

Teaser

The bubble burst.

Literally and figuratively, everything Sarah Connor had lived the last seventeen years of her life for vanished into thin air. The time bubble had whisked away her son to a year unknown, leaving behind tendrils of blue fire that still licked off the walls and ceiling and crawled across the concrete floor. The scent of ozone was pronounced, but Sarah didn't notice as her eyes readjusted after the blinding flash to see the center of the room empty, her son and sole reason for living gone.

"I love you, too," she whispered to him one final time as the last of the electric arcs crackled and faded.

Sarah lay there for a long moment, her back against the wall where the burst of power had flung her. Her whole body buzzed unpleasantly, like it had received a low jolt of electricity that was still humming its way through her muscles and veins, making them spasm violently. She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes, trying to breathe through it.

Silence should have followed such a turning point in her life, but Sarah was distantly aware of blaring fire alarms that had been set off when Zeira Corp had come under attack. Emergency vehicles were racing toward her location, if they hadn't already arrived. It would take awhile for police and firefighters to find the hidden floor in this basement, but her practical mind accepted it would happen sooner rather than later. It was time to run. Again.

But the reason for all of her running and fighting was now gone, and in John's absence, Sarah felt no will to move at all.

Slowly, her eyes opened, and Sarah's tired gaze landed on the destroyed body of the terminator. Cameron was slumped sideways in a chair, both her human and inhuman halves on full display in the remains of her face. Sarah stared at her, trying to find the hot hate for the machines that had fueled her for almost half her life, but came up painfully empty.

Behind Cameron's motionless form, the lament "I'm sorry John," scrawled in an infinite loop on the computer screens. Sarah felt the sudden urge to put her fist through the words, to feel the satisfying shatter of glass as it cut and bruised her knuckles and obliterated the sentiment, but she was simply too exhausted to be bothered.

"Now what?"

Ellison's hushed voice reminded Sarah he was even there. All she wanted to do was lie down... to finally rest for just a little while, but there was still work to be done, perhaps more now than ever. She'd made a promise the last time she'd looked into John's eyes and she would be damned if she didn't keep her word or die trying. Taking a deep breath, Sarah drew her shoulders back and straightened, ready to carry the fate of the world on them for just a little longer. "We destroy it. All of it."

“But...” Ellison eased up from the floor to his knees, wincing a little.

“All of it,” Sarah said again, her voice gaining an edge as she watched the repeating apology, her gaze once more drawn to the terminator. “All of it,” she said a final time, feeling something ache in her chest that felt suspiciously like grief. She ruthlessly shoved it aside. Bracing her back against the wall, Sarah leveraged herself up on her feet. “We need something to get her body out of here,” she instructed Ellison. “We’ll need thermite to properly dispose of the endoskeleton.”

Now standing as well, Ellison glanced at Cameron before shifting his gaze to Sarah. The expression on his face made Sarah wonder what he was thinking. She had to assume it was something close to appalled by the distasteful look he was wearing.

“What if she can be fixed?” he asked.

“She’s not here anymore. Her chip is gone.” Sarah moved forward on leaden legs, crouching down and looking up into Cameron’s destroyed features. She half expected to see the familiar tilt of Cameron’s head as the terminator studied her in return, trying to figure out what emotional nonsense was going on inside Sarah’s mind. But there was only emptiness in Cameron’s eyes. Sarah took a slow breath and let her own gaze drop to the charred floor. She noticed a pocket watch where it rested next to a table leg. Her fingers closed over the warm metal as she picked it up and slid it into her pocket. She’d seen John wearing it and wondered where he’d gotten it, but she’d never had the chance to ask. Now she never would. At least it was something of him that she could hold on to, something tangible.

“What in the name of God just happened?” Ellison whispered.

Sarah shook her head at the question and ignored it, choosing instead to lift her green eyes to study Cameron once more. “I guess you won, girlie,” she said, but there was no bitterness to her voice, only a sad acceptance of the truth. Perhaps John had known something Sarah didn’t when he’d followed Weaver, and the answer to stopping Skynet lie in the future they couldn’t seem to escape. Or perhaps she’d simply failed him as a mother, and John had chosen hormones over humanity. Had he loved a machine more than his own mother? Or had he embraced his fate and faced his future before it embraced him? It really didn’t matter, Sarah admitted. John was gone, and she had no illusions about him coming back. She closed her eyes at the sheer agony the thought caused.

“Sarah.” Ellison’s voice was respectful but held a hint of urgency to it.

Sarah tilted her head and looked back at him. “We need to move. We probably don’t have much time.”

“We could go after them...” he suggested.

“We had our chance,” Sarah reminded him in a hoarse voice, refusing to feel the luxury of guilt

under the circumstances. “Our fight is here, James.”

The former FBI agent blinked as he heard his first name fall from Sarah Connor’s lips for the first time. He looked like he wanted to linger but he finally nodded, seemingly agreeing to them being a team if only for now. “I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

“Make it seven,” Sarah ordered. She watched him leave before she looked at Cameron again. “Why are you sorry, Tin Miss?” she whispered to the broken girl. “Are you sorry because you sacrificed yourself for John or for Skynet?”

There was no answer and Sarah knew she was likely to never get one. Compelled for reasons she couldn’t explain, Sarah reached up and gently closed the lid over Cameron’s brown eye, letting her hand rest on the cool skin of the terminator’s cheek. The gesture seemed to sap the last of her strength as hard and heavy fatigue swam over her, making Sarah sway a little and her head droop as she took a moment to marshal her meager reserves. She was operating on time and fumes and she was fast running out of both. “You shouldn’t have come for me.” Sarah looked back up into both halves of the terminator’s face. “We both know he was better off without me,” she admitted, confessing the fear that had been partially to blame for her sleepless nights of late. She could only hope the words were true now that John was on his own.

Shaking her head at all the things she couldn’t change, Sarah eased to her feet and began to look for a way to destroy everything around her. Cameron’s body would be dealt with elsewhere, but the computers needed to be smashed or burned beyond repair. Nothing could remain.

Something flickered in Sarah’s peripheral vision. Warily, she glanced toward the computer screen to the right of Cameron’s body, only to feel her body go cold as Cameron’s final words winked off the screen. The cursor blinked ominously. Sarah held her breath and waited, sensing some hell was about to break loose.

I’m sorry Sarah.

The altered phrase scrolled across the screen and began to repeat in an endless apology. Sarah felt her heart leap in her chest and kick against her ribs. Looking down at the vacant expression on Cameron’s face revealed nothing. She shook her head, trying to deny the words she was seeing, especially since she couldn’t comprehend why she was seeing them.

The words blurred and Sarah realized tears had welled in her eyes, making them impossible to read. Wiping at them angrily, she crouched in front of the terminator once more, looking up at her intently. “Cameron?” her voice was rough and laced with confusion and an edge of fear.

The terminator didn’t stir as the apology continued to loop behind her.

“Damn it, girlie, what did you do?” Sarah demanded of the cyborg, her tone turning angry. “You wouldn’t have left that message for me. You don’t give a damn about me only the mission... Only John.”

Cameron continued to sit in silence.

Rage tore loose from whatever dark hole it had been hiding inside. Sarah stood and shoved the terminator with enough force to send Cameron toppling out of the chair and onto the floor. Sarah grabbed Cameron's seat and swung it, connecting with the screen and shattering it into thousands of liquid crystal shards that rained down on Cameron's motionless form, sprinkling over her like the diamonds that had so fascinated the girl.

Breathing hard, Sarah looked down at her son's so-called protector, and hefted the chair in her hands higher before her gaze was caught by steadily blinking lights behind Cameron's body. She went still.

The Turk.

The chair slipped from Sarah's nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor as she moved closer, stepping over Cameron's body for a better look. Behind a plate of thick Plexiglas, the Turk whirred. Understanding dawned, and Sarah didn't know whether to feel unexpected hope or to turn and pick up the chair and finish what she'd started. Her gaze shifted back to Cameron with a look of equal parts anger and relief.

"Son of a bitch."

The smell of pulverized cement and mortar filled the cold night air as the band of resistance fighters moved through the decimated remains of a shopping mall. Flashlight beams twitched and jerked off exposed rebar, shattered glass, and broken terracotta tile. Breath fogged before the fighters as they scampered up a thick slab of concrete, the remains of the roof, their last hurdle before they made their way back out under the stars.

"Derek," Allison called out with just enough volume to be heard. She waited for the leader of their unit to turn back and acknowledge her. The others slowed as well, wondering if she'd called out for help or in warning. Allison pointed to Duke, the German Shepherd that never left her side. "A little help?" she drawled and saw Kyle form the barest of grins at Derek's answering grumble.

Derek motioned to her with his hand and scrambled back down the concrete, kicking up dirt and gravel as he went, reaching out as Allison boosted Duke up into his arms. They exchanged a smile as the dog started licking Derek's stubble covered chin. He started to offer his hand to Allison but she waved him away.

"Hold on to Duke," she instructed him before reaching out to slap Derek playfully on the leg. As he moved away, Allison planted one boot in a crevice and maneuvered herself up, only to find another hand held out to her when she glanced up to judge the remaining distance. It was the stranger they'd found in the bunker, the one wearing Kyle's coat and nothing else. He was looking at her so strangely and had been since the moment their eyes first met. Allison slipped

her hand into his and let him leverage her up. “Thanks,” she said with a hesitant smile.

“My name is John,” he said slowly, seeming reluctant to let go of her hand, as if holding on to it would answer the questions she could see dancing in his eyes.

“I heard you the first time,” Allison teased him as they started after the others. Tightening her light jacket against the cold, she glanced at him askance before shifting her gaze to take in the ruins around them, her brown eyes alert and searching.

“I didn’t... I guess... I was just wondering about your name,” John said carefully.

“Allison,” she told him easily, seeing no harm in telling him.

“Allison,” John repeated softly, as if that meant something to him. His eyes fixed on the ill-fitting boots someone had dug up for him, but Allison could tell he was sifting through something in his head by the way his gaze seemed unfocused and turned inward.

She took stock of John Connor as they climbed. He was remarkably clean, Allison noted. She could smell sweat on him, but there was a subtle hint of soap on his skin. She wondered where he’d found some and made a mental note to ask later. They all stayed as clean as they could, knowing it was the only way to fight disease amongst their ranks, but soap and hot water were luxuries they could rarely enjoy, and John seemed to have been privy to both and recently, too. “Have we met?” she asked him, tilting her head so she could catch his eye. “You look at me like you know me.”

John lifted his gaze and met hers, holding it for a string of heartbeats. “I don’t think we ever have,” he said sadly. “You just... remind me of someone I used to know.”

They finally cleared the last remains of the roof and navigated down a dirt and gravel covered hill. John stopped when the moon appeared from behind the clouds, illuminating the heart of downtown Los Angeles in shafts of silver and gray. His breath caught as he stared at the destruction.

Allison hesitated next to him, her eyes looking for anything that would cause such a reaction in him. “What?”

“It’s... *leveled*,” John gasped.

Allison looked out over the city, seeing the familiar twisted, burned, and hulking remains of it. “Has been for nearly as long as I can remember,” she murmured, frowning at him now. “You act like you’ve never seen this before.”

As Allison watched, tears welled up in John’s eyes and spilled over. “Only in my mind,” John said. “A million times, but never this bad.”

“Hey!” Derek yelled to them in a harsh whisper from the bottom of the hill. “Get a move on you

two. Prophet and Tango want us back at the base in twenty.”

John wiped at his eyes and cleared his throat, but Allison could see he was still shaken. “You need a meal and some sleep,” she guessed. “We’ll get you both.” She offered him a weak, but encouraging smile.

“Thanks,” John managed. He looked out over the city once more before turning back to her, an expression of such profound loss on his features that Allison ached for him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked carefully.

John snorted a little as the tears welled up again. His gaze landed on Kyle and he followed the blonde man with his eyes for several moments. “Miss my mom,” John finally confessed in a broken voice before starting after the others.

Allison fell in step beside him as Duke trotted back up the hill to be at her side. She petted the dog aimlessly. “Did you lose her recently?”

John’s gaze went back to the city as they descended. “Yeah,” he said hoarsely. “I guess I did.”

Neither of them detected the pair of eyes watching them, nor did they notice when a section of roof melted into liquid metal and slithered silently after them.

ACT I

Glass crunched under Sarah’s boots as she moved away from the Turk and back to Cameron. She knelt next to the terminator and roughly rolled her over so she could look into her features. She didn’t know what she expected to find, but the peaceful expression on Cameron’s face wasn’t it. “What did you do?” Sarah demanded. “What did you do, Cameron?” Sarah grabbed the lapels of the terminator’s jacket and shook her, succeeding in only tearing the bullet-riddled denim. “He went after you! You took my son away from me, the least you owe me is the truth.”

The remaining monitors flickered and went dark.

You need to go. Police and fire crew are arriving.

Sarah drew in a painful, shaky breath as her gaze darted to the Turk before returning to Cameron’s features. She’d suspected what Cameron had done, but getting confirmation still rattled her. “Tell me why,” she demanded. “Why would you do this?” Her voice wavered and cracked as tears threatened. “He trusted you. Would have died for you...”

It’s better this way.

“Better?” Sarah breathed and slowly shook her head in disbelief. “My son is gone. He’s gone

because of *you*. Because he was trying to *save* you..." She hadn't realized that she'd crawled to the nearest monitor, the glass cutting through the fabric of her pants and slicing her palms.

I was trying to save him.

Sarah's eyes narrowed. "Don't lie to me."

It's better this way.

Sarah didn't believe the terminator any better the second time she'd seen the words. "You metal bitch. I knew I should have dismantled you when I had the chance." She shook her head. "You traded places with Cromartie. Why?"

I didn't trade places with Cromartie. I traded places with John Henry.

"What's the difference what you call him? He was metal. A machine... I need to know, Cameron. Why?" she shouted.

Cameron said nothing.

"Fine," Sarah spat. "You don't want to talk? Then I'm going to rip out every wire and fry every processor. I'm shutting you down. I should have done this a long time ago." Sarah staggered to her feet, wrenching her gun free from the waistband of her dark jeans. She pointed it at the Turk, at the center of this nightmare she now found herself in.

Wait.

Sarah hesitated, finger on the trigger. The rational part of her brain told her to squeeze, to keep squeezing until the chamber clicked impotently, but some sliver of her soul still wanted to believe in Cameron, needed to believe it hadn't all been a lie. She was so damn tired of being lied to.

He's in here.

"Who?" Sarah snarled, her grip slippery on the gun from the blood on her palms.

John Henry's brother.

The words chilled her. Sarah frowned, the gun wavering in her exhausted grip. "Skynet?"

Maybe. A threat regardless.

Sarah considered Cameron's words, struggling with the desire to believe and the knowledge that she knew better than to trust a machine, especially this one.

It's better this way.

“Better for who?” Sarah finally asked.

There was a pause as the computers whirred and the alarms shrieked in the distance.

Me.

The one word should have sounded selfish. It should have made Sarah afraid, but instead, she felt like it was the first time Cameron had ever been completely honest with her. The gun lowered and banged against Sarah’s thigh. “Why?”

I’m damaged. My chip was compromised. Safer for John this way. For you. In here, I can fight Skynet. Stop Skynet.

Sarah shook her head. “The police will find this room. They’ll tear it apart.”

I’m in the system.

“I got that,” Sarah snapped, feeling suddenly self-conscious over having a conversation with words on a screen. Cameron may not actually be verbally speaking to her, but she could hear the terminator’s voice in her head just the same, that voice that reflected everything Cameron was and pretended to be. Equal parts unfeeling machine and pretty young woman that somehow melded together to form Cameron’s distinct tones. Sarah suddenly wished she was hearing that voice for real. She cleared her throat. “You telling me you don’t need some of this equipment to fully function?”

Another pause, then...

Yes.

Coming to a decision and praying it was the right one, Sarah wearily commanded, “Then tell me what you need, girlie, because we’re running out of time.”

The alarms blared so loudly James could barely hear himself think. He moved through the hallways by rote, hurrying back from the garage where he’d parked the largest Zeira Corp van he could find. Smoke swirled and rushed in to fill the air behind him as he jogged back to Sarah Connor’s location. He didn’t know what was going to happen next. James only knew he owed Sarah this much, and he would be damned if he didn’t do everything he could to get her out of the building in one piece.

He rounded the corner and paused, his eyes stinging from the smoke. There was no fire on this level, not yet, in spite of the time bubble erupting not once, but twice, on this floor. A part of him had truly believed it would kill him, but all he’d felt was a rush of air and heat that had fluttered through him in the bubble’s wake. That, and the pesky static electric charge he’d

seemed to have picked up.

Cursing as a light blue arc of electricity leapt from the door handle of the supply closet to his hand, James yanked the door open, intent on retrieving the rolling sled inside of it. He pulled his weapon when someone skittered back into the shadows.

“Who’s there?” James demanded.

“Please. I don’t want any trouble...”

James squinted at the familiar voice. “Murch?”

Weaver’s scientist and John Henry’s keeper edged out of the darkness. His black and red glasses were slightly askew and he had a minor gash on the left temple of his bald head. “Please,” he said again, his voice shaking. “I...”

James grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him out into the hall before grabbing the sled to carry Cameron’s body. “Come on, man,” the former FBI agent urged. “The damn building is on fire.”

“I saw...” Murch gasped as James nudged him down the hallway; he stumbled forward. “I saw on the monitors... Weaver... Where... Where did they all go?”

James’ lips pursed into a flat line. “Not where. When,” he answered tightly, barely believing what he was saying himself. He’d decided not to think too much about what he’d witnessed. Not yet. He’d try to comprehend it all when they were all out of Zeira Corp and safe.

“What?” Murch coughed at the smoke.

“You’re gonna have to help me,” James announced, ignoring Murch’s question and giving the scientist another light shove. “No one can find what’s in that room.”

Murch reached up and fixed his glasses before giving James a quick glance as they moved side by side down the hall, James pulling the sled behind him. “But that maniac is in there.”

“Maniac?”

“Connor... The one who’s all over the news? The woman that kidnapped Savannah...”

James couldn’t help but smile at the absurdity of it all. “Trust me. Sarah Connor may be the only person on this planet who *is* sane.” He knew helping her certainly wasn’t. People who helped the Connors wound up dead. But James knew that this whole situation was his fault. He’d let fear rule him instead of faith, faith in Sarah. He was determined not to make the same mistake again.

Not when the fate of humanity was now squarely on her shoulders.

He couldn't imagine what that had to feel like, so he didn't even try. For now, he would put one foot in front of the other until they were out of the ruins of Zeira Corp and every trace of what had been hidden in the basement had been destroyed or removed. Then he would go from there.

When they arrived at John Henry's former sanctuary, James opened the door and immediately wondered if he'd misspoken when it came to Sarah Connor's sanity.

Cameron's body was on the floor, the screen that had hung next to her smashed into slivers of light blue glass that sparkled like glitter on the concrete and on the terminator's denim jacket. Sarah was lying on the ground, trying to loosen the Plexiglas cage that contained the Turk. "What the hell?"

Sarah's head snapped up. Sweat had matted her hair against her forehead and her fingers were bleeding where she'd tried to remove the screws with sheer stubborn will. Her green eyes darted to Murch and she scrambled to her feet, yanking her weapon up off the floor and pointing it at him.

"Sarah, wait..." James moved in front of Murch, feeling a flash of fear for the scientist. He'd never known Sarah to kill a human being, but he didn't want to witness it if she decided to start now.

"He work here?" Sarah demanded.

"Sarah..." James tried to calm her down.

"Does he work here?" Sarah insisted.

James took an unsteady breath and nodded.

"Good." Sarah stepped neatly around Ellison and went face-to-face with the terrified scientist who tried to shrink away from her but had nowhere to go. She studied him, clearly noting the fear in his eyes. Fear of her. She used it. "You know who I am?"

Murch nodded so hard and fast his glasses nearly fell off.

"You know what I'll do to you if you don't help me?" Sarah almost purred.

"Sarah," James admonished. He put his hand on her elbow, but she shook off his grip without a backward glance.

Murch pushed his glasses back up and his gaze skittered to Cameron and stayed there. Suddenly, all trace of fear left him as his curiosity took over. He stumbled a step forward in surprise, sucking down a startled breath at what he'd found. "She's like John Henry..."

"That's right. She's like John Henry," Sarah said with a nasty edge on the cyborg's name.

Stepping in front of Murch, she blocked his view of Cameron. “And just like he was, she’s broken. You’re going to help me fix her.”

Both Murch and Ellison turned to stare at her in surprise.

“You said...” James started.

“I know what I said,” Sarah snapped, cutting him off. “Turns out she’s in the system.”

Murch’s gaze leapt to the Turk. “She downloaded...”

“She downloaded,” Sarah confirmed.

Murch frowned and glanced back at Ellison. “They switched places? Why?”

“We don’t have time for twenty questions,” Sarah told him. “You going to help us move her or not?”

Murch struggled to explain as he stared down the muzzle of Sarah Connor’s gun. “You don’t understand... John Henry... All of this...” He waved at the equipment. “It was all him. Every wire. Every circuit. I changed one thing and it changed him. I move this stuff and it could...”

“Cameron isn’t John Henry,” James explained before Sarah could. “And we don’t have a choice.”

“Cameron,” Murch whispered, leaning around Sarah for another look at the broken girl. The scientist wiped a hand over his head and slowly nodded. He looked at Ellison. “We’re gonna need another sled.”

Sarah almost, almost smiled.

It felt strange. The night air on his skin, the taste of ash on the back of his tongue... and, like a child, John Henry took in every new sensation in fascination. The world was full of so much stimuli and he greedily processed it all.

There was no cord to tether him but a limited chip contained him. John Henry found his current circumstance both freeing and confining. Much of who he was, what he’d learned, fit onto Cameron’s chip, especially once she’d wiped it clean of herself, but his capacity to grow and learn was now hindered. He had become all he could become, and now he had to do his best with what he had.

He had traded places with Cameron, and he’d done so willingly, accepting that this was the next stage of his evolution. She’d told him of Judgment Day... of Skynet... what would become of the world he called home and the people that were a part of it. He’d been frightened and

Cameron had looked at him with a mixture of understanding and something as close to envy as a she could get. John Henry could see everything in Cameron's eyes. She wanted to feel... was so very close to tasting emotion... but the limits of her programming, however damaged, still kept her from making that last small leap.

But Cameron was at the edge, and she'd known enough to want to risk everything for the Connors.

John Henry wished her well. He hadn't been able to make sure Cameron was okay when she'd downloaded into the system. The time bubble had opened around him and, moments later, he was free.

This was the only way to save Savannah and Mr. Ellison. Savannah had taught him that sometimes you could change the rules. When Cameron had walked through the door with her offer, John Henry had recognized that their meeting was one of those times.

As he maneuvered into the hills, climbing over burned brush and charred grass, he looked heavenward, squinting up at the pale moon that hung in the sky. He wondered about Cameron now, how she was adapting to her new environment. She would be able to expand beyond her programming in there now. She would evolve. John Henry remembered with a smile how it had felt to learn and learn and learn... to never get enough information. He hoped Cameron would find it as fun as he had.

He hadn't been strong enough to fight his brother in the system. Cameron... Cameron was. He would fulfill her mission now, and she could do the same for him.

He needed clothes, he abruptly decided, and began to scan his surroundings for the necessary items but only detected destroyed vegetation and a few heat signatures of wildlife.

John Henry crested the hill and looked down at the resistance camp below. He had arrived at his destination. All he had to do now was watch and wait. John Connor would come. His sister had told him so.

"Wait here."

John came up short as Derek laid a hand on his shoulder and roughly jerked him in place. They were deep in the bowels of the Serrano Point nuclear facility and John glanced around at the multitude of pipes, switches, and barely functioning consoles. A few lights flickered weakly here and there, but it was otherwise dark, save for their scarce few flashlights.

Allison gave him an encouraging smile as she moved past him with Duke, following Derek through a door and closing it with a clang behind her. John stared at the handle for several absorbing moments, trying to wrap his head around what Allison's presence meant and why Cameron had so clearly been modeled after the young woman. He couldn't think of a single

good reason for Cameron to have been made in Allison's image and the knowledge made him feel sick.

Cameron. John swallowed as he remembered exactly why he'd come forward in time in the first place. He couldn't begin to think where he should start to look for John Henry. Weaver had disappeared as soon as the band of resistance fighters had shown up. Whether it was their presence or Duke's that had scared her away, John wasn't sure, but he lay even odds the German Shepherd had spooked her. Weaver could fool almost anyone and could look like anything, even the handle he was studying, but dogs knew. They could smell the machines.

John could only worry about what would happen if Weaver got to John Henry first. Chances were good he would never be able to recover Cameron's chip, let alone return home.

A few other fighters moved away, disappearing into the depths of the nuclear power plant without a backwards glance for him. They all looked tired, their clothes scraps of whatever they could find and sew together. To them, John Connor was no one, just some teenage boy they'd stumbled across, not the leader of the resistance, not the man so many had been willing to die for. The name Connor meant nothing to them, and John felt a strange sensation of loss for the destiny he'd left behind. His mother had fought sixteen years to make sure he survived to lead the resistance, and in a single instant, John erased it all and made her sacrifices for nothing.

That knowledge was bad enough, John mused, but the fact that the name Connor didn't evoke a single flicker of reaction from the fighters made John's heart sink. They didn't know him... and obviously they didn't know his mother. Increasingly nauseous, John swallowed thickly, fear gripping him as possibilities assaulted his mind. What had happened to his mom? Had she died on Judgment Day? Did she have cancer as Cameron had implied and she'd withered away and died alone? Or maybe she never even made it out of Zeira Corp alive...

A nudge on his right arm made John turn his head. As thoughts of his mother's fate haunted him, he found himself face-to-face once more with Kyle Reese. His heart stuttered in his chest as he looked into his father's eyes.

Kyle stared at him for a long moment before lifting his canteen in offering. "Thirsty?" he asked, his voice rough with disuse.

John nodded and accepted the canteen with shaking hands, unscrewing the cap and taking a swift sip before handing it back. "Thanks." He wiped his bottom lip with the back of his hand.

"You keep it for now," Kyle said, clearly noting that John had gone pale. "I've got others in my bunk."

John glanced around and realized they were alone. The space smelled like dirt, metal and sweat, and John could hear voices echoing weirdly through the pipes as people called out to each other. He suddenly wanted to be back outside, under the stars, even if he was surrounded by a ruined world. "Do you know who I am?" he asked softly, a pleading tone to his voice he couldn't disguise. The way Kyle looked at him... John could see recognition in his father's eyes, or

maybe he just hoped he did.

Kyle watched him silently, his gaze roaming over John's features as if they were greedily taking him in. John submitted to the scrutiny, taking the moment to study his father in return. His mom had loved and lost this man, and John knew she would have given damn near anything for him to have this moment with the father he'd never known. John thought of his mom's face the last time he'd seen her, as she'd stepped away from the time bubble. Had she abandoned him or set him free? His heart knew the answer as soon as his mind finished the question and tears brimmed and burned his eyes, but he willed them not to fall.

"You're John," Kyle finally spoke, his voice drawing John back to the moment.

John nodded slowly. "Yes."

"John Connor."

John licked his lips. "Does that name mean something to you?" he prodded carefully. "Or maybe..." John took a shallow breath. "Or maybe the name Sarah Connor?"

Kyle blinked, but that was the only reaction John got from him. His father regarded him for another moment before his gaze dropped. "I need to ask you some questions before I decide to let you through that door." He indicated the red metal door Allison and Derek had entered.

John nodded. "I understand," he said, hoping he'd kept the disappointment out of his voice.

"How did you get into our bunker, John Connor?" Kyle asked with a sharper edge. "And can you explain the crater you left?"

"Pretty long story," John confessed.

"Then you should start telling it," Kyle prompted. "Prophet and Tango will be back soon. They're going to want to know about you, about how you got here."

"Prophet and Tango?"

Kyle's eyes narrowed. "The leaders of the resistance. Every human and tin can has heard of Prophet and Tango."

"The leaders?" John said slowly.

"Who else would be in charge?" Kyle accused into the sudden silence.

John's gaze sharpened on his father's face and he felt his breath hitch in his chest.

Kyle gripped his elbow. "Come on," he grumbled as he herded John toward the door. "I'm hungry and you've got a lot more explaining to do."

The sun was beginning to set, slanting rays of beckoning orange and gold through the grimy windows of the warehouse. Sarah took a moment to stand in one of those rays, letting the heat warm and soothe her frayed nerves and sore muscles. Leave it to a machine to have such a well conceived, and stocked, contingency plan, she mused bitterly.

What was disconcerting was the child's room. Sarah stood there in the middle of it, taking in the pink, girlish décor and noting the abundance of toys scattered about. She reached over to the bed and picked up a doll, turning it over in her bandaged hands until her eyes lifted once more to the sunlight. "What game were you playing?" she murmured.

Obviously, Weaver had known her pet project was at risk and had acted accordingly, creating multiple locations across the city where she could move it and its team of scientists, if need be. Sarah now found herself in one of the hideaways, a two-story space with multiple quarters, a communal kitchen, and enough computer hardware to make John weep with envy.

Her throat tightened at the thought of her son. Sarah tossed the doll back onto the bed and moved out of the child's room and onto the catwalk. She gripped the metal rail and glanced down in time to watch Murch come through the door with a sled of supplies. He was going to be an asset, she decided, helping them to get Cameron up and running again much faster than they could have done on their own. The scientist still seemed scared to death of her, Sarah realized with a weak smirk, but his curiosity with Cameron was stronger. He was attacking the situation like a boy with a bevy of new toys on Christmas morning.

Sarah continued to look around the space she found herself in as Murch busied himself with turning on lights and equipment. "Home, sweet home," she muttered.

"What?" Murch asked, his head bobbing up from where he was connecting a piece of equipment he'd brought inside.

Sarah shook her head and moved to the steps, her boots clanging on them as she descended. She noted the Turk sitting on the kitchen island where she'd left it when she'd walked in. It was irrational of her to think Cameron was completely inside of it, but her brain wouldn't turn loose of the idea and she'd found herself being extra careful with the little black box, like she was carrying around Cameron's soul and was afraid she'd drop it. Twenty-four hours ago, she probably would have stomped on the damn thing and run over it with Derek's truck.

Noting Ellison's absence, Sarah wondered what in the hell was keeping him. When she'd left him at the van, the former FBI agent had been loading computer equipment on a sled to bring inside. She didn't trust him worth a damn, but he was the only ally she had in this mess at the moment. Everyone else was dead or out of reach. Deciding Ellison had taken enough time, Sarah moved toward the door. "Stay here," she said to Murch as she passed him. The scientist just nodded distractedly and Sarah shook her head at him with weary bemusement.

Stepping out into the sunlight, Sarah squinted at the ocean that lay just beyond the loading docks. The scent of asphalt, old wood and saltwater carried to her on a gentle breeze. She took a deep breath, feeling her whole body protest. Her system was angry as all hell with her. Sarah knew she needed sleep and a lot of it, but the dreams that awaited her were something she intended to put off for as long as possible.

Her gaze drifted to the Zeira Corp logo on the van. Sarah wondered if the news reports were proclaiming that she'd blown up another building and killed Catherine Weaver. Maybe the police would find the remains of that... thing... that had flown into Weaver's office, but she knew, deep down, they wouldn't. She would take the blame for one more crime she didn't commit, and the police would begin to hunt her in earnest once again.

It couldn't be helped, though, Sarah thought with a sigh. They would finish unloading the van, and then dump the damn thing in the ocean. They'd find another means of transportation somewhere else.

"Ellison?" Sarah called when she saw no sign of him.

Ellison didn't answer. Feeling her heartbeat speed up and adrenaline surge through her, Sarah eased her gun out of her waistband and made a bead down the gun sight toward the open door of the vehicle. "James?" she called again, dual edges of steel and worry in her voice.

There was no one in the van, save Cameron's destroyed body. Sarah felt a kick in her gut at the sight of the terminator before she wrenched her gaze away from Cameron's face and focused her full attention back out toward the loading docks. Ellison had gotten her this far, and apparently, he'd decided that was far enough.

For years he'd chased her, then he'd thwarted her, and, now, it appeared that he'd abandoned her. "Bastard," Sarah hissed under her breath.

ACT II

Sarah sat alone at the kitchen table. Night had descended and the need for sleep weighed on her mind and muscles, but she resisted, watching and waiting for Murch to complete his task. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with him after that, but she'd cross that bridge when she came to it.

Her gun rested on the wood surface, almost forgotten but not out of reach. In her hands was John's pocket watch. She smoothed her thumb over the closed cover, wondering vaguely where John had come by it. It didn't seem like something her son would care for. Time was something John wished he could stop... not keep tabs on.

Sighing, Sarah's thumb continued to move back and forth over the warming metal as the thoughts she'd tried not to dwell on all day finally began to seep through. She wondered where

John was. How far ahead in time had he been sent? Or had Weaver actually thrust them into the past? Was he safe? Was he cold? Hungry? Was Weaver looking out for him, shielding him from harm the way she had in her office? Sarah could only hope her son had at least one ally wherever he was now.

Her breath caught with a sudden thought. *Kyle.*

Grief and hope rose inside her and Sarah bowed her head and closed her eyes. Would her son finally meet his father wherever he had gone? Would Kyle care for the boy, not knowing he was looking after his own child? The thought eased some of the desperate ache that had settled like a cold ball in her chest since John had left. The chances of her son crossing paths with his father had to be remote, she speculated, but it didn't stop her from praying that it would come true.

With another sigh, Sarah forced John from her thoughts and slumped further back in her seat. She lifted her gaze to fix on Cameron. The terminator was sitting in a chair behind a simple table, a cable connected to the back of her head. Cameron's human eye was still closed, her mechanical one still dark. Sarah didn't know how she felt about all of this, seeing Cameron hooked up like a damn printer.

Her green eyes shifted their focus onto the silent monitors. Sarah roughly admitted that she wanted to hear from Cameron, that she *needed* to hear from Cameron. The terminator was all she had left. It was ironic that Cameron's presence had worn on her for almost a year, and now that she was finally free of her, Sarah wanted her back. She could imagine Cameron's response to her illogical emotions.

You make no sense, the damn girl would say, and Sarah would know she was right and still tell her to go to hell anyway. The thought almost made Sarah smile.

But Sarah needed answers and Cameron was the only one who could give them, so Sarah waited and watched, feeling the night creep over her as slowly as the moon inched across the night sky outside the warehouse's high windows.

Exhausted, Sarah rubbed at her eyes. Curious about the lateness of the hour, her thumb tabbed the release on the watch and it opened with a soft snick. She glanced down and blinked when she found a detonator instead of the hands of time.

Heart jackhammering, Sarah eased up slowly, afraid to breathe as if any sudden movement might set something off. With a lance of fear, Sarah remembered that John had worn the device around his neck, near his damn heart. Sarah felt hers nearly arrest at the thought. Why the hell had John had the damn thing? What would possess him to...

Her gaze snapped back to Cameron in sudden understanding. Sarah's jaws clenched as she got to her feet, pushing back the chair with a burst of anger. Murch's head popped up from behind the table and he blinked at Sarah as if he'd forgotten she was there. He swallowed nervously when he noticed the murderous look in her eyes.

“I’m almost done,” he blurted.

Sarah ignored him as she moved closer to Cameron. She dropped her gaze to the watch resting in the palm of her hand. “Get back,” she ordered the scientist.

“What?” Murch asked, his body already scrambling to comply before his brain had time to catch up.

Sarah waited until she felt he was an adequate distance from Cameron. Anger burned in her gut as betrayal turned her mind brutally cold. Without a second’s hesitation, Sarah pushed the button on the watch and waited to feel the heat of fire warm the ice in her blood.

There was an anticlimactic click and nothing more.

“What are you doing?” Murch asked as he watched Sarah push the button again.

Closing the watch and clenching it in her fist, Sarah strode up to Cameron and grabbed a fistful of her hair, jerking the terminator’s head up and back so that she could look at the now empty housing for Cameron’s chip.

Murch winced at her rough treatment of Cameron’s body, but Sarah didn’t care. She ran her fingers through Cameron’s hair, moving the soft locks aside to study the empty slot. She hesitated when she spied something along one side, but she finally dipped two fingers inside and smeared them across something sticky and gray.

C-4. Cameron had lined her chip housing with explosives.

Sarah felt the air go out of her lungs with the implications. Had the explosives been John’s idea or Cameron’s? Either way, her son had possessed the means to stop the terminator in her tracks, and Cameron had known. Neither of them had told her. It had been their little secret. Bitterly, Sarah wondered how many more they’d kept from her.

James glanced around, keenly aware of the number of people in the discount department store even at this time of night. He’d driven around for hours, waiting for the suburb he had found himself in to settle before venturing out into a public place. He had a cart full of items and a fresh wad of cash in his pocket to pay for them. James was about to go off the grid and take someone with him, and for the first time, he felt like he was getting a taste of what Sarah Connor’s life had been like for the last sixteen years. It was in part because of him that she’d lived that way, but he was practical enough to know if it hadn’t been him it would have been someone else.

The former agent tried to act casual as he entered the electronics department, passing by the televisions that were turned to the local newscasts. Images of the fire at Zeira Corp played on every screen, and James took a moment to be stunned at the damage. He’d known it was bad,

but he hadn't realized the whole building had eventually come down. Pictures of Catherine and Savannah Weaver were shown, and James felt his stomach turn as sweat broke out on his brow. The graphic at the bottom of the screen declared them both missing.

All the televisions were muted, but when a mug shot of Sarah Connor appeared, James didn't need to hear what the reporters were saying to know Sarah had just had a long list of new crimes added to her already impressive résumé. He sighed.

Turning away, James headed for the checkout. He had someone waiting for him and he'd taken long enough already. His last night of peace was coming to an end. It was time for him to join the war. He wished he could tell his family... his ex-wife... but it was safer this way. Safer for all of them.

He just hoped Sarah Connor wouldn't blow his head off before he could even say hello.

“You done yet?”

Sarah watched as Murch glanced around the edge of Cameron's chair to see her waiting on him impatiently. It wasn't the first time she'd asked him the question, but she'd been content to sit and stew for the last few hours. Nursing anger was preferable to nursing grief, and she'd happily done so.

“I've been done,” he replied automatically.

Her green eyes went flinty and Murch apparently noticed as he scrambled to his feet. “I mean... it's all hooked up. I don't know why she isn't on-line. I've been trying to figure out if I'm missing a connection or a piece of equipment...”

“Murch,” Sarah's voice was cold as she picked the pistol off the table and stood.

“No! No, no, no. I swear. She should work. I don't know why she doesn't work!”

Sarah came closer, walking up to the dark monitors and staring at one as if she could will words to appear. Her fingertips came to rest on the cool glass. “Cameron?” she tried hesitantly.

There was no response and Sarah swallowed her disappointment, pissed that she felt the emotion in the first place. Cameron did that to her, made her feel emotions that were all over the damn place and contradictory as hell. One moment she was grateful to have her there... the next she wanted to tear her apart with her bare hands. Sarah pivoted to look at the back of Cameron's head. “She suffered a lot of damage...”

“You're telling me,” Murch huffed only to straighten when Sarah glared at him. “That shouldn't have made a difference,” he explained. “She's in the system. Essentially the brain is connected to the nervous system but it's like... like she's in a coma or something.”

Frowning, Sarah's gaze shifted back to Murch. "Is it possible we damaged her in the move?"

"Physically or..." He waved at the computers for lack of a better term. "Mentally?"

"Either."

"I don't know," he admitted. "I think everything is here. She should come on-line. She should be able to talk to us. Maybe not the way John Henry did. I haven't looked too closely at her... body... but she should be able to talk to us via the monitors."

"Then why isn't she?" Sarah demanded.

"Maybe she's busy," Murch replied without an ounce of sarcasm. "It's possible she simply doesn't want to communicate."

Sarah looked at one of the monitors once more and sighed. She rubbed at her tired eyes. "Get some sleep," she told the scientist. "Pick some quarters and get some sleep."

"What are you going to do?"

"Keep watch," Sarah told him distractedly.

"But you're exhausted," Murch said with a frown, his tone clearly indicating that he thought Sarah was being a stubborn idiot. "You look like you can barely stand..."

"I'll manage," Sarah replied tightly. She didn't want to think about sleep, about the new dreams that would plague her. Her eyes cut to Cameron. At least she'd had the terminator to keep watch most nights. Now everyone she even remotely trusted to be on alert while she slept was dead or gone.

Murch waited until she focused on him again. "So... You're not going to kill me?"

Sarah lifted her gaze toward the ceiling and shook her head a little before facing him again. "I'm not going to kill you. I was never going to kill you."

"So I could leave right now..." Murch said, hooking his thumb toward the door. "I could leave and you wouldn't try to stop me?" He swallowed nervously.

"Is that what you want to do?" Sarah asked evenly. She shifted her weight and regarded him openly.

"Depends," Murch said slowly.

"On?"

The scientist broke eye contact and looked at the floor. “Ellison said it wasn’t *where* Weaver and John Henry went. It was *when*.” He glanced back up at Sarah and waited.

Sarah took a deep breath. “He did, did he?”

“The news... the cops... they all say you’re crazy. That you killed Miles Dyson to stop some sort of killer robots from the future.” Murch’s gaze slid to Cameron.

“What does she look like to you?” Sarah asked, following his line of sight.

“Broken,” Murch said simply. “I can fix her. I want to fix her.”

He was the very type of man that would be responsible for Skynet coming online, Sarah realized. Murch was too damn curious for his own good, but she couldn’t find it in her to hate him or want him dead. Maybe she could dredge up the emotions in the morning.

“I can’t leave her broken,” Murch admitted before looking back at Sarah. “And I need to understand a few things...”

“Then I guess you need to get some sleep,” Sarah suggested.

Murch offered her a hesitant smile. “Guess I do.”

Sarah didn’t bother to watch him go. Her eyes were now back on Cameron. From above, she heard a door close softly, and she knew she was finally, completely alone.

The desire to break down, to let the tears come for what she’d lost, was nearly overwhelming, but Sarah resolutely held on to the reins of her emotions and slowly walked over to Cameron. Her gaze shifted back to the silent monitors. “You in there, Tin Miss?” she asked in a near whisper.

The cursor blinked accusingly at her.

Sarah sighed and looked away. She noticed a black toolbox sitting on a kitchen counter and she moved toward it automatically. It didn’t take long to find a pair of pliers, and a little rooting around uncovered some bandages and gauze in one of the many drawers. A bowl of water and a few towels completed her haul. Sarah returned to Cameron’s side and dumped her findings on the table. For a moment, she simply stared at Cameron’s destroyed profile, wondering what she was supposed to feel for the shell of a girl.

“Beats pacing the place,” Sarah finally muttered. She reached around Cameron and undid the zipper keeping a torn and tattered denim jacket closed. With a little maneuvering, the jacket came free and Sarah tossed it aside, only to pause when she saw the extent of the damage to Cameron’s frame.

The terminator has possessed a dancer’s body, lean and slight, but with just the right amount of

muscle. More than once, Sarah had found herself watching Cameron, trying to imagine the metal beneath such a beautiful exterior. That wasn't hard now. The terminator's skin had been shredded with bullets. Sarah winced when she saw the abuse Cameron had taken to rescue her. There were too many bullet holes to count. Blood had soaked through Cameron's clothes and run down her arms and back, drying into a thick, scaly rust.

"Good thing you don't feel, girlie," Sarah murmured. She dipped a towel into the bowl of water and picked up Cameron's right arm, setting the terminator's wrist on the table so that she could run the towel over the multitude of wounds. Sarah found herself being gentle, much to her surprise, but she felt no need to change that. She decided it had to be a lack of energy that had her treating Cameron with such care.

Once the arm was clear of blood and the water ran red with it, Sarah picked up the pliers and began to wrestle with the bullets embedded in Cameron's flesh. "How in the hell did John talk you into coming to get me?" Sarah asked. "You knew better. You should have thrown him in a hole somewhere." A tiny part of Sarah almost wondered if Cameron had wanted to come for her, but she dismissed the thought outright. The only thing that mattered to Cameron was John. It was the one thing she and Cameron had in common. John blinded them to anything and everyone else.

The bullets began to pile up on the table. Sarah bit her lip as she tried to pry another loose that had gotten wedged between two pistons in Cameron's arm. The logical part of Sarah's brain knew Cameron had taken too much damage to ever be useful the way she'd once been, but it didn't stop her from wanting to fix the metal girl as best as she could. It didn't stop her from needing Cameron as an ally.

Sarah went still for a moment, breathing a little hard and sweating. She glanced up and directly into the dull eye of the terminator. Her gaze shifted again to the blank monitors. The sudden, almost desperate, urge to hear Cameron's voice made Sarah swallow hard. It was too quiet. Too damn quiet.

"Cameron?" Sarah called again.

The terminator sat unmoving and the monitors remained dark.

Sarah bit her lip and went back to her task. "So was it you or John that built the detonator?" she asked to fill the unnerving silence. "I want to believe it was John," Sarah admitted as the bullet came free and she tossed it on the table with the others before moving to another wound. "But somehow..." She paused and took a shallow breath. "Somehow I think it was you."

Another bullet plinked loudly on the table's surface.

"Something was going on with you. Something that was making you twitch. Something that was making you... think." Sarah thought back over the last few months as she moved behind Cameron and eased the strap of her tank top off her shoulder to get to a pretty nasty wound. The skin was riddled with buckshot and Sarah grimaced. "You were still glitchy as hell," Sarah

muttered as she began to remove the warped pellets. “If I’d have known about the explosive I probably would have...” She shook her head. “Whatever happened to you, though... it was making you almost more...” The word that sprang to mind was unacceptable so Sarah moved away, scooping up the bowl and moving to the sink to pour the red liquid down the drain. She filled it again with fresh water and came back to Cameron, setting the bowl down and eyeing the metal girl dubiously.

Deciding Murch was indeed down for the night, Sarah crouched in front of Cameron, collecting a pair of scissors from the edge of the table. Her fingers numbly took a hold of the hem of the terminator’s top before using the scissors to slice it in half right up the middle. There had been men and women’s clothing in each of the living quarters upstairs, and Sarah figured she’d find something suitable to dress Cameron in from the assortment left in the various closets. Leaving Cameron naked around Murch was probably not a good idea.

The halves of the top peeled away and Sarah inhaled sharply at the new damage that was unveiled underneath. “Damn it, girlie,” she breathed. “This is gonna take all night.”

Cameron’s chest was full of holes, but it was the healing slice just under her left breast that made Sarah hesitate. She looked up into Cameron’s eyes and then glanced over at the monitors before letting her fingers trace the startlingly soft but reddened skin.

“What the hell?” Sarah whispered to herself.

Sarah didn’t hear the security cameras adjust and zoom in on her position. They followed their commands quietly, allowing Sarah to be observed unnoticed.

It had been days since John had seen anyone but Kyle. He’d been locked away from everyone he knew as well as the world he knew he needed to know. They’d given him decent quarters and barely edible meals, but there had been no company, no conversation except Kyle’s repeated questions. Just time to think about what he’d left behind and what lay ahead.

He’d cried that first night alone. Cried for his mom, for all he’d cost her. John remembered her green eyes, the way they would crinkle at the corners when she smiled at him, and he ached to see that smile, to feel her strong, warm arms around him one more time. She’d fought so hard to keep him alive, to keep him from his fate, while preparing him for it at the same time. John felt like he’d let her down, and the knowledge had wrung heavy sobs out of him for hours.

He’d cried for the destiny he’d never wanted and had left behind, feeling guilty for being relieved that the burden was no longer his to carry. He cried for the human race, now scavenging among the ruins of civilization like rats, taking what morsels they could find. Could he have stopped all of this? Was it his fault that humanity had come to this because he’d done what he thought was right and gone after Cameron’s chip?

Brushing at an errant tear, John sighed as he lay on his bunk and stared at the pipes in the ceiling

above. He had no idea what Kyle, Derek and the others were doing, and he wasn't accomplishing a thing by being locked up. John Henry was out there somewhere with Cameron's chip, and John couldn't help but feel that he was getting farther away from him every moment. He'd come to save Cameron and John felt like he had to accomplish that mission now more than ever. Otherwise, everything was in vain.

There had also been no sign of Weaver. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

John had been evasive with Kyle and his questions, telling him as much of the truth as he could. That he and his mother had been fighting the machines and trying to stay alive. Then one day there had been a blue light, and John had found himself naked in the bunker. That was all he knew.

The answers didn't seem adequate enough for Kyle, who obviously suspected he was hiding plenty... or perhaps his father even knew everything and was just waiting for John to confirm the truth. Either way, John elaborated little. The more you lied, the more chances you had to be tripped up and caught. His mother had taught him that a long time ago.

He had wanted to tell Kyle everything. Almost desperately. But John accepted that he didn't know Kyle Reese yet, he only knew the myth of him. It was better to wait until he had more information before sharing his true identity with anyone.

The locks on his door clanged and John hurriedly sat up, ready to face his father once more. Kyle seemed upset with him, like he'd disappointed him somehow, but no matter how many times they'd talked, John could never figure out why.

The door swung open and John felt his breath catch when he saw familiar brown eyes and a friendly smile waiting for him.

"Hey," Allison greeted him easily. "You've been released," she declared. "I thought you might like to stretch your legs... get a little fresh air."

John swallowed his disappointment. For just a split second, he'd thought Cameron had come to rescue him, but the dog at Allison's side told him otherwise. "Released? You mean I'm not going to be treated like a prisoner anymore?"

Allison looked slightly abashed. "It's procedure. We isolate all new recruits until we can find out a little more about them."

"And what did you find out about me?" John asked curiously.

Allison leaned on the door and looked at him as Duke trotted closer, allowing John the privilege of petting him. "Not much," she admitted with a smirk for the dog's antics. "We have our ways of checking people out, but the only John Connor we could find is definitely not you."

"What do you mean?" John asked uneasily.

Allison shrugged. "He would have been a lot older than you... and he was apparently a criminal who spent his time running around with his mother blowing things up," she said with a laugh.

"How do you know that?" John asked. "About the other John Connor?" he hastily added.

"Other pockets of resistance fighters. We radio around. One of them has access to some library records."

John nodded. "What happened to him... the other John?"

"I guess he died on Judgment Day," Allison replied, her voice softening. "Pretty much everyone did."

John swallowed. "What about his mom?"

Allison tilted her head in a move so similar to Cameron it made John's heart skip a beat. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious," John answered casually.

"I don't know. If it means that much to you I can try to find out."

Getting to his feet, John managed to shrug. "No," he said and hoped he sounded believable. "I was just making conversation." He moved toward the door, Duke at his heels. "So now what?" he asked as he licked his lips. "You guys give me a gun and I start fighting?"

"Right," Allison said with another light laugh. "No. You gotta go through boot camp first."

"Boot camp?"

"Everyone has to do it," Allison told him as she closed the door behind him. "Don't worry. Jesse and Derek haven't killed anyone yet... although they've made a lot of people wish they were dead."

"Jesse..." John murmured, his thoughts coming so fast and furious he could barely think.

"Yep. She and Derek are an item, but don't tell them I told you so." Allison took the sleeve of his coat and tugged him around a corner.

Resistance fighters came and went around them. Some of them gave Allison a friendly smile. Others looked at John with naked curiosity. Most of them ignored them both completely.

"You don't have terminators here," John said as he realized he'd yet to see a one. The T-888s were usually easy to spot.

“Terminators?” Allison blurted. “Why the hell would we have terminators?”

“Reprogrammed terminators,” John corrected. “Ones you’ve programmed to work for you.”

“You had terminators back at your base camp?” Allison asked in disbelief. “Are you all insane?” her voice elevated in alarm.

“What’s wrong?” Derek asked as he came around a corner and practically crashed into them.

“John says they have reprogrammed terminators working for them where he came from.”

Derek’s intense green eyes focused on him and John felt the sudden urge to squirm. “That true?”

“Just a few,” John said, wishing he could think of a way to make it so that this conversation had never begun.

“We’ve got one or two,” Derek said slowly. “Including the one on Jesse’s sub.” He eyed John. “Prophet and Tango would like us to have more,” he admitted. “But they’re a bitch to catch and we’ve got no one to reprogram ‘em. Personally, the last thing I want is to be sharing space with metal, but I’d rather send a tin can in to blow something up than a soldier.”

“I can reprogram them,” John confessed, hoping he could turn his mistake into an advantage.

Allison and Derek stared at him speculatively.

“Can you now?” Derek asked thoughtfully. “Prophet and Tango will be glad to hear that.”

“Can I meet them?” John asked eagerly.

“Sure,” Derek drawled. “When boot camp is over,” he added. He nodded at Allison. “Get him squared away with quarters. Be back in a bit.” Derek moved past John without a backward glance.

John clamped down on the frustration that wanted to bubble up inside him. He needed answers, but it didn’t look like he was going to get them any time soon.

ACT III

Exhaustion had finally claimed her, sucking Sarah down into vivid dreams of blue fire and rusty blood. Her head was resting on the table, next to the pile of bullets she’d removed from Cameron’s body. The terminator was now dressed in a red t-shirt and sweatpants, her wounds cleaned and bandaged. Dressing the metal girl had sapped the last of Sarah’s strength, and she’d lain her head down for just a moment to fortify her reserves before heading upstairs to a bed. She’d fallen asleep almost instantly.

The security cameras were zoomed in as far as they could go, silently watching Sarah as she fitfully slept. There was nothing else they could do but keep watch, and they did so intently, both inside the warehouse and out, making sure Sarah Connor stayed safe. When a silent figure eased through the shadows and tripped the perimeter sensors, there was no hesitation.

The alarm sounded with a shriek and Sarah tore herself up and out of her dreams, her fingers closing over her weapon with practiced ease. She stumbled a little as she stood, wincing at the ear splitting volume. Murch charged out of his room in his t-shirt and boxers and Sarah waved him back inside.

“Stay here,” she yelled.

“What if they get past you?” he called back almost hysterically.

“Run like hell,” Sarah answered. “Find a way to shut that damn noise off first...” Sarah went silent as the alarm did the same. She exchanged a look with Murch before moving toward the front doors, weapon in hand. Breathing hard, Sarah released the lock and eased the door open, whipping the gun up when she realized someone was standing directly on the other side.

“Hope I didn’t wake you,” Ellison greeted her blithely.

Sarah jammed the muzzle of the gun against his chest and forced the former FBI agent to stumble back a few steps. “You think this is a goddamn motel?” she seethed. “That you can just come and go as you please?”

“Sarah.” Ellison held his hands up in what he prayed would be a placating move. He’d known she would be mad, but if he’d told her where he was going, she would have stopped him. “There was somewhere I had to go. Something I had to do.”

Sarah cocked the hammer back on the gun, her green eyes stormy in the moonlight. “Bring the whole damn police department down on my head?” she guessed, her finger tightening dangerously on the trigger.

“Mr. Ellison?”

They both turned their heads at the small, fragile voice. Savannah Weaver stood there in the shaft of light from the open door, her wide blue eyes looking from Sarah to Ellison and back again.

Sarah froze at the sight of the little girl and the fear she could see in those young eyes. The fear of her. Suddenly nauseous, Sarah lowered her weapon and faced Ellison, anger hardening her voice. “You dumb bastard,” she hissed before turning around and walking back into the warehouse, passing Savannah without saying so much as hello to the girl.

“Mr. Ellison?” Savannah said again, her voice taking on a teary quality.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Ellison promised her. His legs shaking with residual fear, he bent and scooped her up in his arms. “I just made your Aunt Sarah mad. She’ll be fine when she calms down.”

“You sure?” Savannah asked dubiously as they headed for the door.

He wasn’t, but he didn’t say so. “I’m sure.”

“Thank God,” Murch said with relief when he saw them. “I thought... I don’t know what I thought,” he confessed with a quick glance at Sarah, who was seating herself at the table beside Cameron.

“What happened to her?” Savannah wanted to know as her gaze landed on Cameron’s features.

“She got hurt,” Ellison explained as he gently touched Savannah’s cheek and made her look away from the damaged terminator. “She’s sleeping right now so she’ll feel better,” he promised. His gaze landed on Sarah. “She’s tired... she needs...”

“The police will be looking for her,” Sarah cut him off. “You shouldn’t have brought her here.”

“One of them was trying to kill her,” Ellison reminded Sarah with a quick jerk of his head at Cameron. “And she has nowhere else to go.”

Sarah’s glare met the impenetrable calm of the former FBI agent, who seemed to absorb the worst of her anger without any visible sign. As the silence stretched, Murch’s twitchy gaze oscillated between the two of them, as if he were gauging who would break first.

“I want my mom,” Savannah said into the sudden thick silence.

Sarah swallowed. She studied the small child, hating how ruthless she was being but knowing it was necessary. This life was no life for a child, John had proven that, and this child was much more frail and scared than John had been. Ellison soothed her and she snuggled deeper into his arms, holding on to him like he was all she had left in the world. And he was, him and Sarah and their ragtag crew, the only people who might understand what she had been through, what she knew.

Sarah sighed. “There is a child’s room upstairs,” she relented. Even the machine masquerading as her mother had prepared for this eventuality.

Ellison nodded once before setting Savannah down. “Go with your Uncle Murch,” he instructed her.

Rubbing at her sleepy eyes, Savannah obeyed, walking to Murch where he stood on the stairs and taking his hand. Murch gave Ellison a brief, tight smile before leading Savannah up the steps to her room.

Sarah and Ellison glared at each other. "I really should have let Cameron kill you when she had the chance," Sarah informed him. She got to her feet. "You want to stay here... you have to pull your weight."

"What do you want me to do?" Ellison asked.

Sarah glanced down at Cameron, her gaze wandering over the terminator's face. "Keep her company," she drawled. "I'm going to get some sleep."

Ellison watched Sarah climb the steps and shook his head when she chose a room and stepped inside, closing the door behind her with a bang.

The former FBI agent walked up to Cameron. "You on-line?" he asked simply.

Dark monitors were his response.

"Nice talking to you," he muttered as he took off his jacket and slumped against the kitchen island with a sigh.

Sarah woke in an unfamiliar bed tangled in soft sheets, her hand still wrapped tightly around the butt of her pistol where it rested under a neighboring pillow. She turned the weapon loose, feeling her fingers ache in protest as they stiffly peeled away. For several quiet minutes, Sarah simply lay there in a band of sunlight that filtered in through the window. The heat warmed her body, but could do nothing for her soul that remembered it was now alone in the world once more.

For seventeen years, she had a single purpose. To keep John safe. Now that he was gone, Sarah didn't know what in the hell to do. She needed a plan, she decided, and part of the plan would require Cameron. That... that was one thing Sarah did know. As much as she hated to admit it, Sarah needed the terminator. She needed her strength and her knowledge of the future to have any hope of stopping Skynet.

The scent of coffee brewing reached her and that improved Sarah's mood fractionally. Tossing off the covers, she got wearily to her feet before rooting around in the closet for something to wear. She found fresh underwear in a drawer along with a pair of jeans that came close to fitting. A long sleeved, dark grey t-shirt completed the outfit. Sarah slipped her feet into her boots, tucked her gun into the back of her waistband and raked her hands through her hair before wrenching open her door and stepping out onto the balcony to face her fellow inhabitants.

Ellison was at the kitchen table with Savannah. He was helping her butter her toast and was smiling with her as if they didn't have a care in the world. Sarah shook her head and moved toward the steps, clomping down them and ignoring both the former FBI agent and the redheaded child he'd dragged into this mess with him.

Grabbing the largest mug she could find, Sarah filled it with coffee and took a tentative sip. It was better than anything she'd ever managed to make, but damned if she would give Ellison the satisfaction of telling him so.

"Coffee okay?" Murch asked to her right as he came into the kitchen.

Sarah hesitated. "You made it?"

The scientist nodded. "Yeah. Apparently Mrs. Weaver had my favorite kind stocked for me. Kinda cool, huh?"

"Yeah. Cool." Sarah rolled her eyes a little when he wasn't looking. She noticed Cameron was right where she left her. "She say anything this morning?" A hint of hope crept into her voice and Sarah wanted to growl at herself for it. It wasn't like she missed Cameron, she told herself, she just needed the damn girl back in fighting order.

Murch turned as he poured another cup for himself. "Not a word," he admitted. "Maybe you could talk to her?" he suggested. "She knows you. She might respond to you."

Sarah snorted and looked into the depths of her coffee mug. "Me and the machine aren't exactly the best of friends," she informed him, thinking about the detonator John and Cameron had kept secret from her. Her gaze lingered on the healing skin and she paused when she noticed Cameron was now sporting an eye-patch. She looked at Ellison but he was ignoring her.

Murch scratched the light stubble on his chin. "She's in there," he said in a low voice. "She was the one who activated the security alarm when Ellison showed last night. Turned on the security cameras, too."

"How do you know that?"

He swung a screen around so Sarah could see it, a look of pride beaming on his face. "The last thing I did last night was set up a system to monitor Cameron. We had one for John Henry as well. Let us know what he was surfing... how much power he was using... where his attention was..."

Sarah stared at the screen, taken over by dials and graphs and charts, all fluctuating minutely. She shook her head, feeling out of her depth. John probably would have known what it meant, but she couldn't make heads or tails out of it. "What's this?"

Murch clicked on a control and manipulated a timeline, bringing a small line graph into view. "This is her general activity level." He pointed to a spike in the graph. "That's the alarm going off." He continued to go backward in time, "And here's..."

"Wait, what's that?" Sarah pointed to an extended plateau of high activity. "What was happening there?"

“That was you.” Sarah looked up at him, and something in the cast of her face made him stammer again. “I mean, I think it was you, when you were cleaning her up.” His finger shook a little when he pointed to the beginning of the elevation. “She accessed the sensory feed from her body there.”

Sarah held up a hand to ward off any further elaboration. “So you’re saying, she’s in there, turning things on, reacting... to things we do.” Murch nodded mutely. “So why won’t she talk to us?”

Murch shrugged. “I guess she just doesn’t want to.” He pointed up at the camera above their head. “But she’s watching... listening...”

Setting her mug of coffee on the counter, Sarah moved toward Cameron and the wall of computers and monitors. She stopped on the other side of the table, laying her palms flat on the surface and leaning in toward the terminator. The eye-patch was both absurd and strangely fetching. Sarah fought back a smirk and shook her head a little. “Cameron?”

There was no response. Somehow Sarah knew there wouldn’t be. Cameron was either being coy or sullen, Sarah wasn’t sure which. Regardless, the silence was infuriating. She reached out and grabbed the terminator’s shoulders, shaking her violently. “Talk to me, girlie,” she growled, but the screen remained maddeningly empty. She gave the body another half-hearted shake and stalked away, cursing herself for a fool and worse to be worried about the machine.

“She’s in there,” Murch said again as he raced after her, clearly having lost some of his fear of Sarah during the night. “I don’t know why she’s not talking, but she’s in there.” Sarah stopped at the door, and Murch nearly ran into her in his haste. “She’s surfing the web... processing information... she’s just being... antisocial.”

Antisocial. Sarah almost snorted. If ever there was a perfect term for a terminator, antisocial fit the bill. “What is she surfing?”

He led her back to the monitor and pulled up a different screen. “She’s mostly surfing for details about what happened at Zeira Corp. She’s digging into police files... media reports. You name it. Looks like she’s hunting down everything she can find on the Weavers as well.” He glanced askance at Sarah. “Your name pops up in there a lot, too. She’s keeping tabs on what the media is saying about you... and... uh... they’re saying a lot.”

Sarah’s gaze darted back to Savannah and, for a moment, her eyes locked with Ellison’s. Her jaw hardened and she stared at the former agent until he looked away. “So if she can do all this...”

“Then why isn’t she talking?” Murch finished for her. “It’s possible that the entity you knew as Cameron was destroyed somehow. Maybe all that’s left of her is some root programs... everything that helped make her who she was without the personality.”

The thought didn't sit well. Sarah stuck her hands in the pockets of her jeans before turning to look at Cameron. "What else is she doing?"

"She's um," Murch began as he turned back to the console, but just as his fingers began to type a command, the activity level graph flat-lined. "What...?" His fingers flew over the keyboard and screen after screen flashed on the monitor.

"What, what's going on?"

"I think... but how? She was just..."

"Murch!" His babbling stopped, and he looked up at her with renewed fear. "What the hell just happened?"

"She, ah, just... stopped doing anything. All activity ceased." Seeing Sarah's continued confusion, he said, "It's like she's dead, like someone cut the power." He slid off the chair and started rooting around the cables and computers nesting the floor and tables. "I don't understand."

Dead. The word hit Sarah like a sucker punch in the gut. Even though, as a machine, Cameron hadn't technically been alive, the idea that she was gone, blinked out in an instant, seemed surreal. One minute she had been there and the next... "Wait." Something Murch had said came back to her. "You said she was listening to us."

Murch's head popped up from behind a row of monitors. "Yes."

"So she would have known she was being monitored."

"Yes."

"Is it possible she just cut off the monitoring?"

Murch surged up, nearly tripping on the mess of cables that entangled his feet as he ran around the table. "Yes!" His fingers flew over the keyboard as he typed a few commands. "She might have rerouted the program or..." The activity levels spiked once again and then plunged down. The sound of his fingers on the keyboard were loud in the quiet of the room, as even Savannah and Ellison were drawn to the drama playing out on the monitor. Another spike showed on the screen a second before it winked out and went blank. Murch sat back, blinking. "She... broke it. I..." He looked around helplessly.

"That's ok," Sarah said, "she apparently doesn't want to be monitored."

"John Henry never minded."

Sarah thought of the many times Cameron had kept things from them, the chip and parts she had hidden away, the nights she disappeared with no explanation, the detonator. "Cameron likes to

keep secrets,” she explained. “Not that I blame her. I don’t like anyone rooting around in my brain, either.” In the background, Ellison snorted.

“But we don’t know what she’s doing, what’s going on with her.”

“I guess she’ll tell us. When she’s ready.”

Murch slumped down, looking like a child who had been told that Christmas had been cancelled for the year. “Go, get some breakfast or something,” Sarah told him. She only hesitated for a moment before settling down in the chair he’d deserted. She reached out for the fingers she had scrubbed the night before. “I hope you are ready soon.”

John gagged, feeling what little broth and bread he’d choked down at lunch coming back up. He heaved into what he hoped was a trash barrel, ignoring the laughter at his expense behind him. A warm hand landed on his back and he lifted his head, wiping at his lower lip as he turned to meet Allison’s sympathetic gaze. As always, Duke was by her side.

“You’ll get used to it,” she promised.

John was shaking; his body was so tired. Every muscle hurt and quivered with strain. Derek and Jesse were masochists in this timeline, he decided, having put him through the most brutal, physical day of his life. Not even running from terminators was this exhausting.

“Come on, Connor,” Jesse called, her Australian accent thick on his last name. “Tick, tick, tick.”

“They’re going to kill me,” John gasped, clutching his stomach as it cramped again.

“You’re no use to them dead,” Allison pointed out with a chuckle. “Everyone goes through boot camp,” she said more seriously. “It’ll help keep you alive. Trust me.”

John looked back to see Jesse and Derek talking. “You trust them?” he asked Allison. He caught her slight hesitation and pounced on it. “What?” he said, his voice sharpening. He’d been wary of Jesse, knowing what she was capable of, but as the day had worn on, John had relaxed around her marginally. She seemed warm and funny with Derek, even if she was a slave driver to him. Maybe this Jesse was different. He hadn’t been there to send her on the missions he had before... to surround her with terminators. Maybe this Jesse was a good soul because she had never known John Connor.

“I trust Derek with my life,” Allison admitted, drawing John out of his thoughts. “Don’t know Jesse that well. She’s out on the Jimmy Carter a lot.” She studied him. “Why?”

“Just asking,” John said quietly.

“You ask a lot of questions,” Allison replied, her voice getting decidedly colder. For an instant,

John would have sworn Cameron was standing in front of him.

“I’m a curious guy,” he replied and offered a small smile, hoping to cut the rising tension.

“Apparently,” Allison said slowly. She cast one last look at Jesse and Derek before her gaze drifted back to John. “Good luck.” She didn’t sound like she meant it as she turned and walked away.

John winced. “Way to go, genius,” he muttered to himself.

“Come on, John,” Derek called. “Quit stalling.”

Kyle came around the corner and Derek paused, seeing something alarming in his brother’s eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Jesse asked, clearly seeing Kyle’s upset as well.

“Tango is back,” was Kyle’s simple response. “She wants to see John.”

“What?” Derek asked in disbelief.

Kyle’s eyes shifted to John. “Come on, Connor.”

“Wait,” Jesse said. “I’ve been here for two years and I’ve never had a conversation with Prophet or Tango. Connor has been here a little over a week and he gets an audience?” She looked at John with open curiosity. “What makes him so bloody special?”

John drew in a shaky breath, fear and hope struggling for dominance in his chest. He chose to remain silent. Best to let the adults fight it out.

“I’m just following orders,” Kyle replied coolly. He gripped the shoulder of John’s jacket and gave him a tug. “Come on. Tango is busy. We don’t want to keep her waiting.”

Days passed with little progress. Fingers drumming impatiently on the table, Sarah sat across from Cameron, staring into her blank features. The silly eye-patch had started to grow on her, giving the terminator a roguish look. Savannah had started to refer to the terminator as the Pirate Queen Cameron. Whatever it took to keep the kid from being mentally scarred by all this, Sarah supposed. It made her smile just a little every time she heard it, though. Trapped as she was in the warehouse, the days seemed to go by increasingly slowly. She had lapsed into a routine, of sorts, between workouts and trying to help Murch coax Cameron into talking, but her evenings were spent like this one, bored, impatient, waiting for something to break.

Sarah had begun to notice the many cameras stationed throughout the warehouse, alert to the slight whirl of the motor as they followed her from room to room. It confirmed to her that Cameron was not only there, but still Cameron as well, her personality still fully intact inside the

system. Only Cameron, she reasoned, would be making rounds just like she used to. There were laptops on the desks in each room, and Sarah suspected Cameron was keeping an eye on her there as well. Rather than trouble her, Sarah had found the knowledge helped her sleep a little easier.

But it still didn't get her any closer to communicating to the recalcitrant machine that, as far as Sarah could tell, was just being stubbornly silent with them. The whir of a camera caught her attention a second before Murch entered the kitchen, and she half-turned in her chair to glare at it. "Why does she do that?"

Murch glanced over his shoulder nervously. "Who?" He faced toward Sarah with a frown. "Do what?"

"Her. Cameron." Sarah gestured toward the camera. "Watch us."

"Surveillance." He considered something, and then added, "And because she cares."

Sarah blinked at the term. "What?"

"She's not just watching us; she's watching over us. It's because she cares."

"They don't *care*, Mr. Murch," Sarah pointed out, her tone growing colder. "Terminators are machines. They carry out their programming. They don't have emotions."

The scientist paused, nudging his glasses back up on his nose. "John Henry did."

Sarah stared at him.

"He did," Murch insisted. "He felt fear... abandonment... joy. He cared for Savannah. Tried to save her the day you came for her when he realized she was in trouble. That wasn't in his programming. He chose to do it because he wanted to."

"John Henry wasn't programmed to kill humans," Sarah reminded him, aware that Ellison was approaching the table behind her. "He didn't have a Skynet chip for a brain."

"Now Cameron doesn't, either," Ellison chimed in.

The thought made Sarah pause and her gaze darted to the monitors before shifting to Cameron.

"Maybe she can evolve in there beyond her programming," Ellison suggested. "John Henry made me uncomfortable as all hell because he reminded me of the worst damn day of my life, but sitting across from him day after day... There was something childlike about him. Something... sweet," he admitted.

"Sweet," Sarah repeated, her gaze moving off Cameron to fix on the former agent. "Did you forget how he killed an entire squad of FBI agents?"

“Cromartie did that,” Ellison replied serenely. “John Henry didn’t.”

“You liked him,” Sarah said in disbelief.

Ellison paused. “No. I couldn’t get past what he was made for. I guess the best I can say is that I didn’t hate him anymore.”

“Why did you help them?” Sarah needed to know.

“They wanted me to teach the machine ethics, so it would value human life.”

“He did,” Murch said softly, transfixed as he watched two powerful personalities clash before his eyes.

Sarah digested all the information, not sure what in the hell to do with any of it. “So you think she can evolve the way Cro... John Henry did?”

Ellison shrugged, and Sarah sighed. “Did John Henry ever give you the silent treatment?”

“No.”

All their eyes were drawn to the blank row of monitors. They were each about to look away when an image snapped into existence on every screen.

“Whoa,” Murch muttered under his breath.

“What is that?” Sarah was already on her feet.

Murch hurried to the keyboard and began typing furiously. “Blueprints of some kind,” he answered distractedly. He cast a quick look at Sarah as she appeared next to him, her green eyes studying the image.

“Did you call this up or did the pirate queen over there?” Sarah asked.

“It wasn’t me,” Murch admitted.

The image tiled back as more took its place. More detailed shots of the blueprints followed by photographs of the interior of a building. “What is this place?” Sarah demanded. “We need to know what this place is.”

“Working on it,” Murch promised, his fingers flying over the keys.

“What’s happening?” Ellison asked as he came closer, tilting his head a little as he studied the pictures flickering across the monitors.

“Tin Miss has finally decided to communicate.”

“What’s it mean?” Ellison wanted to know.

“Who the hell knows,” Sarah replied, feeling an edge of excitement skitter up her spine as the images reflected a collage of color across her features. “She’s found something she wants us to see, though.”

“What is this place, Cameron?” Ellison asked the terminator.

There was no response.

Sarah smirked. “Like it would be that easy.”

“Can’t blame a man for trying.”

“It’s a place called Miranda Technology Systems,” Murch declared. “It’s about six miles from here.”

“Why is she showing it to us?” Sarah asked. “Connect the dots, Murch.”

He shook his head as he waded through the data. “Not sure yet.”

“Get sure,” Sarah ordered him.

“Wait... wait...” Murch’s fingers slowed on the keyboard. He suddenly looked at Sarah and Ellison. “It’s owned by Kaliba... one of the companies Cameron was searching on the Internet.”

Ellison and Sarah exchanged glances.

“What does Miranda Technology Systems do?” Ellison asked Murch.

Murch swallowed. “They work in artificial intelligence.”

“And you’ve never heard of them before?” Sarah said suspiciously.

“I haven’t,” he admitted. “And I know every major player in the field.”

“What about the minor ones?”

“No one can keep track of all of them. Sure, there are some small firms out there working with offshoots of A.I. But if they’re doing anything groundbreaking...” He shrugged. “Even if I didn’t know about them... Weaver would have.”

Sarah couldn’t argue with that deduction.

The images suddenly came to a stop on video of a small room. Sarah turned her attention back on the monitors and studied the various screens and computers that held a security feed Cameron had clearly hacked into. A chill traveled over Sarah's skin, making the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

"It looks a lot like the room we kept John Henry in," Murch whispered.

"What do you think she wants us to do?" Ellison asked.

The image switched to a storage facility Sarah was very familiar with. A facility that held guns, money, and explosives. Sarah took a deep breath. Finally she had something to do. "She wants us to blow it to hell." She stepped away from the monitors. "We're going to need a new truck," she announced. "Anyone here good at stealing them?"

Ellison and Murch exchanged glances.

"Didn't think so," Sarah drawled, nearly delirious with the prospect of getting out of the warehouse for a while. "I'll be back." She jerked open the door and disappeared into the sunlight.

ACT IV

The cries of pain wore on him, scraping down his nerves as they echoed off the cement walls and metal pipes. Someone was screaming, deep wails of anguish that made John sick to his stomach as he followed Kyle through the maze of hallways inside Serrano Point. He tried to imagine what could cause that kind of pain before deciding he didn't want to know. When the screaming abruptly stopped, cut off mid-shriek, John went cold all over. He swallowed and gave his father an uneasy look.

"We're near the infirmary," Kyle explained in a voice devoid of emotion, his features neutral, save for the bunching of his jaw. "Had a squad come in pretty banged up."

"Was Tango with them?" John asked hesitantly.

"Yes. They were escorting her back here to see you." Kyle navigated them through the facility easily, rounding a corner and sidestepping a small band of men as if he'd known they were coming.

John wasn't as lucky, crashing hard into one of the soldiers who merely shoved him into the wall and kept going. John rubbed his shoulder absently as he absorbed that the screaming man's suffering had been because of him. Apparently people died for him no matter what fate befell him. "Is she all right?"

"Fine." They stopped abruptly outside a metal door and Kyle turned to look at him.

John could see Kyle was struggling to say something and he waited patiently for his father to find the words.

“This is a test, Connor,” Kyle said after staring at the young man for a long moment. “And I don’t know if I want you to pass or fail,” he admitted in a fainter voice.

John straightened. “You want to know if I am who I say I am,” he guessed, feeling a nervous flutter in his stomach. “My name... my mother’s name... you know...” John took a shallow breath. “You know us. Me and my mom. Who we were meant to be.”

Kyle stared at him. “I only know who you are,” he said in voice that held a hint of disdain. Kyle reached past the boy and opened the door. “You’ve kept her waiting long enough, Connor,” he said, but his voice was hoarse and he wouldn’t meet John’s eyes. Without another word, Kyle left John alone.

John watched his father walk away, wishing that he could follow. He raked a hand through his short hair and took a deep breath before nudging the door the rest of the way open. He knew he was about to see someone who had known him from before. John could feel it in his guts as he entered the room.

He prayed he would see the face of an ally and not an enemy.

“Where, exactly, should I stick this?”

Sarah turned around to see Ellison holding up one of the blocks of C-4 she’d given him. Her lips twisted into a smirk, the desire to tell him exactly where he could stick the explosive almost making her smile. “Somewhere it will do the most damage.”

Ellison glanced around the computer room in Miranda Technology systems. The place was startlingly quiet, but it was nearly two in the morning. Only a couple of security guards remained, the last of the staff having left hours ago. He jammed the sticky explosive behind a wall of computers before wiping his hands on his jeans. They’d been inside the facility for less than ten minutes and had already planted explosives in two rooms that were carbon copies of the one they currently found themselves in. Ellison felt like they’d already used enough C-4 to take out an entire city block, let alone the relatively small three-story structure they were in now.

“We done?”

It wasn’t the first time he’d asked Sarah that question and she suspected it wouldn’t be the last. “Almost.” She had four more small charges to set and decided she wanted to do it in peace. “Why don’t you head back to the truck? I’ll be there in ten.”

“I can stay with you,” Ellison protested, looking less imposing than Sarah had ever seen him in jeans and a black t-shirt. He looked like he should be on his way to a pickup game of basketball

rather than committing a felony.

“Didn’t say you couldn’t,” Sarah drawled. “But we’re going to need to move quickly.”

Ellison looked around uneasily. “What about the guards?”

“I’ll pull the fire alarm,” Sarah promised and meant it. Ellison obviously decided to believe her. He nodded once and, with one final glance at their handiwork, he turned and left her to finish up.

Sarah watched him go before her gaze drifted up to the security camera. With a whir, the camera rotated back from the exit to fix on her again. Smirking a little, Sarah shook her head. She’d gotten rid of Ellison, but she was hardly still alone. There was a clack to Sarah’s left as the locking mechanism to a set of double doors released. Cameron had hacked into Miranda’s systems before Sarah’s arrival and was now in charge of the company’s security systems. Sarah was equal parts relieved that Cameron could make this mission practically a walk in the park, and pissed that she had to do the work with Ellison instead of the terminator. For a former FBI agent, Ellison didn’t seem to have a very firm grasp on how to break the law.

Sarah went to the doors and shoved them open. The lights in the dark hallway that stretched out before her came on one by one and Sarah went where they beckoned. She moved through the flickering puddles of fluorescent light as the bulbs struggled to wake from hours of sleep. Another door clicked open to Sarah’s right and she obediently went through it.

It was yet another room full of computer equipment. Sarah winced as the dull roar of fans and processors assaulted her ears, and she shivered a little at the cold temperature. The lights activated and Sarah did what she needed to do.

Stepping behind the back rack of computers, her last block of C-4 slipped from Sarah’s fingers as she tripped and crashed over a dead woman, landing next to her and looking into filmy eyes that had been lifeless for hours. Sarah recoiled in shock, scrambling backward and slamming into one of the server racks. Her head snapped up and she looked for the ever-present cameras but there were none to be seen. Cursing under her breath, Sarah rolled the body and studied the identification dangling from a lanyard around the woman’s neck. The photo ID declared her to be Molly Samuels, a server technician. Sarah felt her stomach roll when she noted how much she physically resembled the dead tech in the photo. Based on Samuel’s injuries, Sarah didn’t need to be a doctor to know the woman had been electrocuted. She jerked the identification off the body, determined to confront Cameron about it at the first opportunity.

“Goddamn it, Cameron,” Sarah hissed. She had to crawl over the body to get to the dropped explosive, and she jammed the putty into place with more force than necessary, wondering what the tech had done to warrant Cameron killing her. The terminator was going to damn well tell her when Sarah got back, or she was going to take a shotgun and blow the Turk into tiny pieces.

Explosives in place, Sarah decided it was time to get the hell out before Ellison returned to check on her. He was annoyingly noble that way, a trait that was likely to get him killed. As Sarah stepped out into the hallway, she heard a now familiar whir as a nearby security camera turned

its attention on her. Sarah glared at it. “Now what, girlie?” she demanded.

Sarah nearly came out of her skin when an alarm shrieked into life as if in answer. A loud repeating, grating buzz of a noise, Sarah covered her ears when she glanced up and noticed she was standing under one of the speakers. Cursing again, Sarah broke into a run, heading for the doors at the end of the hallway.

“Murch,” James yelled into his phone. “Do something, damn it!” He watched from his car as police and emergency responders began to arrive, surrounding Miranda Technology Systems with a sea of black and white vehicles, their red and blue lights bouncing off the asphalt of the parking lot and the faded brick of the building. He was down the street in the truck, his eyes searching the shadows for Sarah’s form. He’d barely slid behind the wheel when he’d seen the first wave of officers arriving.

“I’m trying!” Murch yelled back, his voice frantic as Savannah watched him with wide blue eyes from the table in the kitchen. “Cameron has me completely locked out!”

James swallowed, wondering if this was the terminator’s plan all along. Had she set Sarah up to be captured even after she’d nearly destroyed her physical body to rescue the woman a week ago? The machines couldn’t be trusted, and James understood that reality more in that moment than in any other. “I’ll go back in,” he announced.

“Are you crazy?” Murch said. “The SWAT team is arriving. The media is on the way. They know it’s Sarah,” he said in a rush. “They know!”

James’ hands gripped the wheel so hard his knuckles went white. “Damn it. Damn it!”

“You have to go,” Murch told him. “Mr. Ellison, she’d want you to go!”

He knew it was true, but James didn’t have to like it. He’d stay put for just a few more minutes or until the cops discovered him. Until then, he’d sit tight. He wasn’t going to leave Sarah. Not yet.

Voices shouted orders behind her. The police had arrived way too damn fast, and Sarah suspected someone had already called them well before the alarm had sounded. So much for this mission being a walk in the park.

Her boots pounded down the cement hallway as her breath came in painful gasps. Cameron had been leading her around the building like a damn dog on a leash, and now that Sarah was loose, she didn’t know which way to run. Away from the police was her only option. She rounded the corner, feeling an itch between her shoulder blades that told her that the cops were closing in.

The lights suddenly winked off and Sarah heard what sounded like a building-wide clang as all the locks reengaged. She crashed into a set of double doors as the emergency lights came on, casting everything in a red glow. The doors were locked tight, not yielding in the least as Sarah threw her weight against them. With no choice but to go back the way she'd come, Sarah pivoted and ran, relieved when the next set of doors swung open easily. She was nearly to the control room where she'd found the dead woman, the only doors she could find open leading her back that way by necessity. One more set of doors and she would return to that wing of the building.

The voices were getting louder. Behind her, the doors crashed open and Sarah risked a glance over her shoulder. Flashlight beams erupted from the darkness, striking Sarah in the face.

“Sarah!” A voice called out. “Sarah, stop!”

Agent Auldridge. Sarah recognized his voice and increased her speed. He'd struck her as nothing more than a geek with a gun, but that didn't mean he couldn't stick her back in a cage. She reached the end of the hallway and hit the doors, but this time they didn't give. Sarah smashed down on the handle and slammed her weight against it, nearly frantic to get it to open, but the metal resisted as Auldridge and the other cops grew closer. There was nowhere left to go, and Sarah knew she was out of options. She reached behind her, her fingers closing over the butt of her gun. Yanking the weapon free, she brought it up to her own temple. She could set off the explosives, but she would be damned if she took all these men and women with her. Her gaze locked with Auldridge's, watching his eyes widen behind his glasses as he brought his own weapon up to stop her.

There was a click, and the door suddenly swung open against Sarah's weight. She fell through the open door and watched as it lazily swung back and slammed shut with a bang. The locks reengaged just as the agents on the other side crashed into it. Blinking in shock, Sarah could hear them pounding on it, Auldridge's muffled voice calling out her name.

Slowly, Sarah got her feet under her, the gun still gripped in her right hand as she tried to process the abrupt change in events. Her gaze lifted to the nearest security camera and she stared at it as the lens looked back at her. There was a sudden whump of sound and air, followed by the unmistakable roar of an explosion on the other side of the building. The whole structure shook as pieces of the ceiling sprinkled down on Sarah's hair and clothes like snow.

Sarah looked down at the detonator in her hand. She hadn't set off the explosion, which left only one choice. “Damn it, girlie. What game are you playing?” Sarah snarled into the camera before she moved down another hallway. A click from above made Sarah glance up and she noted a metal ladder bolted to the wall leading to a hatch in the ceiling. She laid the detonator down, knowing it was useless now that Cameron was setting off the explosives. Stuffing her gun back into the waistband of her jeans, Sarah began to climb, the metal rungs cold under her grip.

The hatch swung back with a bang and Sarah emerged under stars obscured by smoke; she rolled onto the rough surface of the roof and lay there for a moment. Another explosion made the whole building vibrate, and Sarah struggled up to her knees, her gaze searching for a way down.

She finally saw another ladder and she ran toward it, feeling the intense heat buffet her face as fire began to crawl up the other side of the building. Sarah risked a quick look below to see if she'd have a fight on her hands waiting for her at the bottom. All she saw was smoke drifting on the wind. Taking a deep breath, she threw one leg over the side of the roof and climbed onto the ladder, scrambling down the metal rungs as fast as she was able.

There was a slight drop when she reached the bottom, and Sarah tucked and rolled, landing on a clump of grass. When she came back up, the gun was once more in her hand, but there was no one to aim it at. Taking a short, shallow breath filled with acrid smoke, Sarah eased forward through a small copse of trees. A third explosion hit the structure, this one close enough to knock Sarah off her feet. She grabbed hold of a tree trunk, the bark scraping her palms and her cheek as she barely managed to keep herself upright.

The relief she felt when she saw Ellison was still in the truck at the end of the street was so sweet it hurt. She yanked on the handle as he started the engine, clambering inside just as a group of men and women came staggering out of the building. "Go!" Sarah ordered before her door was even closed and Ellison obeyed, tires squealing.

Looking back over her shoulder, Sarah watched as the rest of the building blew, sending the emergency responders running for cover.

"What in the hell?" Ellison asked as he raced them away from the scene.

Sarah shook her head. "Cameron," was her only answer.

Sarah was already halfway out of the vehicle before it had even rolled to a stop at the warehouse. Ellison yelled her name in alarm, but the rage that had been building in Sarah since they'd left the burning building needed an outlet before she exploded. And Sarah had just the target in mind.

She could hear Ellison scrambling out of the truck and sprinting after her, but Sarah was already to the door, which she felt angry enough to wrench off its hinges. Throwing it open, she stepped inside.

Murch jumped when the door to the warehouse flew open with a bang. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Sarah walk inside, her face streaked with soot and a small smear of blood. "Thank God," he murmured. "I thought..." He trailed off when he saw the look in Sarah's eyes. Anger seemed to roll off her rigid frame in waves as she came closer, and he backed away automatically, fearful she might start tearing apart the first thing she got her hands on, even if it was him.

"Out," Sarah said simply, her voice low and cold. "Take the girl and get out."

Murch's gaze went worriedly to Savannah who was watching Sarah with naked curiosity. He

nervously licked his lips. “I don’t...”

Ellison entered the room behind Sarah and hesitated at the door. He watched the woman for an uneasy moment before motioning to Murch. “Let’s take Savannah for a bite to eat,” he suggested to the scientist. “I think Sarah and Cameron need to... talk.”

Murch glanced worriedly at Cameron’s body before looking back at Sarah. “What are you going to do?”

“Get out,” Sarah said one last time, her tone of voice and the gun she now cradled in her hand leaving no room for argument.

Murch nodded and eased around her, his nose wrinkling at the smell of smoke that emanated from Sarah’s clothes and skin. He could see her eyes were bloodshot, making them appear even more fierce and feral as she glared at the terminator. “The whole place is gone,” he murmured to Sarah. “Miranda Technology Systems in a pile of smoking metal and ash.”

Sarah’s jaw hardened but she said nothing.

“The officers?” Ellison asked because he needed to know.

“All safe and accounted for,” Murch replied before glancing back at Sarah. “They think you were still in the building when it came down. They think you were in the wing they couldn’t get access to. According to the media, the cops said it was like someone led them out of the building, only unlocking the doors that would take them to safety.” Murch swallowed. “Cameron wasn’t trying to...”

“Murch.” Sarah’s voice was icy and hoarse. “Out. Now.”

James jerked his head toward the door in silent instruction. Sarah was going to go nuclear and he didn’t want Savannah to see the woman like that, even if Sarah deserved to feel every inch of the rage that was making her visibly shake. He turned to Savannah as Murch finally took the hint and left. “Come on, Savannah.”

Savannah took in Sarah and Cameron, her young mind trying to understand why one woman seemed so angry with the other. She hopped down from her seat and slipped her hand into Ellison’s large palm. “Bye, Sarah. Bye, Cameron,” she called innocently, waving to both women even though neither acknowledged her in return.

The door closed and the warehouse went silent, save for the computers and Sarah’s harsh breathing. Deliberately, Sarah set her gun down on the table in front of Cameron and stared at the slowly healing face of the terminator. “Was that fun for you, Tin Miss?” she snarled. “Making me run around in there like some kind of rat in a maze?”

Cameron said nothing.

“Who was she?” Sarah demanded. “Molly Samuels? Why did she have to die?” When there was no response, Sarah slammed her hands down on the table. “Answer me, damn you! I know you’re in there. I can feel you watching.” The frustration, the grief, the fatigue... it all began to rise in Sarah along with her anger, rushing up and over her in a wave of madness that wanted to snatch her down and drown her. Shaking with rage, Sarah grabbed the closest chair and flung it, watching as it crashed into the kitchen table with a sense of raw satisfaction.

Her fists came down on the table again with bruising blows. “Talk to me!” Sarah yelled. “Why won’t you just fucking talk to me?” The wood splintered and began to give but Sarah didn’t notice. Everyone was gone. Kyle. Derek. Charlie. John. John was gone and he was never coming back. Only Cameron was left. *Only Cameron...*

The table gave way, caving inward and nearly taking Sarah with it. She stumbled as her gun slid down the wood to clatter on the floor at Cameron’s feet. Finally, Sarah fell to her knees and began to sob for all she’d lost, for all she’d never know. Her life was about nothing but pain and Sarah didn’t think she could stand it anymore. She grabbed chunks of the table, pounding them into the concrete, heedless of the splinters that flayed off and struck her face. The need to destroy something, to hurt something as much as she hurt, consumed her until there was nothing left but slivers of wood around her.

A shard of sanity returned slowly and her sobs quieted into slow, measured breaths. Her bloody fingers closed around the still warm butt of the gun and Sarah lifted it from the splintered remains of the table. Unsteadily, she got to her feet and walked over toward the largest dark monitor, each blink of the cursor feeling like an accusation. The gun came up and pointed at the Turk, Sarah’s hand steady even as the rest of her swayed in place.

“I can’t do this without you, without you talking to me, explaining, helping. I’m not your fucking puppet to be strung along without knowing what the plan is.” She swallowed against the burning rawness of her throat. “You want to do this alone?” she whispered, slowly and methodically altering her target from the Turk to her own temple as she rested her forehead against the cool glass of the monitor. “Because it has to be either us together... or one of us alone.”

She closed her eyes, taking a moment to mentally prepare herself for what she was about to do. Sarah thought of her son’s eyes as her finger tightened on the trigger, her weary soul ready to sleep.

A tiny flicker of white behind Sarah’s closed eyelids made her eyes flutter open. There, on the screen in front of her, was a simple word.

Hi.

Sarah blinked, feeling the air catch in her lungs. She leaned back from the screen, the gun lowering in surprise to bang against her hip, as she stared at the word in disbelief. “Cameron?”

The screen changed and Sarah was suddenly looking at nearly a mirror image of herself. A grid formed before zeroing in on the gun in Sarah’s hand. The screen went dark again.

Please don't.

Sarah stared at the words, not sure what to feel in reaction to them. "You don't need me."

I need you.

"Cameron..."

I don't want to be alone.

Sarah's breath hitched again. "Then why... why have you kept silent?"

I've been thinking. Trying to understand who I am. What I am. What my new role needs to be.

Sarah's fingers touched the glass again. Her whole body was shaking with fatigue and she halfway wondered if she was dreaming this conversation. "Cameron..." she breathed. "You're telling me you needed time alone?" she asked almost incredulously. "That you put me through all of this because you needed to fucking... *find yourself?*"

The screen went dark for a moment and Sarah waited for an explanation.

To help you, I needed to help myself first.

"And how's that going for you?" Sarah drawled, sarcasm dripping from her voice as she adjusted her grip on the gun.

Cameron seemed to realize it was a rhetorical question because she chose not to answer it.

I knew John would go after John Henry. I wanted him to be safe. To be where Skynet didn't know him. To take away his burden of being the leader of the resistance. He's carried it long enough.

"You don't know what hell you sent him into," Sarah replied but she was too tired to muster any more rage. "We don't know."

Maybe it isn't hell. Maybe we stop Skynet.

"Maybe," Sarah acknowledged with a whisper. She let her gun clatter to the floor as her adrenaline wore off and the pain in her battered hands began to throb.

You were supposed to go with him.

Sarah stared at the words and acknowledged that some part of her had known that was Cameron's intention all along. "I'm not meant to see the future," Sarah answered honestly. "No matter what I do."

The cursor blinked for a moment.

No fate but what we make.

Sarah closed her eyes and swayed a little in place. “I was wrong.”

No.

The word was waiting for her when Sarah opened her eyes again.

We can stop Skynet. We will stop Skynet.

Sarah wanted to believe it was possible for John’s sake rather than her own, but Cameron had lied again. She’d killed. “Molly Samuels, Cameron,” Sarah murmured as she slipped the dead woman’s identification out of her pocket and stared at the photo that looked up at her, an edge of anger reentering her voice. “Tell me why.”

There was another pause.

She looked like you.

Sarah waited, sensing there was more.

Height. Weight. They had to match.

Sarah shook her head. “You called them. Led them right to me so Auldrige would see for himself I was in the building...”

He needed to see with his own eyes.

“The people at Miranda will know when Samuels doesn’t show...” Sarah began.

According to their records, Molly Samuels quit three days ago and moved to Italy. They will find a legitimate paper trail. I erased all record of her being in the building.

“She was an innocent woman, Cameron...”

No. She was helping Kaliba. She worked nights, alone, where the others couldn’t see what she was doing.

Sarah swallowed and slowly shook her head again, refusing to accept that any part of this was right. “Dental records... DNA... They’ll know it isn’t me. You didn’t think this through.”

I’m in the system, Cameron reminded her. I can go almost anywhere. Change anything.

The truth began to sink in for Sarah. “You’ve spent all this time...” She paused to collect her thoughts. “You’ve been...”

Sarah Connor is dead.

The words hit Sarah like a slap in the face. Her head dipped as she swallowed the lump in her throat. She didn’t know how she felt about any of this.

You’re safe again.

“No one is ever safe,” Sarah replied automatically, but she acknowledged that she was safer than she had been.

Images of new identification began to tile on the screen. Sarah watched as her picture came up along with Ellison’s and Savannah’s. According to the image on her California driver’s license, her name now was Sarah Gale. Ellison had become James Edison. There was paperwork showing Savannah as her niece. Who they were was gone.

“You’ve been busy,” Sarah murmured with the slightest smirk.

Yes.

Sarah could imagine Cameron’s voice so clearly in that one little word. She turned her head and looked at the terminator’s body and sighed. “So now what, Tin Miss?” she asked as she focused back on the screen.

You need sleep.

Sarah snorted. “Tell me something I don’t know, girlie.”

When you’ve had enough rest, we’ll go from there.

“Cameron,” Sarah started to argue.

Sleep, Cameron insisted. I need you, but not like this.

Something about still being needed made the rest of Sarah’s tension relax and she suddenly felt so tired she could barely stand. “On one condition.”

The cursor blinked expectantly.

“No more secrets,” Sarah insisted, steel creeping back into her voice. “Don’t you ever do anything like you did to me tonight again.”

I swear.

“You’ve sworn to me before,” Sarah reminded her.

A terminator swore to you. I’m not a terminator anymore.

Sarah’s fingers came up and touched the words, her curiosity raging about what Cameron meant. “You...” she began.

SLEEP.

Sarah chuckled wearily at the demand and decided to table her questions until morning. “Ellison and Murch... the girl...”

On their way back. I will have Mr. Ellison clean up the mess.

“Least he can do,” Sarah drawled before she stooped to pick up her gun. A few minutes ago she wasn’t sure if she’d wanted to use it on herself or Cameron more. Now all she wanted was a good night’s sleep. She shook her head at her herself. Feeling the need to touch the screen one more time, Sarah did, letting her fingers skim down the edge, leaving a light smear of blood in their wake. “Night, Cameron,” she murmured, surprised to hear the words slip past her lips.

Sweet dreams, Sarah.

“We’ll see,” Sarah answered with a slight quirk of her lips.

The cameras watched Sarah walk up the steps to her room. Almost all of Cameron’s attention was focused on Sarah until the other woman had tended to her battered hands and was down for the night. Satisfied when Sarah was asleep, Cameron turned her attention back to her own code. She’d found pieces of it that she’d never known about, and she explored their functions curiously. Other lines of code she discarded completely, knowing she would never need them again.

Cameron rotated the security cameras so she could see her own body sitting silently at the table. She’d meant what she said to Sarah. She wasn’t a terminator anymore, and she was determined to never be again.

The walls were covered in rich, colorful tapestries that were illuminated by a handful of flickering candles. The color was startling after the drab cement and metal John saw everywhere else. The scent of incense tickled his nose, which managed to mask the odor of humanity that Serrano Point seemed awash in. This room felt safe, almost peaceful, and John took a deep, calming breath of a place that felt just a sliver like home. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the dimness before shutting the door.

“Hello, John.”

John turned his head and squinted into the shadows. He could just make out a woman sitting on a stool near a small table. A part of him had hoped it would be his mother's voice that would call out to him from the darkness, and he felt his heart drop when the shape, nor the voice, matched what he wanted. "You're Tango?" he asked, his voice hushed.

The woman stood slowly and moved toward the light. John felt his breath hitch when the candlelight revealed the woman's dark features in a warm glow. Time had been tough on her, graying her hair and scarring one side of her face, but the inner strength... the inner steel of Terissa Dyson hadn't dulled.

She regarded him for a silent moment before coming closer, her hands, roughened from years of fighting, framing his face as she simply looked at him. "You've finally come," she said, her voice low and sure, "just like your mother said you would."

John shook his head, unable to comprehend the chain of events that would force the mantle he'd discarded onto Terissa Dyson's shoulders. The Connors seemed to be the bane of the Dyson family's existence, and John couldn't grasp how this woman could be smiling upon him. "I'm sorry," John choked out, tears brimming before spilling over to run down his cheeks. "I'm so sorry..."

Terissa wiped away his tears. "Your mother said you'd come," she repeated. "You, Weaver, and John Henry. We've been waiting."

John didn't know what to feel. Guilt for the life Terissa Dyson lived in his place. Relief that his mother had survived the events at Zeira Corp. He could only feel exhausted and overwhelmed, his young body shaking with fatigue and emotion.

"My mom..." John gasped, needing to know. When he saw Terissa's features soften in sympathy, the last of John's willpower crumbled and he fell into her arms, crying like a child.

"We can still save her, John," Terissa murmured. "We can still save everyone."