."

"I don't think you could be. Do you mean sex?"

"Hush!" he hissed, looking at the doorway.

She giggled, her face red. "Hatchy... crap... we just kissed, that's all!"

"Oh..."

"I mean, you can't even... y'know..."

"Oh, of course not. I am unable anatomically to perform coitus. But I have amassed considerable knowledge about the pleasure zones of the body and how to-"

"Hatchy!" she squeaked, clapping her hands over her face.

"I only wish you to understand that I can engage in-"

"Hatchy!" she cried. "Stop it! I don't want to have sex, okay?"

He cringed, hoping there was no one nearby. It would sound most suspicious...

"I am very sorry..." he said unhappily. "I did not mean to make you uncomfortable. I have no sexual desire myself, you see. I am content to show my affections through romantic gestures and spending time enjoying your company. But I understand that young people today are very liberal with their sexuality and... I care very deeply for you indeed, enough that I would not be averse to such if you wanted it. And I thought you might be trying to suggest as much. But if you do not wish it at this time, I am content to wait until you feel otherwise."

She was gaping at him.

"Camille?" he murmured.

"I don't know about this..."

His core seemed to go cold. "Don't know about what?"

"Hatchy... you can't just be telling girls you have a whole plan on how to do them! Don't you know that?"

"Do... what?"

"You can't just say you've got it all planned out about whether you're going to have sex!" she hissed. "It's... it's rude! And... you just don't do that!"

"Well... I suppose. I have never had a girlfriend before, you see."

"Oh..."

So much for his carefully crafted romantic evening! Now he would be lucky if she was even willing to talk to him!
"I think perhaps I should go..." he said faintly, turning toward the door.

"No! Wait..."

He paused, hopeful.

"Look..." she faltered, "um... I don't want to have sex. Okay?"

"Understood."

"Good. And... I haven't had a lot of boyfriends either."

"Oh... well you are very young..."

"Shush. What I mean is... I've never had sex, even. That's okay, y'know?"

"Of course..."

She put her finger to her lips and he fell silent, watching her grapple for what to say.

"Thing is... I never really felt all that interested in it, either."

He widened his eyes but meekly remained silent.

"So you don't even have to worry about it, okay?"

He nodded.

"Great. So... can we just, like, be boyfriend and girlfriend? And we can kiss and share flowers and jokes and just be nice and happy?"

He smiled.

"Um... it's okay to talk now..."

"Oh, my dear!" he cried. "That would make me as happy as could be!"

"Really?" she laughed.

"Yes! That is what I most wanted!"

"Oh!" she giggled. "Well, then... it's decided."

"May I kiss you, then, to seal the deal?"

She ran into his arms and kissed him. He steamed with relief.

"Thank you, sweet Camille," he sighed, holding her close.

"No problem. If I ever do take an interest in it... I'll let you know. Don't assume anything until I say it in no uncertain terms, though."

"Of course, my dear girl. I am so very sorry I almost ruined everything."

"Oh, Hatchy..." she sighed. "It's okay. You understand now."

"Indeed I do. Well, shall we?"
She took his arm and they returned happily to the party. There were many coy looks as they entered the room, and he hoped very much that no one though they had engaged in sexual activity, especially considering their agreement.

_You were gone a long time_, Rabbit sent.

_We had to talk a bit. But fear not... we have agreed to refrain from the sex._

He saw Rabbit relax just a little. _Oh... did you?_

_Yes, I can see you are glad._

_Kinda..._

Hatchworth sighed, and happily joined Camille in a game with the others.

Chapter End Notes

*Sometimes, yeah. They're all just waiting for you to deliver. Literally.

**Sammiches is the most gorgeous little cat I think I've ever seen. I dunno how Bunny found such a splendid beast but I swear she's a perfect match for her owner.
A Picnic in Kazooland, pt. 1/3

Chapter Summary

Peter and Bunny find lost things on the other side of the portal...

And it turns out they're not alone.

Chapter Notes

It's Summer and the retcons are in bloom again... also, Steve and Michael reprise the last chapter of Life with Marie by having an even more awkward and (personal) discussion about robot romance...

I suppose I made things far too convenient for some characters. But I also made them better. Working on a happily ever after to this endless fic so that I can move on to finishing some others and throwing out a little "what if" au I've been mulling over for this one.

Warning: Chapter includes completely oblivious misgendering of Rabbit. It'll make sense in context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2012:

"I can't believe Col. Walter just left you down here all this time..." Five said as he opened the chest plate.

"Please be careful..."

"Don't worry, big guy... I've been doing robot repairs since I was a boy."

He removed another screw. Why was this thing fastened so tightly?

"Oh, good! Are you the guy who downloaded Miss Qwerty? You must be a genius!"

"Oh, um... no, that was my son..."

"Oh... sorry..." the automaton said faintly. His fingers twitched nervously. "Then... maybe he could help..." he suggested timidly.

"Now, really..." Peter V said, nettled. "He's a busy man and I've explained that I'm an experienced mechanic. You really need to give me a chance."

"But... it's just kinda complicated because there was some damage in the war, Mr. Walter..."
"Call me Peter. Your brothers do."

"Brothers..." the automaton said wistfully. His eyes brightened slightly and dimmed again. "Do they know I'm their brother?"

"Well..." He removed yet another patched on plate and found one more beneath it. Geez... "I have to admit, they never mentioned you."

There was a visible droop in the automaton's stance. "Oh."

"But I know them. They'll be absolutely delighted. Honestly, I'm surprised The Jon didn't know you were down here."

"Oh, yeah... I don't think that mojo he does can reach this far."

"Mojo?" Five chuckled. "I think he calls it juju..."

"Juju... an object venerated superstitiously and used as a fetish or amulet by tribal peoples of West Africa. Maybe he got it put on him during the war!"

"Where'd you learn that?"

"The Googles."

"You're hooked up to the wifi? How'd that happen?"

"Oh... the boop module did it. Years ago when they started connecting the computers."

"Boop module?"

He heard a soft electrical noise that sounded very much like a boop. A little automaton nudged his leg.

"Oh, I didn't know any of the lesser robots still worked," Peter V remarked.

"He's actually a small computer out in the sub-basement. That's his remote unit. He brings me things."

The boop module thumped his leg again, a little harder this time.

"Is that how you got my old record player?" he asked, ignoring it. "That's impressive work for such a little robot."

"Yeah, he's pretty good at getting things around. When he found me, he wanted to bring me something so I wouldn't feel alone. He put in a little camera, too."

"But..." Five said, turning another screw and ignoring a still more insistent thump from the boop module, "if you're on the network, then you could have told the others that you're here..."

The automaton looked down shyly. "Yeah, I guess so. But... Col. Walter set me up to keep the tunnels running, and..." He looked up. He still had a very rudimentary facial design, but Peter V could swear he was anxious. "Are you sure they'll be absolutely delighted?"

"Of course they will! Once I find out what's got you pinned here I can install a processor to run the tunnels for you and then you can meet them." The little robot thumped him hard enough that it stung. He gave up ignoring it and placed a foot firmly atop it. It revved its little motor but made no further
"Funny, though... I thought QWERTY was running the whole house."

"Oh, that thing in the attic? Yeah, it thinks it is. It does some stuff but not as much as it thinks it does. But back when it was Miss Qwerty I had to move fast to keep her from finding me. She was a lot smarter. But I convinced her I was just a generator."

"Also impressive. She's not easily fooled. And that explains why she didn't mention you, either. But why hide yourself? When I tell The Spine who... y'know, it just occurs to me that you must have a name..."

"Oh, yeah, I have a designation..."

Five removed the last screw. There was blue light visible around the cracks as he pulled it away. The boop module, with one rapid burst of speed, came loose and made this time for the robot's chair, thumping it just as the plate came free.

"Oh, well, my name i-" the robot began. He looked down in shock. "No! Don't open tha-"

Blue light flashed.

Time seemed to split, stretch, turn itself inside out, slow to a halt. He was still there, transfixed, staring into a searing blue core. Everything sped up again and he was moving through space. He was on the other side of the universe in a streak of purple light. He was passing through air that vibrated, hummed... it sounded almost like a kazoo... He was old... he was young... he was far away and he was still in the manor staring at... what? He looked around without looking around.

There was a sparkling trail coming from the manor. He could see its beginning and he could see the entire span of it as it zigzagged all over the world and space and time. And it stopped... on the other side of the universe.

He had a feeling he couldn't pin down. A terrible urge to follow. And just like that, he did, rocketing along the length of it in the twinkling of an eye. Was he dead? Was this the path to eternity? But it felt so warm and familiar... He desperately wanted to find what was at the end of it.

And he was still staring at a blue light. Why was he doing that? Why didn't he look away? How had he gotten there and how could he be here, too?

He reached the end of the trail. He was in a house, staring into a face that he hadn't seen in decades.

Peter? she gasped. The sound seemed to reverberate from the walls around them.

Lily! he cried, his voice vibrating like hers. Is it really you? Am I dreaming?

It's me, but...

Lily! he gasped, embracing her. She gently pushed him away, her expression worried.

Oh, no... what happened? she exclaimed. Are you...?

What?

Dead? Are you dead, Peter?
Am I? Maybe...

Maybe?

Um, why do you ask?

Why do I ask? For crying out loud! Peter... do you really not know if you're dead?

Oh... no... no, I'm not... am I?

Oh, good grief...

I thought it would feel more... final...

He could still see the blue light as if with another set of eyes... He had the feeling something wasn't right, not right at all. But here was Lily, sweet Lily, after all these years...

It does, honestly. I should know. So I assumed if you can see me, then... Maybe you are, too.

Maybe I am... I... I'm sorry I'm so fuzzy...

This time, she embraced him.

Oh, Peter! I've missed you...

Peter caressed her cheek. She didn't feel like a ghost, didn't look like one, despite the strangeness of her voice. I've missed you, too, love! he breathed.

Lily sobbed. He held her close...

And felt awful! He may have been muddled but he remembered he was married. What would Annie think if she knew he was with Lily?

But he wasn't, was he? He was standing, frozen on the spot, staring into a blue light...

How could he be both places? He could feel her in his arms...

And from behind the searing light, firm hands shoved Five backward. The blue light grew further and further away as he flew several feet backward and fell to the floor. Peter cried out in anguish, expecting the dream of Lily to end.

Lily... wait, what about Lily? Peter's memories seemed to fail him as his awareness twanged like a guitar string. His mind and body tugged across a divide, the connection stretching and thinning like taffy. He concentrated, tried to bring it together. What had happened? He vaguely recalled having been back at Walter Manor doing... something... He had a strange flash of being on the floor somewhere...

And he was still with Lily, in an old house, holding her close...

I'm sorry I had to leave like that! she sobbed.

He tried to grasp what she was saying, but his thoughts were a jumble. Where am I? he thought. He looked around. Peter's memories began to return slowly, trickling back, as he looked at Lily...

And Five saw the vivid blue gleam across a dark room, blinding him as he grew more confused. He clamped his eyes shut and turned away.
What had just happened? In neither place could he remember the last few minutes before the blue light had appeared. Those moments were broken, shattered at the bruised center of the string of memory that had once been his mind. He could see the other side of it vaguely, knew that there was a woman he loved, a son he couldn't let go.

And he was here, with Lily, his first love and lost wife. He could see the room, the walls, the woman herself...

But he wasn't really here. He was on the floor of an old room deep under the manor...

_I have to go back_, he told her unhappily.

She looked at him sadly. _You're not really dead. Are you?_

_No... and... I married again. Her name is... dammit, what was it..._ He concentrated and it came to him. _Annie! Her name is Annie. And I love her and our son._

_Good! That's wonderful, Peter!_

_But... I love you, too..._

_But you're right. You have to go back... you shouldn't be here. You made a life with her. You can't just leave her now. It was good to see you again, a dream come true... but... yeah, you just shouldn't be here..._

_Right..._ he replied sadly. _But how could he go back, exactly?_

Five tried to rise but couldn't seem to get to his feet. He looked around in the darkness and saw a door. He crawled toward it on shaking limbs. A small automaton, just a rolling module, booped softly as it approached and then rolled toward the door, as though leading him to it. He struggled to his feet and followed it with halting steps.

Where was he? And what had happened? He remembered exploring the maintenance tunnels, and then he heard singing... blue light, and then he was... no, it had to be a dream...

_A beautiful dream of Lily_, Five thought as he staggered through the tunnels. _But she died... and now I'm married to... dammit... Annie! Yes, sweet Annie! How could I have forgotten? No, I can't be with Lily... something's wrong..._

Peter V watched as if through a camera, endeavoring to return to his struggling physical form.

Neither could recall what had happened. Neither knew how to set it right.

_Lily... how do I get back? I'm there still... I'm trying to get upstairs but I may not make it unless I can get all the way back..._

_Just let go. Your body will pull you back since you're still alive._

_But... It's not, Lily! I can't seem to return. It's like we're different people sharing the same memories..._

There were tears in her eyes. _I know... I can see it now. Peter... I can't help you. You're split... broken... what happened to you?_

_I..._

What _had_ happened?
I don't know...

He desperately caught at all the memory he could grasp and saw the progress of his former body making its way out.

The boop module guided Five slowly. He didn't remember that it was called that. He wasn't sure where he was, who he was. No, wait... he was Peter... but everyone called him Five, because... yes, Five. He was married to... Annie. Good old Annie.

That was her name... wasn't it? Where was she?

Lily... what do I do? I can’t come all the way through and I can't go back!

Then... I guess... I hate to suggest it, but... just stay.

Stay?

Peter still held her. Five was climbing stairs, trying to get back to... someone. But Peter was in a house, holding Lily. She kissed him softly.

Stay, like you are now. Not that you have a choice, unless you figure out how to let go and return. You can be there with her. And you can be here, with me. Maybe... maybe it's best just to accept it.

He'd missed her so much. He loved... yes, Annie, but in a way his body was still there with her, still walking around conscious. He couldn't be sure how conscious, but it was there. It had Annie and Peter.

He couldn't, though, could he? Wasn't it wrong? Or... was it wrong, really? Everything that had been so certain seemed muddled all of a sudden!

He was still with Annie. And he was also with Lily. It was too perfect. Since he couldn't seem to rejoin the rest of himself, she must be right; he had no choice. If so, why fight it?

Maybe... Peter whispered, reaching for her. Maybe it is.

They melted together as Five slowly made his meandering way, half walking and half hovering, to his bedroom, where he sank down into a heavy sleep.

The automaton cried fitfully and went into stasis.

January 3, 2013:

"So... here I thought you were just a prude and it turns out you were secretly into it."

"Steve..."

"I mean, you were all, 'Steve, no, don't talk about the robot sex lives,' and then..."

Michael counted to ten. He should have known Steve would have a field day with that kiss. It had been a few months and he thought the chatter had died down. But Steve's memory was long, and
since he didn't have the heart (or the courage) to tease Rabbit about it, that left the One Man Band as prime target.

And unfortunately, everyone was busy and Steve had the day off. And he was bored.

"And I was right," Mike said firmly, trying to change the subject a little. "Or did you forget the incident with the scrapbooks? Spine snuck up behind us and scared ten years off your life."

"Just mine?" Steve scoffed. "You looked like you were gonna piss yourself!"

"I wasn't happy, no."

"Because you were busted!"

"Because we were out of line. We shouldn't have been speculating..."

"Pssh, don't feel bad, it was a reasonable question," Steve responded, clearly forgetting he was the one who brought it up. "Who knew he had a..." Steve looked around hastily and whispered, "A dick, y'know..."

"Yeah, I've heard of them," Michael said sarcastically. "So why are we talking about this again? It was only a kiss."

"It was only a kiss... and she's touching his chest now," Steve sang, "he takes off her dress now..."

"Let me go, Steve. And that's not how the song goes... and you're you're gonna get it stuck in my head."

"You brought it up..."

"I didn't... I was just saying it was just a kiss."

One he had enjoyed. Not that he'd tell Steve that... and as for Rabbit, he knew perfectly well that she'd likely set him on fire if he tried it again. Probably just as well. From what he'd seen, romance with a robot was far too complicated, and Rabbit still wasn't over Paige anyway.

"Not that," Steve was saying. "You asked why we were talking about this, and I'm telling you. You mentioned the scrapbook, which naturally raises the question of how The Spine was able to... y'know." He winked. "Do it."

"Fine. So I brought it up. This time. "We already know the answer so just forget I mentioned it and everyone will be happier."

Steve sat on the high lab stool, swinging his feet like a child helping to make cookies, and watched Michael tinker with a small robot that had a curious purple glow.

"The hell is that, anyway?" he asked, squinting at it like an old lady. "You and Rabbit having a baby?"

"No, dumba$$$. It's one of the old so-called 'lesser robots'. Beebop said he found them somewhere in the basement in a box labeled 'castor oil.'"

"There's a basement?"

"Yeah, same level as the vault, and sub-levels below it, apparently. So this box was just sitting by the door between the basement and the maintenance tunnels, he said. You wanna know the really freaky
Michael reached under the table and pulled out the aged wooden crate. Steve leaned forward eagerly.

"Cool," he murmured, examining the wood. "It's so old!"

"Yeah, but... this is exactly how Beebop found it, apparently. So whoever bundled them into the old box obviously cared enough to do this..." he explained.

He tipped it gingerly toward Steve.

"Mike..."

"I know..."

"They're all tucked in..."

"Yup." Michael put the box back under the table. "Someone crocheted them little cozies and made them dolls out of spare bits of hardware. I hate to say it, but I think we might have hobos."

"In the basement?"

"No, but maybe the maintenance tunnels?"

"There are maintenance tunnels?"

"To a point. Apparently no one in living memory has gone past the main power room. Could be anything in there. Hobos, Victorian ghosts, maybe some mad scientist creation someone lost down there..."

"Ugh... great, we have Morlocks."

"What?"

"Never mind. Hey, maybe it's like the Phantom of the Opera!"

"Huh." Michael chuckled at the notion. "Heard any ghostly singing through the ventilation system?"

"No, unless you count David wheezing too close to one of the vents after climbing a flight of stairs. He needs to get more exercise."

"Chelsea's got him hiking now."

"Good. Y'know, I kinda wanna explore down there now. In the tunnels. Might be great for some larping, too. That would get David moving."

"Well, I'd check with Peter first and take a few robots with you."

"Fair enough. Maybe your girlfriend would like to help out."

"Drop it."

"What?"

Michael resumed work. *Don't feed the troll*, he thought, tightening a castor carefully. Steve resumed
his watching, fidgeting as he sat.

"What's it do?" he asked at last, his restlessness winning out.

"Dunno. I think it's a prototype for the larger robots. Either that or it's supposed to collect fallen screws from under the table. See?"

He pressed a button and a small, blunt grappling hook shot from the front of the little robot's chassis. Michael wound it back inside.

"It should be able to do that itself when it's powered on."

"How's that a prototype? None of them have that."

"Maybe it was removed? Hands are better during peace time, after all."

"Maybe. But why is it glowing purple?"

"Oh, that. Its Blue Matter core was failing so I transferred what I could to a new core and filled up the rest with this stuff. It's a new form of matter I've been working on."

"That's another thing. Since when are you a tech?"

"I've been interning for a few months. You really should come by the manor more often."

"I practically live here since that damned doll came to life!"

A faint, gruff little voice could be heard from Steve's duffel bag. "I heard that, meatbag!"

Steve ignored it. "And I've seen you necking with robots but not working on them!" he added.

"Steve..." Michael groaned. "Look, I already knew a lot from my dad. He worked here for a few years in the eighties. And my great-grandpa taught The Spine to play guitar and piano."

"Holy crap, no kidding? That's quite a legacy. But why'd you act like such a stranger?"

"I dunno... Because I was one, I guess. I mean, I knew Peter from school but I didn't realize he was one of these Walters. He moved up an extra grade every year, I swear. We were only in the same class for first grade since he had to repeat a grade after his mom had him switch schools. So since it had been a long time, I figured he wouldn't know me. Turns out he's got a photographic memory? But yeah, they might have remembered my dad and great-grandpa but not me so much."

"Huh. So it's like it's in your blood or something. Must be why you wanna screw Rabbit."

Michael stared down at the robot, taking a calming breath. "You do realize that's impossible, right?"

"What? They're rebuilding her whole chassis, so... y'know..."

Again with the robot anatomy... "Yeah, she'll be shaped female externally but I can promise you she won't have the necessary access port."

"Access port?" hooted Steve, nearly falling off his stool. He righted himself hastily. "Are you telling me you asked?"

"No! It wasn't my choice of words. Peter decided to be typical and took me aside to straighten me out as specifically as possible. Until I asked him what he thought I was thinking of doing and he got..."
all squeamish and started talking about 'access ports'!

"That's amazing!" Steve giggled, swabbing his eyes.

"I know, right? I really thought he'd be past that kind of schoolmarm nonsense after he married Bunny and they started going at it in every corner of the house. I mean, every time someone needs Peter for something he seems to turn up out of breath and adjusting his pants and wearing her blouse by mistake under his vest and she's right behind him all red faced and trying to keep his shirt buttoned over her boobs..."

"I still can't believe that happened."

"It was one of the funniest things I've ever seen, full stop," Michael snickered. "Anyway, I'm not sleeping with Rabbit. Okay? We just wanted to try something new."

"Well, it doesn't get any newer than being the first man to get busy with a..."

"Just... don't."

"Why? But maybe you'll get lucky and have a Blue Matter accident, too."

"Lucky?" Mike cried.

"Yeah! If that thing explodes too close to your crotch, you may end up anatomically compatible with Rabbit!"

"Will you f***ing shut up, Steve?" Michael snapped. "It's Purple Matter anyway..."

Steve recoiled slightly, still smirking. It took a lot to make Michael angry, but Steve was uncommonly gifted at it.

"Temper, temper! It's just some good-natured ribbing!"

"Uh-huh. So I can tease you about being a band fanboy?"

"Pssh, I'm not a..."

"Oh, you're not, huh? What about the time you danced with Upgrade in the park?"

"I was a plant. I was helping them out..."

"Bullcrap. You were at every performance! They pull random people from the crowd for that bit and you were there so often you just happened to be picked this time."


Michael finished his work and powered the little robot on. It turned a single eye toward him and beeped enquiringly. He smiled just as The Jon pelted into the room.

"Oh, my gosh! You're awake! Hey, nice purple! Come and meet my girlfriend!

Before Michael could stop him, Jon swept up the little robot and strode out with it, chattering and getting oddly warm-sounding beeps in response.

"Huh..." Steve said, staring at the doorway. "Were you done?"
"Mostly..." he sighed, starting his clean up. "The Matter is stable anyway so I guess it's alright. I'll go get it back later for some fine-tuning and maybe Jon can translate for it."

Steve helped tidy as Peter strolled into the lab. "Hey, what was Jon carrying?"

"The little bot I was working on. I guess they're old friends."

Peter chuckled. "I heard as much from Dad. Most of those little guys were already broken down by the time he came to the manor and once his uncle joined the Marines no one had the time or the skills to fix them. Still dunno how they ended up bundled away like baby dolls in the basement. I guess we should repair the rest. Maybe ask Aunt Wanda to help. She grew up with them."

"Alright, I'll have a look at the others," Michael promised.

"Great. I assume you remember that today is the picnic."

"Yep. Have a good time!"

"I think we will, once Mom stops crying and patting my face," Peter said dryly.

"You sorry Bunny did it?" Steve asked.

"No... I know Mom has been eating her heart out about it even though she's trying to be tough. I just... I wonder whether it's such a great idea to bring Dad."

"He's been feeling a bit better though," Michael said, rummaging through the crate of tiny robots.

"Yeah, but he's away with the fairies mentally."

"Hey," Steve said. "Can I ask... has he been diagnosed with anything? 'Cause my Pappaw..."

"Your what?" Mike snickered.

"My Pappaw," Steve said in a surprisingly hurt tone. "My Grandpa, okay? That's what we call him. Anyway, he had Alzheimer's and it was sorta similar but he didn't just wake up one day like that."

"Neither did my dad... he was getting forgetful."

"Everyone gets forgetful, Peter. Your dad went from senior moments to "We're having jell-o today!" in a month or something. My Pappaw..." He looked sharply at Mike, who smirked and looked into the box. "My Pappaw took, like, twenty years to decline before he died of pneumonia."

"Twenty years? From onset?" Peter asked.

"Well, yeah. Haven't you ever looked this stuff up, Peter?"

"Sure... I just figure all bets are off with a Walter. Everything seems to happen differently here."

Steve folded his arms and stared at him. "You were caught up in something else, weren't you?"

"Steve, lay off," Mike said.

Peter sighed. "A few dozen things, Steve. Look, I have regrets, okay? I didn't spend enough time with my parents and my mom missed me in her own house while her husband lost his mind and her son lost his face. I get it. I was a crappy son. I'm kinda trying to fix that now, okay?"
"Of course it's okay, Peter," Mike said soothingly. "Steve's just having a don't-know-when-to-shut-the-hell-up-kind-of-morning, trust me."

Steve sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah... some days I just wake up hyper and don't know what to do with it."

"Go jump off a building," Mike suggested with a grin.

"Mike!" Peter exclaimed. Steve snorted.

"I usually do parkour with a buddy. Wanna go with?"

"Oh..." Peter said softly. "That kind of jumping off a building... right."

Michael chuckled. "Yeah. And I don't think so, Steve. I'd actually die."

"Anyway," Peter said firmly, "I gotta get going and make sure I'm there to help with Dad, and hope I can keep track of him. I still don't know, though... Suppose he wanders off?"

"Watch him like a hawk, I guess..." Steve faltered. There really wasn't a fix for this.

"Or take a robot along!" Peter said. "Why didn't I think of that before? Now I'm losing it..."

"Take Rabbit," Steve suggested. "Y'know, so she won't make out with Mike while you aren't looking."

Michael clapped his hand over his face.

"Oh, I don't think they'll..." Peter trailed off, his head tilted toward Michael as though looking sidelong at him.

"I'm not gonna make out with Rabbit!" Michael cried, exasperated.

"Right, of course not, sorry, Mike..." Peter said absently. "Y'know... Rabbit hasn't been out much since she recovered. Maybe I will bring her. I mean, just because of Dad, not because of... the thing..."

Michael groaned and glared at Steve, who was wearing a huge grin.

"I'm serious. I think she'd enjoy it," Peter insisted.

"Fine. You're right. Go for it."

"Hey, Pete, buddy..." Steve said hastily, as Peter turned to leave. "What are your thoughts on a little expedition down to the... what was it..."

"Maintenance tunnels," Mike prompted.

"Yeah, those. As you have observed, I got nothin' goin' on today and I heard you got Morlocks or C.H.U.D. or something down there..."

"I have what?"

"I mean that the place is a mess and might have some cool mysteries. Maybe Col. Walter used to be a bootlegger or something. Might find an old speakeasy down there."
Peter snorted. "Now I'm kinda curious myself. I'm sure there's no speakeasy but maybe when we get back we can talk about it. I've only been as far as the access panels inside the doorway."

Steve slumped a little. Peter shrugged.

"If you're bored, go ask David if he needs any muscle."

Steve sighed. "We all know the answer to that," he mumbled.

"Huh?"

"Nothing..." he said quickly, but Peter had started to chuckle as though he had made the connection two seconds after asking.

"Oh! Yeah, well, I threw my back out trying to lift my wife, so I'm in no position to judge him on that," Peter said. "Anyway, I gotta scoot."

"Have a good picnic!" Steve said.

"Give Annie a kiss on the cheek for me," Michael added.

Peter nodded. "Will do. Thanks. See ya."

As he walked out, Michael looked back at Steve, who was calmly smirking.

"Like you can't do your own kissing," Steve whispered.

"Shut up or I'll kiss you," Michael growled, pulling out a little robot.

"Fine, fine, you don't have to get gross."

Peter trotted down the hallway to find Rabbit. This could be just what the doctor... or tech... ordered.

Mike was taking it personally, of course, since he'd given him that little talk. He wondered whether that had been a good idea, considering he genuinely trusted Mike not to do anything while he was away. Even if Rabbit was interested, which he doubted.

He honestly worried about her. She'd shown a little of her old sass here and there but was still far too meek and quiet. As much as she had changed as she settled into being feminine, she had never been meek... until the accident. A personality change on that scale was more suggestive of trauma, which she most certainly had suffered. Maybe a nice picnic would help shake her out of her funk, or at least give them a chance to observe her and decide what to do next.

Peter was, after all, trying to be a big boy about the champagne incident and do right by his responsibilities. Also, Bunny had abruptly asked him to just drop the matter. Considering she prudently waited until just after sex to ask him, so as to make sure he was feeling relaxed and magnanimous, he had agreed all too easily. But a deal was a deal, and he meant to keep his word.

And besides, it really was a good idea to bring a robot, and the others were busy. The Spine was doing lab work with his wife (Peter really hoped that wasn't a euphemism) and Hatchworth had borrowed Bunny's idea and went on a picnic with his sweetheart out on the grounds. Peter was still trying to wrap his head around Hatchworth having a girlfriend, but at least it meant he'd prepared both picnics at the same time as a favor to Peter. Jon and Upgrade were available, but bringing them stood the chance of compounding the problem.
Bunny popped out of their room as he approached. He opened his arms expectantly and she rolled her eyes.

"It's only a request, not an order," he remarked. "Just indicating my preferences..."

She smiled and slipped into his arms. "Alright. It's not like I didn't wanna."

"Where's the kitten?"

It had spent the night curled on their bed, although in the morning it had decided Peter's mask was a scratching post. He was very much on the fence about her. Bunny, on the other hand, clearly had no qualms at all.

"The Spine's watching her for me. It wasn't easy handing her over."

"Already in love, huh?"

"No, she grabbed onto my dress when she saw him. But yeah, that too."

"She gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, once he petted her for a minute she settled down."

"I don't suppose you've chosen a name...?"

"Still working on it. Maybe something Hatchy related, but I dunno. Speaking of which, where's the food?" she whispered.

"He left it in the kitchen. I figure we'll grab it on the way to the portal. I was just gonna go ask Rabbit to come along."

"Oh, good idea. She's been weird lately."

"Weird-er, you mean. But I was actually thinking she would be helpful with Dad."

"Oh..."

"Something wrong?" Peter asked.

"Well... have you ever been invited somewhere just because you were the only one who could drive or something? Like you thought maybe they liked you but you couldn't shake the feeling you were only asked along because no one else had a car?"

Trust Bunny to think of it from that perspective. It always hurt a little, knowing it most likely came from something she'd experienced. He stroked her back, hoping on some level to comfort her for something long since past.

"Oh... yeah," he murmured, feeling a little choked up, "I tended to get that syndrome when we had group projects in school. So you don't want her to think she's just invited to be Dad's nurse. What do you suggest?"

"Let me ask her."

"Okay... I assume you have an approach in mind?"

"I do, and I think it'll work. Just trust me and go along, okay?"
"Will do."

"At least... I really hope it works..." she breathed as they walked down the hallway. "I'm worried about her. I mean... she's so nice now."

Peter blinked at her. He'd thought so himself, but the way she put it was a trifle baffling. "Compared to before, I guess. Is that... bad?"

"Yeah! She's not herself!"

He snickered softly. "Ah, well... that I noticed."

They found Rabbit sitting in the library, wearing a short wig and her new sundress, looking out the window. They glanced at each other.

"Rabbit?" Bunny whispered.

"Hm?" she said, looking back at them. She smiled a little. "Hey, guys. I thought y-y-you were goin' on a picnic like Hatchy."

"Oh, yeah, we're heading out now," Bunny replied. "Just the four of us."

"Four?"

"Yes, we're taking Peter's father."

"Oh, good. He don't get to go anywhere anymore."

"True. You have to be careful or he'll wander off."

Rabbit raised an eyebrow. "Oh, yeah. But... well, you'll watch him, right? 'Cause it's easy ta get lost there."

"Of course," Bunny whispered. "But he's not fast enough to get away from us!"

"Though..." Rabbit said thoughtfully, "he does that floating thing."

"Oh..." Bunny said, as though dismayed. She looked at Peter worriedly. "I didn't think of that..."

Was this her plan? It seemed a bit risky, but of course they didn't want Rabbit to catch on. He played along, as instructed, hoping he'd understood.

"Well, I mean, there will be three of us," Peter said soothingly. "I'm sure we can keep track of him."

"Unless we doze off after lunch!" Bunny exclaimed, her whispery voice hissing like a pierced tire. "And he gets a wild hare to go floating off into the atmosphere! Or... who knows, maybe he might just get caught in an updraft and... there aren't even helicopters there, we couldn't... Oh, what was I thinking, planning a trip like this?"

"Bunny, it's okay..." Peter faltered. This really seemed sincere. He forced a chuckle. "We could... maybe tie a string to his leg?"

There were actual tears in her eyes. Either she was that good, or she hadn't thought of the possibility that he could float away. She was starting to make him worry, too!

"I'm not gonna fly your dad like a kite, Peter!" she gasped. "We'll have to leave him home, only... we
gave his nurse the day off!" She sobbed softly. "Oh, Peter... I've messed up everything!"

He couldn't help it. He pulled her into his arms. If she really was upset, she needed a hug, and if she wasn't, well... she certainly seemed that way, and he just couldn't help it. When she was upset, he wanted to hold her.

Rabbit had gotten up and walked over to join them. "Simmer down, baby," she said soothingly, putting her arm around Bunny. "If ya do-don't mind a fifth wheel, I could come along an' keep an eye on him for ya! I don't even eat lunch so I won't f-f-fall asleep."

Bunny looked up from where she had been crying against Peter's shoulder.

"Really?"

"No problem at all," Rabbit said gently.

Bunny turned back to Peter. With her left eye, which was out of Rabbit's view, she flicked the barest of winks. Of course, he thought. He was terrible at bluffing so she'd had to bluff him, too. Peter was glad Rabbit couldn't see the little grin on his face as Bunny mopped her eyes with her sleeve and turned to hug Rabbit.

"Thanks, Rabbit!" she whispered. "That's a wonderful idea!"

"No. Thank you, baby," Rabbit purred. "That was the cu-cutest way I've ever been tricked into anything. Hehe... 'fly your dad like a kite...' That was a good one! Welp, gotta go ma-make myself pretty. See ya at tha portal."

Rabbit favored them with a wink of her own and strolled off down the hallway. Bunny turned to stare at Peter.

"Well," Peter said amiably, stroking one last crocodile tear from her face, "She is more than four times your age. You have to expect her to be hard to buffalo, even after the memory loss. And it got the job done."

Bunny grinned weakly and nodded. They hooked arms and headed to the kitchen for the picnic supplies.

Peter...

Lily?

He saw her face for a moment... it faded. He turned and saw her again... no, wait... Lily was shorter... Who was this, then? He used to know, could almost grasp the memory, but it was always just out of reach.

He looked around blankly. Five also couldn't seem to remember how he'd gotten there.

There was a large metal circle standing in a lab. He'd heard Lily again... but she wasn't there. But this lab... he'd worked here, trying to find the answer...

Why wasn't she here? She was always here...

He stood between two women. One was shorter and had blond hair and blue eyes. There was something familiar... no. It was gone again. He felt awful that it was... hurt, guilty, and a little angry...
without knowing exactly why. She was... important...? But it was just not there. And it was his fault? Or not...? And he almost remembered... almost... but then it seemed to be pulled away again.

The other woman was tall, with dark hair and green eyes... or were they? There was another name for the color... a girl's name...

It was so hard to remember! He'd seen the color, but he could swear it hadn't been a girl. Just as tall, though. He'd been eye to eye with them. But it wasn't a girl... He focused, tried to pull it back. Yes... Two men... yes, two men with that eye color. One was a girl now. No one had explained that to him. He wasn't even sure how he knew it.

He heard a familiar voice... they were all familiar... and stared at a man in a keyhole mask. Who was he? Was he even real? No. This had to be a dream. He was always dreaming, lately...

And the robot. There had been robots since he was a boy. Probably... maybe? But this one was wearing a dress. He'd seen her before, a long time ago, in another place, while he was trying to...

Gone.

There was a robot in a dress. He vaguely recalled that there had been one in a dress... but she was little... Yes, he remembered her now. She had once been a computer, Lily's cousin. And then Lily had died. Lily had died! And he wept, and hurt, and healed, and traveled far and wide. And then one day he brought home...

Gone.

There was a man in a keyhole mask. This had to be a dream. He was always...

"Come on, everyone. Time to show you Kazooland," said the man.

But that voice! If he heard it again, he was sure he could place it. Why couldn't he place it? It was important! It was really, really important! He just wanted to remember, with all his heart and soul. He needed to remember! But just as surely as he recognized it, something pulled it away!

The robot put an arm around his shoulders, gave him a little squeeze. The smaller woman took his hand and they walked him forward. He could ask them... but they stepped through the circle and...

Blue. So much blue... swirling around him on every side. It was beautiful! And he'd seen it before. Sometimes he felt like it was all he saw...

There was a stabbing pain in his head. He gasped.

Peter...

Lily? Peter V thought. He'd know that voice anywhere!

Peter... oh, dear... this can't be good...

Lily! a man's voice gasped. What's going on?

Well... it seems your other half has come to visit.

What should I do?

Go back to it, silly.
But... suppose he takes me back when he goes?

You'll be whole again. Don't you want that?

Silence. Five had stopped walking. Someone was tugging on his arm but he was too focused on the voices.

I don't know.

Peter! What about Annie? Don't you miss her?

How can I answer that? Lily...

I know you miss her. Go back.

But I want to stay with you...

Peter, you're being childish.

I feel childish! I don't feel like him anymore! I...

What's wrong?

Lily! Lily, I can't... it's too... gasped the man's voice. Lily... something's wrong... He's pulling me in!

There you go. Lily's voice faded as if she was walking away. Don't tell me you didn't know he was coming here. Your son comes here all the time with his wife.

I don't want to go back! He's dying!

Dying?

Then so are you, came the faint reply. But it's your choice, Peter. I have to stay here but you don't. Better decide what you're going to do by the time he leaves.

Lily, come on! Lily! Dammit... Y'know what? Fine. Whatever.

The blue swirling thinned. How long had they been in it? Minutes? Years? No... just a few seconds...

He thought he heard someone swearing. He felt suddenly dizzy and his eyes crossed slightly, involuntarily, and resumed focus. He felt angry for a split second, frustrated. She thought she knew everything, the little brat! Same as always. And she knew he'd forgive her so she wasn't a bit sorry for leaving him to his fate. Sure, he missed Annie and Peter and thought of them all the time, but he'd been perfectly content staying with Lily... somewhere...

Had he been living with Lily? But how was that possible? She was dead! How silly. Now that one just had to be a dream. Lily was long gone, after all. He squeezed Annie's hand fondly. Sweet, sweet Annie...

They passed through the last of the shimmering blue membrane and came out in the living room of an airy old house with white curtains. Five looked around him. It was lovely! Simple but elegant, wood floors, natural lighting, like something from a quiet old movie. He loved Walter Manor but this place was delightful as well. He could imagine living out his days in a house like this...

"Peter?" sobbed Annie.
"Hm?"

He turned, expecting her to fall into his arms after saying his name like that. But she was embracing a young man who was holding the same keyhole mask he'd seen earlier.

Well, look at that, he thought. It's Peter! Look at that five o'clock shadow... When did that happen? He glanced around. When did any of this happen?

It slowly came back to him as he looked around, as though he was gathering his thoughts after a long sleep. Yes... There had been an accident. Annie had cried a lot. He'd heard her telling other people about Peter losing his face, of all things. A worker had been turned into a woman... surely not literally? He shuddered. If it was a figure of speech, then... no, he didn't want to think about it.

And there had been more. Accidents involving at least two of the robots. He wasn't clear on any details since he'd overheard it all in snatches. But why in the world did no one tell him directly?

But wait... Annie had done that. How did he forget so quickly?

He looked the tall woman over. She wasn't much more than a girl, really... at least, to Five. Weird... he knew where he'd seen those eyes now. The twins must have had a sister. No, wait... maybe that was the twin? The man who got turned into a woman, possibly? It had to be literal, then... her figure testified to that. Well... the Blue Matter had clearly outdone itself with this one! Those legs!

And the robot... when did they build that one? Wait a minute... no, it couldn't be... Just what sort of accident had Rabbit been in, anyway? Unless that was The Spine...? No, too short and there were the telltale cheek vents.

His attention was pulled back to his family. Annie was crying over Peter. She patted his face. There was a shimmer of blue and she gasped.

"Oh, it tingles!" Annie said, rubbing her fingers together.

"It does?" Peter asked. He kissed her forehead. "Does that tingle, Mom?"

"Uh-huh! Isn't it supposed to?"

"Well..."

The robot prodded Peter's cheek. More blue shimmers. With a look of deep fascination, she gave him a light slap.

"Ooo," she breathed as a cloud of shimmers floated around his head.

"Could you not?" Peter growled.

Five stared at the robot once more, baffled. There really was no way it wasn't Rabbit. He'd seen him enough to know the design.

"Yeah, alright. But... does that usually happen?" Rabbit (??) asked.

"No..." Peter said uneasily.

"Well, technically..." the girl began. Annie jumped. "Sorry... you haven't really heard me like this much..."

"Oh, you sound just lovely!" Annie said, beaming. "Just exactly like Lauren Bacall."
"No kidding?" the girl asked, wide-eyed.

"Oh, I don't know..." Five said. Her voice was low and dulcet, sure, but exactly like Lauren Bacall?

They turned and looked at him. He smiled pleasantly back. Annie chuckled and patted his arm. He patted her hand in return.

"Anyway," the girl continued, as if Five hadn't spoken, "I just mean that no one has really touched Peter's face here except for me. And I've never seen any blue flashes from it."

"Bet ya fe-felt some tingling, though," Rabbit (!?!) said with a grin.

*I must be seeing things...* Five thought. *That must be Rabbit, but what's with the sparkles? And why are they ignoring me? And what's up with the innuendo?*

The girl blushed scarlet. "Really?" she said wryly.

Rabbit (!!!) giggled.

That confirmed it. He knew that laugh! It really was Rabbit! But he said he'd never dress like a woman again! Why was he doing it now?

"Um, Peter?" Five said, looking intently at his son.

The others turned as one to look at Five. Annie put her hand to her mouth.

"Yeah, buddy. That's Petes," Rabbit said gently.

"Oh! He recognizes you!" Annie cried. "It must be seeing your face..."

"That's true, he always looks at me like he's trying to remember something."

"He looks at everyone that way," the girl remarked.

"Everyone and everything." Rabbit shook his head.

"Not as much as us," Peter sighed. "Me and mom, I mean."

"Oh, sweetheart," Annie breathed unhappily, "he... he's just..."

Five looked at each of them in turn and frowned. That was just about enough of that.

"Why the *hell* are you all discussing me right in front of my face?" he demanded.

Silence. A few glances around. He did not care for any of it.

"Seriously... kind of rude, don't you think?" Five prompted.

More silence.

"Um..." Annie faltered.

"Dad?" Peter said softly.

"Yes?" he demanded.

Silence yet again. It was getting very, very old.
"Look, did I miss something?" Five asked, frustrated. "I was just gonna ask Peter when he started growing that much facial hair."

"Um... what?" Peter said blankly.

"And by that I mean any. Last I remember, you could barely get a light mustache."

"It sorta kicked in recently..." Peter said blankly.

"Huh. You're so fair-skinned I thought you'd never need a shave..."

He paused. No one was moving. He wasn't even sure they were breathing.

"Okay, you're all starting to make me nervous. Annie girl... tell me what's going on."

"Oh, Peter!" she choked.

Annie was crying again. She threw her arms around him the way he'd expected her to before, as though he'd just come back from a long journey. He still rather felt as though he had. He held her and kissed the top of her head.

"Annie, come on..." he breathed. "Seriously, what is it? I can take it."

This, apparently, was the last straw for Rabbit, too. He... or was it she...? started to sob.

"That tears it. Rabbit, when in the world did you decide Wanda was right?"

Rabbit laughed messily and threw her arms around Five and Annie. The girl joined in the laughter without hesitation. Peter, however, still stared, stunned, at his father.


Rabbit pulled away and looked at him in surprise. "Last time, buddy?"

There it was again. That condescending tone.

"Buddy? What's that all about. That's your 'kids and idiots' kind of talk. You haven't called me that since I was both."

"Sorry... it's a long st-story..."

"Don't you remember anything from the last couple of years, Mr. Walter?" the girl asked.

Oh, now you speak to me? he thought. But she was an absolute bombshell, and since she was here with the family, wherever here was, and if Rabbit was dropping hints about them, then maybe she was Peter's girlfriend. If so, he didn't want to screw it up. Sure, the data suggested she'd once been a man but there was no trace of it now. And wasn't like Peter had dated anyone before, that he could tell, even the man she had once been (which certainly would have fit what he and Annie had suspected about him). Either way, was about time and he secretly had never been able to imagine his science-obsessed son Peter getting himself a boyfriend or a girlfriend, much less a girlfriend with a figure like Raquel Welch and eyes like Susan Sarandon.

Although, with the way he felt just now, she could be some kind of leggy hired nurse. Why was he so tired? And where had he been for the last year... or was it years? He remember interesting dreams of an old house on a quaint old street and a girl who looked a lot like Lily. But he also remembered living with Annie in Walter Manor. And he further remembered not being able to remember! Things
had seemed simple and clear in the old house but in Walter Manor they'd been blurry, as though that was the dream instead...

But he had no answers that made any sense. Maybe she'd once been a man, maybe she was Peter's sweetheart, he didn't know. Rather than try to unravel the tangled threads of his memories, he favored the girl with a smile. Time to turn on the charm. He'd gotten his share of interested looks from both sexes in his prime, though he only reciprocated one way. He had this.

"Well, hello!" he said pleasantly. "You have the advantage of me."

"I have what?" she giggled.

Five took her hand and kissed it. "Peter Alexander Walter V, at your service."

Annie rolled her eyes and the girl blushed. Yep, he thought. Still got it.

"Quit flirting, you old poop! This is Peter's wife, dear!" Annie explained, beaming.

Five blinked, looking at the girl's free hand. Oh. There was a ring. Peter was wearing one, too. Well, then. That answered at least one question.

Wait a minute...

"Wife?" he cried. "Did you forget my address? I don't recall receiving a wedding invitation!"

Annie sighed and wiped her eyes. "Alright. I think I've finally gotten my bearings. Time for some lengthy explanations."

Five looked at her, puzzled.

Chapter End Notes

I was looking for references that matched Five's era, so Raquel Welch and Susan Sarandon fit in all the described areas.
Chapter Summary

A day spent with family, asking questions, making the most of it, and trying to decide what to do next.

Sometimes the happy ending isn't all happy. But everyone is better than they began.

Chapter Notes

With a humorous little subplot to break up all the discussion and feels. And like part one, to hint at things to come.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A little while later, they sat on the porch, still trying to work out what had happened and why.

Peter VI loved a good mystery. But this one punched him in the gut. His dad had his memory back? How? Of course, there was one obvious implication, but it made no more sense than the others and was considerably more serious. Here they were, just trying to have a nice picnic. He should be happy but it blew the top off of every expectation. There was so much to talk about, because who knew whether it would last? And if it didn't, they needed to get in all the time they could, not to mention telling those back home...

"Aunt Wanda!" Peter cried. "We should tell her! And Uncle Norman. Dad, we should let everyone know you're... y'know... lucid. They'll want to talk to you!"

"An' Spine an' Tha Jon! An' Upgrade!" Rabbit cried. "They'll wanna see him, too!"

"Oh... but... we can't very well bring everyone here," Peter said. "We need someone back there in case we need help getting back..."

"We don't have to bring everyone here, though," Annie said. "The workers wouldn't be as interested, and Hatchworth hardly knows him."

"I guess..." Peter said slowly. "But... we meant to keep it small..."

Bunny snickered. "It's alright, dummins. We brought loads of food."

"Alright, well... Give me a minute."

He pulled out his comm. Five held up his hand.

"Wait. Look, we can call them later, but... can we just go on like this for now? I know they'll want to see me, but... I want to just talk with all of you for now. I certainly have a lot to talk to you about, married man."
"Oh..." Peter put the comm away, hoping his dad didn't plan to give him any awkward advice about sex in present company. That ship had sort of sailed anyway. "But, Dad... I hate to say this, but... we don't know how long it'll last. We don't even know how it happened..."

"You have your face for as long as you're here," Bunny interrupted. "Just like my voice. So maybe it's like that."

"Maybe. I'd considered it..." Peter agreed. "But that means it'll be gone again when we go home!"

"Well, I mean... whatever it is, it's not going to last forever anyway, because I won't," Five said. "I am sick. I can feel it, even now. I can think straight, but it's still affecting my body and... well, I'm just not going to last forever, that's all. Nothing does. So I think I'd rather just live in the moment."

Annie closed her eyes and rested her head against his shoulder. Peter gulped. His father had been getting sick more often lately, and he knew his mother had been quietly making certain arrangements, putting things in order. No one was willing to say it. Peter didn't even want to think it.

"But don't you remember anything from the time you were out of touch?" Bunny asked, even as she squeezed Peter's hand comfortingly.

"Well, yes and no. It's not that I don't remember the last year or so," Five said. "It's that it seems like I dreamed it. I remember my memory getting a bit fuzzy for a few years and then..." He flicked a glance at Annie, "...a lot of strange dreams and... well, here I am."

"Did something happen during an experiment, maybe?" Peter asked.

"Experiment?"

"Yeah... that seems to be the link. Everyone who experienced a Blue Matter accident can access something here that they lost."

"What? I ain't found anything I lo-lost!" Rabbit complained.

"Sorry... I think it may only apply to organic life forms..." Bunny said soothingly.

Rabbit scoffed. "Rip-off," she muttered, folding her arms.

"Anyway," Peter pressed, "it sounds familiar, and what you describe sounds awfully sudden, not to mention oddly specific. Just like what happened to me and Bunny."

"Well, if there really is something wrong with my brain, my perceptions would be off, so you can't determine much based on my take on it," Five replied. "You're a certified genius, son, you should recognize that."

Peter sighed. "Yeah, Dad, but if you were just sick, you wouldn't suddenly be better here, would you?"

"Well, I said I wasn't. I'm talking to you but that doesn't mean I'm at one hundred percent. I'll be honest... I'm still pretty muddled. I just remember more than I did before we came here. As for experiments, you know I wasn't really doing that sort of thing anymore. Last thing I was doing before it all went really fuzzy was... yeah, I think... I was just doing a bit of exploring... Down in the archives under the lab levels. Huh... how'd I forget that?"

"Were you?" asked Annie. "I thought you were digging around in the basement..."
"Well, sure, that's how it started. I remember digging in the crates from Hatchy's vault and... oh, yeah. I found a big ol' key. Big rusty iron thing... and you remember that the maintenance tunnels end in a locked door, right? And Aunt Wanda always discouraged me from going down there as a kid but the only excuse she had was that her grandpa told her not to. But of course I did, as far as I could manage at that age, since the key was missing anyway. Based on the location I figured it must lead to Delilah's storage bay which would be pretty dangerous for a kid.

"So I never got around to looking too deeply while I was the man of the house because I didn't want Peter finding his way down there, either. And I mostly forgot about it with all the other worries. So here I was with a key that looked the right size and plenty of time, and well, I had to go and try it, only... right... the lock was gone."

"Gone?" Peter gasped.

"Yep. Broken. There was enough left to confirm the key looked like a match but I didn't need it, the thing just swung open. So I started exploring it."

"Huh..." Peter murmured. "Rabbit, do you know anything about the archives? Maybe one of you opened it at some point?"

Rabbit, still sulking, grumbled, "I dunno! If anyone did it, it wasn't me! I haven't been in 'em since I was a kid! Pa-Pappy kept a lot of old parts from tha war in there. Like... like a graveyard, only... he just locked 'em up in there, didn't bury nobody." Her voice had dropped to a whisper. "Don't wanna see that. It's scary."

"I guess that makes sense," Bunny agreed.

"He just left it all down there?" Peter asked.

"He'd go down to get pieces he needed, sometimes. I think it was ju-just a scrap pile to him. But I wo-wo-wouldn't go with him. None of us would. An' then Hatchy got locked in tha vault an' I didn't even wanna go to tha basement."

Bunny hugged her and Rabbit smiled weakly, wiping surreptitiously at one eye.

"If The Spine did it, he'd have mentioned it," Annie commented. "Maybe one of the others?"

"Maybe. I'll ask them later but... did something happen to you down there, Dad?" Peter asked.

"Maybe..." Five said.

"You don't know? Is that part of your memory still inaccessible?"

"Like I said, it's a bit of a jumble. The last few years feel like overlapping movies. Besides, it's dusty as hell down in the depths of the house. And the darkness seems to swallow the light from any lantern or flashlight you bring in."

"So you got nothing," Peter grumbled. "Well, so much for that lead..."

"Now, I didn't say that, son. I remember... well, that must have been my imagination, too."

"Never assume, Dad especially under the circumstances. Tell us and maybe we can all riddle it out."

"Yes, but... I swear when I opened the door... I remember hearing Al Green singing."

"What, a record?" Annie asked.
"No... More like an actual voice echoing through the tunnels. Crazy, huh?"

Bunny and Annie chuckled.

"He always was a favorite of yours," Annie said. "Figures he'd show up in one of your dreams."

"When was that, do you think?" Peter asked thoughtfully.

"I think... right after Upgrade and Jon left on their trip. I suppose I must have been slipping already."

Peter wasn't willing to rule anything out. This was too strange to do that. But he also didn't want to waste the time they had been given, so investigating the tunnels would have to wait.

And of course, he was going to have to make sure Steve wasn't being typical, in case there was something dangerous. He didn't want to be responsible for Steve prematurely ending up like his "Pappaw."

"Yeah, that does sound kind of far-fetched..." Peter said casually. "Weirdly, though, it lines up with your sudden decline. For all we know everything is exactly the way you remember it."

"Or maybe all those memories were a symptom," Bunny said.

"Maybe. Do you remember anything else, Dad?"

"Not really. I remember poking around the junk piles. I... must've lost track of time doing that, then realized how tired I was and went back upstairs and went to sleep. Seem like after that I just wasn't keeping my memories anymore."

"Just like that..." Peter murmured.

Yes, it was suspicious.

"So I remember. But I already put my disclaimer on that."

"You've got me curious about those tunnels, now, though," Peter said. "I wonder what kind of stuff is down there."

Rabbit shivered, presumably for effect. "Nightmares. Tha-that's what down there!"

"Well, it'll have to keep. We haven't even had the picnic yet," Five said. "I know you're worried because of what's happened, but I want to make the most of it."

Of course his dad saw right through him. "Alright, Dad. Hey, um... before we do, though... I need to make a quick call home. Forgot to tell David something for the chassis."

Peter moved away a suitable distance and pulled out the comm.

"Beebop?" he said.

There was a crackle. "WHAT IS IT, PETER?"

"Hey, do you know where Steve is?"

"STEVE IS CURRENTLY DIGGING THROUGH STORAGE TO FIND A LENGTH OF ROPE AND A LANTERN."
"Thought so. Steve tended to do whatever he damn well pleased.

"Can you find him and tell him to stay the hell away from the maintenance tunnels until I talk to him? It's very important that he not go into the tunnels."

Silence.

"Beebop?"

"YES, OF COURSE. I HAD NOT REALIZED HE INTENDED TO DO SO. I WILL MAKE CERTAIN THAT HE DOES NOT ENTER THE TUNNELS."

"Thanks. He wanted to explore them but I have reason to believe there's something dangerous down there."

Silence.

"Well..."

"WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE DANGER, PETER? I CAN TAKE STEPS TO ELIMINATE IT."

"No, we need to be careful. We need more information. I just know that something down there might be responsible for my dad's memory loss. He's recovered some of his memories and things just aren't adding up."

Silence again. Weird. Maybe there was a delay in the audio? Or Beebop was processing. He might be a new robot, but Peter had harvested the core used in his construction from a disused household work station. He had sat for years compiling information about everything except for social interaction. Half the time he seemed completely at odds with human behavior, and other times he seemed far wiser than any of them. As such, sometimes he understood everything Peter told him, and other times he understood none of it.

"Well," Peter said slowly, "that's all, so..."

"THEN PETER V HAS NO RECOLLECTION OF WHAT OCCURRED TO STRIP HIM OF HIS MEMORIES?"

"No... he just remembers being in the maintenance tunnels. So like I said..."

"ACKNOWLEDGED. I WILL BLOCK STEVE WITH MY VERY BODY IF NEED BE."

"Um... great. See you when we get back."

"UNDERSTOOD."

He switched off the comm. What a weird conversation! But that was Beebop. He walked back to the porch to find the conversation had moved on to Rabbit herself.

"Yeah, you had The Jon's spare wig on and a flowy pink dress. And you were really stacked," Five was explaining. "Kind of like you are now."

"Oh... I'm just wearin' some f-f-fake boobies..."

"Well, they're pretty convincing. Just like the chest plate was."
Annie chuckled. "It took a lot to convince me it wasn't your usual look."

"I just wish I could re-remember. Annie told me about it but no one has any pictures."

"Pictures!" Peter exclaimed, looking at Bunny. "Well, as it happens, we can help with that."

"Really?" Five asked. "How?"

Bunny rose, beaming, and took Peter's hand.

"If you'll follow me, it's easier to show you," he said.

Steve whistled a mindless little tune as he strolled around the manor. He had an armload of supplies gathered from various closets and storage areas... a length of sturdy rope, a slightly rusty Bowie knife, a very old but functional hand crank flashlight, an entire military issue field pack complete with canteen, mess kit, blanket, raincoat, tent, etc... only a little moth-eaten and clearly from some past military Walter/robot.

And a comm. Because he didn't know what was down there.

But which robot to take? There was The Spine... strong and reliable but also decidedly less fun than the others, especially since he'd insist on checking with Peter first. And there was Jon... strong enough, easily buffafoed and a lot of fun, but far from reliable. Upgrade... no, Jon was friendly until Steve came anywhere near her... then the slightly menacing looks started. Weird, especially on Jon.

Or Hatchworth... was always with his girlfriend. Even if they weren't picnicking today, he'd skip it because he was sure Hatchy would try to bring her along. She was fit and probably would be a fun addition to the party, but even if she, too, didn't insist on checking with Peter, it would also probably mean Steve would keep turning around to find them making out. And finally Beebop, the new guy... too danged tall and too by the book. He made The Spine look like a loose cannon.

Well, he'd have to settle for Jon...

"STEVE... EXCELLENT, I HAVE BEEN ATTEMPTING TO LOCATE YOU FOR SOME TWENTY MINUTES."

Steve jumped so hard the mess kit clanked. "Dammit, Beebop! How the hell did you manage to sneak up on me?"

He turned as he spoke. It wasn't the biggest hallway and Beebop had to crouch low to walk through it. Steve felt pity, though he couldn't relate at all. He'd been in some small caverns while out exploring, but to feel cramped in a hallway?

"So what's the problem, Beebop?"

"PETER THE SIXTH WISHES ME TO INFORM YOU THAT YOU ARE NOT TO ENTER THE MAINTENANCE TUNNELS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE."

"Ah. Okay, thanks Beebop. Guess I'll just go clean this stuff up, then."

Beebop stared down at him silently.

"So you can go about your business," Steve said pleasantly.
"Was... there anything else?"

"I AM ATTEMPTING TO ASCERTAIN WHETHER THIS IS A RUSE."

"A what?" Steve said lightly. "Why would you think that?"

"YOU AGREED FAR TOO READILY TO PETER'S REQUEST."

"It was more of an order, though, wasn't it? Can't go against orders, right?"

"A PERSON EITHER CONSCRIPTED OR ENLISTED TO MILITARY SERVICE CANNOT INDEED ACT AGAINST ORDERS WITHOUT SEVERE REPRIMAND."

"Well, there you go."

"YOU, HOWEVER, ARE A SOUND ENGINEER SLUMMING AT YOUR EMPLOYER'S HOUSE."

"Your point?" Steve asked, idly examining the rope.

"YOU ARE A FREE AGENT. ONE THAT IS, I MIGHT ADD, PARTICULARLY WELL KNOWN FOR YOUR AUTONOMOUS ACTIONS."

"That's me, alright. So you think I'd just do what I want the second your back is turned?"

"THE THOUGHT HAD OCCURRED TO ME."

"Welp, I don't know what to tell you, Beebop."

Another long pause.

"THERE IS ONLY ONE ENTRANCE TO THE TUNNELS," he said, carefully turning to go. "AND I WILL BE GUARDING IT."

"Hey! I thought you were on litter box duty!"

Beebop stopped short.

"THEN I WILL OF COURSE COMPLETE IT WITH ALL SPEED. FOLLOWING WHICH I WILL TAKE UP MY POST. IT IS BEST THAT YOU DO NOT FIND YOURSELF ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE DOOR WHEN THAT OCCURS."

He walked away, still crouched, until reaching a hallway with a taller ceiling a little way down.

"Dayum. That was a threat and a half!" Steve whispered. "Well, no time to find me a robot. Better scoot!"

He rinsed and filled the canteen in a bathroom on the way and ran full speed for the basement door.

A few minutes later, Peter and the others were in the museum, walking into Hall Five.

"I think we should be careful," Peter advised. "Some of the exhibits might be... I dunno... iffy."
"Iffy?" Annie asked.

"He's afraid you'll find out what a womanizer I am," Five chuckled.

He and Annie snorted with laughter. Hers trailed off first.

"Well, now... I do know about Lily and about the women you slept with on the road, considering you had to tell me why we all needed to get those blood tests in the eighties..."

"Blood tests?" Peter gasped.

"Yeah... your father thought we'd better make sure none of us was HIV-positive. You know, with all the deaths going on at the time."

"But I thought that was just... y'know... gay dudes..." Bunny said awkwardly. "Back then, I mean..."

Peter said nothing. Just how into free love had his dad been? Did he want to know?

"Political nonsense," Five said with a sigh. "Yes, a lot of gay men died. It was pretty horrific. But I mean, everyone was sleeping around a lot more before that. All it takes is a few guys who work both sides of the fence and you never know what your partner has been exposed to. So we figured just in case we should get tested."

"Ye gods, Dad! You always made it sound like you were such a prude when you were young..."

"I was!" Five chuckled. "Very young, that is. I blossomed later." He winked. "Guess we're all late bloomers."

"Dad..." Peter groaned as Bunny blushed and giggled softly.

"Now, Peter," Annie chided. "It wasn't just him, you know. We each had just enough experience that..."

Nope. Hearing about his dad was bad enough. "No! I got it. No need to elaborate."

She giggled. "Anyway, silly... I was wondering about one particular event."

Why? Peter looked at Bunny, pained. She was beet red and grinning nervously. Rabbit, throughout, had remained carefully blank and silent.

"Oh? Which one would that be?" Five asked casually as they strolled.

"Well... I believe it was something about a goddess."

Five stopped short, paling. He looked at Annie blankly.

"Or do you not remember mentioning that?" she asked archly.

He rose slightly off the floor, gasped, and landed suddenly back on his feet as Rabbit put a gentle hand on his shoulder. Annie nodded.

"I, uh... seem to remember it, but again..."

"You thought it was a dream. Mm-hm. Well, there's one way to find out. Come on, hot stud. I need to see this."
"Y'know..." Peter said abruptly. "Maybe Bunny and I will just go get the picnic ready. Um, Rabbit, you could come with us..."

Rabbit turned with a wicked grin and winked. "Nah, Petes, ol' buddy... I wanna see tha time I went ta New York!" she said innocently.

They went on into Hall Five together.

"Typical Rabbit," Bunny chuckled as they hurried out.

"Yeah," Peter replied. "Finally."

They set the basket under a tree and spread the blanket they'd brought out on the grass. Bunny sat on the side of it, patting it with satisfaction.

"Perfect," she murmured, as he settled in beside her.

He put his arm around her and she snuggled against him. He wondered how long they'd be in the museum. It would be delightfully naughty to just... well...

But no. All that talk about his dad sleeping around was still too present in his mind. And for all they knew, there were real people here somewhere. He might have some fantastic visions of making love in a blanket out on a green meadow, but he had no idea how anyone could do it without looking around constantly to make sure they were alone.

Plus they'd be spreading their lunch out on that blanket. Still, sometime he resolved to come back with her and take their chances. He sighed and rested his head against hers instead.

By the time the others had returned from the museum, about an hour later, he and Bunny had instead done a great deal of kissing and talking over nonsensical subjects. He still felt it was time well spent and it almost distracted him from the very engrossing questions raised by his father's unexpected recovery.

Bunny, still flushed and mussed from the last passionate kiss they'd shared, handed out plates and cups. Rabbit, grinning, poured herself a cup of water.

"That was an education," she chuckled.

"Do I want to know?" Peter asked uneasily.

"Nah, I wouldn't tell ya! Might scar ya. But I can say this..." She leaned in close to Bunny and whispered, "Ya look real sweet ho-holding a baby.""I what?""It's just a projection," Peter sighed. "Something I've thought about. I hope to make it a reality someday, but it's just theoretical."

"You keep up what y-you were doing when we walked up and it won't be theoretical for long..."

"Rabbit, cut it out," Bunny murmured, smoothing her hair. "Well, that's adorable, Peter. Your hall, I presume, has a photo of me holding a baby?"

Peter pinked. "Yeah. I admit I've pictured it quite a few times."

She looked at him and smiled. "So have I," she whispered. He could swear his blood started
"Well, for that matter, so have I!" Annie giggled. "But that's between you two."

"Thanks, Mom," Peter sighed dryly, selecting a piece of chicken from the container Bunny had handed him.

"So..." Five said as he picked at his meal. "We went into overdrive discussing my brain but not your face and voice."

"Well, I mean... I didn't want to get into a technical conversation, I guess," Peter replied. "Any more than we had, that is."

Five chuckled. "It's getting weird, though. It's not like you to calmly shrug and accept things without question, son."

"I know, Dad. But... I've had to learn to do it anyway."

"Good! That's a part of life, letting go sometimes. Glad you grew up before you got married. And you two... you're just as cute as you can be. I just can't get over it... We thought Peter was gay, did you know? Guess we were half right."

Peter slapped his hand to his face, mortified. "Dad..."

"No, now, I'm not being an old fart. I can see she's a girl. I just mean that you must have liked her before the accident, right?"

They could literally hear crickets. Funny that he hadn't noticed those before...

"We were kind of... enemies. Sort of..." Bunny said softly.

"That's what they all say," Five said, winking.

Peter rolled his eyes.

"That museum, though." Five whistled. "The things they showed in there. I won't scar you for life discussing my hall. But we looked at yours and saw the exhibits about each of your accidents. You're two of a kind, aren't you? But of course, that's why you fought. You thought you had nothing in common because it looks different from the outside." He chuckled. "Anyway, you clearly put your differences aside when you found this place, if that photo is any indication."

Peter, who was looking down at his food, stiffened. "Which photo would that be, exactly?" he asked in a slightly squeaky voice.

"Oh, you know..." Five chortled.

Peter gulped. He remembered a very steamy photo in that display! It was just a kiss, but it was a particularly filthy one. He glanced at Bunny who was blushing for the nth time. Of course... she'd seen it, too...

He ventured a glance at his parents who were grinning at Rabbit. Rabbit winked back. She'd also seen it before it happened. It struck Peter that he hadn't really absorbed just how bizarre that was.

"Uh... yeah... well, we... dammit."

They all laughed.
"Peter, sweetheart! Why are you embarrassed?" Annie asked, beaming.

"I dunno... Wait... we are talking about the photo of me and Bunny?" Peter asked.

"Yeah," Rabbit said, beaming. "It's changed, though..."

"Well, right..." Peter sighed. "I'm sure it's a little different..."

"I'll say! Now it shows you two in tha sack."

"What?" Peter and Bunny cried simultaneously.

The others roared with laughter and he considered just opening a portal and leaving with his wife.

"Oh, Rabbit, stop it!" Annie giggled. "There was no such photo!"

Bunny smacked Rabbit on the arm, scowling. Rabbit blew her a kiss.

"Oh... good," Peter faltered. Why had he wanted her back to normal? She was a fiend. "I mean, yeah. We had our first kiss here."

"See, not as embarrassing as ya thought, is it?" Rabbit asked calmly. "Compared to other stuff."

"No. I guess it's not," he said as casually as he could manage, thinking wrathfully of a certain champagne-related incident that he had promised to be a big boy about.

"But didn't you ask yourselves how you were even able to kiss?" Five asked. "I mean, maybe you wanted to just be glad you could, but surely you didn't just accept the fact that you have a face and a voice when you're here."

"Well, we have a lot of theories, as I mentioned... it's connected to brain waves and Blue Matter saturation. Bunny tends to just take it at face value, though."

"That was a pun!" Rabbit squawked. Bunny patted her limply on the head.

"Too good to be true, though. How can you trust it?" Five asked.

"They're too busy ne-neckin' to ask questions, Five."

"Muzzle it, Rabbit. Well... the answer is, we don't, not for very long," Peter replied. "A few days here and there at most."

Or overnight. They'd had some very, very nice overnight visits. But he wasn't mentioning that. They were already going to town with the innuendo.

"Probably best. No sense immersing yourself in the imaginary for too long."

"Imaginary?" Peter asked.

He and Bunny exchanged worried glances. It didn't feel imaginary...

"Isn't it? I was looking when your mother touched your face, after all. I noticed her reaction. She said it tingled. Not to mention the glitter."

"It wasn't glitter!" Peter shook his head. "She couldn't really touch my face if it wasn't real, though, could she?"
"And how would you hear my voice?" Bunny gasped. She put a hand to her neck. "I can feel the vibrations in my throat!"

"But where does it all go when you leave? Look, I'm not trying to ruin your fantasy. I'm glad you have it. But I want you two to stay safe and aware of what it really is. It may be real here, for now, but it's a band-aid, son. Enjoy it, sure. But it's like dressing up and going to a ball. Sooner or later you have to go home and take off the fancy clothes."

"But..." Peter was shaking. The notion wasn't alien... he'd considered every angle. But the implications were terrifying. "Dad, what about you?"

"Me? Well. You said it's based on Blue Matter saturation and desire. I'd insert brain waves in place of desire, but it comes to the same thing. I had the first already, I assume, from living in Walter Manor. The one thing I wanted the most, when I was aware enough to know it, was to remember. So... now I remember."

"But... how?"

"I suppose alternate pathways might have opened in my brain. Possibly an obstacle vanished briefly. Maybe my memories were here all along, waiting for me..."

He trailed off, looking into the sky as though seeing something no one else could. He shook his head.

"Couldn't say. But something must have happened to make me temporarily able to think clearly. Like you, I'd rather not look the gift horse in the mouth."

"But if it's not real..."

Peter touched his cheeks, his nose, his facial hair... He half expected it all to vanish, for the blue to return. He could feel his face, but he always could.

"Bunny," he said pleadingly.

"It's still there," she said a little too stoutly. She kissed his cheek. "And it still doesn't tingle."

Rabbit tweaked his cheek and blue sparks shimmered and vanished. "How d'you explain that, though?" she asked.

"Well, maybe it's under there. The Blue Matter, I mean," Five suggested.

"Stop it, you two!" Annie ordered, looking worriedly at Peter. "Stop freaking him out!"

"Mom," Peter whispered tremulously. "Does it still feel the same way?"

She closed her eyes and sighed. Opening them, she leaned across the blanket and patted his cheek.

"Yes, sweetheart. Does that worry you?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice breaking. "But... it also means it hasn't changed."

"Why wouldn't I feel it, though?" Bunny asked.

Five reached over and patted his son's cheek. There were no sparks.

"Doesn't tingle for me, either," he remarked.
Peter's hair stood on end. "It's connected..."

"Yep. We're the kids in the Blue Matter saturation club. Who knows, your wife might even be able to touch your face back home, too."

"Oh, wow... That would be awesome..." Bunny breathed.

"Yeah, but... How could I even test it?" Peter asked. "Pretty sure someone actually lost a stethoscope in there at some point... It isn't safe."

"If it doesn't actually suck things in, I'd just let her gently poke it and find out."

"I'm down with that," Bunny said.

"I don't know. If anything went wrong I'd never forgive myself..."

"I'm too big to fit through, though. And if I can, well... there's no actual pull to it. Think it over, okay?"

Peter sighed and nodded.

"Can't blame a girl for wanting to kiss her husband in her own home instead of having to come here." Five glanced at the house. A wicked little smile came across his face. "Speaking of which... you stay there when you aren't home?" he asked.

And he was at it again. Dirty old man... Suddenly Bunny couldn't seem to look at him, but Peter nodded. Five snorted with laughter.

"Good. About time. I hope one room in particular gets a lot of use."

Dammit anyway... "Dad!" Peter gasped. "Enough already with the... y'know..."

"Know what?"

Annie snickered. "Your always did like the kitchen, didn't you, dear?" she said with a wink.


Peter groaned and shook his head as Rabbit chortled softly to herself.

"Good ol' Petes," she sighed.

Five looked at Rabbit. "And you... I mean it, you look great! So you're working on changing the chassis to look more feminine? Well, just be careful. I know you have the structure to pull it off but make sure all the parts work everywhere else before adjusting the center of gravity. Got that, Peter?"

"Got it, Dad," Peter said, relieved at the change of subject.

"Wanda always said someday she'd find proof. Dunno why she was so determined about it but I'm sure she's delighted. Last time I got the feeling she enjoyed dressing you up. But back then, boy did you hate it!"

"So I heard. I just... I didn't know..."

"It's alright," Five assured her. "You were a good man. It's okay to remember that even while you're
trying to embrace your original programming. There's no shame in it. Just be who you are now and
don't try to erase what you were... you can only whitewash so much and it wastes energy. Being
who you are now is hard enough, trust me. And you're in good hands."

Rabbit smiled sadly. "Thanks, Petes."

Steve approached the door to the tunnels. He'd been afraid he wouldn't find it, considering he had no
directions. But it was one room behind the vault room, with no other doors visible. He cranked the
flashlight a few more times as it dimmed. He wasn't even turning on the light just in case the power
drain alerted QWERTY... who sometimes fought with Beebop but was sufficiently afraid of him to
spill his guts at the slightest coercion.

The door opened easily enough, to his surprise. It seemed like they'd lock it... but then, no one ever
came down here except Hatchworth anymore. The room beyond wasn't anything to write home
about, other than being fascinating for its age and for the panel of old Young Frankenstein style
switches that still functioned as a the main breaker, so he assumed by the labels. He perused them
briefly.

"Not... the third switch!" he said in a fake British accent, chuckling as he moved on.

He walked down a passage straight out of Portal, lined with dusty filing cabinets and some old office
equipment sitting at various angles, and a couple of chairs, one of which was tipped over. Years of
varying sizes of earthquakes, no doubt, had shifted the looser and lighter items from where they'd
been left. He stopped to tug his bandanna off his head and tie it around his nose and mouth. It
smelled of hair oil and sweat but it was better than a lungful of dust and who knew what else. Once it
was firmly tied in place, he cranked the flashlight again and moved on into a larger open space with a
lot of crates scattered around. Any minute now he'd find a mural telling him the cake was a lie...

The crates were mildly interesting, though. Some of the contents weren't that old, maybe ten or
twenty years. Some were old but unusable, like a crate of very brown preserves, several of which
had exploded. He wisely moved out of range before another decided to pop.

There were piles of old, warped lumber on one side. He inspected it to see whether it might be some
kind of fort, but no... just a stack of forgotten wood. Well, he could always build a fort with it. He'd
have to ask about it... assuming he wasn't fired after this. There was a twinge of misgiving about the
possibility, but if he got out fast enough no one would know he'd been, and he could act like he'd
found it for the first time when Peter did let him come down here. It took ages to clean out the litter
box, even for Beebop.

He turned from the lumber, pumped the flashlight again, and stared at what it revealed.

A very old door!

Giggling in silent glee, he hurried to it. The workmanship on it was a little more ornate than the last.
The lock, however, was broken. Well, good thing. He didn't have the tools to pick it.

He started to tease it open and stopped. Was that someone's ringtone? He leaned closer to the door
and it was louder, leaned away and it was softer. Well. He leaned closer again and listened to the
cracke of an old vinyl record.

"Brother, brother, brother... there's far too many of you dying! You know we've got to find a way to
bring some lovin' here today... Father, father..."
Steve could swear someone was singing along! He reached for the door once more...

A hand grabbed his shoulder. The door slammed shut.

Steve was dead. That was it. The finish. No more sound guy. The C.H.U.D. had found him! At least... *something* had grabbed him... He was dead from the shock, if nothing else. He turned, shuddering all over, to see Beebop's face resuming its usual illumination. Ah.

After a prolonged and filthy swear, Steve stood panting, trying to catch his breath.

"YOU ASSURED ME THAT YOU WOULD NOT ENTER THE MAINTENANCE TUNNELS, STEVE. THAT WAS A FALSEHOOD."

"First of all... you could have warned me before grabbing me like that! You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"YOU ARE IN EXEMPLARY HEALTH AND MY PROJECTIONS INDICATED THAT A STEALTHY APPROACH WOULD LEAVE THE MOST LASTING IMPRESSION."

"Thanks a lot..."

"YOU'RE VERY WELCOME."

He considered whether Beebop understood sarcasm. He had a feeling he did.

"And as for 'assuring you' I wouldn't come down here, all I said was that I was gonna clean up the camping gear."

"YET YOU HAVE NOT."

"I rinsed a canteen."

Beebop stared at him.

"Look, what's the big deal? There's just a bunch of junk down here..."

"YOU WERE ABOUT TO GO THROUGH THAT DOOR. THAT IS AN UNSAFE AREA."

"Is it? Only I could swear I heard someone singing along to Marvin Gaye."

Another stare. Steve was getting a slowly dawning realization. Beebop knew what was behind that door! The lock was broken... who could have done that but a robot?

He grinned.

"Beebop..." he purred, "what's back there?"

"YOU SHOULD NOT BE HERE, STEVE. GO BACK UP TO THE HOUSE NOW."

But there was hesitation. He could feel it. Less confidence than before.

"Okay, sure," he said lightly. "I'll have to tell Peter about the music, of course. We might have hobos down there..."

He turned and headed back for the basement.

"WAIT."
He stopped, deeply satisfied with himself, and turned.

"PROMISE TO KEEP IT A SECRET."

"Why should I?"

"YOU WOULD FACE CERTAIN CONSEQUENCES FOR TRESPASSING, AS I HAVE RECORDED OUR CONVERSATIONS AS INSURANCE AGAINST FURTHER FALSEHOODS."

"I dunno. I think Peter might take into account the fact that by coming down here I've discovered... oh, I dunno... maybe a secret tribe of Motown-loving Irish Travelers stealing our internet, and let me off with a wrist-slapping as a reward for unearthing a Van Morrison infestation."

He turned once more. Beebop put his hand surprisingly gently on Steve's shoulder.

"THEN... I ASK IT AS A FRIEND."

Steve was thrown by this. He hadn't really seen Beebop as a friend. Sure, they worked together a lot, and recorded that comedy routine for the last album, but Beebop... well... he was so new to being a robot, and he didn't blend well with people and... what did he even know about friendship?

"A friend, Beebop? he asked guardedly.

"IF PETER LEARNS THAT I LET YOU COME THIS FAR, HE MIGHT DECOMMISSION ME."

"Aw, come on, Peter's nicer than that..."

"HE DOES NOT SUFFER DANGEROUS BEHAVIOR IN THE STAFF AND AUTOMATONS IN HIS CHARGE. HE MIGHT SHUT ME DOWN OR REPROGRAM ME. PERHAPS EVEN ASSIGN ME PERMANENTLY TO THE LITTER BOX AND SEAL THE TUNNELS AGAINST INTRUSION."

Steve felt surprisingly guilty. Beebop had a point about Peter. He didn't feel great about getting the big bot in trouble, and he certainly didn't want the tunnels sealed. He still nurtured the hope that someday he might get in there and find out what was behind the door.

And of course, he hadn't intended to tell Peter anyway... unless he thought Beebop would do it first.

With a deep sigh, he replied, "Alright. I'll keep my mouth shut, Beebop. But look... whatever it is... whoever's in there grooving to Motown... they aren't safe either, right?"

Beebop gave him the long stare. He hoped that meant he might share something more in confidence.

"HE IS SAFE ENOUGH FOR NOW. AND THERE HE MUST REMAIN FOR THE SAFETY OF OTHERS."

Damn. That was more information, but it was almost worse!

"Alright. I think you know how much this is gonna cost me, keeping it a secret. I like a secret, mind you, but the curiosity is half of it and keeping it to myself is just twisting the knife. But... you don't ask for stuff like this much. So you owe me a solid, got it?"

He sighed deeply.
"THANK YOU, STEVE."

"You're welcome, big guy. Well, come on. I wanna look this soldier stuff up on ebay."

They ate and talked, enjoying the perfect picnic weather and each other's company. They worked through every topic they could think of, knowing nothing was certain, nothing was guaranteed.

Five pondered the events of the day in the quiet spaces. It was a lot to take in.

Peter was married. His son. Apparently they'd had a simple civil wedding and, to his disappointment, had left Five home because of his health and mental state, or rather the fact that he wouldn't understand it anyway.

But why? What had happened to him? They'd assumed it was Alzheimer's, and with good reason. But Alzheimer's didn't get better out of nowhere, and it didn't have anything to do with Blue Matter.

And he suspected this did.

He'd said he only remembered exploring the tunnels. But he remembered one other thing... a flash of blue light. That suggested certain possible sources.

The rest of the memory was gone. Just someone singing Al Green, a blue flash, and an exhausted journey to bed. After which he was already detached from reality and grew more so every day after.

Annie eventually finished eating and asked for a tour of the house. Peter started to rise, but Annie put a hand on his shoulder.

"Why don't you and your father just rest here? Rabbit can come with us."

"Huh? Yeah, alright..." Rabbit said faintly, rising from the blanket.

"Weird," Peter said as they walked away. "I guess Mom's worried about you overdoing it."

Five smiled sadly. "No, son. Well... maybe a little. But I think she just wanted to back off and let us talk. I mean... who knows if we'll get the chance again?"

Peter paled and gulped audibly. "Well, we could just come back..." he suggested almost pleadingly.

"No, Pete. I thought I'd gotten my point across. I can't go on forever, memories or no memories. This is it, okay? I'm beholden to you and the cosmos for it, but it isn't real. It's a little treat for the road. When I go back, I stay."

"Dad, why?" he cried unhappily. "Why even go back? I know what you said, but... we could find a way... you don't have to give this up!"

"Peter," Five said firmly, taking him by the shoulders. "Son... tell me... You have your face here, and your lovely wife has a voice of her own. Why do you go back?"

"Well... my whole life is there... I run the Walter Robotics, manage affairs... Bunny's brother is there, our friends, the robots..."

"Well, there you go. I may be retired, but that's my home and my family, too. The family's there, the robots... Your mother's there... you are there. My precious, precious boy. I want to be where you are, where your mother is."
"But more than that... I wasn't kidding. I'm feeling better today, up and about, full of beans. But I'm dying. I can barely choke down half a meal, even the delicious picnic you brought. I'm not healed, I'm still wearing away. It's like your face, covered with a memory of what it once was. I can't explain it any better than you can, but I just have that feeling, like my mind and body are split, broken and unable to be healed. I may not even be able to come back here on my own two legs."

Peter's chin trembled. He turned away.

"I'm sorry, son," Five murmured.

"No... don't be sorry," Peter said, his voice shaking. "It's not like I didn't know..."

"But you did your best to forget. Hm? So you didn't have to face it?"

Peter struggled to keep it together... and lost the battle.

"I'm not ready for you to go!" he choked.

Five ached. Poor boy! He didn't cry easily, not that he'd ever seen. He grappled with what to say.

"I understand, believe me I do," he said sincerely. "I've lost a lot of people, Peter..."

He trailed off, smiling in spite of the tension of the moment. Funny, that coming back to him just now! Peter swabbed his nose and blinked at him worriedly.

"Dad?"

"Just... remembering," he murmured. "It's nice to be able to. But... if I have to lose those memories again in order to go back with you, I'll accept it. So while I can, let me just pass on something a very wise man once taught me."

"What?" Peter sobbed.

Five pulled his son into his arms and held him. It was a bit awkward as they sat on the grass, especially since Peter was a few inches taller than his father. But Peter closed his eyes and relaxed, crying fitfully against his father's shoulder.

"I've lost a lot of people," Five repeated. He kissed Peter on the head. "And... well, when my time comes, just remember... you're not alone. I don't want to go, either, not if it means leaving all of you behind. But I can only fight so much, and I'd rather be home when I lose the war. But you're surrounded by people who love you there, Peter. Your mother, your wife, your aunt and uncle, robot relatives that are more human than most people. If you ever need advice, they have a hundred times more experience than I do.

"But I just wish... I wish I could tell you everything now that I took it for granted I'd be able to say when you needed it. I wish I could have been there for you when you got married. I did my best while I could, but I wanted to be able to advise you before your wedding night, before you took on the responsibility of sharing your life with someone. I don't have any big revelations now. Just love her, tell her so, be gentle and don't let little things become big. Commit to stay together and as long as you both treat each other with respect, love won't be far off... even if sometimes you think it's gone. It always comes back."

"I'm glad..." Peter whispered, sniffling. "I never want to lose her..."

"Good boy. She's a knock-out. Smart, too. So remember that. No two people are a perfect match,
and no one just suddenly becomes unlovable unless they're trying to be. There's always something to tolerate and always something to love. Roll with the changes, okay? And... always make sure to make time for your kids. Because they grow like weeds and then..."

His voice trembled. Peter looked up at him. Five smiled, his eyes sparkling with tears.

"Well, you're damned proud of them, even while you wish they'd stayed small just a little longer," he finished thickly.

Peter grimaced and looked down again. "Dad..." he said tearfully. "I'm sorry if I ever let you down... I should have been with you when you were exploring the archives... then maybe... I dunno..."

"You'd have lost your face sooner? Come on, boy. I was already declining..."

"I know..."

"Just make sure you're careful and send the robots ahead of you when you check it out. Whatever happened to me down there... I don't want it to happen to you."

Peter swabbed at his face with his sleeve and nodded.

"I won't deny that it's gonna be tough, though," Five murmured. "I'll walk through that portal and leave the memories of you and your mother behind. That's hard. I know you can't take things back with you but... if I could, I'd willingly leave all my memories of Lily behind just to be able to know you and your mother until the end."

There was a strange tickle at the back of his mind, as though someone else had borrowed his mind for a moment to do a little thinking. Give up certain memories in return for others? Was it possible?

He tried to bring the thoughts into focus. The tickling sensation faded.

"You'd give up Lily for us?" Peter asked, surprised.

*Lily...*

Five brushed aside the moment of strangeness and murmured, "Son, I already gave up Lily. I loved her dearly but my time with her has been past and over for more than half my life. What's important is what I have now, and what I have now is you two." He sighed deeply. "Maybe if I wish really hard, or pray really hard, or make a deal with the cosmos, I'll be able to trade in the memories I have for the ones I want, hm?"

Peter sighed shakily. "That's magical thinking, Dad. I can't buy into that, not even here."

"Well, I may give it a shot anyway. You know stranger things have happened to me, just like they have to you."

Peter shook his head.

"Can't blame a guy for hoping, hm?" Five said with a chuckle.

But it felt like more than a hope. It felt like... like someone had very softly agreed to try. But who?

"It's getting late," Peter said. "I was wondering... would you and Mom like to at least stay here overnight? It may be imaginary but it's no worse than a hotel stay."

"Hm... yes. I'd like to. The others can come through in the morning and we can have a nice visit
before I head home."

Peter nodded. There was a suspicious tremble to his chin again and Five sighed and pulled him into a side hug this time. Peter tipped his head sideways against his father's shoulder and Five rested his head on his son's.

"I love you, Peter," Five murmured. "Don't forget it, okay? Even if I do."

"I love you, too, Dad!" he gulped, his voice trembling.

Five sighed contentedly. His boy. He was a lucky man to have such a son, and to have this chance to tell him a few important things while he still could.

They were still sitting like that when the others returned. Five had gotten heavier at some point and Peter had checked his breathing for one panicky moment, but no... he was just snoozing in the afternoon sun. Annie settled beside him and Peter sat up stiffly as his father woke and laid back on the grass with a deep, relaxed sigh.

"When should we tell the others to come through?" Bunny asked with a small smile. "It's getting late."

"Tomorrow," Five sighed sleepily, staring up at the sky. "Peter suggested your mother and I could stay here overnight."

"Oh, that's a good idea!" Bunny murmured, winking at Rabbit, who smiled sadly back at her.

They'd dragged it out, but it was winding down already. Peter pondered their options. Before they came through the portal he'd had the idea of sending his parents home that evening with Rabbit and staying the night with Bunny.

He watched Five take Annie's hand and bring it fervently to his lips. Annie pinked and Peter had a sneaking feeling that if his father had any stamina at all, he'd be taking advantage of one last night with his wife. Peter shuddered. It wasn't that he blamed them if they did, but... He shuddered again. Enough.

Violently pushing aside any unwanted mental images, he debated where his parents could stay that night. It had to be somewhere he and Bunny never intended to make love, that was certain. He didn't need the mental associations...

Well, if Bunny had imagined up a house of her own, maybe he could invent one for his parents. He concentrated, eyeing a nice spot on the next hill. He attempted to picture a house with all the necessary rooms. Nothing happened. Clamping his eyes shut, he gave it one more try. Nothing fancy, all the essentials...

When he opened his eyes, there was a cardboard refrigerator box, with windows and doors cut out of it, sitting among the tall, windswept grasses on the hilltop. A gust of wind blew it over. He wearily watched it roll down the hill, where it lost momentum and slowly flattened onto the grass.

Huh. He turned to Bunny to ask her whether she'd give it a try (she clearly was better at creative endeavors not involving science) when a shrill whistle pierced the air. A train appeared as if out of nowhere at the station down the street and pulled to a stop.

Well, that figured! By his estimation, the train had been the product of his mind more than hers, and
he associated it very much with... well, anyway, it was better than letting them sleep in the house. "Hey, there's the train," Bunny said, smiling. "Should we take a ride?"

And now everything sounded like innuendo! They'd been back to have a ride (by both definitions) on the train several times. There was just something about the rhythm of the rails that...

He hastily bundled the entire notion, tied it up, and pushed it out of his mind. Now was not a good time, especially with his parents being the ones potentially spending a night there. He would just have to deal with the residual connotations because he didn't have any better ideas.

And to be fair, having a nice train ride wasn't a bad idea. His parents would love the old train and maybe he'd think of an alternative as they watched the countryside trundle past.

"I dunno, baby..." Rabbit was saying, in response to Bunny's suggestion. "Freaky stuff happens on that t-t-train..."

Bunny turned bright red and put her hand to her mouth. Of course the train represented the same thing to her that it did to him! Peter fought giggles.

"What's wrong with you two all of a sudden?" Rabbit asked, scowling.

"Nothing!" Peter said hastily. She clearly had a different interpretation of the word "freaky" than they did. "What's wrong with the train, Rabbit?"

"I saw some weird crap when I was on there last time... Stuff from that dream you had as a kid."

"Well, you're with us now. And we always have nice rides on it," Bunny assured her.

"Al-alright..." Rabbit said faintly.

"What dream?" Annie asked.

"Tha one we turned into a song."

"Oh! Yeah, that one was a doozy."

"Well, Dad?" Peter asked, wondering which things Rabbit had seen. He wouldn't mind seeing them himself, but if they scared Rabbit... oh, well.

Five snored sharply and looked at them. "What? Oh... hey, there's a train... Just what we need."

"You want to take a nap, Dad?" Peter chuckled.

"Kind of. But not here with the ants."

"Oh..." Fair enough.

They gathered up their things and headed for the train station.

After a brief discussion, they agreed that Rabbit should sing for the tickets this time, considering she was a professional. Rabbit started to sing "Turn Back the Clock", glanced at Five, and sang, "On Top of the Universe" instead, with harmonies thrown in by Bunny.

"Are y-ya sure it's safe?" Rabbit asked nervously as they boarded the train.
"I promise, Rabbit," Bunny said gently.

"Well... okay."

They found a booth shaped seat in the club car. Peter and Bunny smiled as Annie and Five admired the old school train car.

"If we were back home, I'd say this was beautifully restored," Five said appreciatively. "Look at that woodwork!"

Peter and Bunny told them, with some careful omissions, about their first ride on the train together. Peter decided it was enough to say Bunny had fallen into his lap. The story was funny enough without telling them what she felt when she landed. Bunny smirked the whole time, and Peter hoped it wasn't too obvious that they weren't giving the full account.

He'd already confessed to her, privately, that she had been absolutely right about the bottle of sunscreen, which had been in an entirely different spot. He also mentioned that it had taken every ounce of willpower not to curl up on the floor in a sobbing ball of agony. Her bottom was delightfully soft but she'd landed pretty hard. Her smirk at being right had wavered at the realization that she had hurt him so badly. He assured her that he'd suffered no lingering effects. She'd said she wanted to make sure. It had been a very nice evening.

Rabbit also told them what she'd seen when she last rode the train, which prompted a long discussion about what could have caused such an oddly specific set of things to appear.

"I still think it's magic," Bunny said with a sly grin at Peter.

He knew she was teasing but he still almost launched into a speech on the subject of magic versus science. He heard her soft, bubbling laughter and felt hot and cold all over. It still thrilled him that they had moved past their animosity to the point that she could playfully tease him and he found it hard to listen to the conversation for a few minutes as he imagined being alone with her.

And considering he couldn’t seem to get his mind off of sex, he concluded that he did, indeed, want to spend the night here. And he had an idea.

"Dad... Mom... have you thought about where you'll stay tonight? This place doesn't exactly have hotels."

"Well, I thought maybe that nice house..." Annie began.

"Oh, no, I don't know about that, Annie girl," Five interrupted, flicking the barest wink at Peter and Bunny. "I was wondering whether this train had any berths, though."

Peter glanced at Bunny. Sure, he'd considered the idea. But would Bunny feel this was too much invasion of her space?

Bunny grinned. "It does! And they're really nice!" she replied, winking at Annie.

Ye gods... So she was fine with it, then.

Annie pinked but smiled a wicked little smile. "Well, that's good enough for me," she said, her voice bubbling with amusement.

Peter had reached his limit and aggressively pondered complex chemical formulae relative to the state of Mike's Purple Matter experiments and their affect on miniature automatons. It helped.
Bunny divided up the remaining picnic foods and handed over the spare comm they'd brought. The train stopped, as it usually did lately, just when needed and at the exact same place they'd left. Rabbit peered out, baffled.

"We didn't go nowhere!"

"Yeah, it does that now," Peter confirmed. "I know it's weird..."

"Petes... I wanna go home..." Rabbit said shakily. "This place is still s-s-scary..."

"Alright. Mom, Dad... we'll get everyone rounded up to come through tomorrow, okay? Just, um... call us when you're... y'know... ready to, um..."

"Call us when you're ready to see everyone, okay?" Bunny said, clasping Annie's hand briefly. "We'll see you two tomorrow."

Annie beamed and Five winked as Peter hastily left the train with Rabbit and Bunny.

"Oh, man, I am scarred for life..." Peter muttered. "Do you think they even can... no, forget it."

Rabbit giggled nervously. "I hope so, buddy."

Peter sighed.

Rabbit was sent back through the portal with messages for everyone, asking certain relevant family members to come back with her in the morning, and to bring more food. Peter had never tried Kazooland food and wasn't easy with starting now.

"So," Bunny murmured as the portal vanished, "Care to join me in my breezy and scented boudoir? Or are you too scarred by the thought of your parents having a second honeymoon on the train?"

Peter looked at her. He remembered kissing on the picnic blanket, the endless innuendo, and the constant intruding thoughts of getting her alone, and felt as though his skin was on fire. He pushed the thought of his parents from his mind and focused on her.

He pulled her close. She smiled and melted against him. They stood, in the middle of the same street where they had shared their first kiss, and brought it full circle with one of equal longing. But where the spell had been broken by the comm before, this time nothing cooled the longing. This time, all Peter could think about, without any hesitation, was being with her in the bed waiting inside.

"No..." he breathed between kisses. "I'm not... too scarred..."

"Wow... just..." she managed breathlessly, "just don't you dare... try to carry me inside..." They shared another deep kiss. "You... you throw your back out now and I'll murder you..."

He laughed a little madly, took her hand and kissed it warmly. She giggled as they ran back to the house together.

Peter V sat with his wife as the train moved on. They hadn't paid for a berth. He wasn't sure whether they sold them once you boarded the train. But for now he wanted to just sit and look at her, to take in her face while he still knew it. And who could say whether tomorrow he might just manage to remember her for a little while when they went back?
Maybe Peter was wrong. Their genius son... No, it wasn't likely that he was wrong, was it? Not under ordinary circumstances. But something felt different this time. As though that consciousness in the back of his mind was still tossing around an idea, weighing the good and bad of it. In one moment he would almost be aware of what it was and why it felt at once strange and familiar. The next moment it was faded, like a dream, leaving only the impression of awareness.

Kind of like how he'd been before he came through the portal.

They talked for a while as Annie ate the food Bunny had left them. He did his best to eat as well, seeing Annie's concern when he made no move to take any.

"Peter..." she murmured. "I don't want this to end. I've missed you so much..."

"I know, Annie girl. But... y'know, let's just not think about it tonight. Okay? Tomorrow will take care of itself."

"But you'll give up your mind again, Peter! You always seemed so frightened when you couldn't remember!"

He reached across and gently wiped the tears that had begun to trickle from her eyes. She rested her face against his hands for a moment.

"But I'll be with you, sweetheart," he murmured. "And our son, in our home, with our family. I mean, you don't want to stay here, do you? Away from Peter and the others?"

"No, of course not... but..."

"But I don't remember you. Hm? I call you Lily sometimes. That's the problem, isn't it? It's alright so say so, my love."

She burst into tears, her head turned away. "I know you don't mean to!" she sobbed. "I do, I understand!"

He slid around to her side and pulled her close, holding her as she let it out at last. She had to have been holding it back for a long time now. He had to have been holding it back for a long time now. He knew her, knew that she had tried to be strong through it all... his illness, Peter's accident, all the other disasters that had struck them in the past year. Having her husband not recognize her was the cruelest barb of all. He couldn't take that pain away from her. He knew she was strong enough to cope, but still he just wished he could lighten the load for her. But all he could do now was hold her.

Which was what he wanted most of all tonight... to hold her, as close as he could. If he could find the strength. He dearly wanted to find the strength!

"Annie," he murmured, kissing her brow. "We have a little more time, and, well... there are beds on this train. There's one way I'd like to spend this night with you, Annie girl."

She looked at him, all astonishment, her face bright red. He was surprised. She'd been throwing out innuendo, too. Maybe she just hadn't expected any of it to actually happen.

And with that thought, he was determined that it would, even if it killed him.

"Are you sure you're up to it?" she whispered.

He kissed her and murmured, "For you, Annie? Always."
She sobbed as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Yes, Peter... I just can't pass up an offer like that," she sighed at last.

He stroked her hair and smiled. "You’re as beautiful as the day I saw you in that cafe."

"I was a mess..."

"You were. And you couldn’t have been more lovely if you’d been done up in silk."

He kissed her and was pleased to feel his neck grow hot; a sure sign that she was lighting up his fires the same as ever. He felt a shiver pass through her and knew that meant she felt the same. Years of marriage had made it all familiar, but no less thrilling. It had always been reassuring to know that another glorious night was ahead.

He rose quickly and managed to locate a porter, who told them their berth was already turned down. He wasn't as surprised as he would have expected. He was a little creeped out by the convenience of it, but he had no intention of allowing that to get in the way. He felt thirty years younger and meant to enjoy it. He would likely wake up feeling eighty years older, but it was worth it.

"The room's ready," he murmured, turning and holding his hand out to his wife.

Annie, smiling through her tears, took his hand and followed him through the train.

Chapter End Notes

For clarification, Five is not suggesting that the death toll among gay men was insignificant (those who were adults in the gay community at the time tell tales of nearly empty clubs because there were so many gone) but that those who tried to make AIDS a gay-exclusive problem were harping on that as though the simple fix was “don’t be gay” when in reality anyone could get it by action, circumstance, or accident, and there needed to be treatment for it. Possibly if we had simplified the information into the phrase “disease bad and make people die” they might have worked it out.
A Picnic in Kazooland pt 3/3

Chapter Summary

The family gathers to have one last good talk, to share things they need to share, and to say the good-bye they thought they’d never have. Peter V, however, has a plan to prolong things for just a little while.

Chapter Notes

Toward the end in the italicized passage, the Kazooland Peter V will just be called Peter and the Earth edition will be called Five.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Morning came just as golden as ever. Peter VI, relaxed and comfortable in his bed, reluctantly rose with his wife to prepare for the arrival of the family.

Peter V woke sore and stiff on the still moving train. After a few minutes of assessing his physical state otherwise, he brushed aside the aches and pains and woke Annie with a kiss to make love just one more time. He had to, if only for her. He'd be feeling it later, but he wouldn't remember why.

He thought he wouldn't. Pretty sure. But at least she would. At least she'd have that.

After another light cat nap, they dressed and called Peter on the comm and told him they'd be back soon.

"Oh, good. Dad, everyone's here. Do you need any help getting here?"

He probably did, but wouldn't have dreamed of admitting why. "No, we're..."

"Yes," Annie interrupted. "Your father needs help."

Five looked at her in surprise.

"Alright, I'll send the robots down."

"Okay..."

Five shut off the comm.

"You didn’t have to explain why, silly. And before you say anything," Annie said primly, "you know perfectly well you I wore you out last night... and this morning. We didn't even do it that often when we were younger! Why did you think you could handle it twice so close together, you old fart?"

He sighed and stood, legs trembling, before sitting back on the bed again. Giving up for the moment, he pulled her close and rested his head against her bust. He could feel her giggling silently.
"Because..." he murmured contentedly, "I really, really wanted to. And it was absolutely, utterly worth it. So there."

"Oh, for crying out loud..."

"And I did it, too. Didn't I? Hm? Got it up without a struggle, twice inside of ten hours. I blame you for that, you seductress."

She giggled again, to his enjoyment... until he realized the giggles had turned abruptly to sobs. She sank to the bed beside him and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Thank you, sweetheart..." she whispered thickly. "I thought we'd never get to do it again at all."

"I know," he sighed, wrapping both arms around her and holding her close. "We can at least get out into the club car to meet them."

"Alright."

They made their slow and shuffling way out of the berths and into the more public part of the train, which had stopped. The Spine bolted up the steps moments later and hesitated, wide-eyed, for only a moment, before striding to Five's side and taking his arm.

He looked down with an almost frightened expression. "Peter?" he whispered. "Rabbit said..."

"Spine. Yes, I know you."

The Spine's chin shook. He carefully embraced Five.

"It's good to see you and know you, old man," Five said warmly. "You've had some work done. Looks sharp, as usual."

The automaton looked at him and grinned. Oily tears had started down his cheek plates.

"It's good to see you and know you, too, Peter," he said hoarsely. "And your son was the one who did the work."

"I know. That's my boy."

The Jon, beaming, trotted up the steps and ran to them, slowing carefully before embracing Five.

"Peter! I mean, Five... Peter... Six that is... he says you remember us!"

"I do. The Jon. How could I forget you?"

"But... you did," Jon whimpered, his smile dropping. "An' I missed you, Peter! A lot!"

"Me, too," murmured as Jon embraced him.

Upgrade walked up beside Jon and stared at Five with an anxious face.

"Do you remember me, too, Peter?" she asked softly, joining the hug.

Five beamed. "Of course. The little girl in the attic," he murmured. "Peter's done an amazing job on that body, but you were already amazing."

Upgrade laughed through her tears. "That's not what you said back then!" she giggled.
"Well, you were also a brat," he chuckled.

Rabbit, strolling up at last, gave her a hug.

"Do-Don't make me separate you two," she said playfully. "Told you, baby. Ain't it amazing?"

"Yes! But... when he comes home..."

Rabbit shushed her hastily and she looked down and nodded. After a moment, she looked back up at Peter, beaming.

"Then we gotta have tha best day ever!" she said brightly. “Come on, the party’s waiting an’ I wore my pretty dress!”

They made their way back to Peter's house slowly and carefully, talking and laughing the whole way. Five felt it might have been a little forced at first, but they soon relaxed into a more natural conversation.

Sitting on the porch waiting, wringing her hands, was Wanda. Norman sat beside her. Both rose as he approached.

Five chuckled, still leaning on The Spine's arm. "Guess I overdid it a little," he confessed, carefully refraining from saying exactly how. He thought he heard Rabbit choke back a laugh.

But Wanda, sobbing, threw her arms around him and hugged him before leading him to the porch to sit.

"Oh, sweetheart! Oh... look at you..."

"I look the same, Aunt Wanda..."

"But... you know us!"

"For now..." sighed Rabbit.

Wanda looked at her and back at Five. Her face fell.

"Of course... you want to come home," she murmured sadly. “You’ll forget everything, but you still want to come home.”

"Wouldn't you?" he asked.

She nodded, lips pinched together. "I didn't want to come here at all until Rabbit said why. I heard you find things here that you lost and I'm afraid of what I might stumble across. Although I was really afraid Norman would change when he came here, and you can see he looks just the same as he always does."

Norman smiled. "Well, to hear Peter tell it, that's because I don't want anything back that I've lost. If we'd found this place back in the fifties, I might have changed back. More likely, I’d have changed into Rock Hudson."

Five laughed. "I like you best as you are, Norman."

They went inside after a while to find everything prepared for breakfast. Peter and Bunny beamed at them, proud in their little house, as they all settled in. They talked about all the things they could, the strange things that had happened, what Five had missed during the time he was disconnected with
reality. They had different family members touch Peter's face, to his discomfort. But he suffered it for
the sake of gathering more information. Consistent with Five's theories, Wanda said it tingled,
Norman said it didn't. He noticed Bunny and Peter sharing a look and hoped he was right.

Partway through the meal, Peter got a call on the comm and the portal opened again. Dave and
Sunshine walked through, flinching a little at the swirling matter, and stopped short, staring at Peter.
He smiled awkwardly.

"Hi," he said blandly.

"So it's true!" Dave gasped. "You have a face here..."

Sunshine beamed. "Then that means..." She turned to Bunny.

"Do you want me to sing something?" Bunny asked, grinning.

Dave and Sunshine glanced at each other.

"Hey, toerag," Five called from the next room.

"Toerag?" Sunshine said, bemused, but Dave almost ran to where Five was sitting.

"Peter, holy crap! You do remember me!"

Sunshine burst out laughing.

The gathering eventually settled into a sort of party, with people settling into their own conversations,
taking turns to sit and have a talk with Five while they still could. Dave eventually ended up talking
with him on a sofa with the others scattered about the house and porch and Annie off chatting with
Sunshine in the little garden out back.

"This is crazy, Peter," Dave said. "You seriously aren't even going to consider staying behind? I
wouldn't go back if that's the price you'll pay. We can visit you and you won't have to die confused,
not even knowing your own wife and son! Think of them, at least!"

Five sighed. He rather liked being able to discuss things with someone who wasn't afraid to be frank
about death. Dave had been terrified of losing his wife and kids after losing his mother and sister, but
even then had at least discussed the subject openly.

"It's not real, dummins. Look at all this! This house wasn't built, it just happened! They didn't come
here and get a home loan and buy it. Bunny imagined it, did you know? She dreamed of this house
as a kid, and here it is, down to the last door and window and climbing vine. She told us all about it.
How can we just live in a place like this?"

"Well, it seems pretty solid now... Look, I don't know what to believe, but here we are and you're
actual freaking lucid. I doubt we're all caught up in some mass hallucination so there must be
something else going on. It is what it is, so why just walk away from it?"

"I just am. I need to, Dave. Something isn't right. I'm enjoying it and I don't know that there's any
danger. It's just... not where I belong. I can't shake the feeling that I need to go home, and soon. So at
the end of today, I intend to do just that."

Dave sighed and sipped his juice. "Alright, stupid. Couldn't ever tell you anything, could I? Not
since you moved in."

"Of course not. You were a child."

"A child who got out of the house more than you did, turkey."

"Sure, back when you were stoned half the time."

"Whaddya mean half?"

Five snickered and Dave grinned.

"Did I mention it's good to be able to talk to you again?" Dave said.

"No, but everyone else did." Five sighed. "Rabbit's been verklempt half the time. Still can't get over that... So Col. Walter really did design her as female. Ha, good... caught myself that time. Almost got the pronouns wrong."

"Takes a while to get used to it, yeah. I'll admit, I miss old Rabbit sometimes."

"Well, I mean, the personality is intact..."

"Mostly. The real change came after the memory loss."

"Peter said as much. She's certainly been softer. But the sass remains."

Dave chuckled. "That makes it easier."

"She never did like change, though. Wonder if that was a side effect of getting rewritten at an early age. The crap we had to go through, though, to get her to upgrade..."

"Oh, yeah... She always knew she needed it, though, deep down. Oh... except the one time..."

"Which one?"

"Y'know..." He glanced around almost guiltily. "After 'Nam?"

Five's face was blank for a moment. "Oh, yeah..." he breathed at last, glancing around similarly.

"Did you ever tell her?"

"No. Now that you mention it, though, I think I should before we go back. Seeing as how she lost most of the memories from that part of her life, she might take it better than she would have otherwise."

"Want me to go get her?"

"No. It'll keep a few minutes."

Silence fell, or near silence, as there was a genial hum of laughter and conversation coming from the garden.

"Look... Dave..." Five said at last, "can I tell you something, well... weird?"

Dave snorted. "I dunno, man. You wouldn't want to mess things up by making it weird, would you?"
Five shook his head, smiling. "I know, you think this day couldn't get weirder. But how many times have we both found out that it always can?"

"More times than I can calculate. Alright, spill it."

"This might sound crazy, but... No, seriously," he said when Dave started to laugh. "Listen... on my way here, I thought... I thought I heard Lily."


"Yeah. That's what I thought. Eventually. At the time, I wasn't sure what to think, as you can imagine."

"I suppose you thought she was real. I mean, you weren't... y'know.. all there."

"No, I wasn't. But... I do think she was real, Dave..."

Dave choked, spitting a little orange juice onto the floor. He hastily mopped it up with a cushion and nonchalantly stuffed it back onto the sofa. Five raised his eyebrows at him.

"It's not real, right?" Dave said, shrugging. "Are you sure you got your head back on straight?"

"No, honestly. But, look... suppose she's here? As in, really here?"

Dave glanced at the back yard and back at Five, who shook his head.

"Now don't give me that look. I'm not going over the wall and yes, I love Annie. I'm a different man. But... I heard her... Lily, that is... talking to someone familiar sounding. I hate to even mention this because you're already thinking of tackling me and I know how you'll react to this part, but... it sounded like my voice answering her."

"Well, yeah! Because it was your imagination, Peter!"

"Maybe..." he began, realized he didn't have an argument, and finished lamely, "Yeah, maybe. I don't know. But... I heard the guy kinda... blend into my head. Like he became part of me or was part of me and was returning, I dunno. And then all of a sudden I could remember everyone and... the time from the past two years, only double, like I was living here and there at the same time. Do you really think that's a coincidence? Yeah, yeah, I see the look on your face, you're thinking of calling a robot to grab me before I fly off into the ether..."

"A little. Don't even get me started on the flying, I'm at my limit. Look, just... why are you telling me this?"

"Because I need someone to know when I go back, in case..." He took a breath and said it. "In case I lose my memories again."

"In case you do? What other choice do you have?"

"Look... I don't know what happened to me, okay? Not exactly. I heard something weird in the maintenance tunnels of the Manor and then I went truly fuzzy in the head. That's all I can remember, just a flash of blue and some dead air building up to it and being confused after. And coming here I heard my own voice talking to Lily, saying I'd been with her and didn't want to go back because..."

He swallowed and steadied his voice. "Because I was dying."

"Dying?"
"Yeah. And... it's true, Dave. I'm sick."

Dave examined his drink in silence, took a big breath and murmured, "I know, Peter."

"Right." It was certainly a conversation stopper, but he wasn't done. He needed to sound out his idea. "Look... I'm just saying, maybe something happened, something that sent part of me here, and the separation has gotten worse."

Dave whistled softly. "And to think I was worried about cancer. At least cancer is familiar... Alright, Peter, so what if it did, I dunno, split you down the middle? If your brain has been blown across dimensions then the only thing I can imagine doing is making sure no one goes into those tunnels so it won't happen again!"

"And you're right. We can't be too careful, and I have a feeling Peter has already taken action on it. He's really come into his own and become the man of the house."

Dave smiled and relaxed a little. "You're pretty proud of him."

"Of course," Peter said warmly. "He's bright and grown up and married to a tall, raven-haired sexpot with a mind. Um, don't tell anyone I called her that. Anyway... she may be a little unorthodox but by all accounts she's all woman, so if that's what he wants and he's happy, well... who am I to argue? And she even wants kids. That fixes it for Annie. She's been dreaming of being a grandma since he was born, I kid you not. She kept quiet about it, though. No one likes to be nagged to produce grandkids."

Dave chuckled. His smile faded. "I guess it must be scary to think of forgetting all that again."

"Scary as hell. I look calm and I'll go back either way, but... well, that's why I'm telling you this. Because I want to try something on the way back."

Dave went a little pale. He sighed, "I remember when you were just a slightly aloof kid who knew a lot of swear words and when not to say them. It's been a long time since you were anything resembling normal, Peter."

"I'm surprised you have any expectations of normality, Dave."

"Don't knock it 'til you try it. So... what insane plan did you concoct, then?"

"Well... if I'm right... there's either two of me now, or my mind is divided and nearly separated into two selves that remain linked across, well... a gap between worlds. So I suppose. If that's true, and one of the halves is living here with..." He hesitated. "Look, does it bother you to talk about her? The idea that she's still around somewhere?"

"It hurts a little. But if anyone could have found a way to linger, it would be Lily. And this is just the sort of place she'd pick. Does it ever rain here?"

"Ask Peter. Why?"

"You know her. She loved sunshine. Even when it needed to rain she moped if it did."

"True."

"I guess I can take it, though. So go on... assuming my sister is haunting this place or something, what did you have in mind?"
"Well, if I'm right, then I want to try and reason with my other half. I want to take the memories I need now and let him have... Lily. Or my memories of her."

"Okay, I take it back. I don't think I can handle this, Peter. You want to try and cut your consciousness in half and take the bits you like with you back to Earth? Even if it works, you'll forget Lily!"

Five sighed shakily and gently wiped his eyes. "I know. But what I would get is what I need now."

Dave gaped at him. "You'd do that for Annie and Peter?"

"In a heartbeat."

"I guess... I understand. But you don't even know what did this. What makes you think you can change it just by sheer force of will?"

"Nothing at all. I have nothing, Dave. I go back to the promise of deteriorating health and a jelly brain. I may not even outlive Louise and my remaining years will be spent trying to remember one wife while the other cries next to me. But... this has been killing Annie. If I can avoid that, I'd like to... just not by hiding here. That's the one condition."

"So why tell me? Why not Peter? He's the damned super genius!"

"You know why. I can't tell him now... I can't tell any of them because they'll try and talk me down. Even if they went along they'd be crushed if it fails. I want someone to be able to explain if anything goes wrong, and I needed someone to discuss it with me. You know enough to make suggestions."

"I don't know about that," Dave sighed. "And I did try to talk you down."

"Yeah, but you usually give up and let me go to Hell in my own way."

Dave snorted. "Supposed something does go wrong, though?"

"Annie had these two days. That's better than nothing. She expects me to go home just as silly as when I left so we've said our goodbyes."

Dave looked at him with a sidelong smirk. "Were they the kind of goodbyes I think they were?"

"Hell, yeah! Twice."

"Good for you. Well, then, back to question one. How?"

Peter snickered.

"You know what I mean, a-hole. How are you gonna get your memories sorted?"

"It has to be inside the portal. That was where I heard them and where I think the two parts merged together. Lily said I wouldn't be able to keep him. I mean me. So that's where I have to stop and talk to, well... myself. Can you stall for me?"

"Stall. This whole thing is nuts but you ask me to stall?"

"Yeah. Just say you'll walk me through but that I'm moving slowly and that they shouldn't hurry after us."

"Why do you need me to lie about that? It's the cold truth. I saw you walk over here from the table
and you almost fell over. The real problem is that you’ll need a robot to walk you through."

"I can't... I can't ask any of them..."

"Not even me?" asked a soft, gentle voice.

Jon was resting his chin on the back of the sofa, smiling sweetly at them. Neither had even noticed he was there.

"I wanna help, Peter," Jon murmured. "I wanna help you get those memories back."

"Jon... you believe me, then?" Five asked softly.

In response, Jon tipped his head. His smile, golden in so many ways, said it all.

"Of course you do," Five sighed, smiling himself. "You know. You always know."

"Not always. But this time I do. I heard her say my name when I came through tha first time... but... I didn't wanna upset Tha Spine..."

"Then... she's really here?" Dave asked incredulously.

"I think so. I mean... I coulda imagined it... I imagine stuff sometimes... only Peter heard her, too. We may both be crazy but we're different kinds of crazy."

Dave snorted. "Can't argue with that. Huh." He looked around as though expecting his sister to walk into the room. "Y'know... this is kinda creeping me out..."

"Don't be scared, Dave. Lily isn't an angry ghost. She's Blue Matter. She always was. She got pulled here because this place... there's something about it that understands Blue Matter and everyone who's been soaked with it. It understood us, and it understands Six, and Five, and Bunny... and it understands Lily. And it's her home now."

Dave shook his head. "I never could understand you, Jon."

"Then... just don't be afraid. Okay? She loves you. She won't hurt you."

"I wasn't afraid..." Dave said softly.

"Jon..." Five said. "Is she alright?"

The golden robot beamed. "Sure. I don't know what she's been doing this whole time. An' I know she won't come out for us. She wouldn't do that to us. But, I think she's just fine."

"You don't know?" Dave asked.

"Nope. I just have the feeling she's happy. An' I know she'd always do the right thing."

Five snickered and wiped his eyes. She was really here...

And that meant... he had to let her go. All the way this time.

Jon rested his hand on Five's shoulder. "You can do it, Peter. An' I really wanna help ya remember Annie. 'Cause if I don't, Upgrade might hafta open her Lily file. It may not really be Lily, but... well... It's just like her, so even though it should be safe now, Upgrade is still scared an' doesn't wanna do it."
"What? Why would she have to do that?" demanded Dave.

"'Cause Annie doesn't want Peter to be scared. An' he only remembered Lily, not Annie. So she asked Upgrade to help calm you down when you're scared."

"Oh..." Five breathed. "Sweet Annie. She's a generous woman, but I want to spare her that. Upgrade, too. They've been through too much already."

"So let me help you walk. I'll keep your secret," Jon begged.

"Alright. If you help, Jon, I think I can face it."

"I know," Jon whispered. "So I will."

Rabbit approached with Upgrade as he said it. "You need me for something?" she asked.

"Huh?" Dave murmured.

"Jon radioed me..."

Five snorted. "I shouldn’t be surprised. Jon and his little psychic moments."

"Nah, I heard ya talkin’ about it a while ago."

Dave laughed.

"What’s go-goin’ on?" Rabbit asked.

"Take a seat, Rabbit. I have something to confess while I still can."

"Did ya kill someone?" Rabbit and Upgrade asked at the same time.

Dave guffawed.

"No, you two," Five said dryly as they settled in to join them. "Good to know some things never change. No, it’s about when they found your chassis, Rabbit. After Vietnam."

"Oh. Spine told me about that."

"He did?"

"Yeah, he downloaded some memories for me an’ it showed tha time I needed my old chassis and they found it and cleaned it up and sent it back."

Jon whistled softly. Upgrade shushed him.

"Peter," she breathed, "are you sure about this?"

He nodded. "It’s time, Upgrade."

"We really should have told her sooner but... you know how she is," Dave added.

"What?" Rabbit asked, looking around at all of them. "What’s the big secret about my old chassis?"

"Rabbit..." Five said gently, "Your chassis was missing for years. Did you think they just kept it in a box somewhere?"
"I figured... I don’t actually know what I figured. The only memories I have from then are from things I thought about recently. An’ all I got is tha memory of th-thinkin’ about it."

"Well, I’m here to tell you that we lied. Straight up lied to you. We were all in on it but I take full responsibility for the choice to go ahead and do it."

"Well, that would mean something if I even remembered the lie..."

"Alright, look. First of all, we told you they found your chassis and made some repairs to it so that it worked better. And that I installed it with Wanda’s help."

"And... that’s a lie?" she asked hesitantly.

"It is. First off, they never found your chassis."

"What?"

"It’s true. I mean, you didn’t really think that a country at war for so long would just hang onto all that scrap metal?"

"Scrap metal?" Rabbit cried indignantly.

"Sorry... but to them, it was. They just wanted the metals and the weapons. The feds located a number of parts on the black market. Most were theirs so they kept them. And they questioned the sellers and managed to piece together the story. The prison camp was seized by our military, the scientists fled, but one of the trucks was stolen and the thieves got what they could selling off the contents. All the copper and iron was sold for scrap, just like the titanium and aluminum from The Spine’s chassis."

"He told me the government kept his..."

"Right. They didn’t find it either and he already had one, re-polished and refined until it was almost as slick as the one that got stolen.

“So there you were, limping around in that half-baked thing I made. You know I never could turn my hand to creating automatons, just repairing them. And seeing you struggling in my inferior handiwork killed me.

“They once offered to make you an entirely new, state of the art set of plating. They practically salivated over the idea. When they sent me the news about the lost chassis, they paired it with a fresh offer to make you a replacement set of plating. The finest government engineers wanted to create a new chassis for you, free of charge. Rabbit... I just couldn’t turn that offer down."

Rabbit, now calmer, asked, "So... they made me a chassis an’ y-y-you attached it?"

"Well, actually... I assisted. Wanda did a lot. But no, they sent someone out to do it. I knew you wouldn’t like that, either. So I had them ship the plating and once you were prepped and blissfully unaware of your surroundings, their engineer came up to the HoW and walked us through it. And we lied through our collective teeth to you about it."

"Everyone was in on it..." Rabbit said faintly.

“I’m sorry, Pappy!” Upgrade whimpered.

"I’m not," Dave said stoutly. “It was for your own good. And you’re gonna swap it out soon"
anyway.”

"Good point," Jon said.

"Yeah...” Rabbit said.

They all watched her. Rabbit nodded slowly.

“Well, shoot. I told Bu-Bunny yesterday that her little trick to get me to come along was tha sweetest way I’ve ever been tricked into anything. Guess I was wrong.”

She rose and gave each of them a hug. To Upgrade she added a kiss on the brow.

"Thank you,” she murmured sincerely. “I would have dug in my heels and lived through years of Hell if you hadn’t done it. You know I would.” She clasped her hands as she looked around at all of them. “I love you all so much.”

Five looked at her in blank astonishment. Well, maybe Dave was right about how much she’d changed. But while he did miss the person he’d known since coming to the manor, he couldn’t complain about the person she was. Though he did wonder what trick Bunny had used to get her to come along. She could have just asked.

“I... think I wanna go sit in tha garden before we go back,” she said softly.

"We’ll come too,” Jon said, taking Upgrade by the hand.

Before leaving, however, Rabbit looked back over her shoulder. "And Petes... thanks for te-te-tellin' them ta make me sexy," she added, winking.

Jon and Upgrade giggled and Dave rolled his eyes at them as they walked away. But Five stared after them, brows knitted in thought. So human... more than human. Yet he still owned all of them, as he had since he was a boy. He felt sick... not his usual weak appetite but a pit in his stomach he’d gotten from time to time since Peter IV had first explained to him how things were. It wasn't right, but the world wouldn't see it that way. Or would they? Maybe... maybe now was the time. Maybe the world was ready. If Rabbit had been ready to learn that her chassis wasn’t built by a Walter, anything was possible.

Something big and important needed to be done, at long last. But considering what lay ahead, whether he went back or stayed behind, it was clear that he was no longer the man for the job.

Annie and Peter VI walked in a minute later.

"Jon said you wanted to talk to us, dear."

"What?” Dave said, eyebrows raised. But Five chuckled as Annie snuggled in beside him.

"I was thinking about it,” he murmured, clasping her hand. "This place must amplify his ‘Jon powers’ or something. Look... I've been thinking today about something I'd been tossing around in my head before I went fuzzy. I need the three of you to take care of it if I can't.”

Annie squeezed his hand and Peter looked very much as though he wanted to start the obvious argument up again. Instead, he walked around the sofa and sat with a deep sigh.

"Alright, Dad. What's up?"

Five smiled sadly. "It's about the robots and their future."
Dave murmured, "'Bout freaking time." Annie breathed a soft "mmm" of acknowledgment. And Peter nodded.

"I have a feeling we've all been thinking the same thing," he agreed.

The party slowly wound down... very slowly. They talked, played games, laughed, cried... made the most of time. No one wanted it to end. It took Five finally getting up, with Jon's assistance, and insisting that the time had come. Many tears were shed as the house was tidied in somber silence. Five felt he was at his own funeral.

He wasn't afraid to die, though. Lily had taught him that. He hoped he didn't forget everything he'd learned from her.

Peter opened the portal and suggested that Wanda and Norman go first, followed by Dave and Sunshine. Five gave Wanda and Norman a hug and a goodbye, in case he couldn't communicate properly later. Wanda sobbed softly as Norman walked her through. Dave glanced back at Five as he followed them.

"Jon will be walking me through," Five said.

"Are you sure, Peter?" The Spine said, a little thickly.

Jon stuck out his lip. The Spine didn't seem to notice, but Upgrade kissed his cheek and he relaxed.

"Jonny can do it just fine," she said stoutly.

"Oh... I just mean... he's the smallest..."

Jon rolled his eyes and Five suppressed a grin. Jon had developed some sass in recent years...

"Yes," Five insisted. "You're a bit tall and take big steps, and you know Jon is strong enough."

The Spine looked a little hurt, so Peter clasped his hand. Of course the automaton was feeling protective of him. It was one of his primary traits... and they had a long history.

"Thank you, Spine," he said warmly. "Thanks for being the father I never knew. I had Norman, but there were things he couldn't understand, and you could. And I may forget, but you won't."

Spine nodded, his face plates twitching with emotion. He pulled Five into a firm hug.

"See you back home, Peter," he murmured. "And thank you, too... for being what Lily wanted most of all."

Five gulped a little at this. He could do it, though. He could give her up for Annie and Peter.

The Spine went on ahead with Rabbit. It was time. Upgrade would walk through with Annie, then Five and Jon.

Five embraced Annie as though planning to stay that way, whispered that he loved her, and kissed her with a passion (partially fueled by guilt) that doubtless made their son blush. But when he glanced at Peter, all he saw were tears and a sad smile. He turned and watched Annie and Upgrade walk through the portal together, then pulled his son into his arms.

"I love you, son," he reminded him. "Don't forget it, even if I do."
"If?" Peter asked.

"A man can hope. Remember, I did have some hope."

Peter sighed and sniffled. "Then... I'll try to hope too..."

Five smiled and patted Peter's shoulder. Jon took his arm firmly. They faced the portal.

"Take it slow, Jon," Five said a little too loudly. "Tell Peter once we're through, okay?"


They stepped into the shimmering blue light. Five felt it almost immediately... his mind was splitting, part of him was escaping back the way he had come. Or was it caught there, as Lily had suggested?

*Finally!* a voice seemed to cry.

He already felt disoriented. Some part of him was leaving, fleeing back to the place it called home, and it was taking his memories with it, like a scarf unraveling stitch by stitch across the divide. Maybe he could pull back, if he kept his head... but he hadn't before, and the memories were already breaking free, following the man who was both him and someone else.

Maybe this meant that he really was dying, and his soul was just working its way across gradually. Maybe that was just his way. But he wasn't ready yet... it wasn't time to let go and cross, and that meant some part of him was clinging to life back on Earth, even while his mind pooled here with the other consciousness. Well, it was hardly fair that his other half should get to eat his cake and have it, too.

He had to work something out if ever he could, and he had to act fast.

*Wait...* Five thought.

*What? We're fine here! Go home to Annie...*

It was his voice! It was him... Peter Walter V! He sounded a bit younger, though. No wonder it had been hard to place him at first. But this might mean his plan had a chance.

*I will... Peter...* Five replied. He felt the other man... Peter's... surprise. They were connected, after all. *Once we talk about something.*

*No, go away! I live here now. You have Annie and Peter!* Peter protested.

*Do you expect me to just let you go, just like that?*

*You did it before. Stood there and let your mind get sucked into space...*

*Then we did, Five insisted. But... how? How did it happen?*

*I... don't know. I just remember the blue light. You... we stared into it. We just stood there and stared...*

*We couldn't move...* Five added. He remembered that much.

*Yeah. And then...*

*Then what?*
Never mind.

Lily, Five pressed. You found Lily.

He felt, rather than heard, a sigh. Yes, fine. I found her. But you have Annie, so go back!

I have Annie, yes, Five replied. But she doesn't have me. I don't know her name anymore. It isn't fair, Peter. You can't have both.

I don't. You have her, I have Lily. Why is this so complicated to you?

He wanted to scold, well... himself, for being unfaithful to his wife and son. He felt sick with guilt for it, because it had been him that did it, even if it was a part that could no longer come back to them, even if it was with his first wife. He, the other self, had spent the night with Annie just as he had, had told his son he loved him, knowing he would likely never see them again. He had guided his words the whole time they were joined, been her husband and his father. And now he was just leaving them with nothing more than a forgetful shell of himself?

He was angry... but he understood. Having been one with those thoughts, he now saw the issue. This other Peter V was convinced he was evenly split, that he was just as lucid on Earth as here. And so he had broken, given way and gone back to Lily. He had lost her so young! And he had never gotten to say goodbye...

But that raised the question... if Lily really was here, how was she okay with all of this?

He soon found the chance to ask...

Peter?

It was her! But he couldn't see her, any more than he could see his other self.

You're both still here, she said, her voice shivering like trembling leaves.

Five gulped back tears. Even now, aching with guilt about Annie, he felt how deeply he'd missed Lily...

He won't leave! Peter complained. He won't go back!

Why? she asked.

He knows, Five said firmly. Part of him wanted to join with the part that he now thought of as simply Peter, to go back with Lily. He was so tired...

But he also knew that it would mean sending his lifeless body back with The Jon while he remained. It was too cruel to everyone involved. And he had resolved that what time naturally remained for him to live, would belong to Annie, his sweet wife. He loved her no less than Lily, maybe more, if it came down to it. She had given him everything and he couldn't abandon her before his health forced it. It was clear that he couldn't reclaim himself entirely. He would settle for what he could get.

He wants you to come back with him. Doesn't he? Lily asked.

Is that possible? Five wondered.

I can't... I don't know how... Peter argued.

Five felt a warmth, old and familiar... it was like seeing Lily smile.
You don't want to, you mean.

Silence.

*I understand,* Five told them. *Believe me, I do. I... I love you, Lily. I never stopped. But I love her, too. She's my wife, the mother of my child. She doesn't deserve to suffer this way.*

*I know,* Lily whispered. *But you... this part of you... tried to return. I honestly don't think he can.*

*Neither do I! But... I need at least part of what he has. And I think he knows he can give it to me.*

*What part?* she asked.

*He wants...* Peter began. There was a pause as though he could barely force himself to say it. *He wants my memories of Annie.*

*More than that. The memories of our years together. It's only fair, because...* Here Five paused similarly. *Because I'll give you all the memories of Lily in return.*

A pause. He felt her pain, which she quickly concealed. *It's only right, Peter,* she breathed. *Each of you should have equal.*

*I know...* Then do it. Let her go, and let him take that much back.

He could feel a rising panic. The part of him that was Lily's, was terrified. Five felt strangely embarrassed. He was being so immature! Had he managed to abandon his experience and maturity as well, in order to stay with Lily without regret? But this wasn't bad news. If the Peter of the far side of the portal chose to cast off his strength, maturity, and similar gifts, then he, Five, could certainly use them.

*Peter... please...* she begged. *I let you go a long time ago. I wanted you to marry again and be happy. And you have been. Don't taint that now by being selfish.*

*Selfish? You're the one who asked me to stay!* Yes, she said faintly. *I actually didn't think you'd be here long. I... was selfish, too. I missed you so much!*

Silence again. Five waited anxiously as he and Jon shuffled slowly forward toward the end of the tunnel.

*He still won't be one hundred percent. Neither will I,* Peter grumbled.

*I know. But I'll take care of you, and she'll take care of him. Do you accept that?*

*Yes,* Five replied. *I have to. But is it that easy?*

*With my help, I think so.*

*Then... I agree to those terms. Until the day I finally die, when I assume I'll come back to you.*

He suppressed the stab of longing he felt at the idea. He'd honestly thought there was only one woman in his heart since he married Annie. But it seemed he could love her with all his heart and still love Lily. And that was how love was, he knew. It was inexhaustible. There was enough for as
many people as you wanted to love. But it wasn't right to love them all in the same way. As luck would have it, that issue had solved itself.

Alright. Good-bye, Peter. She's waiting.

Good-bye, Lily. I love you.

I know. And I love you.

Jon had brought him to the other side of the portal.

Wait! Peter... before I forget her... please... tell Annie how much we love her. Every day. And Peter. And tell him what a good son he is...

I will. Of course I will.

And with that, he felt his other half let go. There was a feeling of panic, sharp and sickening.

No! No, don’t leave me again, please! he begged.

Silence. Wait... What was he saying? He felt afraid, felt loss, but why? He swallowed hard. Where was he?

He looked and saw The Jon guiding him. It was blue here, all around them. They passed from it into a room. Five winced. Something... he'd forgotten something. He was crying, but he didn't know why.

There was a woman in front of him. The panic started to burn away at the sight of her. She was comfort and safety and he hobbled to her as quickly as he could manage, smiling through his tears. But she was crying, too. He didn't care for that. He didn't want her to cry.

"Annie girl, what's wrong?" he asked softly, touching her cheek.

Annie reacted as though she'd been slapped. Her mouth worked for a moment before she threw her arms around him and wailed into his chest.

Back in the old house, the portal snapped shut, startling Peter and Bunny. There was a strange rush of wind. Peter thought he felt a hand stroke his cheek, a familiar, comforting smell... and then... it was gone.

"The Hell was that?" Bunny cried.

"I dunno but we'd better make sure everything is okay," Peter replied, shivering. What if something had gone wrong?

He hastily reopened the portal and they hurried through. David was at the portal console and the room was filled with the family that had just gone through. In the middle of it all, his dad was embracing his mom while she sobbed.

"Poor mom..." Peter sighed. Bunny squeezed his hand.

But Jon was grinning from ear to ear.

"Dave, it worked!" he was crying.
"What worked?" Peter asked.

Five blinked at him. "Jon..." he said softly. "Jon... where are we?"

Peter and Bunny gasped as one.

"We're in the portal room, Peter..." Jon said.

"Portal? Oh... did we... did we just go through one? I remember... a flash of light. The rest is a little fuzzy..." He turned to Annie. "Annie girl... why are you crying?"

"Son of a... I can't believe it!" Dave cried.

"What?" asked Annie thickly.

"Hang on." Dave put his hand on Five's shoulder. "Peter... do you remember Lily?"

Five looked at him blankly. He seemed to be struggling with something. Peter's heart sank. He'd always looked that way when he was trying to recover a memory. Maybe it was temporary and the effects of the trip through the portal were wearing off...

"Can't say that I do," he said. There was a note of sadness in his voice. "I seem to have a bit of a gap... I'm sorry. I can't remember... I can't seem to remember anything before... not sure."

"But you remember me? And Peter?" Annie asked desperately.

He looked at her and his confusion seemed to fade. He laughed gently. "Of course. How could I ever forget my sweet Annie girl, or my favorite boy?"

Annie held him and sobbed.

"Ugh... what have I done to my knees?" Five groaned. "And my arms and legs feel like jelly..."

Annie pinked and shushed him softly. Dave snickered and coughed hastily. Peter refused to acknowledge either of them.

Five looked at Peter. "Shame about the face, though..." he said faintly.

Face? Oh, right. Peter still had his mask off. He started to put it on.

"Wait..." came a fierce whisper.

Bunny stepped up to him.

"Wait for what?" Peter asked.

It came back to him all at once. He'd forgotten in all the excitement. But surely she wasn't going to just... uh-oh... she'd raised her hand...

"No..." he began, but he was too late. She'd already slapped him very lightly on the cheek, yanking her hand away as though touching a flame. They stood, staring at each other, hearts pounding in terror.

"Dammit, Bunny!" David and Peter cried at the same time.

"It worked!" Bunny gasped, her hand to her chest. "Peter..."
"Well... look, let's just take this slowly, okay? First of all, you scared me to death..."

Bunny, wide-eyed, stepped backward and bumped into David as he came forward to investigate. Was she scared, too? Peter thought she'd be happy!

"So you can touch his face?" David asked, confused, as the others stared in stunned silence. "But... can anyone else?"

"I... I don't know..." Bunny whispered shakily.

She was suddenly even paler than usual, which was as impressive as it was unnerving. David, every ounce as impulsive as his sister, reached around her and poked Peter's cheek... and yanked his hand away with a yelp as a Blue Matter tendril curled around his finger. Bunny gasped and smacked him in the arm.

"Ow!" David cried. "Stop it! I already stung my finger, I don't need a bruise, too!"

Bunny said nothing. She just stood, hugging herself and staring.

"We think only a few people can do it, David," Peter said, looking at her uneasily. "You all have some exposure but Bunny's one of a rare few with a strong enough infusion of Blue Matter to..."

He was abruptly interrupted by Bunny bursting into tears and making an ugly and too familiar sound before running to the sink at the back of the lab, where she vomited violently. The stunned silence, which had begun to fill with low murmurs, resumed. Annie, at least, trotted back to help. David turned back to Peter.

"Already?" he asked drily. "She's only been a girl for about ten months, Peter..."

"What?" Peter asked blankly. "No! She can't be..."

Bunny flailed a hand as she wiped her face with a towel. "It's not morning sickness," she whispered urgently.

"Oh... then you're just sick?" Peter asked blankly. "I hope it wasn't the potato salad..."

"No..." Bunny began.

The sobs rose again and she couldn't speak. Annie embraced her and looked at Peter, who strode to them and held them both.

"If... if I... I could have..." Bunny choked.

"What?" he asked.

"Peter! I d-drowned y-you... I mean I..." She sucked in a breath and rushed on. "I pushed you down to stop you fighting and... and... and if I hadn't been... able to do mouth to mouth... then... then you would have... oh, Peter!" she gasped, burying her face against his shoulder.

Annie prudently slipped free and returned to her husband who, other than his newfound memory of his wife and son, seemed as oblivious as ever. Peter gulped and held his wife close. He had little recollection of the incident in the river, but she'd hinted from time to time that it still bothered her.

But now he could do something he once thought he could only do across the portal. He hesitated and then kissed her gently on the head. She cried a little harder at this, but he had no regrets. To him, it was a wonderful discovery.
He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Sunshine. She held out a slip of paper.

"Here's the numbers of couple of local colleagues. After all that's happened today, I think you may need to call one or all of them," she said.

Peter sighed and took the paper without a word.

Chapter End Notes

You ever read a fic that’s not what you were expecting and feel so gross that you consider deleting your whole account? People, please tag your porn... Just calling it mature and romance really doesn’t warn you adequately about an explicit sex scene, no matter how well written it is.

And I recommend not leaving kudos until you read the whole thing or you name will be on that list forever no matter what’s in it... sigh... They really enable removal of kudos for ongoing fics in case it out of nowhere turns super nasty but in my case I’m just embarrassed because the fic I was reading had a play by play sex scene (something I try to avoid or keep vague, but have I done so well enough? Anyone can read these, tags or no tags) and now I’m considering cutting everything remotely related to sex out of my own fics in case I’m having the same effect on other people.

Works inspired by this one: The Strange Love of Wanda Walter (side fic for Life with Marie) by The_Whistler

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