

## Episode 4: The Song Remains the Same

The rains returned to Southern California with a vengeance. Already night, the fat drops pounding the earth obscured the landscape, flooding streets, cutting visibility to nil, and threatening to turn the fire-scorched hills of the LA basin into rolling landmasses of rock and mud. It was a night not fit for man nor beast.

In an alley, behind a strip of abandoned and dilapidated buildings with 'For Sale' signs, something flickered, a flash of light. As if seemingly from nowhere, a spark of blue and white expanded upon itself until it was a ball of energy. The light was blinding, so bright even the rats scurrying about the alleyway ran for cover.

The ball grew and spread outward in a bright, heated pulse, building in a heartbeat until it was a perfect circle of light - eight feet wide and just as tall. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the light blinked out, the alley returning to darkness, except for a small space of cement where the bottom edge of the circle had cut deep into the man-made stone. It glowed an eerie orange of still smoldering rock.

In the center, a naked man crouched. Steam rose from his skin in drifting wisps as the rain poured down on him. He rose, slowly, purposefully, his head turned, his eyes scanning the alley. He began to walk, in the darkness of the alley; the only illumination was the man's pupils as bright and red as blood.

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John thought about asking where they were going, but he was getting used to not asking questions. That wasn't his job anymore, to ask questions. To lead. They told, he did. Here, he was no longer the leader of the resistance, he never was. Not asking questions made life both easier and harder. Easier because he was no longer responsible for the decisions made around him, and harder because he couldn't help but wonder if the resistance was better off without John Connor or worse.

He followed Allison and Duke to the edge of a collapsed building. He thought he recognized it - someplace on Wilshire? - but then blinked away the thought. The past was the past, and it was best not to remember what things used to look like. Better to concentrate on the now, the always darkened sky, the scorched earth, the smell of death and destruction.

They slipped around the side of the structure, going over and then down a hill of crumbled and collapsed stone. There wasn't so much a door as a hole no more than four feet tall. Allison crouched at the entrance, letting Duke lead as the dog sniffed around.

"It's clear," she said before disappearing into the hole.

John followed. They crawled over, under, crouched and walked on their knees through the collapsed foundation. Eventually, a half-mile or so, John thought, the hole opened to a corridor

where a thick, metal door stood. Allison banged hard, three times and then twice.

“What’s the password?” a male voice asked through the metal.

“Deadtown,” Allison answered.

The door opened, and they were immediately met by two men with guns pointed at them. The German Sheppard next to the armed guards started barking madly, yanking at its leash. Duke lowered, haunches raised as he started to growl. Allison pulled back on his leash.

“Stupid dog,” one of the men muttered, yanking his dog back so they could walk past.

The dog continued barking; John could hear it as they met the end of the corridor and turned left. They were in a basement of sorts, one of the few places still left standing that could be considered safe. There were people sitting against the walls, refugees: men, women, and families with children, their faces and clothes covered in dirt.

Another corner and the refugees turned to soldiers. The distinction wasn't in their weapons, but the way they carried themselves, hardened, ready to snap into action at a moment's notice. Some nodded at Allison, most just looked at them with disinterest.

“We’re here,” Allison said as they came to another door near the back end of yet another corridor. It was flanked by two guards who merely nodded as Allison opened the door.

The room was warmer and smelled of not exactly fresh coffee. There were maps on the walls with pins and black x's dotting their surfaces. In the center of the room was a large table overflowing with maps. John recognized several of the people huddled around an unfurled map - Tango, Derek, Jesse, Kyle and Sierra. There were others in the room, faces John didn't recognize. The majority of them stood to the side, listening to the conversation.

That was the way it always played out whenever Tango was in a room: the soldiers standing at attention with a sort of reverence. Terrisa Dyson didn't just lead them, she'd saved them. Gave them the one thing that seemed to be in such short supply - hope. John wondered if there would have been such a reverence for him, and then pushed the thought away. That future didn't exist. Not anymore.

Duke padded towards Sierra and immediately sat at her feet. “Duke!” Allison whispered harshly, pulling at his leash, but the dog wouldn't budge.

“It's okay,” Sierra lifted her head towards the two. Her eyes lingered on Allison. John thought he saw her blush. “Glad you could make it.”

“What's going on?” John wondered, finally in a situation where he felt comfortable asking a question.

“It's the machines,” Derek said, scratching the side of his scruffy face with his fingers.

“They’re up to something.”

Jesse snorted. “The machines are always up to something.”

John took a step towards the table, staring down at the map. “What’s the plan?”

All eyes turned to Tango. She lifted her cup of coffee to her lips, taking a long sip. Her mouth minutely twisted in distaste, like a person who remembered what coffee was supposed to taste like. Tango lowered her mug onto the table, pointing with a finger at the map. “We’ve been getting some chatter from China Lake. There’s been some, and I quote, ‘strange activity’ over in Death Valley. I’m going to send a team to rendezvous with them here.” She pointed again. “Of course, that’s where things will get hairy.”

John chuckled. Jesse’s head snapped up, her eyes glaring at him.

“Something funny, Connor?” she practically hissed in her native Australian accent.

“No, sorry.” John shifted nervously. “Just thinking about what my mom would do.”

Sierra snickered. “Barrel in with a truck full of C-4, blow the place sky high, and then come back with a flamethrower just to make sure.”

John smiled for the first time in what felt like weeks. “Yeah.”

All the eyes in the room were on them, Allison’s voice breaking the odd tension. “You knew John’s mother?”

“Yeah,” Sierra chuckled, her eyes getting a far away look.

“I also knew hers,” John added.

Sierra’s head snapped up, her eyes heated as she glared at John. “That *thing* wasn’t my mother.”

“Sierra,” Tango said calmly and coolly, but underneath, there was the hint of a warning tone. The two shared a look, weighted with a meaning that reminded John of his mother. A look that said Sierra had said too much.

John thought about looking away, breaking eye contact, but slowly thought better of it. He felt a responsibility for her, towards the life they’d once shared. But, as Sierra had told him, that was in the past. Whatever he and Sierra had shared, it had been cursory, like everything else. They were survivors. But, he didn’t turn his eyes away because they did have one thing in common.

They’d both been trained by Sarah Connor.

## Act One

It was only thunder.

For most of Los Angeles, the distant rumbling portended nothing more ominous than an oncoming storm, but in Sarah's dreams, it was a shotgun blast, cannon fire, the sonic boom of a nuclear warhead detonating...

Or the explosion caused by stabbing a screwdriver through flesh and metal and burying it in an open electrical panel.

Sarah's eyes snapped open, her heart drumming heavily in her chest, and her fingers instinctively reaching for the gun under her pillow, as if the nightmare might follow her out of sleep and into the waking world.

Another distant growl of thunder muttered its way into the silence of the warehouse, and Sarah finally recognized the sound for what it was. She inhaled deeply, willing herself to calm, and then exhaled in a long, drawn out sigh. Releasing her fingers from their death grip on the cold steel of the gun, Sarah rolled onto her back and draped an arm over her face. The single unbroken night of sleep she'd gotten in Savannah's pink ruffled bed already seemed closer to weeks than days ago, and she could feel herself starting to fray around the edges.

Closing her eyes had been a mistake.

The last few frames of the dream came back to Sarah in a rush. The full-body pain, the slipperiness of the screwdriver handle under her blood-coated fingers, and the terminator's face as it had turned in that final moment... Sarah's heart rate kicked up again at the one detail where the dream had differed from reality. In the instant before she had plunged the screwdriver through the machine's wrist for the second time, it had been *Cameron* looking at her from behind those warm brown eyes.

Not a nameless terminator with a copied face, but Cameron.

That was the shock that had torn Sarah out of her nightmare; watching the electric current rip through that familiar body and cast it aside and knowing it wasn't just another machine she had taken out.

And if Cameron wasn't just another machine, then what the hell *was* she?

Sarah recalled the warm comfort of Cameron's fingers sliding over her own at the bonfire the night before, and her skin prickled, every hair standing on end.

The real question might be, what was Cameron to *her*?

She pressed the back of her arm more firmly against her eyelids and clenched her jaw, willing the images and the uncomfortable questions to fade. They obeyed reluctantly, retreating even as the storm crept closer.

Underneath the rumbling, the warehouse was quiet. No Murch on his computers, no Savannah quietly humming herself to sleep, no Ellison shuffling his papers, no Cameron walking the perimeter.

No Cameron walking the perimeter...

Sarah yanked her arm back from her face, her eyes flying open. While Cameron had been in the system, Sarah had almost been able to forget the rhythm of the machine as she'd moved through their house on her nightly rounds. She had almost forgotten how reassuring, even soothing, that rhythm had become. Sarah's own walking metal lullaby. But she'd... missed it, and last night, it had been the return of that rhythm that had finally lulled her to sleep. The dull ringing of Cameron's boots against the catwalk outside her door had filled a need Sarah would have preferred to deny.

Now the silence in place of Cameron's soft but weighted steps was deafening to her ears. Sarah took another deep lungful of air as her senses went into overdrive, ears straining to hear every moan and creak of the warehouse. It was quiet, painfully so.

She rose, sliding her legs over the edge of the bed and leaving her gun behind in the tangled sheets.

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As rain began to patter on the pavement beyond the open warehouse door, long fingers drifted through ash and rust, the skin becoming coated with tinges of brown and grey. The fine particles were all that was left of her, of who she had been. Cameron lifted her hand from the pit and blew the powdery substance off before wiping it clean on her jeans.

Even the air smelled like ash. Before, she would have only noticed scent as chemicals in the atmosphere in which John Connor breathed. She hadn't been able to appreciate how good, or bad, something could smell. Since entering this new body, Cameron had been assaulted by sensation to the point of being almost overwhelmed. In reprogramming the new chip, she'd stripped away Skynet's filters, filters designed to make her appear human while preventing her from ever truly feeling what it was like to be one. Now... everything she touched, heard, saw, smelled... it was all new to her, revealed in a rich detail she'd never known.

Ash may have been all that was left, but Cameron had still felt compelled to return to the fire pit in the early light of morning.

Sarah had walked away first the night before, offering Cameron a simple nod as she left. Cameron had remained alone, making sure everything was destroyed, that nothing of who she

had been remained. But as the sun rose behind rain-heavy clouds, she'd found she needed to see the truth one more time before she could fully believe it.

There was no remorse for the loss of her old body. Cameron felt only satisfaction that another terminator had been destroyed.

A footfall made her turn her head, and Cameron was unsurprised to see Sarah leaning against the open door, studying her carefully. Sarah hadn't bothered with an umbrella and she was already soaked to the bone, her dark hair hanging in loose curls around her face. Cameron rose from her crouch beside the pit, resisting the urge to say anything about the other woman's condition. Sarah hated it when people 'fussed' as she put it. Privately, Cameron thought Sarah could do with a little more fussing, but she didn't say that either, settling for a simple, "Good morning."

Sarah took a deep breath and stepped inside the space, approaching the pit warily. "Having second thoughts?"

Cameron glanced down at the ashes before looking back at Sarah. It was a cool morning in Los Angeles, and Cameron could see Sarah shivering slightly. Pursing her lips, she slipped out of her leather jacket, tossing it to Sarah with ease.

"I don't..." Sarah started to protest. With a sigh, she stifled the argument and slipped the jacket on, surrounding herself in warm leather. "What are you doing out here?"

"I don't know," Cameron confessed, pleased that Sarah had accepted the jacket with little argument. "I needed to see it one last time, I think, in the light. I needed to know it was real." She blinked, surprised by her own thoughts. "Why did you follow me?"

Sarah shrugged. "I just wanted to make sure you were... here."

"I'm here," Cameron said simply.

Sarah nodded and came closer, standing next to Cameron. They both looked down into the pit of ash and rust. "You didn't answer my question," she murmured, lifting her gaze to study Cameron's profile. The small gashes along her jaw from the gunshots were almost gone already.

"Am I having second thoughts?" Cameron repeated before tilting her head to look at Sarah. "That worries you?"

"Some," Sarah admitted. "I can never tell what you're thinking, Tin Miss." She sighed and ran a hand through her damp hair.

Cameron tracked the motion with her eyes, taking an interest in the way the light caught the different shades and textures in Sarah's hair. She wondered how she could have missed them before now.

“Like now for example,” Sarah murmured, unsure of what to make of the enraptured look on Cameron’s face as she watched her.

Cameron blinked again. “You’re still shivering,” she pointed out instead of answering either of Sarah’s questions, explicit or implied, unsure why she didn’t want to admit what had caught her attention. She stepped closer, grabbing the lapels of the jacket and drawing them closer.

Sarah inhaled sharply in surprise and Cameron looked up, startled by her body’s reaction to the tiny sound.

They stared at each other for a long moment before Cameron willed herself to let go of the leather and back away. She frowned at the floor, trying to understand the cascade of feelings, both tactile and emotional, that were washing over her.

Sarah took a breath as she watched Cameron. “You okay?”

Cameron looked at her again. “It... will take some getting used to.”

“Being in a body again?” Sarah guessed, gripping the edges of the coat and holding them tighter against her body.

“Yes,” Cameron agreed. “The body,” she hesitated slightly, “and the modifications I made to my programming.”

“Modifications?” Sarah asked, a note of alarm creeping into her tone.

“Yes,” Cameron said again, then added more abruptly, “I have work to do.” She wasn’t ready to discuss just how many modifications she had made to her original programming or the way some of them were reacting in Sarah’s presence, not yet, not until she’d figured it out herself.

“Cameron,” Sarah called after her when she’d reached the doorway.

The former terminator hesitated before glancing back over her shoulder.

“We’re going to talk about your... modifications... later.”

Cameron nodded her head once before stepping out into the rain. She paused halfway to their warehouse to tilt her chin up, taking in how it felt to have the heavy wet drops striking her face. She decided she rather liked it.

Caught up in the sensation of rain on her skin, she didn’t see Sarah watching her, a speculative look on her face.

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Later that morning, Sarah stepped heavily, wearily, out of the shower. Chilled from her walk through the rain, she had stayed under the spray until the water went cold, her fingertips taking on the appearance of small pink prunes and the bathroom filling with a thick mist. Wrapping a towel around her torso, Sarah wiped the condensation off the mirror, her fingers leaving long streaks against the cool glass.

She gazed at her reflection. The shower had helped, increasing her circulation and bringing a fleeting blush of health to her skin, but she still looked tired. Battered was more like it, battered and bruised. There wasn't a patch of skin that was left unmarked from her fight with Cameron.

No. The thing that *looked* like Cameron, Sarah corrected herself. The distinction was as important now as it had been at dawn.

More important.

Seeing Cameron again this morning, brimming with her own unique brand of understated intensity, had brought that point home almost painfully. The body was the same, but Cameron's presence within it was unmistakable. The whole situation had left Sarah feeling strangely agitated, but like poking at a sore tooth, she couldn't seem to leave it alone.

Last night they had stood shoulder-to-shoulder, hands overlapping, and today a nightmare had sent Sarah tracking Cameron out in the rain, just to make sure she was still there. Something had shifted, something small, but it felt like the next-to-last unit of pressure before a storm. Sarah had no idea what would happen if the mercury in their metaphorical barometer climbed any higher, and she wasn't sure she could handle finding out.

Shaking her head as the fog settled back onto the mirror and slowly blotted out her face, Sarah pushed uncomfortable ruminations firmly aside and dried herself off. The towel was rough on her half-scalded skin, and she went slowly, careful of both new and half-healed bruises and scrapes. Most of them would fade; some would be added to the gallery of scars documenting the damage she'd already done to her body.

It was all Sarah had ever been able to count on - her mind, body and soul - and as she turned back to the mirror, she couldn't help but notice that it looked like parts of her were failing. Her skin was still too pale; there were dark circles under her eyes. When she inhaled too deeply, her ribs hurt, along with all the other aches and pains a long hot shower couldn't alleviate.

Then there were the parts Sarah couldn't see. Was there still a ticking time bomb hidden within her body? Under her skin, was the cancer that was fated to kill her already stirring? Unlike Cameron, Sarah couldn't upgrade to a newer model.

She let the towel fall to the floor, raised her right arm like she'd been taught by the doctors, even though she should have been lying down, and began a careful examination of her right breast. Her fingers immediately went to the receiver implanted deep within her flesh. It was about the size of a grain of rice. To Sarah, it felt like a two-ton boulder. She'd thought about taking a knife and removing it herself, but then she'd need time to heal afterwards. And, like



everything else in her life, time was a luxury Sarah couldn't afford.

She dressed, running a towel over her head to dry her hair as best as she could before heading for the stairs. The main floor was quiet, save for the fast clicking of fingers across a keyboard.

Cameron's fingers.

The machine was back in front of the monitors. It was exactly where she had been every day for the last month, but instead of slumping over in a chair like a doll whose batteries needed replacing, Cameron sat, perfectly erect, in the same chair near the middle of the table, her hands dancing over a wireless keyboard while information streamed across the screens too quickly for Sarah to follow. Murch stood behind her, watching with one hand tucked under his other arm while he chewed on a thumbnail. Savannah was at the end of the table, her child's brow comically furrowed as she worked on some problem or other, pencil scribbling furiously.

Sarah's eyes strayed from Cameron to the long cord still attached to the Turk. Neatly coiled on the floor instead of plugged into the back of Cameron's head, it reminded Sarah that Cameron hadn't answered her question at the fire pit. The cord may have been nothing more than another piece of hardware now, but to Sarah, it looked like a sleeping snake. She wanted it gone.

Her fingers rose to cover the watch hanging from her neck. John and Cameron's secret, it was a symbol of a certain level of intimacy, a certain level of trust the two had shared between them. A trust that Sarah and Cameron, despite everything they'd been through in the last few weeks, years, didn't have. Not yet, not quite.

Was that something she wanted?

There was no C-4 embedded in this Cameron's head and Sarah didn't want it there; the very idea made her slightly ill, but she wouldn't have minded some kind of sign or guarantee that Cameron was back to stay. The fact that the machine hadn't discarded the cord didn't necessarily mean Cameron was planning anything, but if she felt that returning to the system was the best thing for her mission, she would probably do it, and Sarah was well aware that she had no way to hold her here.

She took a deep breath, burying her worries and the uneasiness they evoked as she moved to the bottom of the stairs. Savannah looked up with a smile when she reached the kitchen. Leaving her work, the little girl picked up a book from beside her on the table and bounded, as only small children could, over to Sarah. She held the book tightly against her chest, a shy but expectant look in her blue eyes.

"Good morning, Aunt Sarah," she said dutifully before blurting, "can we read another chapter of *The Wizard of Oz* today? I finished my math..."

Sarah dragged her eyes away from Cameron and refocused them on Savannah, but looking down at that upturned face reminded her of another face she hadn't seen yet. She scanned the

room quickly, a frown coming to the edges of her mouth. “Where’s Ellison?”

Savannah shrugged, an over-exaggerated gesture of exasperation. “He said he needed some fresh air.”

Sarah pursed her lips. Ellison leaving unannounced wasn’t like him. Other than that first time, when he came back with Savannah, or maybe because of Sarah’s reaction when he came back with Savannah, he’d stayed close to home, only going out when he had to, and always letting Sarah know. She felt a tug on her hand.

“Can we?” Savannah repeated, her small fingers gripping tighter, one hand wrapped around Sarah’s, the other clutching her book. “Please?”

Sarah pulled her hand gently free of Savannah’s, placing it on top of the child’s head and rubbing gently. “Maybe later,” she promised.

Savannah sighed, “Okay.” But it was the ‘okay’ of a child who’d learned adult’s promises didn’t always mean what they were supposed to. Sarah remembered the first time she’d learned that lesson. She remembered the first time John had, too, and she had no more idea how to ease that blow now than she had then.

Guilt gnawed on her, but Sarah still walked away. Their one night of mutual comfort aside, she had no business taking on another child. Her life was too dangerous for promises. If a bullet didn’t get her, then the cancer probably would. It might be better for both of them if Savannah didn’t get too attached.

She poured a cup of coffee and left the kitchen, heading for Murch and Cameron. Savannah, innocent of Sarah’s morbid brooding, followed on her heels. Sarah had said later and apparently the girl was going to hold her to that. Sarah paused next to Murch, standing a few moments in awkward silence as they watched, Murch’s eyes on the screens and Sarah’s on Cameron.

“What are you doing?” she asked finally, annoyance swimming up out of the mire of tension and self-indulgent fatalism when it became obvious that Cameron wasn’t going to acknowledge her presence.

“Searching,” Cameron replied simply, but her fingers faltered. She glanced up briefly before returning her attention to the screens, and Sarah could have sworn she saw something unsure, even nervous, in those wide brown eyes.

She understood completely. Cameron, it seemed, didn’t know quite where they stood after their moment by the pit this morning either.

Murch, still focused on Cameron, leaned slightly towards Sarah. “I think she misses it,” he whispered conspiratorially.

Sarah repressed the urge to roll her eyes at the scientist's ineffective attempt at subtlety, settling instead for raising a single brow in question.

Murch gestured towards the monitors, his eyes wide with excitement. "Being inside the system..." he elaborated, "I think she misses it."

Sarah shrugged, but the suggestion followed too closely on the heels of her own concerns for her to dismiss it as casually as she'd have liked to. Murch was oblivious. His interest was purely academic; he thought of the machines differently than Sarah. They hadn't tried to kill him, yet. He hadn't been exchanging unsettling physical contact with them lately, either.

Sarah turned her back to the table, leaning against it and crossing one ankle over the other as she folded her arms over her chest. She glanced out of the corner of her eye to see Savannah mimicking her pose. The mother in her melted a little at the sight, and she ached for the girl's obvious need for attention. Her resolve to keep her distance wavered, but the thought of Savannah's hands wrapped around the butt of a gun, her innocent blue eyes gone hard and dangerous, stiffened it again. Sarah was the last person Savannah should be influenced by.

She turned her attention back to Cameron. "What are you looking for?"

Cameron kept typing, her eyes darting from screen to screen. "Our mission hasn't changed." The pause was almost so brief as to be nonexistent, and then Cameron looked up, holding Sarah's gaze this time. "We need to find C.A.I.N. We need to destroy him."

Sarah stiffened. *Our. We...* Cameron was speaking in the plural. She hadn't done that before. It had always been *the* mission, or *my* mission. Never *theirs*... and despite the nonspecific pronoun, something in Cameron's tone excluded the scientist standing behind her, or anyone else other than Sarah.

That was what Sarah had wanted, wasn't it? She'd been doing everything in her power to bring Cameron back into the fight since she'd dragged her body and the Turk out of the rubble at Zeira Corp. Neither of them could do this alone, and despite Murch and Ellison's assistance, it wasn't really their fight, and Savannah was too young. So why did she suddenly feel so suffocated?

Sarah didn't know how to put her unease into words, or even if it was something she wanted to share, so she said nothing, but she felt the tension between them stir and swell and she had to look away. After a few breaths, the return of clattering keys told her Cameron had gone back to work. Sarah shifted on her feet, focusing on the monitors. Two of the screens were nothing more than zeroes and ones raining down in singular columns. No wonder Murch was so fascinated. The other screens flipped through a never-ending series of images, police reports, building schematics and security snapshots.

Sarah frowned, surreptitiously checking the back of Cameron's head again. Even as un-computer savvy as she was, she hadn't thought this kind of performance was possible with nothing more than a keyboard and a mouse, but Cameron was clear and free so to speak; there

was no evidence that she had any connection left to the system she manipulated so easily.

Just what were those modifications Cameron had mentioned?

Sarah shifted again. She needed something to do, something concrete. “You find anything yet?”

“Nothing that will lead us to C.A.I.N.,” Cameron said, but the slightest twitch to the corner of her lips and almost imperceptible cant of her head that no one else would have seen raised the hairs on the back of Sarah’s neck, along with her suspicions. She pulled her foot off the other, distributing her weight evenly.

“What is it?”

Cameron’s eyes flicked minutely up towards Sarah, and the streaming binary code slowed for a moment, but then continued at its normal speed. “It’s nothing,” she said again, but her protest sounded faintly defensive.

Sarah pushed herself away from the table, tensing. Enough that even Murch noticed, taking his eyes off the terminator and turning them to Sarah with a hint of apprehension before he stepped back, out of their way. He drew Savannah back with him, ignoring her sigh of disdain.

Sarah barely noticed, all of her attention on Cameron. The machine was capable of lying. For all that she had just thrown around, words like *we* and *our*, as if she understood the idea of teamwork, she was also fully capable of withholding information, information she didn’t want Sarah to have. This was more familiar ground, and Sarah let it steady her, pushing everything else aside.

“Cameron,” Sarah growled and then the printer whirred to life.

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The room was quiet other than the hum of the machines and the air conditioner to keep them cool behind their thick glass doors.

Vaughn sat on one side of the table, elbows on the surface, his chin resting on his clasped hands. Before him sat a chessboard, some of the pieces already moved around the surface. Across from him, his opponent, C.A.I.N., was embodied only by a half circle of monitors.

Vaughn reached out, his fingers hovering over the pieces before he finally chose to move his rook. It had taken him almost 30 minutes to make a move; in the blink of an eye, C.A.I.N. had chosen its own.

*P-A6*

The computer screen displayed the characters in a 2-inch size font. Vaughn could have

activated the speakers, but he preferred the formality of text. If C.A.I.N. had a preference, the A.I. hadn't voiced it. At least not to him. Danny Dyson might have known; his relationship with the C.A.I.N. project was more intimate than Vaughn's, but Vaughn had been keeping the boy busy elsewhere since the complete mess with his mother and the Connor woman. He needed to make sure Danny was still theirs, and Danny had been asking a lot of questions. Vaughn didn't want to risk C.A.I.N. answering any of them.

Vaughn reached for his cup of coffee, taking a long sip before setting down his cup and placing his chin back on his fingers. He loved this game. He'd been playing since he was a boy, owned a libraries worth of books and knew all the top players' moves. He was a formidable opponent, but he'd yet to win a single game against the machine. Sometimes, it wasn't because C.A.I.N. was a better player, either.

The screen went blank before a new set of characters appeared.

*What is HOPE?*

Vaughn pursed his lips. He'd become accustomed to, if not easy with, C.A.I.N.'s questions, questions that seemed outside the parameters of its program. But he found the programs endless curiosity distracting, especially when they were playing chess.

“What do you mean?”

*You hope to find Sarah Connor.*

Vaughn tilted his head slightly, squinting his eyes and gazing at the screen. “Yes, we hope to find Sarah Connor.”

*Why?*

“Because she's a threat,” Vaughn answered shortly. “Sarah Connor has information we need. She is very important.” He reached out and moved one of his pawns, hoping his play would compel the machine to continue with the game. “It's your move.”

*That was not my question, C.A.I.N. clarified. Why do you hope?*

Vaughn leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. “Do you know where Sarah Connor is?”

The screen went blank. A second later, a single image made Vaughn jerk up from his chair. Palms flat on the table, he leaned forward, bringing his eyes closer to the screen. It was a missing person's flyer. There was a name—

*John Connor.*

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“This is a bad idea, Sarah,” Ellison said, stepping out of the way to keep from getting run over as Sarah marched past him into the back room.

“Yeah,” she fired back. “Almost as bad an idea as going out without telling anyone.”

“I told Murch and Savannah,” he pointed out with a glance over his shoulder into the warehouse proper. Sarah followed his gaze to where Cameron still sat at her table, and then refocused on his face. She saw some of her own unease echoed around his eyes, and her anger gave a last weary sputter and died. Ellison wasn’t sure what to do with the new and modified, walking, talking Tin Miss either, and he had nothing like her experience. Getting a little air was sounding like a better and better idea.

Leaving it for now, Sarah opened one of the many weapons lockers they’d retrieved from the last of Derek’s caches.

Ellison watched, a concerned look in his eye as Sarah grabbed a semi-automatic, loaded a clip and then pulled the chamber.

They hadn’t talked since she had brought Cameron’s new body back, not really. Sarah had always been a woman on the edge. Having been one of the people who’d put her there, Ellison understood that. He hadn’t known her when she’d been on the run with John, not as a person. First, she had been a means to making his career, and then she had been the ruin of it. He hadn’t known her then, but he knew this woman before him was someone else.

Someone lost.

He’d seen it before, too often amongst his former colleagues. She was a guttering candle, burning out, and desperately searching for one last blaze of glory to make it all worthwhile.

He tucked his hands into his pockets, knowing full well he wouldn’t be able to talk her out of this crazy idea she fully intended to carry out. Sarah Connor couldn’t be talked out of anything once she set her mind to it. “Has it occurred to you that this is a trap?”

Sarah tucked the semi-automatic in the back of her jeans. “A lot of things have occurred to me, James.”

“You have obligations.”

Sarah stilled. She turned towards Ellison and he looked pointedly to the doorway. Savannah was standing there, half obscured behind the wall. *The Wizard of Oz* was still held tightly to her chest and her wide blue eyes were fixed on the ugly gun that Sarah had just shoved into her jeans.

Anger and guilt collided and mixed in Sarah’s gut, churning into a thick morass that tasted like bile on the back of her tongue. She didn’t need a new pair of eyes looking at her like that, asking her to make all the bad things go away. Her gaze snapped back to Ellison, dark and

heated. “She’s not my obligation, James.” She slammed the locker shut. “You brought her here. She’s yours.”

Sarah held out a hand. Ellison sighed, pulling the keys from his pocket and dropping them into her palm. “You don’t have to do this.”

Her eyes lost focus, brows furrowing softly, and Ellison could almost see the weight pressing down on her shoulders. “I can’t... *not* do this.”

There was another flash of motion in the doorway, and Sarah turned to see Cameron pass Savannah with a gentle touch on the girl’s shoulder before opening the weapons locker.

“What are you doing?” Sarah asked, watching as Cameron pulled out two guns, tucking them both into her jeans to settle snugly against the small of her back. It was a stupid question; Cameron’s intentions were as clear as the fear on Savannah’s face had been, but the machine answered it anyway.

“I’m going with you.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Ellison put in with undisguised relief. Sarah wasn’t sure if he thought she needed protection, or if he just wanted Cameron away from the warehouse, but she wasn’t a big fan of either sentiment.

“Stay out of this!” she growled before turning back to Cameron. “You’re not going.” It was a knee-jerk reaction, an instinctual urge to get away from something she couldn’t cope with. Sarah was honest enough with herself to recognize that, but understanding it didn’t lessen the need to escape.

Cameron didn’t react, but she didn’t move out of the way either. Sarah stepped sideways, intending to go around, but Cameron stopped her with nothing more than the tips of her fingers against Sarah’s chest.

The tension levels in the tiny room jumped upwards. Ellison’s hand jerked towards his gun, but stopped short. His eyes flicked between the two of them, as if trying to decide whether he needed the weapon or not.

“You are not going alone,” Cameron stated firmly, her fingers pressing just hard enough that Sarah could feel the faint synthetic pulse beneath her skin, but not hard enough to hurt.

“Cameron...” Sarah trailed off, taken aback by the terminator’s sudden intensity and unexpected touch. This was what she had brought back into her life, a machine capable of doing whatever she thought necessary for the sake of her mission. It wasn’t a matter of closing a laptop, or taking out an earpiece anymore; this version of Cameron would be far harder to argue with. For a moment, Sarah felt cold fear lick up her spine, and then their eyes met and something hot and bright flared in her chest. Cameron’s words rang in her ears.

*Our mission.*

It was too much to deal with, and exactly what she needed, both at the same time. Most of Sarah desperately needed some space, but the small, and insistent, piece of her that had sent her out into the rain at dawn didn't want to let Cameron out of her sight.

So she swallowed hard and nodded, dropping her gaze to the floor. Cameron pulled her hand back without another word and turned on her heel. Zipping up her jacket, Sarah followed.

Savannah turned to watch them go as they passed, and Sarah glanced back over her shoulder to see the child almost reach out, almost protest, and then check herself. Even at five years old, Savannah was learning that there were things in the world that were more important than what she wanted or needed, and Sarah cursed fate for forcing her to watch another child grow up too fast.

James slid the door closed, the lock clanging loudly within the cavernous room. He turned to see both Murch and Savannah staring at him expectantly. Sarah was right. She wasn't the only one with obligations.

"What's going on now?" Murch asked, flopping down in Cameron's empty chair. "I mean, she practically freaked out when Cameron printed that missing person's flyer. She knows the kid's not hers, right?"

"With Sarah?" James ran his fingers over his chin. "Logic is not always the point," he said as if that would explain everything.

After a beat of silence, Murch shook his head, extending his hands out and up. "Then what is the point?"

James ignored him for a moment. He walked to the counter where the coffee machine sat and poured himself a cup, adding three sugars and stirring. What was the point? For sixteen years, Sarah had only one purpose - to protect her son. Now John was gone. He turned around, leaning against the counter as he took another sip.

"She's a mother," he said softly, his eyes straying to Savannah. The child was still watching the closed door, her little shoulders tense with the effort of trying to be good, trying to be grown up, like her Aunt Sarah and Aunt Cameron. "She'll do whatever it takes to protect her son."

Murch's look was pure disbelief. "Even if the kid's not hers?"

## Act Two

They were back at the compound, back inside Allison's quarters. Duke took his place next to Allison's cot, the back of the girl's fingers brushing lightly over his head. The dog had been Allison's touchstone. This was part of their routine; the girl couldn't fall asleep unless she was



touching the dog. Duke let her. He had learned the hard way how lightly Allison slept, almost fitfully without some sort of contact before she fell asleep.

All organic creatures needed sleep. Even sharks, creatures that had once been believed to require constant motion to survive, had formed the ability to sleep.

All organic creatures needed to sleep. Except Duke. Duke no longer needed sleep. He lay there on the floor, head resting on his paws, Allison's fingers on his head. Instead of sleeping, Duke waited and listened. Listened as Allison's breathing turned slow and relaxed. Listened long enough to make sure there were no twitches or quiet whimpers, no signs of a nightmare.

Certain the girl was finally asleep, the dog rose onto all fours. He padded quietly towards the door and then stilled. His eyes closed as his body began to change. Hair, nose, tail, all retracted inwards. The body condensed, losing shape, losing species, losing gender. In seconds, what had been a dog became a silver puddle on the floor, and the liquid metal known as Catherine Weaver oozed through the crack underneath the door.

Weaver took on the appearance of the dirt and grime covering the floor. From a distance, she looked like one of the many puddles that dotted the resistance hideout. But, Weaver wasn't one to take chances. She moved herself carefully across the floor. Pressing herself into the crack at the bottom of a wall, Weaver stretched her body until she was as thin as a wire, blending with a rivulet of water. She slithered through the compound, crossing corridors, gliding around corners, underfoot and over. Even past the dogs that would have normally gone into fits at her presence, Weaver went unnoticed. It wasn't the metal that bothered them; it was the metal pretending to be something else. They smelled the wrongness.

There was no need to deviate from her usual pattern. The path had proven efficient in both time and ease. While the human resistance knew how to defend themselves from the T-800s, it would be some time before Weaver's model would be built, even longer before they would be detectable by humans.

Pooling herself at the base of the wall, underneath a stack of long forgotten crates, Weaver once again stretched herself across the floor. She poured through a crack no reasonable security force could have considered a breach, and in a second, she was on the other side.

The human named Jesse's quarters. She and her male companion, Derek, were rutting on Jesse's cot. The female's hand was on the male's mouth to keep him silent as she writhed atop him. Weaver didn't waste any time on this display of carnal activity. She found human sexual intercourse inefficient and messy. There were better ways to keep the species alive, but that would have involved machines.

Minutes later, Weaver was outside the compound, where she pooled into a larger mass, still without shape. A mile outside the perimeter fence, Weaver morphed back into a dog, this one bigger than Duke, and female, with longer legs and a streamlined body. She began to run, continuing until the crumbling foundations, rocks and debris turned to hard ground, burned undergrowth and desiccated trees.

She ran until she reached the edge of a precipice, the canyon wall below her steep, overseeing a dry riverbed. The wind whipped hard, kicking up dry dirt and dust. Her body changed once more, back legs losing fur in favor of scales, dog's claws becoming talons, forelegs stretching and broadening into wings, and her muzzle sharpening, curving, into a beak.

Wings outstretched, Weaver dug her talons into the rocky soil, hopped once, and then flung herself over the edge, letting gravity take over. More like a glider than an actual bird, the wind still caught under her wings. She circled in the strong updraft of the canyon, until she was a mile above the earth. Duke's duty was to guard Allison, but Weaver had larger, more important responsibilities.

She circled the compound. Her eyes catching the things the humans always missed. But tonight, there were no creatures in the dark, no terminators lurking around the compound. The humans would never know how many Weaver had already relieved them of.

She soared higher, until she was just below the cloud layer. From here, she could see for miles. She saw the machines' transporter ships and the ever-searching drones as nothing more than tiny dots against the black curtain of the horizon. On the ground, she watched T-600s, scouring the plains.

She had searched for John Henry this way, night after night as a bird, and at Allison's side by day, but he'd been careful. Weaver had been as surprised as the humans when he showed up at the compound. She still didn't know what his plans were, or why he had left her behind when he made the time jump, but she was determined to find out.

She could wait, though. For now, both of her children were safe in the compound, and she was content to keep them that way until she had a better grasp on the dynamics of this new future. John Connor, the boy that should have been a hero, might yet prove to be useful, despite his relative insignificance in this timeline.

That was something else she had not expected. Without John Connor, the humans should have been disorganized, scattered and desperate for a leader, any leader to bring them together, to give them hope. But someone else had taken up his mantle when the world had burned.

Weaver's nightly investigations, and what she had overheard at Allison's side, had led her to believe this might not, as the humans believed, be Tango or the elusive Prophet. There was a different feel to the mind behind this resistance, a familiar one.

Weaver suspected a clue lay in the name without a face, the name even she had been unable to uncover a face for, the name that directed the invisible threads of information and espionage through both human and machine camps.

The Spider.

Weaver banked as something caught her eye.

A flash of light on the distant horizon. To the human eye, it would have appeared to be no more than lightning. But Weaver wasn't human, and this wasn't lightning.

Tilting her wings, Weaver turned, soaring closer.

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"In half a mile, turn right on Aceveda," the feminine voice spoke with a mild British accent through the tiny speaker of Sarah's GPS. Sarah frowned, narrowing her eyes at the device.

"What is it?" Cameron asked and Sarah shifted nervously in her seat.

"It's nothing." She shook her head. It *was* nothing, nothing more than that she'd gotten used to it being Cameron's voice that was her disembodied shadow. It was strange hearing a computerized version again after Cameron's clear tones. Unsettled by the vague notion that she missed the relatively uncomplicated relationship they'd had when Cameron had been at a comfortable distance, Sarah shrugged it off. "Tell me what you know."

"About?"

Sarah spared a glance at Cameron. "John Connor, the missing boy."

Cameron nodded, keeping her eyes on Sarah. Sarah looked at the road, the unsettling feeling growing stronger. Her chest still burned with the phantom sensation of Cameron's touch.

"John Connor. 15. Brown hair, blue eyes. Mother, Christine Connor, died in 1996. Father, Alexander Connor, sentenced to state prison in 2005. Adopted in 2006 by Joshua and Emily Kuhoric."

It was like a greatest hits compilation, same tune, different band. Only this John had found a family willing to adopt him. Her John's foster family had wanted to keep him... but they were dead, and she'd gotten him back, she'd gotten another chance. She wondered if this John's real parents, Alexander and Christine, had loved each other. She didn't wonder if they had loved each other as she and Kyle had, but she knew the pain of loss while raising a child. How that pain can warp a person, a parent. How that pain can shape the child left in its wake. Maybe Alexander had been a good father, maybe he hadn't. Sarah wondered if he'd felt the same sickening dread as she had when he lifted the pen and signed his rights as a parent away. She gripped the wheel tighter.

"...in point two miles, turn right on Aceveda."

The car slowed to a stop at the light a block from Aceveda. Sarah placed her arm on the windowsill, cheek slightly resting on her palm. Cameron had stopped talking. Sarah glanced at the terminator through the corner of her eye. Cameron sat as she always did, neatly, hands on her thighs. Usually, her face was turned forward or towards the passenger's window, scanning

the sights around them. Today, her head was turned toward Sarah. Her gaze not so blank, and if Sarah were inclined to define it, she'd call it focused. If she were inclined.

“What?”

Cameron continued to stare. Her brow twitched slightly and Sarah could only imagine what the machine was thinking. “This is probably a trap.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sarah muttered, clenching her jaw. The light turned green, and Sarah gently eased on the gas pedal. “I don't care.”

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“Sir.” Hale, head of security at Kaliba, limped after Vaughn as his boss made his way towards the elevators. He was still recovering from the gunshot wound to his ankle he'd received in his first encounter with Sarah Connor. “Are you sure about this?”

It was unusual, searching for John Connor personally, but not unheard of. Vaughn didn't want to have to say out loud that he didn't trust anyone else to do it correctly, but there had been too many incidents like the one that had taken out Miranda and Hale's own botch at the garage that had lost them both the possibility of Terissa Dyson's cooperation and one of their precious cyborgs. Too many failed missions, with nothing but the C.A.I.N. project bringing anything to fruition.

The decision to bring Danny Dyson on board had been a good one, especially with his ties to the Connors. But that was all ancient history. Vaughn needed something substantial to show his clients, something to reaffirm their faith in him. He needed to prove that the company could handle small time problems like the Connor woman and her fellow nut jobs.

A clipboard was handed to him by a man in a white lab coat. Vaughn paused a moment to look at the man's badge before clicking his pen and signing the papers.

“Has a team been sent to the Kuhoric home?” He stowed his pen back into his jacket pocket and handed the clipboard back to the lab tech.

Hale nodded. “Yes, sir. They should be arriving within the hour.”

The elevator doors opened and Vaughn smiled as he stepped into the lift. “Good.”

“Sir, I don't understand. This is a high risk operation. Why take it on personally?”

Vaughn stared at the man with eyes gone hard and steely, using his expression to say it all. Paling, Hale stepped backwards, letting the elevator doors close.

The John Connors of Los Angeles County had had a bad habit of disappearing over the last fifteen years or so, but this one had gone missing within the past week. If Sarah Connor was, or

had been, involved, Vaughn needed to know.

By any means necessary.

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“...You have arrived at your destination.”

It could have been any typical middle class suburban neighborhood in any typical suburban city - two story homes in light colors with manicured lawns, wooden mailboxes by the street, bicycles lying on their sides in the yards and SUVs in the driveways. A Norman Rockwell painting come to life, all mom, baseball, and apple pie.

Sarah used to dream about homes such as these, a home for her and John. It was a dream she'd all but given up on before John had left, and now she could only dream about what might have been. Whatever home she might find for herself, it would never have John in it again.

Resentment threatened, resentment against the people who could sleep soundly in their white-trimmed homes, oblivious to the war being waged around them.

There were cars jammed bumper to bumper in the driveway of the Kuhoric home and along both sides of the street, making parking near the home impossible. Sarah drove a bit further up the street, sandwiching the truck between a station wagon and brand new pickup truck. Reaching for the safety belt, Sarah let her fingers drift lower to the semi-automatic stowed between the seat and the gearshift.

She had mentally compartmentalized her life into two sections - life before she knew about the machines and life after. In life after, there had always been two constants - John and guns. Now, one of those constants was gone, leaving the metal under Sarah's fingers as a cold comfort of sorts.

The metal sitting in the passenger seat beside her was another matter entirely. Their drive had been one vast reservoir of silence around tiny islands of stilted conversation. The connection that had been there last night and this morning by the fire pit felt like it had been severed somehow. They were grating against each other like two edges of bone that couldn't figure out how to fit back together. The mission was the muscle that prevented them from retreating completely, but instead of helping, the forced proximity was only making it worse.

Almost involuntarily, Sarah noticed Cameron's gaze, the flicker of motion as her eyes went from Sarah's face to the gun and back again. Checking the weapon, more out of habit than anything, Sarah sighed as she stowed it in the glove box.

“I'm not planning to shoot anyone.” She eyed Cameron. “If that's what you're thinking.”

Cameron's face remained blank though her eyes made a passing glance as Sarah closed the glove box. “You never plan on shooting anyone.”

Sarah frowned. She couldn't decide if Cameron was simply making an observation or if there was a reproach hidden in there somewhere. In the past, Cameron had had a very direct approach to threats, repeatedly questioning Sarah's reluctance to do what needed to be done.

Sarah didn't know what Cameron's philosophy was now. She didn't know what modifications Cameron had made to her programming, or how they might affect her methods. That was something they were going to need to talk about, and soon. Just as soon as Sarah had made sure John Connor was safe.

"What are you planning?" Cameron interrupted Sarah's thoughts, the faintest trace of frustration coloring her voice. There was a visible tension to the set of her shoulders, the same uncertainty Sarah had seen in her eyes that morning. Cameron was worried.

That worry was like salt in a wound.

"Same as always," Sarah said, ignoring the unspoken concern. She reached down and unfastened her seatbelt. "We go inside. Ask questions. Try and find out as much about the boy as possible."

Sarah opened the driver's side door. Cameron didn't move. "What?" Sarah snapped.

The terminator tilted her head, tilted it the tiniest fraction of an inch. Anyone else might not have noticed; to Sarah, the gesture might as well have been a neon sign declaring that Sarah Connor was a complete idiot.

"Dressed like this?"

Sarah pulled her door shut, making a quick check of her appearance - jeans, boots, t-shirt, leather jacket. Her eyes then made their way to Cameron in her cargo pants, boots and bomber jacket zipped up over a black t-shirt. Sarah grimaced at her own tactical error. They needed to be as inconspicuous as possible, and here they were in the suburbs on a Sunday, looking like two people on their way to a fight club.

Cursing under her breath, Sarah set her elbow on the windowsill, pressing her fingers to her temple and rubbing in a circular pattern. "Why didn't you say something when we left?"

"You didn't tell me where we were going when we left." This time the reproach wasn't merely a possibility; Cameron was definitely annoyed.

"I didn't plan on having a tag along!" Sarah snarled, regretting it immediately when Cameron's expression went from subtle to non-existent.

"I'm sorry," she said after a tense moment, speaking to the steering wheel through gritted teeth. "I'm just..."

“Having second thoughts?” Cameron finished for her.

Sarah shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. Instead, her eyes went to the car parked in front of them, with its bumper stickers announcing the academic level of the owner’s child and mountains of athletic gear in the back.

“What school did you say John went to?” Sarah asked, a plan forming.

“Canego High School,” Cameron answered. “Why?”

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The school was empty, as expected for a Sunday. The parking lot bare, save for a lone car which had yet to be towed. The terminator strode across the lot, dressed in the jacket, shirt, jeans and boots he’d taken from a surprised bar patron who’d had the misfortune of choosing the wrong exit.

The machine didn’t think about the slices on his fingers as his fist broke through the glass of the front doors. The damage would heal. The door was chained from the inside, but his hand made steady work of the lock, crushing it within his fist and then yanking it off.

He walked the corridors of lockers and closed classrooms until he found the door he was looking for. It was also locked, but it took little effort to push through.

Sitting behind the desk, he turned on the computer and waited for it to boot, before beginning his search. It was an older model, and the task took longer than he had anticipated.

His head tilted coyly, ears alerted to the sudden sounds coming from the corridor. Footsteps. He rose from his seat, taking a position next to the open door. A security guard entered the room. He was old, with a balding head and a protruding belly. He turned towards the terminator, as if sensing the machine’s presence, hands fumbling at the radio on his belt before the terminator reached out with lightning speed and snapped his neck.

The terminator paused, staring down at the man as the last of his life force twitched out of him. He paused, but only briefly, before walking back to the computer. It had taken time but the information the terminator was searching for was on the screen. He had no need to print it. The moment his eye hit the screen, the information was instantly stored, immediately processed.

A machine with a singular purpose, he had found what he was looking for and he wouldn’t stop until his mission had been fulfilled.

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“Tuck your shirt in,” Sarah mumbled as she knocked on the Kuhoric door. “And quit fidgeting.”

“I am not fidgeting.” Cameron pulled at the hem of her two-sizes-too-large ‘Canego High School’ t-shirt. “It itches. And it smells.”

Sarah fought the sudden smile pulling at her lips. “Since when do you care if your clothes smell?”

Cameron chose not to answer, but the expression she turned on Sarah spoke volumes.

The door to the Kuhoric home swung open, revealing a small girl. She was no more than eleven with soft Asian features, her jet black hair pulled back into a ponytail, brown eyes, and a whole lot of attitude in the hand on her canted hips and the popping of the gum in her mouth. “Fliers or phones?”

“Excuse me?”

The girl rolled her eyes. “Are you here to pass out fliers or call people on phones?”

“Both?” Cameron suggested while Sarah was still marveling at the difference between this little princess and Savannah’s understated sincerity.

The girl sighed heavily, popping her gum again as she turned on her heel. “Whatever.”

Sarah entered first, Cameron on her heels. There were people in the Kuhoric home, lots of them. The air in the living room was filled with the sound of soft, sympathetic chatter. To the right was a large table with a map half buried under stacks of fliers. On the opposite side of the table, Mr. Kuhoric, Sarah presumed, stood with two other men, organizing what looked like a search party.

There were people crowded onto the couches, cell phones in hand. This was the source of most of the talking, as they made call after call, asking about John Connor.

Nodding to Cameron, Sarah waited until the terminator silently moved towards the back of the home before Sarah turned and continued her exploration of the living room. Moving on to the hallway, she scanned the family pictures lining the walls. Individual and family group photos, the standard school pictures, baby pictures and vacation photos. The young girl at the door was the Kuhoric’s other child, adopted a year after her birth, judging by one of the pictures on the wall.

In another, John Connor was several years younger, smiling through his missing two front teeth as he held up a large fish. Sarah grimaced. She’d never taken John on a real vacation. They could never afford to take any risks.

“Oh.” Pushing open a door at the end of the hall, Sarah stopped in her tracks. “I’m sorry.”

She’d entered the kitchen. Unlike the living room, it was almost empty, but Sarah recognized Emily Kuhoric from the family pictures. The woman was in her early forties, short brown hair



pulled back from her round face with a scarf, a soft pink color that matched her sweater. She was holding the end of a pearl necklace between her forefinger and thumb, nervously nibbling on the end. For some reason, it reminded Sarah of her own mother. Sarah hadn't thought of her in years.

Emily, surrounded by plates of cookies and cakes and tea cups ready to be filled, lifted her head, reddened eyes turning towards Sarah.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," Sarah mumbled, all at once regretting the resentment that had been building in her chest. This woman wasn't sleeping soundly. Not anymore.

"It's okay." Emily waved a hand. "It's hard, sometimes. Everybody wants to help. I just want John back."

"I know." Sarah took a step forward. "How long has he been gone?"

Emily sniffled lightly, pulling a tissue from her sweater pocket and politely dabbing her nose. "Four days."

Sarah gritted her teeth. Cameron had been keeping this a secret longer than she'd thought. "And the police?"

"They say they're doing everything they can, but with things the way they are these days, I don't think John's their top priority. Not anymore, anyway. There was an Amber Alert, but it didn't seem to help."

"And you have no idea where he could be or," Sarah paused at the thought. "Who might have taken him?"

Emily seemed to stiffen at the question. She lowered her necklace, smoothing it out before pulling more tea cups from the cupboard. "Do you have any kids?"

"Two, actually." Sarah's heart ached for the one truth she always allowed herself, no matter the cover. "John, and..." She hesitated, balking at the idea of identifying Cameron as her daughter now. "Savannah," she finished instead. The new lie felt more natural than the old one, almost effortless.

Emily lifted the boiling kettle off the stove and began pouring two cups, one for herself and one for Sarah. "How old is your son?"

"Seventeen." Sarah forced a chuckle. "Going on forty."

Emily smiled. "I know what you mean. They grow up so fast. Think they're older and smarter than they actually are."

Sarah leaned against the counter, folding her arms over her chest. "All you want to do is

protect them. All they want to do is grow up and get as far away from you as possible.”

Emily nodded, holding out one of the cups. Sarah accepted it with a quiet smile. She would have preferred coffee but it was hot and full of caffeine, and she understood the need to stay busy.

“Where’s your son now?” Emily asked.

The cup held before her lips, Sarah paused, her eyes looking distant. “He’s with his father.”

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John twisted and turned in his bunk. It wasn’t the eerie, tension-filled quiet of hundreds of people always on alert, the threadbare blanket that itched like crazy, or his rifle in the bed beside him that was keeping him awake. The routine wasn’t new, and he’d gotten used to everything else.

He couldn’t sleep because he was anxious, anxious with a nagging inexplicable anxiety that poked and prodded at him until rest was impossible. The others would be going on a mission soon, one more important than any that he’d been included in, where failure wasn’t an option. But that was every mission, both now and in the past. John was anxious, not because of the mission itself, but because he had no place in it.

He wasn’t going, and the endpoint was not to protect him. John still didn’t know how to reconcile himself with either of those facts.

All his life, he’d been told he was special, important and even necessary. Now, he was in a world where, by all accounts, he was anything *but* necessary. The resistance still had leaders - Tango, the mysterious Prophet and this Spider everyone seemed to know about, but no one knew personally- and they all had one thing in common. They didn’t need John Connor.

John tossed off his blanket, sitting up and draping his legs over the side of his cot. Slipping his feet into his boots and grabbing his jacket and rifle, John left his quarters, stopping in his tracks just as he closed his door. Duke sat no more than ten feet from him in the hallway. John ran a hand over the back of his neck, smoothing out the hairs that had leapt to attention in the instant before he’d recognized the dog.

"Hey boy, where's your mom, huh?" John reached out, intending to give Duke a scratch behind the ears, but the dog rose to all fours, turning in the opposite direction and padding away.

Shrugging it off, John walked aimlessly through the corridors, no real destination in mind, just the need to be in motion. He made his way to the outer walls of the compound. As much as he wanted to go outside the fence, John quelled the urge, not out of fear but how much trouble he’d get into for breaking ranks.

“Connor!”

John heard the familiar voice calling his name and felt the familiar mix of emotions jerk in his chest. He looked up to see Kyle sticking his head out of one of the many lookout posts in the buildings that overlooked the wall.

“What are you doing walking around?” Kyle asked in a forced whisper.

John shrugged sheepishly, thankful it was Kyle and not Derek. Not only because this world’s Derek was a hard-ass who probably would have skinned John alive, but because he yearned to spend time with Kyle, even if the soldier who had fathered him didn’t seem to share that urge or the knowledge of their connection. “Needed to stretch my legs. I couldn’t sleep.”

Kyle inhaled, squinting his eyes like he was examining John, sizing him up. “Get up here then.”

John slung his rifle over his shoulder and climbed up the wall, using the makeshift ladder made out of a series of holes gouged into the wall. He heaved himself up over the edge and into a small room. Once inside, a soldier John didn’t recognize brushed past him without a word to crawl out the way he’d come in.

The lookout post sat in what used to be a corner office. The glass in the windows had long ago been blown out, and refuse and fractured stones were piled high to hide them from the outside, but from inside, they had almost an 180 degree view.

Kyle lay on his stomach on a pile of rocks covered with slats of wood. Elbows propped, he scanned their section of wall through a pair of binoculars. John, realizing he’d been called up to relieve the other soldier, took the secondary position, mimicking Kyle’s pose and picking up the binoculars left for him.

It never failed to amaze John - although, ‘amaze’ probably wasn’t the right word - the utter devastation of the world he’d grown up trying to save. Destroyed buildings, scorched and blackened earth and a night sky that was never truly dark, lit up by fires still burning, tens and hundreds of miles away. That was what made up his world now.

It was a world his mother had spent sixteen years trying to prevent. John inhaled, feeling his chest clench as it always did whenever he thought of his mother. However it had ended, her fight was over. The fight was John’s now, or it would have been, if anyone here had given a damn what he thought.

He lowered his binoculars, turning his eyes towards Kyle. A good man, John’s mother had always said of him, a hero. Alias after alias, it was the same story. John couldn’t have said whether Kyle really was a good man or not, he’d had so little contact with him, and Kyle may have been a hero to the young Sarah Connor, but here he was just another soldier.

They were both out of their times.

John would never be the leader of the resistance, no terminator would be sent back in time to assassinate him or his mother, so no Kyle would be sent back to protect her. John had forfeited both of their opportunities for heroism. Did Kyle know? Was that the source of the disappointment John saw in his eyes every time the soldier looked at him?

Ask Kyle, Tango had told him, but John was afraid of the answer.

“What?” Kyle asked, twitching under John’s gaze.

“Nothing.” John placed his binoculars back up to his eyes. “I was just thinking.”

“Who said you were allowed to think?” Kyle growled, but the corners of his lips turned up as he said it.

John’s heart jumped as he recognized the expression. He’d always known he had his mother’s eyes, but she’d never told him he had his father’s smile. He returned the grin hesitantly and saw Kyle’s eyes widen a fraction before he looked away.

There was an awkward pause before Kyle sighed. “So what is it that’s chewing on you, Connor?”

John scratched the seven or eight hairs that had begun growing on the bottom of his chin. “Have you ever... have you ever thought about what you’ll do when this is over?”

Kyle lowered his binoculars, turning his head towards John. “Over?”

“You know.” John shrugged. “The war with the machines.”

Kyle turned his head forward again, continuing his duty as lookout. “No.”

“Never?” John scrunched his brows, not sure if Kyle was lying or if he just didn’t like his father’s answer. “You never thought about... kids, maybe? A son?”

Kyle stiffened and lowered his binoculars. “Have you got a real question to ask or are you just making conversation?” The faint light that reached his eyes betrayed a challenge.

John swallowed. Kyle had just handed him an opening, albeit a terse one, and John wanted to take it, meant to take it, but the words wouldn’t go past the lump in his throat. Kyle knew, John couldn’t think of any other reason for the way the soldier was looking at him, as if daring him to claim the relationship, but he wasn’t going to claim John first. Maybe he didn’t want to claim him at all.

Pain closed John’s throat further, and all he could do was shake his head.

Kyle snorted. “Those are fantasies, John. Fantasies are for people with futures. We don’t have the luxury of thinking about the future or the past.” Kyle paused, jaw clenching as his lips

pursed together tightly. “Even if I did meet a woman I’d want to have a child with, even if we do win the war with the machines, I wouldn’t wish this world on anyone, not if there was something I could do to prevent it. If I had a son, I’d hope he’d feel the same way.”

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Cameron entered John Connor’s room. There had been an effort made to tidy it; the bed was recently made, the floor vacuumed, but it still had the smell Cameron associated with teenaged boys - the same scent as the shirt she was wearing, a cloying stench of hormonal sweat and dirty socks.

There were posters on the walls, action figures on the bookshelf, a computer, television, DVD player, and a game system with stacks of games piled around it. Cameron hadn’t been inside the room of any teenaged boy other than that of her John. She didn’t know if this was ‘normal’ or not, but she found it overly cluttered. Should the need arise for this John Connor to leave quickly, he’d be dead the minute he tripped over one of the cords snaking across the floor.

She walked to the desk, casually sorting through the pile of schoolbooks, spiral-bound notebooks and unfinished homework. There was nothing of note, nothing unexpected.

She made her way towards John’s closet, wrinkling her nose as she opened it and discovered the source of the dirty sock smell. Some of John’s shoes needed to be discarded, immediately. She began sliding his clothes on the rack, sifting through jacket pockets.

“What are you doing?”

Cameron turned to see the youngest Kuhoric standing in the entrance of the closet, arms folded over her tiny chest.

“I’m helping to search for John,” Cameron answered honestly, surprised at the frustration in her own voice. Not at the emotion itself- this mission was a waste of their time, a waste of Sarah’s energy and focus—but at the aural expression in her voice.

“By going through his clothes?” the child asked suspiciously, reaching a volume Cameron estimated capable of bringing unwanted attention.

In a nanosecond, Cameron processed the various scenarios by which she could deal with the child. She knew what her original programming would have told her to do, but she wasn’t a terminator anymore. She thought of Savannah, of what she would do to protect her, and for the first time, took that thought further, acknowledging that this little girl was someone else’s Savannah.

“Yes,” Cameron said, going back to her search. If the girl was going to sound the alarm, then she would deal with it when it happened. The research she had done to prepare herself to interact appropriately with Savannah had also told her that most children, given the choice, would rather follow the lead of a same gendered role model than appear un-cool by questioning

their actions.

This effect was enhanced if the child believed they were being taken into confidence.

The girl squinted her eyes, popping her gum. “Are you a cop?”

“No.”

“How do you know John?”

“I don't.” Cameron paused, pulling out a tiny slip of paper from John's jacket pocket. A receipt. Cameron tucked it into her pocket.

The girl snorted a laugh. “Yeah, John doesn't know girls like you.”

Cameron turned her head towards the child, tilting it slightly. “What do you mean?”

“You know. Pretty.” She unfolded her arms and entered the closet, imitating Cameron by rifling through John's pockets as if she knew what she was searching for. “What's your name?”

“Cameron.”

“My name's Sun, but everyone calls me Sunny,” Sunny said. “You want some gum?” she asked, already pulling out a packet from her pocket and handing it to Cameron.

“Thank you.” Cameron unwrapped her piece and placed it into her mouth.

Sunny went back to rummaging through John's pockets. “I don't understand what the big deal is. It's not like he hasn't done this before.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh.” Sunny paused, lowering her head slightly as she realized she'd said something she wasn't supposed to. “John's run away before.”

“When?” There hadn't been anything in her research about John Connor previously running away.

“A couple years ago. That's why we moved here.” Sunny shrugged. “His real dad got out of jail back in Arizona. But John, like, came back after a couple days anyway. Mom and Dad got a court order and everything to keep the guy away, but it didn't really matter since he got sent back to prison.” Bored with searching through clothes, Sunny turned to Cameron. “Are you adopted?”

Cameron blinked. “I don't know.”

“I am. So is John. I don’t get why he wants to be with his real dad so much. He’s...” Sunny frowned. “A bad man. Mom and Dad are really cool, and they love us and stuff.” Sunny paused, her face scrunching like she’d been given a difficult math question. “But, I guess that’s what parents are supposed to do, save you from doing something really stupid?” she said, not certain if that should have been a question or a statement.

Cameron stared back at the girl, her own questions running through her mind. “What if he’s not supposed to be saved?”

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“What did you find out?” Sarah asked, sliding the key into the ignition and turning it before Cameron had even shut her door.

Cameron fastened her seatbelt and looked up, studying Sarah’s profile. She wanted to reach out and push back the dark lock of hair that always fell forward over Sarah’s eyes, wondering what it would feel like under her fingers. Of all of the new sensations to explore, this was the one that she kept coming back to. She had touched Sarah before, both in the past and since she had left the system. She knew the texture of Sarah’s skin, so there was no reason for the compulsion to experience it again and again, and yet, she wanted to. More, she wanted Sarah to look at her with something other than anger or wariness.

She wanted to be doing anything but this, this pointless exercise that was putting them both at risk and doing nothing but hurting Sarah when the last thing the other woman needed was more pain.

Cameron turned her eyes forward. “Nothing,” she lied.

Sarah glanced away from the house, her eyes narrowing. “Don't lie to me...”

Cameron didn’t think that now would be an appropriate time to touch Sarah, but her fingers still itched to do so. She closed them on the fabric of her jeans instead. “This search is a mistake. We have other priorities.”

“Our priorities are what I goddamned say they are!” Sarah snapped. She reached over, opening the glove box and pulling out her semi-automatic. Checking the clip and loading the chamber, she slid it back into the space next to her seat.

Cameron watched without turning her head, realizing that Sarah was reassured by having the gun close to hand. The weapon centered her. Cameron didn’t think that was healthy; Sarah needed more than a gun. Cameron had hoped to fill that need when she returned to her body, but so far she hadn’t succeeded. Her eyes went from the gun up to Sarah’s face. “He's not your son.”

“That’s not the point!” Sarah hissed through her teeth.

Cameron felt her own synthetic pulse pick up speed and realized that she was becoming angry. Sarah was making her angry. “What is the point, Sarah? Why are we here?”

Sarah’s mouth opened and then closed. She put a hand to her forehead, pushing her fingers hard against her skull. Things were... shifting, no, make that spiraling. Cameron’s presence was forcing her to think about things more than she wanted to. She didn’t want to think anymore, she just wanted to do. She couldn’t save her son, and she couldn’t save herself, but she needed to save *someone*.

Sarah pulled her hand away from her face and turned, once again, to Cameron. “I have to do this.”

“Why?”

“Because...” Sarah said softly, closing her eyes, “because protecting John Connor is all I know how to do. Do you understand?”

The silence stretched while Cameron weighed her options. She could refuse to give Sarah the information she needed, and Sarah might agree to return to the warehouse, but Cameron knew from experience that it wouldn’t end there. Sarah wouldn’t be able to let it go. She would lose more sleep, and if anything happened to the boy that she could have prevented...

Cameron released the grip she had on her jeans, smoothing out the wrinkled fabric. “John Connor’s father was released from prison three and a half weeks ago,” she admitted, without looking up. “John’s been keeping up a secret correspondence with him. If the boy has disappeared, he’s probably with his father.”

Sarah exhaled a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. She shifted the car into drive and pressed on the accelerator. “Thank you.”

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“Dammit!” Murch cursed under his breath as he dropped the last screw. He slid off his chair, getting down on hands and knees, cursing once again because it had been awhile since the floor had been mopped and God only knew what kind of germs were on it. Not to mention all the dust getting sucked into the computers.

Finding what he was looking for, Murch lifted himself back into his chair, picking up the screwdriver and reattaching the panel to one of the many computer towers.

“What are you doing?” Ellison asked, walking down the stairs and heading towards the coffee machine.

“Diagnostic,” Murch answered. “The computer’s acting... wiggly and I can’t figure out why.”

“Wiggly?”



“Yeah, you know,” Murch turned in his seat, wiggling his fingers. “Wiggy. Cameron did something to the network, but I have no idea what she did or how to undo it.”

Ellison frowned. He walked over to the table, setting his mug down on its surface and taking a seat. “Is it working?”

“Oh yeah. It’s working, the connection is up, and all the laptops are picking it up, it’s just...”

“Wiggy,” Ellison finished. “I got it.”

Murch nodded and went back to screwing the panel back on. Satisfied, he turned the tower around and began plugging the cables back in. “So,” he spoke aloud. “Mini Me asleep?”

Ellison chuckled. “Yeah. I volunteered to finish reading *The Wizard of Oz*, but she only wants Sarah to read it to her.”

“Great,” Murch snorted. “The next time that woman has a gun pointed to my head, I’ll just remember to ask her to read me a book.”

“No one’s making you stay.” Ellison stilled and turned towards the man. “Why *are* you staying? I would have thought you’d have left as soon as Cameron was up and running...”

Murch untangled a cable and fitted it into its proper slot. “I... I don’t know. This is everything I’ve been working on since... forever.” He lifted his head from behind the computer and looked over at Ellison. “I can do that? Just... leave?”

“I won’t stop you.”

“What about,” Murch looked about nervously. “You know, her. The chick with the big guns? She said I could, weeks ago, but she’s been a little...”

“Crazy?” Ellison supplied without a trace of irony. He shrugged. “I have a feeling she’ll be relieved to see you gone. As long as you remember to keep your mouth shut.”

“Like anyone would believe me,” Murch snorted. He quieted for a second. “But, it might be nice. Do you really think it would be that easy?”

“No.” Ellison shifted in his chair again. “It won’t be that easy. To just get up and walk back into the world knowing what you know. That the world could be ending, you might have been able to stop it and you just walked away.” He picked up his cup of coffee and took a sip. “No, I don’t think it would be easy at all.”

Murch opened his mouth, but no words came out. He had no idea what to say, and anything he might have come up with was cut off by the shrill demand of Ellison’s cell phone.

Ellison fished the phone out of his pocket, pressed in the code Sarah had given him, listening for the response. “Hello?”

“Ellison?” Sarah snapped in an irritated tone. “Do you have a pen?”

“I have a keyboard.” He snagged the nearest keyboard and poised his hands over its keys.

“Whatever. I need you to do a search on an Alexander Connor. He’s John Connor’s biological father. He was recently released from prison. I need everything you can find on him. He may have some idea where John is.”

“Okay...” Ellison pinned the phone between his jaw and shoulder as he typed, leaving the rest up to Murch once he had the name down. “What’s going on?” he asked as he gave up his chair for the scientist.

“I’m following up a lead,” Sarah answered. “Everything’s fine.”

“Do you need anything?”

There was a pause on the line, long enough to make Ellison shift nervously on his feet.

“No.”

“Alexander Connor!” Murch shouted loud enough to be heard over the phone. “I got it.”

“What’s the address?” Sarah asked.

### Act Three

“Turn left here. We’re going to Carson.” Sarah closed her cell phone and placed it back into her pocket. She’d switched places with Cameron, letting the machine drive while she made a few phone calls.

The car continued in a straight path.

“Cameron.” Sarah felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on edge. “Did you hear me? I said turn left.”

“I heard you,” the terminator replied, her eyes making a quick glance to the rearview mirror. “We’re being followed.”

Sarah’s eyes immediately went to the passenger-side mirror. Traffic was practically bumper-to-bumper and she had no idea how long they’d been followed or by whom. “How long?”

Cameron changed lanes, merging right. “Since we left the Kuhoric’s.”

“And you’re just mentioning this now?” Sarah snapped, already reaching for her gun. “Which one?”

“Black sedan, five cars back. Black SUV, eight cars back.”

“Shit,” Sarah mumbled. She hadn’t seen them, either of them.

The truck slowed to a stop at a red light.

“What are you doing?” Sarah asked, alternately cursing their switch and being grateful Cameron was driving. Her track record with car chases wasn’t great. The cross traffic was light, but not light enough to get through without causing a scene or an accident.

Cameron didn’t wait for an answer. With the light still red and cars still driving by, Cameron slammed on the accelerator. The truck lurched forward, tires squealing and metal screaming as it scraped any car not quick enough to get out of the way.

In the rearview mirror, Sarah watched as both the sedan and the SUV swerved into the opposite lane, surging forward and weaving through the sudden traffic jam. They disappeared temporarily as Cameron made a hard right turn, the truck practically tilting onto two wheels. She cut onto a side street, making a left that put them back into a residential area where she stepped harder on the accelerator as the houses whipped by.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Sarah yelled, fingers digging into the plastic of the windowsill as the speedometer hit fifty in a residential area, which was sure to attract attention. “Cameron!”

“Yes!” Cameron snapped back. “I know where I’m going!”

“Mind sharing with the rest of the class?”

“No time,” Cameron answered, the truck tilting hard to the left as she made another sharp turn.

The luck was all on their pursuer’s side. Cameron turned the truck right into the path of the sedan. She jerked the wheel, the vehicles barely missing each other. Sarah watched in the mirror as the sedan did a quick turn and, again, they were being followed.

“Goddamnit, Cameron,” Sarah hissed in frustration. It wasn’t Cameron’s fault, she knew. It was the loss of control; the frustration of not being the one behind the wheel was turning her stomach into knots. “We need to lose them.”

“I know.”

It was a Sunday in a residential area. The longer they stayed, the greater their chances of hitting someone. Sarah imagined one of the bikes she saw lying in the yards, imagined a boy who

looked a lot like John, her John, dashing out into the street as their odometer hit sixty. “Get us the hell out of here!”

Another loud squeal of tires, and the sedan was joined by the SUV. Sarah felt like a rat in a maze. She had no idea who these people were, what they wanted, and she didn’t care. All she wanted was to escape.

Cameron made another hard left, then a hard right, and the streets widened, the buildings changing from houses to an industrial section, where the streets were emptier. The switch was both good and bad. Good because it lowered their chances of an accident, bad because the cars tailing them were getting closer.

There was a plunking noise, like hail falling onto the hood. Sarah recognized the sound immediately - someone was shooting at them. A second later, the rear window exploded in a shower of glass. Sarah turned around completely in her seat, rolling down the window. She climbed halfway out and balanced herself on the windowsill. Left hand under her right wrist, she steadied her shot. She didn’t want a shootout at sixty miles an hour, but they’d started it.

Sarah pulled her trigger. Three quick shots and she watched as each bullet punched a hole in the front window of the sedan. The car swerved, slowing down, its passenger scurrying back into the cab. But that still left the SUV. The two cars switched positions. An arm shot out of the passenger window, a flash of white and Sarah felt something whiz by her ear. Cameron swerved the truck. Sarah fired again, missing completely.

“Sarah!”

That was all Sarah heard before she felt a hand grabbing her belt and yanking her back into the cab. Instantly, her side of the truck was scraping against a wall, sparks filling her vision. They’d entered an alley, a very tight alley. Had Cameron been a half second later in grabbing Sarah, she would have been nothing more than a greasy stain on a wall.

The alley opened and the truck burst onto the street; Cameron made another hard right turn, the g-force so strong that Sarah was practically in her lap. Then there was a sign. Actually, it was more a flash of color that resembled something familiar. Sarah finally got a sense of where they were.

“Turn left!” she yelled. “Now!”

Cameron crossed two lanes of traffic, running a red light, leaving another impending accident in her wake.

“There!” Sarah pointed towards their right, “the mall.”

The last time Sarah had been to this particular mall it had been the grand opening. Two days later, a man named Kyle Reese had entered her life and nothing had been the same since.

The parking lot was practically filled to capacity, cars and people streaming everywhere. Cameron slowed to the appropriate speed as they drove down the ramp. Sarah was already unfastening her seatbelt.

“It doesn’t matter where you park,” she said, already picking up anything that could identify them. “We’re not staying.”

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“We lost them, sir.”

“That’s,” Vaughn paused, smiling politely as Emily Kuhoric handed him a cup of tea. “Unfortunate. And you’ve no clue as to where they might have gone?”

“No, sir,” the voice in his ear replied immediately. Vaughn inhaled deeply, quelling the urge to scream at the top of his lungs. He kept the fake smile plastered on his lips as he rose from his seat and walked towards a less crowded part of the living room.

“You understand there will be consequences.” Vaughn set his cup down, using his free hand to add two creams and a sugar.

“Yes, sir. Do you want us to return to the base?”

“No.” Vaughn’s smile turned genuine at the fear he heard in the other man’s voice. “There’s still a way for you to redeem yourself. I need you to find a man, an Alexander Connor. She won’t be back here. If she’s going anywhere, it’s to find him. And we need to get there first.”

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Sarah jerked awake, her heart leaping with momentary panic before she remembered where she was. They’d abandoned the truck in the mall and used the crowd of shoppers as camouflage until they were sure they’d lost their would-be pursuers. Five minutes later, they had hopped on a bus, and now they were in a cemetery.

It seemed morbidly appropriate.

For once, Cameron hadn’t argued, and for that Sarah was grateful. Understandably, she’d never been fond of the idea of fate or destiny, but when she’d seen the cemetery through the window, she felt like something had drawn her here.

Her eyes adjusted slowly to the soft darkness within the columbarium. It had been over a year since she’d come to say goodbye. Straightening from her awkward curl against the wall, she sat up and tilted her head back. Her eyes went first to the opposite wall, where the plaque bearing Andy Goode’s name hung, and then to the terminator standing at the end of the hall.

Cameron was staring out into the late afternoon sun, motionless the way only a machine could

be, but she turned when Sarah drew her feet across the floor, pulling her knees up against her chest. “You’re awake.”

“Why did you let me fall asleep?” Sarah asked shortly.

Cameron glanced back once more into the light, as if making a last check of the perimeter, before returning to Sarah. Her movements had always been fluid, but on the stone floor of the mausoleum, her steps were almost whisper quiet.

Sarah found it eerie.

She half expected Cameron to drop down beside her, but the terminator kept her distance, coming only close enough so that they could speak without raising their voices. “Because you needed it,” she said at last, her voice devoid of inflection.

Sarah couldn’t argue with that. She ran a hand over the back of her neck, squeezing the muscles. It didn’t help that the only reason she could have fallen asleep so quickly—and slept so soundly—was because Cameron had been watching over her. “How long?”

“Four hours.”

“Cameron,” Sarah growled, but her heart wasn’t in it. She wasn’t ready to stand just yet anyway. She still felt languid, tired, aching and sore. It was as if the very act of sleep had awakened all the long ignored damage, and now her body was demanding rest so it could heal. She stretched out her left arm, wincing as the old ache under an ugly scar spiked, sending pins and needles down to her fingertips.

When she glanced up, Cameron was watching her, but the machine looked away before Sarah could catch her eyes. The sensation of something being out of place between them grew stronger, almost painfully so, the bones scraping and jerking apart again.

“Cameron,” Sarah said again, but this time she made an effort to soften her voice. “Are you... okay?”

Cameron was silent for so long that Sarah almost gave up on getting an answer, and then...

“No,” the terminator said finally. “I am not okay.”

“What-” Sarah started, but Cameron interrupted her.

“You could have been killed,” she said bluntly. “I cannot protect you from yourself.”

“Who asked you to?” Sarah snapped without thinking, responding automatically to the pointed accusation, but Cameron’s answer stopped her usual defensive cycle cold.

“You did.”

Sarah gaped, searched for a halfway believable denial, and couldn't find one. "I..."

Cameron stepped closer, kneeling down so that Sarah had to press her spine back against the wall and wrap her arms more tightly around her knees to avoid contact. She dropped her eyes to the floor, but Cameron's fingers curled under her chin, gentle but insistent, and forced her to look up again.

"Why am I here, Sarah?" Cameron asked evenly. "You said you wanted me to come back, you risked your life to get this body, this chip, but now that I'm here you are pushing me away." Frustration, almost as clear as if Cameron had been human, crossed her features and entered her voice. "I don't understand."

That made two of them. Sarah couldn't explain the contradiction to herself, let alone anyone else. All she knew was that Cameron's presence had become both essential to her ability to keep putting one foot in front of the other and its greatest threat. It was a delicate balancing act, and Sarah felt like more and more plates were being added to the stack.

Unable to bear that intense brown stare, Sarah lowered her eyes to the corner of Cameron's jaw instead. "I don't suppose you could be here from a little farther away?" she asked wryly.

Cameron's touch didn't falter. "No."

No, that would be too easy. Sarah watched the synthetic pulse under Cameron's skin beating out a steady rhythm, felt her own ease when Cameron let go of her chin, only to jump at slightest brush of the backs of Cameron's fingers as she slid them under the watch around Sarah's neck and lifted it slightly from her chest.

"You cannot have it both ways," Cameron continued. "If I am here, then I am here with you. If you do not want me here, then I can pursue our mission more efficiently in the system." She paused. "I would rather be here, with you, but I do not want to be here without you. I do not want you to die for this boy who is not John, not our John."

*Our John...* Sarah swallowed hard, gritting her teeth as her eyes found something of interest on the floor. "Cameron..."

She felt Cameron's fingers gently releasing the watch before the terminator quickly rose to stand on her feet. "It's getting late," Cameron said flatly. "We should go."

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John couldn't sleep. Again. It was becoming a habit, one that would have been marginally less trying if he'd been able to pinpoint the thoughts that were plaguing his mind into sleeplessness, but there were too many candidates.

He rose, tossing his legs over the side and running a hand through his hair. He gazed about his

quarters, his room. He'd been trained - since birth practically - to pack light. He'd learned not to get accustomed to whatever room was currently designated as 'his,' learned not to decorate it or personalize it. He never really stayed for long anyway.

But he must have been a slow learner, because despite everything, he'd kept trying. Because he always believed, maybe this time, they'd actually stay. As he gazed around his new room, John realized he missed the little decorations his mother had always discouraged. The little things that made this room John Connor's room instead of the room John Connor occupied.

He climbed to his feet, zipping up his jacket and slinging his rifle over his shoulder. All he'd ever need - the clothes on his back, boots on his feet, a rifle over his shoulder - just like Sarah taught him.

Opening the door, John looked down to see Duke sitting on the floor outside of his quarters again.

The repetition made it stranger. "What are you doing here?" John murmured, crouching down to pet the dog. Duke didn't run off this time, which worried John more. The dog never left Allison's side, everyone knew that, and took it for granted. But, here he was, with no Allison in sight.

Duke remained motionless as John petted him, sitting there as if the signs of affection John showed were a mere formality he had to endure. With one last pat, John rose to his feet. He re-slung his rifle and began walking down the corridor. Curious, John looked back over his shoulder.

Duke was gone.

Shrugging, John continued walking, tucking the strange encounter with Allison's dog in the back of his mind. The corridors were filled as they always were with soldiers and refugees, and they eyed him as he walked past. They knew who he was now, if not who he should have been. He was no longer John Connor, the stranger, he'd become 'John Connor, the one who's friends with metal.'

Most of them trusted Tango, they trusted the unseen Prophet and the even more elusive Spider, but they didn't trust John. They tolerated John Henry's presence in the compound, but with the machine out of sight, their unease had to be directed somewhere, and John was a natural target.

Some of the looks were the kind that could get a man a bullet to the back if he wasn't careful. Not many, but a few. John ignored them. He could only trust that their respect for their leaders was strong enough to protect him.

It'd been four days since John Henry had appeared at the compound's doorstep. And even though it was John's name the machine had called out, John had been kept out of the loop. They'd used him to get John Henry, and with that accomplished, there was no more use for John Connor.



There were rumors floating around that Prophet had been recalled from wherever he'd been to deal with the John Henry situation, but John had no idea if that was true or not. No one in the know had told him directly.

The communal bathrooms were ahead of him. John thought about stopping to relieve himself when the door opened and he stopped dead in his tracks. For John, it'd been a little over a year since he'd last seen her. For her, it was over a decade but, he could see it in her eyes, she still recognized him. She'd been a foot soldier in a gang back then. Now, as John watched the soldiers around him straighten, he realized that she was something more.

"John Connor." The woman who had carried his mother's last message out of prison nodded her head.

"Hi," John stammered. "I'm sorry. I don't remember your name."

"That's because you never asked." The stony face softened into a soft smile as she extended her hand. "Sabine."

Her grip was firm, strong, and just like that, their greeting was over. She nodded her head again before releasing John's hand and heading down the corridor, a stream of soldiers following in her wake.

John shook his head in disbelief and struck the question of who else he might meet from his past from his mind. There were only two people he wanted to see again, and John already knew they weren't here. One was dead and the other... John thought of Cameron for the first time in days, her eyes, her face and the way she'd tried to puzzle out each new piece of humanity and add it to her repertoire.

He still missed her, but the sharp edges of the pain had been worn down by time and distance. He'd been here for over a month before he'd even met Tango, another before he'd finished boot camp with Derek, and then spent more months looking for John Henry. John added up the time in his head and stopped cold when he realized it had been nearly a year since he'd landed in the future. His eighteenth birthday was coming up. He'd be a man.

John wondered what Cameron would think of that, what his mother would think. He'd killed his first man on his sixteenth birthday, and his seventeenth had passed while his mother was in prison. It wasn't a great track record, but he liked to think they would have thought of him when the date had come and gone in the past. Or, that his mother would have... Cameron hadn't survived the loss of her chip, had she?

John pushed such depressing ruminations aside.

The bathroom was empty, quiet, except for the erratic drip from the ceiling and the few rats that didn't both to scurry when John entered. Standing by the makeshift urinal, John leaned forward, resting his forearm against the wall, and placing his head onto it as he closed his eyes.

He learned long ago to take his solitude wherever and whenever he could.

Except, John wasn't alone.

It was the rats that tipped him off. Their soft chattering suddenly turned to a frantic screeching noise as he zipped up his pants. It sounded like the dogs.

The dogs.

John's eyes snapped open. He spun around, his hands going for the rifle slung over his shoulder.

There was a puddle on the floor, like water but not. It was too shiny, too shimmery compared to the dark, grimy look of the other wet stains on the floor. John had seen it before. The puddle began to rise into a shapeless mass.

John raised his rifle. In an instant, an appendage, shining like a silver sword, streaked out, knocking the rifle aside. A mass of metal wrapped around John's hand, encasing it, making it impossible to fire. Another liquid limb snaked out. Lightning fast, it pressed itself against John's throat and shoved him hard against the wall. John flailed, kicking and punching to no avail. The metal against his throat squeezed, cutting off his oxygen.

Just when the edges of his vision turned black and stars formed on his eyes, the metal took form. Red hair, pale skin, a white and crisp suit. All John could do was look on in shock.

Catherine Weaver stood before him.

She pulled back the hand holding John's trigger finger, bringing her index finger to her lips. John relaxed and the hand on his throat loosened. He sucked in a large breath of air.

"What does John Henry want?" she asked in a thick brogue accent.

"I don't know." The hand around his throat tightened. "I swear! I don't know. I haven't seen him since the day he entered the compound."

The hand loosened again. Catherine squinted her eyes, gazing hard at John. She released her hold completely, taking a step backwards as John slumped, a hand going to his throat as he coughed.

"No matter," she said, arms slack at her sides, looking crisp and clean, a stark contrast to everything around them. "I have a job for you, John."

"You can't be serious." John sputtered, rubbing at his throat. There'd be a bruise in the morning. If he lived.

The terminator stared back at him, eyes blank and expressionless. "I'm perfectly serious. Tell

my daughter, they're looking in the wrong direction."

"What?"

"You're going to China Lake, but what you're looking for isn't there."

John swallowed. Sliding back up the wall, he stood on his feet, his curiosity piquing. "How do you know that?"

Catherine began looking about the room, as if this were her first time here. "Do you know your history, John? About the future?" She didn't wait for an answer, her eyes coming back to him. "Do you know what happens now?"

His brows furrowed as he thought for a second. "No."

"Yes you do. You jumped forward, you changed history, human history. But the machines are still here. They have the same objective, the same technology."

"I don't understand."

"It's no longer about what the machines have done, John. It's about what they're going to do. What they've always done. The only difference between now and your future is..." A rat ran by Weaver's foot. In a flash, she stepped on it, the soft crunch of bone filling the air. She lifted her head again. "The only difference is, this time, you know what they're going to do."

John blinked in frustration. Of course the machines were going to do what they always did - try to erase humans from existence. But he wasn't John Connor, leader of the resistance. All the things he was supposed to do but never did. His eyes widened. He'd never give Kyle Reese a picture of his mother. Kyle would never go back in time.

Time. Human history had changed. The history of the machines hadn't.

"Tell them," Weaver said as she saw the comprehension in John's eyes. "They're looking in the wrong direction. China Lake is a diversion."

John was already running towards the door, his head spinning. As he burst through the door, he dared a look back and almost tripped. It wasn't Weaver he saw standing in the middle of the bathroom but Duke.

John continued running. He thought coming here had changed everything. He'd left the past, run like a coward into a new future because he couldn't face his own. Left the fight to someone else, only to realize he wanted that purpose, that destiny. He'd changed the future, just not all of it. He hadn't changed the machines. The words may have been different, but the song remained the same.

The machines were still going to go back in time; he just wasn't their target.

Along with the sudden panic, John felt something he hadn't felt since the moment he'd arrived in the future - hope. The hope that maybe he could go back, maybe he could become who he was meant to be after all.

The hope that maybe, just maybe, John could fix what he, himself, had broken.

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Cameron watched from the doors as Sarah tapped the tarnished brass bell on the counter. It clanked more than rang, the sound an affront to her ears, a reflection of the establishment they found themselves in. The Avenue Apartments may have seen better days, but they were long past. Now it was nothing more than a flop house. Cash only, anonymous, filled with prostitutes, drug addicts, former and future cons.

The lobby was small; there was a faux leather couch covered in duct tape along one wall, and an 'out of order' sign taped to the elevator doors that looked like it'd been there for months, judging by the less than polite words written on it. At the end of the lobby, next to the stairs, was a soda machine and beside it, a snack machine with condoms and cigarettes lodged between the chips and candy bars.

Cameron wrinkled her nose at the unpleasant combination of smells. She could have analyzed and identified the different components, but she chose not to. There were, apparently, limits to even her curiosity.

Sarah tapped the bell again, harder. Behind the bulletproof glass that served as a window to the desk clerk, someone stirred in the back.

"All right already," a man's voice called out. He was in his late forties, sandy blonde hair pulled back off his scalp by several cups of hair product. There was an athletic build underneath signs of a growing pot belly, but blood-shot eyes indicated habitual narcotic usage. Marijuana, Cameron concluded by the cloud of smoke following him and the bitter smell.

"I'm comin'," he grouched while he zipped up his fly. Whatever he'd been doing in the back, it probably wasn't in his job description. His eyes brightened at the sight of Sarah on the other side of the glass. The walk turned to a saunter, and he preened as he pressed his hands to the counter.

Cameron didn't like the way he was looking at Sarah. Leaving her position at the front entrance, she stepped up behind the other woman's back, glaring at the manager over Sarah's shoulder.

He didn't seem to notice. "What can I do for you ladies?" he leered, in a tone Cameron recognized as innuendo.

Sarah ignored both the building manager's insinuation and Cameron's display. Cameron knew

Sarah had noticed the latter from the way her shoulders tensed and her pulse jumped when Cameron had stepped into her space, but that was all. "I'm looking for Alexander Connor."

"You cops?"

"No."

"Then that information don't come for free." He pushed himself away from the counter, folding his arms across his chest as he licked his lips. "But, I'm sure we can work out a way for you to pay."

Sarah exhaled through her gritted teeth. "Listen..."

Cameron didn't wait to see how Sarah was going to handle the situation. The manager was looking at Sarah like she was one of the prostitutes that had scuttled out when they came in, and he was wasting their time. Time they didn't have. The sooner they found Alexander Connor, the sooner they would find the boy and save him, and the sooner Cameron could get Sarah safely home.

The bulletproof glass shattered as Cameron shoved her fist through it. The manager yelped, scrambling towards the gun under the counter, but Cameron caught the collar of his shirt and dragged him forward through the broken window.

"Dammit, Cameron!" Sarah yelled, jumping back as glass rained down around them.

Cameron had the manager by the throat as soon as his feet cleared the counter, forcing him to stand on tiptoe; she lifted him up and shoved him back against it.

"Where is Alexander Connor?" Cameron demanded.

The manager sputtered, his eyelids fluttering wildly as the whites of his eyes began to show.

"Cameron!" Sarah shouted.

Cameron released her grip enough for him to take in a huge gulp of air.

There was more movement in the backroom. A woman, probably a prostitute, lurched forward towards the window. "What's going on?"

Sarah turned towards her, flashing the gun tucked in her jeans. "Nothing you want a part of."

The woman grabbed her purse before holding up her hands and edging out from behind the counter. She made a rush for the front entrance and neither Cameron nor Sarah made any effort to stop her. For the moment, they didn't have to worry about anyone calling the cops, one of the advantages of seeking information in a place like this.

“Where’s Alexander Connor?” Cameron asked again.

“Jesus!” the manager squeaked. “Room 412.”

Sarah stepped up beside Cameron, letting her know with a brief sideways glance that they’d talk about this later. “Was there a boy with him?”

The manager gaped at her in disbelief. “Do I look like a 7/11? I ain’t here every fucking second.” Cameron shook him. He had six inches and about a hundred pounds on her, and still he swayed like a puppet on a string. “Fuck, I’m telling you the same thing I told the cops. I haven’t seen Connor in days, and I ain’t seen no kid!”

Cameron, her hand still around the manager’s throat, turned her eyes towards Sarah. After a moment of consideration, Sarah nodded, and just like that, Cameron released her grip. He dropped to the floor like a sodden sack of dirt, his hand to his throat as he gasped desperately for air.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Sarah grumbled as they marched up the stairs. “I had everything under control.”

“You did,” Cameron agreed easily, keeping her more confusing motivations to herself. “But my way was faster.”

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John skidded to a stop in front of Sierra’s quarters. Not bothering to knock, he shoved open the door. The room was empty. Spinning around on his feet, John surged towards the first person he saw.

“Where’s Sav..” he stumbled over the redhead’s alias, shocked by the revelation of Weaver into thinking of her as a child again. “Sierra?”

The soldier looked at John’s face and then at the hands gripping his jacket, as if he were debating whether to answer or punch John in the face.

“Answer me!” John yelled with a soft shove.

The soldier chose. He gripped John by the lapels of his own jacket, lifting John up, spinning the two and slamming John against the wall. He jerked his hand back, ready to connect it with John’s face.

“HEY!” a voice yelled and both men turned to the sound. Jesse stood at the other end of the hallway. John had never been so glad to see her in his life. She walked quickly towards the two of them, her gaze hard. “What’s going on?”

“Where’s Sierra?” John blurted, he and the soldier simultaneously releasing their grips on each

other.

Jesse sucked her lower lip into her mouth, debating whether or not to tell him. She'd never trusted John, probably never would. There were too many unanswered questions about him. Jesse didn't like questions. She also didn't like the affect the boy had on Derek and Kyle. But, she saw something in John's eyes, questions or not, what John had to say was important. And Derek was with Sierra.

"She's preparing for the mission along with the rest," Jesse finally answered.

"No." The word slipped from John's lips as if the world had already ended. He slithered out of the small space between the wall and the soldier trapping him there and took off running down the hall. "It's a trap!"

"What?" Jesse shouted after him, her feet already moving.

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The door was locked.

Sarah patted her jacket pockets, pursing her lips and groaning inwardly. She'd forgotten her lock picking kit. She looked back at the terminator standing behind her, but Cameron's head was turned towards the stairs, guarding them.

A different set of circumstances and Sarah would be doing this alone. She *had* been doing this alone for weeks, missing the machine at her back more keenly every day. Cameron was right; Sarah had all but begged her to take up this role again, and so far she'd been repaid with nothing but the sharp edge of Sarah's temper.

Cameron had chosen to leave the system. She'd chosen to return to a body with all of its confines, restraints and limitations. She'd done it willingly, and she might choose to go back.

Cameron, as if feeling Sarah's eyes on her, looked back quizzically. Sarah managed to dredge up a half-smile from somewhere near her toes and gestured grandly to the door. "Do what you do, girlie."

Cameron blinked, her gaze shifting from Sarah to the door and back again. Then she nodded and the tension between them eased just a fraction.

Sarah moved back as Cameron stepped up to the door, and her hand twisted the knob and pushed, the frame giving in with a sickening crack. Sarah's weary smile expanded into a ghost of her usual smirk; there were certain advantages to having one's own personal terminator.

Alexander Connor's apartment was a one-room studio. There was a futon against the wall, a milk crate serving as an end table, a television with a broken antenna. The kitchen area held a tiny table and a single chair. The place was a mess, and it smelled of old and rotting food, the

stench most likely coming from the broken refrigerator and the open pizza box sitting on the floor, still holding several moldy slices.

“John’s been here,” Sarah said aloud, noting the items only a teenaged boy would be interested in - comic books, an empty video game sleeve, a pair of sneakers too small for an adult male.

“Sarah,” Cameron called out. She was crouching down by the TV. Sarah walked towards her, Cameron standing up to give Sarah a better view.

There were bullet casings on the floor. Sarah pushed an old crumpled newspaper aside with her boot, her heart sinking at the sight underneath - rubber surgical tubing, a soot-stained spoon, a needle. Alexander Connor seemed to be picking up right where he left off, John Connor in tow.

Gritting her teeth, Sarah kept searching. She found a list of names and numbers scribbled on the wall over the phone. Probably his dealers, Sarah thought, as she wrote the numbers down, but it was more than she’d had earlier. Her eye caught something under the phone. A picture. Sarah pulled it out. It was a man and a woman, posing in one of those photo booths at the mall. They were smiling crazily at the camera, their eyes heavy lidded and bloodshot. The picture was part of a strip of shots, four in all. As Sarah pulled the strip out from under the phone, her heart skipped at the last shot.

John Connor, leaning halfway into the booth, a grin stretching ear to ear.

Sarah’s eyes went from the photo to the numbers scribbled on the wall. There were eleven of them, all the names male except for one - Julia.

“I think I have something,” Sarah said, tucking the photo into her pocket. “Let’s go.”

They took the stairs two by two. Cameron in front, and Sarah right behind her.

Fishing for the cell in her pocket to call Murch and run a trace on the number, Sarah practically ran into Cameron and the terminator’s arm, outstretched to keep Sarah from moving forward.

Sarah rocked back on her heels, steadying herself with a hand on Cameron’s shoulder. She looked past the machine, to the bottom of the stairs and across the lobby, to where three men stood conferring quietly before the building manager’s desk, their feet crunching broken glass into the stained tile.

Sarah didn’t need to know what they were saying. The hairs on the back of her neck were already standing on edge.

A half second, and she felt Cameron’s grip on her arm, pulling her back up the stairs. In that time, Sarah saw the men reach into their jackets, saw them see her and Cameron on the stairs and saw them start after them.

Sarah followed Cameron as the terminator ran towards the other staircase at the end of the hall.



Cameron hit the door hard, and Sarah was surprised it still stayed on its hinges. She glanced back to see the men reaching the top of the stairs as she and Cameron headed down.

Clouds, threatening of rain, had already blackened the evening sky. A sole light in the alley flickered sporadically. Cameron cut right, taking them towards the back of the building, the door behind them slamming against the wall as their pursuers exited. Sarah didn't have time to curse under her breath, but she did it anyway, admonishing herself for taking too much time inside Alexander Connor's apartment.

Cameron paused, just enough for Sarah to run past, her hand pulling out the gun tucked in her jeans. It was the cleanest alley in Los Angeles with nowhere to duck and take cover. Sarah heard the pop of gunfire. Her breath squeezed from her as she felt Cameron's arm wrap around her stomach, the terminator's chest pressed hard to Sarah's back. Sarah felt the impact, one, two and then three shots connecting with Cameron, and heard something unexpected, a recognizable grunt and strangled hiss of pain in her ear.

She had no time to wonder what that meant. Spinning together, both women turned, firing their weapons. Cameron let Sarah go and moved backwards, weapon still raised as the men ducked for cover behind a dumpster just outside the door they'd exited. Another step and they were beyond the edge of the building.

Sarah never saw the fourth man come up behind her. One second, her eyes were on the center of the alley, covering Cameron's back. The next, she saw stars. He slammed into her, his shoulder hitting her ribs like a linebacker making a tackle. She fell hard to the ground, head smacking against the cement. And then he was on her, one hand grabbed her jacket, the other reared back, curling into a fist and striking hard against her jaw.

Cameron saw Sarah go down, saw her gun go skittering across the pavement, out of reach. She had been shooting to frighten, to warn, to give them space to run, not to kill, but her restraint disappeared the instant the fourth man's fist hit Sarah's face.

Covering the distance between them in three strides, Cameron planted her feet on either side of Sarah's head. She grabbed the man by the hair and lifted, his voice roaring to a scream as his scalp tore from his skull. Hands striking like a snake, they were on either side of his head, and in one quick move, Cameron twisted his head a full 180 degrees. The snap of his neck echoed sickeningly in the alleyway.

"Goddammit!" Cameron heard one of the remaining three shout. "He wants her alive!"

Sensing an opening, the other three surged towards them. One jumped into the air, foot extended in a side kick and connecting hard to Cameron's head. She lurched sideways, dropping the body in her hands onto Sarah.

Sarah felt hands on her feet, holding her tightly as the body was shoved off her. 'Her,' the man had said. They wanted her. Not John Connor.

Sarah Connor. And like a fool she'd played right into their hands.

Fear suddenly mixed with the adrenaline coursing through her veins. Sarah kicked wildly, arms flailing as another pounced on her.

Another pop, the unmistakable sound of more gunfire. Another pop, and the back of the head of the man pinning Sarah's shoulders to the pavement exploded outwards from the bullet exiting his forehead.

The last man, the one holding Sarah's legs, realized he was now outnumbered and outgunned, let go, and jumped to his feet, running towards the front of the alley.

Cameron stepped over Sarah, the arm holding her gun still raised.

"Cameron!" Sarah shouted. "No!"

Cameron fired. The man flew forward, dead before he hit the ground.

Sarah lay under the terminator's protective stance for a moment, catching her breath. She waited for Cameron to drag her to her feet, urge her to get going, but Cameron didn't move.

"Cameron?"

No answer.

Scooting back, Sarah rolled free and stood on her own, wincing as the new aches and pains made themselves known. Shaking her head to clear the last of the dizziness, she reached out and tugged on Cameron's shoulder, but the machine was as immovable as if she had been completely carved from the metal under her skin.

"Hey," Sarah said peering worriedly into Cameron's completely blank face. "We need to go."

Cameron came back to herself with a twitch and a shiver that Sarah felt under her fingers. She turned her head stiffly, nodded, and this time, when Sarah tugged on her arm, she followed.

## Act Four

The bullet dropped from Sarah's pliers, plunking loudly in the empty wastebasket. She readjusted the flashlight she'd purchased at a gas station, changing the angle towards the next bullet. Hand against the smooth surface of Cameron's back, forefinger and thumb stretching the wound open, Sarah slid the nose of the pliers into the hole. The bullet was deep, just under Cameron's ribcage. Had she been human, the damage wouldn't have been so easily fixed with a pair of pliers and some gauze. Sarah pushed deeper, digging around for the bullet.

“Talk to me, Cameron,” she demanded, torn between worry and horror. The worry had been getting stronger since they’d left the alley and holed up in a public washroom, with Cameron remaining in a semi-catatonic state. “What happened back there?”

Cameron almost flinched, twisting around to look at Sarah standing behind her. “You’re angry.”

“You’re goddamned right, I’m angry,” Sarah hissed. “You just killed four people.”

“I know.” Cameron’s confession was hollow, empty, grieving. “I should not have.”

“You’ve killed before…” Sarah’s voice trailed off. She had been readying herself for a lecture about the value of human life, but she had the strangest feeling that Cameron had just finished giving herself the exact same speech. They’d said it all so many times already.

“Yes.” Cameron leaned forward against the wall again. “But that was before.”

Sarah sighed and went back to work. She was tired of pulling bullets out of Cameron’s body. She wouldn’t be now, if she’d been smarter. Cameron wouldn’t have had to kill either. Cameron, Sarah thought, shouldn’t be the one who was always paying for her mistakes. “So what’s changed?”

Cameron shook her head. “Nothing,” she said desolately. “Nothing has changed. I am still a terminator.”

“You’re-” Sarah struggled with herself, with what she wanted to say. Yes, Cameron had killed, but she had done it to protect Sarah, and it was Sarah’s own damned fault that she had needed protection. Cameron had said over and over again that this mission was a risk. Sarah was the one who had been stupid enough to assume Cameron had meant it was only a risk to Sarah. The machine had known Sarah might put her in the position of having to be the terminator she was trying so hard not to be, and she had come along anyway.

“A terminator wouldn’t care,” she said finally. “Things have changed, *you’ve* changed.”

“Not enough,” Cameron insisted stubbornly. “I was wrong, I cannot be something else. This is a killer’s body.”

Sarah lowered her head, running a hand over her face. They’d been standing too still for too long, and she could feel her body rebelling, screaming for rest. She placed a hand on Cameron’s shoulder, more to brace herself, keep herself from swaying on her feet. The back of Cameron’s head was inches from Sarah’s face and, underneath the smell of blood and gunpowder, Sarah smelled cherry blossoms. Cameron was different. More than a terminator, more than a machine, Sarah had to accept that. Cameron was also learning, and it was up to Sarah to teach her.

“I’ve killed,” Sarah whispered quietly. “It doesn’t make you a monster. Monsters kill for fun, or

because it's the easiest way to get what they want. They don't kill to protect people they..." she swallowed. "It matters, *why* matters. And it matters that you regret it, that it hurts."

"Human life has value," Cameron argued, turning around again.

"Not only human life," Sarah countered, noticing the thumb that had been subconsciously grazing the skin of Cameron's neck. She balled her hand into a fist. "There's no point in fighting this war if we..." Sarah paused on the word, realizing 'we' also meant Cameron. "There's no point if we become exactly like those we're fighting. We don't kill... but sometimes they don't give us a choice."

"Like today?"

Sarah nodded. "Like today."

Cameron blinked. She turned her head again, facing forward, her back to Sarah. "I understand."

How much Cameron understood, Sarah didn't know. She didn't know how much she understood of her own reasoning. She only knew that she wasn't going to let Cameron tear herself apart over something Sarah had forced her to do.

Picking up the pliers, she laid her hand flat on Cameron's back and went digging for the bullet again. Pulling it out, she dropped it in the wastebasket with the others and went after the last one. "Why does it always seem like I'm pulling bullets out of your body?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"Because you always are," Cameron answered.

"I was going to say because you're always getting shot."

"I would prefer it if I didn't."

"Why?" Sarah snorted. "Because it hurts?"

"Yes," Cameron answered, her face in profile as she turned her head towards Sarah. "I feel, Sarah, more now than before."

Sarah suddenly remembered Cameron's exclamation of pain in the alley and noticed the sheen of sweat on the machine's skin, realized that the wince when she dug too deeply with the pliers hadn't been triggered by what Sarah had said, but because it had hurt.

She became aware of her hand on Cameron's back, the warmth and softness of Cameron's skin. She'd always thought of the skin the terminators encased themselves in as nothing more than a disguise. It never occurred to her that it could be something more.

Sarah hadn't considered the possibility that her touch might have been as confusing to Cameron as Cameron's was to her, but if it was...

As if bitten, frightened by the sudden revelation, Sarah jerked her hand from Cameron's back, reaching for the gauze and tape. The impulse was instinctual - leave the last bullet in because she didn't want to deal with this. Cameron was a machine; it could be pulled out later.

But she couldn't do that anymore, treat Cameron as an unfeeling machine when it suited her and demand that she understand some complex human motivation five minutes later. Sarah had to do better. She put down the gauze and picked up the pliers.

"Hold still," Sarah said. She lifted her eyes to the back of Cameron's head, thankful the terminator's back was turned. "One more."

The last bullet removed, gauze over the wound affixed with tape, Sarah stepped back, turning her back and she wiping her bloody hands with a baby wipe as Cameron put her shirt on.

"You're still going to try and find John Connor?" Cameron asked.

"Yes," Sarah answered, turning around and grabbing her jacket when she saw that Cameron was ready.

"Is it because he's human?" Cameron asked, sliding into her own jacket. "Or because his name is John Connor?"

Sarah paused, lips pursing. Maybe Cameron did understand, more than Sarah realized. "Both."

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John burst through the doors. Fueled by instinct and training, the soldiers in the room treated him like a threat, and John found himself suddenly facing the barrels of a dozen guns. He skidded to a stop, hands raised defensively. His eyes hurriedly scanned the room, ignoring Derek as the man lowered his weapon, and falling on scarlet hair and blue eyes.

"Sierra!" John called out.

"What the Hell are you doing?" she yelled back, stomping her way towards him as she gave the signal for the rest of her soldiers to lower their weapons.

John stayed where he was. Wary, he kept his arms raised. "You have to abort the mission."

"What?" Sierra looked at him, her eyes squinting.

"You're going the wrong way," John insisted, suddenly feeling the eyes of the entire room on him with more than just suspicion.

“John,” Sierra snapped. “I don’t have time for this...”

“It’s a trap,” John cut her off, finally comfortable enough to lower his hands. “I need to talk to Tango. I need to see John Henry. I know what the machines are doing.”

Sierra pursed her lips, inhaling deeply. John Connor was many things, not all of them complimentary, but a liar wasn’t one of them. Derek stepped towards her, hands clasped behind his back.

“Sierra?” he asked flatly.

Sierra, her eyes on John, nodded her head. “Abort the mission,” she said, heading towards the door. “We need to talk to Tango.”

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Ten miles from the Kuhoric home, eight miles from Alexander Connor’s apartment, Sarah and Cameron stood on the sidewalk before the home of Julia Westmore, Alexander Connor’s girlfriend. There were cars in the driveway and parked haphazardly on the overgrown yard. Music blared from the open windows.

They entered through the open front door, wading their way through a house filled with partiers. The air stank of smoke - cigarettes and marijuana; there were empties of beer and liquor, some seemingly left for days, strewn about on the floor. This was no place for a child and Sarah could feel her anger building at the people around her, at Alexander Connor for bringing his son here.

“Alex Connor,” she began to ask. “Have you seen Alex Connor?”

No one knew anything. They were too drunk, too high, or had only come for the drugs and had absolutely no idea who Alex Connor was. Her eyes went to Cameron, the terminator’s face blank as she scanned the crowd. Sarah wondered at her slip, or epiphany, whichever it had been. *Not just human life...* How important had Cameron’s existence become to her?

In a dump like this, around these useless excuses for humanity, Cameron shone like a precisely cut gem. Not only because she was beautiful, but because she was battling odds they couldn’t imagine, in pursuit of becoming recognized as a decent and worthwhile being, while they had discarded the potential they’d been born with as if it was worthless.

Sarah saw a flash of hair and a face she recognized, and she pushed her way through the crowd. Julia Westmore stood in the kitchen, playing quarters with several men who were not Alexander Connor. As Julia raised the shot to her mouth, Sarah reached out, grabbing the woman’s arm.

“Hey!” Julia squeaked.

“Where’s Alex?” Sarah demanded. “Where’s John?”

“I don’t know,” the woman slurred. “The bedroom, probably.”

Sarah was off like a shot, pushing and shoving her way through the crowd. It began to thin as she entered the back of the home. All she wanted was John. She didn’t care about Alex. She just wanted the boy, to get him home, safe and sound.

The last door was closed and Sarah didn’t bother knocking before she entered. A single lamp barely illuminated the room. The boy lay face up on the mattress, his eyes open and glassy, skin pale, his lips blue. Surgical tubing was still wrapped around his left bicep, and Sarah could see the needle sticking out of his arm.

“No!” Sarah choked, rushing towards the bed. She yanked the needle from John’s arm, tossing it across the room. His skin was cold as she tilted his head back, opening his mouth and beginning CPR. “Cameron!” she shouted, coming up for air. “I need you!”

The terminator followed her over to the mattress. She stepped to the other side of John Connor’s body, kneeling down.

“Start compressions!”

Sarah prayed Cameron, at some point in time, had learned how to do CPR. She didn’t have the time to tell her, just continued breathing air into the boy’s lungs while Cameron pressed down on his chest. The machine was quick and efficient but every time Sarah checked John’s pulse, the artery in his neck remained silent and still.

“Come on,” Sarah pleaded, the seeds of panic taking root within her. Seconds ticked away to minutes, all to no avail. Her eyes began to sting and Sarah blinked away the tears trying to form. It wasn’t supposed to end this way.

“Sarah.” She heard the terminator call her name. “Sarah! He’s dead.”

“My son is not dead!” Sarah choked.

Cameron’s hand whipped out, grabbing Sarah by the front of her jacket. She yanked Sarah towards her. “This isn’t our John!” Cameron released her grip, cupping Sarah’s cheeks, forcing her to look up and away from the dead boy. Her fingers were warm against Sarah’s skin, her voice softening as she said again, “This isn’t your John.”

Sarah closed her eyes. Leaning forward, she rested her head on Cameron’s shoulder, letting the machine steady her as her body simply gave up. The adrenaline wasn’t enough to overcome sixteen years in fifth gear suddenly come to a screeching halt. She became aware of every ache and pain, every scrape and scratch, of the scars, torn muscles and ligaments. The weight she so desperately tried to hold up crushed down upon her. This wasn’t her John, their John. But it might as well have been. Because she’d failed him. Again.

“He...” Sarah opened her eyes and pulled back at the sound of a voice that wasn’t her own.

“He said it was okay.”

Her head whipped towards the voice. Alex Connor sat in the corner, knees drawn up to his chest, red-rimmed eyes wide with shock. He lifted his eyes from the body of John to Sarah. “He just wanted to try it. It was just a little.”

“What?” Sarah hissed, already on her feet, jerking away from Cameron and marching towards the man. “You did this?”

“It was just a little,” Alex raised his head to her. “I was the same age...”

A growl erupted from Sarah’s throat. She reached down, grabbing Alex by the shirt and lifting him up. “You’re his father!” she snarled, slamming him against the wall. “His father!”

Like a cork under too much pressure, the rage surged from Sarah. Emotions she’d kept in check for years burst forth. One hand gripping his shirt, she grabbed Alex by the neck, dragging him towards the mattress. She shoved Alex to his knees, pushing his face towards his dead son.

“You selfish son of a bitch!” she growled. “Is this what a father does? To his own son? You love them, you protect them, with your life if you have to.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex wailed.

Sarah yanked Alex back. He flopped onto the ground, his body trembling and shaking as he sobbed uncontrollably. Her fingers went to the gun tucked at her back. She pulled the chamber, loading the round, and then stepped towards Alex, jamming the gun against his temple.

“You were supposed to protect him!” she hissed, blinking through the tears filling her eyes. “You were supposed to put John first!”

Alex looked at Sarah as if he didn’t see her at all but only his inevitable fate. “I just wanted to know my boy.”

“You’re...” Sarah felt her finger twitch, ready to apply pressure. Then, she felt a hand on her wrist, a familiar presence by her side.

“Sarah.” Cameron tightened her grip, lifting the gun up and away from Alex’s head and saying for a third time, “This wasn’t our John. The authorities will deal with him. We don’t kill.”

Sarah blinked, mouth opening like she wanted to say something. She turned her eyes towards Cameron’s. “I...”



“We have to go.”

Sarah nodded in compliance, lowering her weapon. She took one parting glance at the body on the bed. John, her son, his eyes wide open and glassy, stared vacantly back at her, a vision from a thousand nightmares. She blinked and the boy became the other John again, a stranger. Sarah turned and walked away. There was nothing more she could do.

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Murch sat before the bank of monitors, feet up on the table, coffee cup in hand, quietly sipping as he watched the various security feeds. It'd been hours since he'd put Savannah to bed, since Ellison retired for the evening, going off to do whatever it was Ellison did. Sarah and Cameron still hadn't returned. Admittedly, Murch relished the times when Sarah was gone and the weird tension in the air whenever she was here. She scared the ever loving piss out of him and, still, he couldn't find it in himself to leave.

Something flickered in the corner of Murch's eye. He turned towards the furthest screen to his right, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on edge as he saw one of the alarms had been triggered. Then, just like that, the alarm blinked off. Murch squinted his eyes, pulling his legs off the table and scooting his chair forward, fingers reaching for the keyboard so he could investigate if he'd seen what he'd thought he had.

His eyes caught movement on one of the cameras. The front gate slid open, two figures walking onto the grounds. Sarah and Cameron. Murch swallowed hard, body already tensing.

“Ellison!” he shouted.

The door to one of the back rooms opened, and Ellison emerged into the main room just as the door to the warehouse pushed open. Ellison took a breath to speak when Sarah entered the room, but stayed silent when he got a good glimpse of her.

Sarah looked pale, paler than normal. There was a red spot on the side of her chin that would become an angry bruise in the morning. Cameron walked in right behind her, looking no worse for the wear, but dressed in a different shirt. She closed the door, engaging the lock.

“John Connor is dead,” she said before walking towards the large bank of monitors and taking a seat.

Sarah stopped in her tracks at Cameron's announcement. She couldn't face the questions in two pairs of eyes, and she couldn't stay and watch to see if Cameron used the keyboard or picked up the waiting cord, giving up on herself, giving up on Sarah.

Halfway out of her jacket, Sarah yanked it back on, turned on her heel and left.

She slammed the door hard behind her, hoping everyone got the hint that she didn't want to be followed. She was beyond tired, heart tired, soul tired. She felt like a carpet that had been worn

so thin that the color was only a memory, leaving behind nothing but an indeterminate, splotchy grey. Sarah felt grey, faded. She didn't even know who she was anymore, not without John. And if Cameron...

Sarah pushed that thought aside, immersing herself in physical exhaustion to avoid everything else. It wasn't hard. Her body wanted nothing more than to curl into a ball and sleep for weeks, if she'd let it. But Sarah wouldn't let it. Wouldn't let her body give in to what it so desperately needed. Sarah needed to be in motion. She needed to keep moving because if she stopped...

Sarah found herself back at the cinderblock-lined fire pit.

Her eyes went to a lead pipe lying on the floor. Without making a conscious decision, she lifted it into her hands, her fingers tightening. Heavy, strong, it felt good under her fingers, like it was supposed to be there. Like Sarah could give it a purpose beyond its usual fate.

They were both broken. She looked down at the pit where she had burned the first Cameron, and the cold lead throbbed against her palms like a tell-tale heart. It had its purpose now. Sarah had a purpose, a focus.

She gripped the pipe with both hands, lifted it above her head and brought it down hard on the cinderblocks. Charred cement cracked under the impact, the reverberations jolting Sarah's frame painfully. But it felt right. So Sarah did it again. And again.

A scream pressed on the walls of her throat, but she choked it back as she swung the pipe for her son, and for John Connor, the boy she couldn't save. She swung for Charlie and Kyle and Derek. She swung for her mother and father, and everyone else she had ever failed, everyone else who had left her. She swung because she couldn't stand the idea of burning Cameron. Not again.

Lastly, she swung for herself, because that was all she had left, and she was nothing more than a brittle empty shell, a life with no purpose, no meaning. She'd resolved herself to dying before John, but now John was gone, and she was probably dying anyway.

The blocks were nothing more than rubble, but Sarah kept swinging. She swung through the burning in her arms, the sharp ache in the left, the tears stinging her eyes, her throat gone hoarse from the effort of holding back the scream that would carry the last of her soul out with it.

Sarah brought the pipe down once more and felt it stop, sudden and hard, a good two feet from her target. She saw a hand, not her own, wrapped around the metal, looked up to see brown eyes gazing back at her.

"Sarah, stop," the terminator said. "You're hurting yourself."

Sarah released the pipe and went for Cameron's throat instead. She grabbed Cameron by the jacket and pushed her backwards, shoving the terminator until her back hit the wall and there

was nowhere else for her to go.

“Don’t you understand?!” Sarah snarled. Everyone in her life was gone and Sarah was alone. Alone except for one. The one who’d take bullets for her, kill for her, risk everything on a stupid futile mission for her, the one who might also leave her.

Cameron stayed perfectly still, not struggling against Sarah’s grip, though she could have freed herself easily. “I understand that you’re in pain,” she said gently. “I want to help.” She reached out and brushed a piece of hair back from Sarah’s face, her fingers lingering on Sarah’s cheek. “Please, let me help.”

The stubbornness that had sustained Sarah up until now abandoned her like dirty water being sucked out through a drain. She sagged against Cameron and felt the machine’s hands come up to rest on her waist, and slide around to the small of her back, felt it, and didn’t protest, letting Cameron pull her closer.

“I can’t watch you burn,” Sarah rasped, resting her forehead against Cameron’s. “Not again...” Hands clutching the leather jacket became hands cupping the terminator’s face. Sarah felt the warmth of Cameron’s skin as if it were filling the emptiness of her soul. Without thought, without pause, Sarah leaned in, closing the distance between them as the connection that she had been doing her best to pull apart, snapped back into place.

She whimpered as their lips met, at the feel of warm and wet breath filling her mouth. Her heart thudded heavily in her chest as she deepened the kiss, pressed her mouth harder against Cameron’s.

Cameron’s.

Sarah’s eyes flew open. Doe-brown eyes stared back at her, questioningly. The weight Sarah had tried to release crashed back down upon her shoulders. Dazed, shocked, confused, Sarah jerked free, staggering backwards and raising her sleeve to her mouth to wipe her lips.

“Sarah...” Cameron called out to her, confusion heavy in that single word.

Sarah raised her hand. “Don’t. Just... don’t.”

Turning her back on everything, she turned and fled.

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“John Connor’s dead,” Vaughn spoke flatly into his cell phone. He stood next to the mattress where the boy’s body lay. Alexander Connor next to him, his back to the wall, a needle stuck in his arm. Dead.

“Yes,” Vaughn sighed in an irritated tone. He’d missed them by less than an hour. The entire house had cleared out upon discovery of the bodies. Fortunately, for Vaughn, no one had called

the police.

“She was here. They both were. I...” Vaughn closed his mouth, jaw clenching as the voice on the other end cut him off. “Yes, sir, I understand some may feel this is a waste of resources and my time, but this wasn’t a fruitless mission. We know Sarah Connor is still in the Los Angeles area.

“We found her once.” Vaughn knelt down next to John Connor’s body, almost gently wiping his hand over the boy’s face to close his eyes. “We can find her again.”

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Standing before the bathroom mirror for the second morning in a row, Sarah wiped off the condensation with her hand and stared at her reflection. Despite everything, she only had a few scrapes and bruises to show for yesterday’s exercise in futility. The new scars she’d acquired were all internal. She still looked like hell, but she also looked... better.

The sound of Cameron’s boots walking the perimeter had soothed her into a deep, dreamless sleep. She hadn’t expected that. If anything, given last night’s conclusion, she would have thought hearing Cameron walk back and forth along the catwalk would have made sleep impossible. It should have, but apparently her subconscious, satisfied at being acknowledged in such an earth shatteringly explosive way, had decided to settle down and play nice.

She’d kissed Cameron.

Sarah had kissed a machine.

No. Not a machine, something more.

Something more that had compelled Sarah to risk life and limb obtaining another body and chip, to venture out into the rain just to make sure Cameron was there, and to try everything just to give her a reason to stay.

Sarah didn’t want to think about this ‘more’ that was Cameron; she didn’t want to think about any of it. She needed time.

Time. Sarah stared at the scars on her body, thought about the ones beneath the surface. Time... the clock kept ticking, for her and for the world. She might not have much time left, but the world might have less.

Dressed, her hair mostly dry, Sarah made her way downstairs. She could see Cameron sitting in front of the screens again, Murch sitting next to her enraptured, scribbling furiously on a notepad. As Sarah made her way down the stairs, she noticed the sudden slowing of Cameron’s fingers as they typed, the subtle acknowledgement of Sarah’s presence. A moment later, they resumed their lightning fast speed.

“Good morning, Sarah,” Ellison said from the kitchen table.

Sarah nodded her head. She folded her arms across her chest, eyes boring a hole into the back of the terminator’s head. Could Cameron still feel Sarah’s lips as Sarah felt Cameron’s? Had the kiss even meant anything to the machine? Did Sarah want it to?

She glanced down without thinking, her heart thudding painfully as she took in the empty patch of floor where Cameron’s cord had been coiled.

It was gone.

Sarah opened her mouth, but a small tug on her wrist stopped whatever she might have said. She looked down into bright, blue eyes gazing expectantly up at her. “Savannah?”

“You promised you’d read me *The Wizard of Oz*,” the young girl said. “Is it later yet?”

Time... there was so little of it. Sarah tried to remember all the reasons why she should keep Savannah at arms length and couldn’t. Whatever time she had left, she’d prefer to spend it living. Sarah’s lips curled in a soft smile. “Yeah,” she said softly. “I guess it is.”

The little girl took Sarah’s hand, leading her away and towards the couch they’d dragged down from one of the unoccupied rooms to make a sort of sitting room to one side of the kitchen.

Cameron stopped typing and watched them go. Murch’s scribbling slowed and stilled.

“Cameron?” he prompted.

She ignored him, rising from the chair, leaving the half-finished search behind and going into the kitchen. Sarah hadn’t made her usual cup of coffee. She took a mug down from the cupboard, filling it from the carafe, just the way Sarah liked it - black. Cameron noted the way the mug felt against her hand, the warmth of the ceramic, the rich scent filling her nostrils. If she were to taste it, it would be bitter.

Not all sensations were good. Her back still stung where Sarah had dug out the bullets, but that pain had been overwhelmed by the touch of Sarah’s lips against hers.

Even the memory made Cameron’s body whisper and burn.

Sarah had kissed her. Cameron didn’t know why, or why she had reacted, and was still reacting, this way, but the why didn’t really seem to matter so much at the moment. Cameron wanted more.

She turned, cup in hand, and walked over towards Sarah and Savannah. She stood there, waiting patiently until Sarah stopped reading and looked up at her.

Savannah looked up because Sarah had stopped reading and smiled. “Cameron, we just got to

the part where Dorothy meets the tin man. You're kind of a tin man, but you already have a heart, don't you?" Not waiting for an answer, she turned back to the book, tapping the page impatiently, but Sarah's attention was elsewhere.

Cameron tilted her head under Sarah's gaze. "I brought you a cup of coffee."

Sarah looked puzzled, but she reached out to take the mug, her fingers wrapping around the ceramic mere millimeters from Cameron's own. All it took was a little shift. As Cameron released the mug, she deliberately brushed her skin against Sarah's. An experiment, a simple touch, a moment of intimacy, a question...

Sarah's eyes widened, her pulse picked up. Cameron noted the reaction, noted her own, and decided she liked it.

"Thank you," Sarah said, blinking away her confusion.

"You're welcome." Cameron smiled softly.

"Cameron?" Savannah spoke up, obviously realizing she was being ignored. The two women broke their eye contact to focus on the child, one out of nervousness and the other curiosity. "Do you want to read with us?"

Cameron tilted her head slightly, her eyes then going to Sarah who merely shrugged before she focused back on Savannah. "Yes," she said.

The child smiled broadly, scooting away from Sarah and patting the space where she'd been sitting. Cameron sat down, hearing Sarah's breath hitch as their thighs brushed. Savannah clambered into Cameron's lap and wiggled around until she got comfortable.

Sarah shifted, a little uneasy at the familiarity with which Savannah interacted with Cameron, and a great deal more uneasy at the warm length of Cameron's leg pressed against her own. She reopened the book on her lap, thumbing to where she'd been reading when she'd stopped, only to lift her head when she felt Cameron staring at her.

"No second thoughts," Cameron said quietly.

Sarah swallowed hard. She nodded her head towards Cameron in silent understanding, and then turned her eyes back to Savannah's book and started reading.

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The terminator was there with the crowd of college students waiting for the library doors to open. They pushed their way past the bleary-eyed librarian as she slid her key and turned the lock. He went straight for the computers, for the digital newspaper archives.

The address he'd obtained from the school had been a dead end, but he had a name, a company.

He just needed to broaden his search. As morning turned to afternoon, he did not move, did not take a break as thousands of images whipped by at lightning speed.

Occasionally, the images would stop just long enough to be stored into his memory. He focused on records and articles regarding building ordinances for a certain company - Zeira Corp.

He cross referenced Zeira Corp with another name - Catherine Weaver. Images and words continued to whiz by. He stopped on another article. The terminator tilted his head slightly, his red eyes glowing dimly under the fluorescent lights of the library. The news article stated Catherine Weaver had left the country and that her daughter was missing. He clicked on the picture in the story.

The terminator rose from his station. He'd collected all he could at the library and would continue his search elsewhere. He was a machine with a singular mission. He would not stop, not rest or pause until he'd completed it. The mission was simple - kill a woman who would threaten them in the future, a woman who, today, was nothing more than a child. A child named...

Savannah Weaver.