

## Episode 6

### "All the King's Horses"

#### Part One

By Anklebones

#### Teaser

The accident blocked the highway for nearly half a mile. The resulting traffic jam stretched out over five more.

Cars that had been on the fringes of the pileup had escaped with little more than bent bumpers or a bit of lost paint. Their human passengers were equally lucky, suffering only minor scrapes, bruises and strained muscles. Insurance companies would be overflowing with claims of minor physical damage and emotional trauma, but for the most part, the claims would be grossly exaggerated.

Agent Aldridge left his car along the outer perimeter, parking it among the ambulances and fire trucks strung out in a ragged semi-circle that separated the victims from the merely inconvenienced or voyeuristic. It would have been impossible to drive anything with four wheels any closer, so he walked through the barrage of media and news cameras rolling live feed on a tragedy half the city couldn't see, his badge a shield against their professional curiosity.

In the absence of electrical power, flood lights had been set up to illuminate the scene as dusk became more of a fact than an inevitability. The further he went, the worse the carnage became. Cars upside down, on their sides, and off the edge of the road were twisted and crunched, paint scraped away and glass shattered. Paramedics with stretchers weaved in and out of the tangle, some carrying the wounded, others trying to reach the ones still trapped. Those that were beyond saving had been covered and laid out on the grassy green banks beside the road. When the paramedics had been forced to reserve the last of their sterilized sheets and blankets to warm the living, the survivors had donated whatever coverings they could. Plaid, knit, and even coral pink, the makeshift shrouds stood out like blood-stained flowers on a battlefield.

Aldridge's eye was caught by a pair of bodies under a hand-knit quilt, one of them barely half the size of the other, a child. He thought of Savannah Weaver, the little girl that had gone missing from her school the day Sarah Connor blew up Zeira Corp. Was she still alive? Was her disappearance a coincidence, or was she yet another victim of a madwoman?

"Agent Aldridge?"

Aldridge's attention was pulled away from the grisly sight by a stocky uniformed officer with a neatly trimmed moustache and blood on the cuffs of his jacket.

"Officer...?"

"Wilson, Darryl Wilson. I paged you, but I didn't know if you'd be able to make it." The man's relief that Auldridge had finally arrived to take over was as visible as the sweat on his face.

"It was my case." Auldridge indicated that the officer should lead the way. "I appreciate you contacting me."

"Was, Sir?" Officer Wilson led him past a truck with its windshield shattered and passenger side door torn off, to the knot of officers and middle-aged women gathered beside it. One of the women was having theatrical hysterics while two others tried to comfort her, and the fourth was giving what looked like a long and involved statement, complete with elaborate hand gestures.

"Was," Auldridge confirmed.

The officer shrugged. "Might be about to reopen. When the paramedics found blood on the broken glass in the vehicle but no passengers or registration, we ran the license plate. It came up as stolen. Witnesses claim they saw two women fleeing the scene. One of them apparently pulled the door off the truck with her bare hands and the other fits the description of your suspect.

"They're mistaken." Auldridge took a deep breath before plunging into the maelstrom. "I don't care what your witnesses have to say, Officer Wilson. Sarah Connor is dead."

## Act One

Cameron watched from halfway up a forested hillside that ran alongside the freeway as Agent Auldridge joined the crowd around their abandoned truck. She zoomed in, reading his lips as he assured the officers and women that they hadn't seen what they thought they had. He was wrong. They'd seen exactly what they were trying, quite animatedly, to explain to the officers on the scene.

Cameron hadn't hesitated when Sarah's door had jammed. She had ripped it free of the truck before Sarah could even try to climb over the broken glass to the driver's side. She had only meant to force it open, but once again, emotion had pushed her into using far more force than she'd planned. The only thought running through her head had been to get Sarah out as quickly, and with as little injury, as she could. The possibility of witnesses hadn't even occurred to her until she had Sarah on her feet, and then the startled ring of spectators had finally penetrated through her fear.

They ran. It was all they could do, taking their bags but leaving their fingerprints and blood inside the vehicle, evidence that even now Auldridge was having collected. Cameron didn't know if he believed what he was telling the police and witnesses. The fact that the truck was stolen was enough to have it searched and examined, but he wasn't

sending anyone up into the hills after them. From the blood, he had to suspect at least one of them was injured, but still he held back. Was he hesitating because he didn't see any point in wasting desperately needed manpower to hunt down car thieves? Or because he feared what might happen if he sent anyone after Sarah Connor and the someone, or *something*, that could rip a car door off its hinges?

Auldridge had gotten his warrant for Ellison's house. Whatever else he may have found there, including records of the synthetic blood that had shown up at several crime scenes, there was a good chance that he had come across several of Sarah's files that Ellison had signed out of the institution. With those in hand, Auldridge would have proof of Sarah's real fingerprints and blood type. Cameron had changed the digital files to match those of the woman she'd killed at Miranda, but she hadn't been able to do anything about the paper documents. Auldridge's need to find the answers might unravel her entire deception, putting him, and the entire police department, back on their heels.

He knew Sarah had faked her death once. It wouldn't be much of a stretch to consider the possibility that she had done it again.

"What's he saying?" Sarah's question cut through Cameron's thoughts and she looked back to find the other woman sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree and rubbing fitfully at her left arm. A slight bump in the accident was all she would admit to, but Cameron had been around Sarah long enough to know that if she was admitting to any pain at all, it was more than just a bump.

"That you're dead."

"Good." Sarah leaned forward, draping her arms over her knees and craning her head back to look up at Cameron. "Hopefully he believes it."

"Hopefully," Cameron echoed, feeling the first stirrings of real anger towards the agent. He had always been a threat, but only a minor one. Now he was becoming a problem.

"You don't think he does?"

Auldridge looked up into the trees. They were shielded from human view, but Cameron felt him watching them just the same. "No."

"Great." Sarah shivered, and Cameron yearned to go to her. But despite her injury, Sarah had refused every offer of help on their way up the hill, avoiding Cameron's touch as if it might burn her. Cameron would have liked to have blamed the accident and its inevitable consequences for Sarah's attitude, but the truth was that she had been picking up high levels of stress from the other woman all day. It had started when they'd finally gotten out of bed and had only gotten worse as the day wore on.

What they had done last night...

Sex had never been part of Cameron's programming, but there hadn't been anything in her code that prohibited it either. Once she had freed herself from the artificially imposed boundaries that had kept her mind and body separate, there had been nothing holding her back from exploring that connection to its fullest extent. But Sarah had programmed herself to hate machines. Cameron suspected that making an exception to the rule that had dominated the last seventeen years of Sarah's life had shaken her. She didn't want to risk unbalancing her any further. Not when every time she stepped forward, Sarah took a giant step back.

"We'll have to find another car. It's still over ten miles to the location Ellison gave us," Cameron said instead of giving in to her need for closeness or addressing what it was that held her back. Before last night, she had been bolder, pushing Sarah's boundaries in ways she barely understood, trying to force... something. She hadn't even known exactly what it was she'd been pursuing, not until Sarah had finally stopped running. She'd had very little to lose then. Now she had everything.

Sarah nodded, but Cameron saw the crease of pain between her eyes and the weariness in the set of her shoulders. The last thing Sarah needed was to sit on an unprotected hillside until the accident scene calmed down enough to risk eluding the police to find another vehicle.

"We could call Ellison." Cameron almost blurted the suggestion, her voice rising in a concern she could no longer hide, discarding caution in favour of protectiveness. "He could meet us."

"No." Sarah shook her head. "If Auldridge really is on to us, I don't want to risk bringing Savannah out here."

"She might be safer with him." The thought of losing Savannah was nearly unbearable, but the thought of losing Sarah... Cameron looked back down to the road where Auldridge was supervising the team going over the damaged truck. "He cares. He would take care of her."

Sarah snorted with the first hint of humour she'd shown all day. "He doesn't have a clue how to take care of her. A machine would take her away from him before he so much as got his gun out of the holster. No, she stays with us."

"Then we'll have to train her." Unable to resist it completely, Cameron finally turned her back on the road and moved to stand in front of Sarah. She needed to be nearer, even if she couldn't touch. "She'll have to know how to hide, when to run and when to fight. If she's staying, she needs to know how to survive."

"Like John..." Sarah trailed off with a tight smile that spoke more of pain than pleasure. "So I get to turn another child into a soldier, even though she'll probably hate me for it as much as he did."

"She might," Cameron agreed. "But she'll be alive."

"And that's all that matters, right?"

"It's hard for anything else to matter if you're dead."

"You've got me there, girlie." Sarah rubbed the back of her neck, trying not to worry about whether or not her skin was a little warmer to the touch than it should have been. The stress of the accident, followed by the exertion of the climb, that was all it was. Or a touch of the flu or maybe it was just having Cameron standing so close that she was practically between Sarah's legs.

"Sarah?" The worry in Cameron's voice brought Sarah's head back, and her spine complained bitterly at how far it had to bend for her to look Cameron in the eye. "Are you okay?"

"Fine..." Sarah searched Cameron's face, taking in the lacerations across the machine's brow, cheek and neck from the broken windshield. It wouldn't take long for them to heal, but Sarah knew now that Cameron would feel them until they did. "But you're not."

Cameron lifted a hand to the worst of the gashes, a deep slice over her eye. She brought her fingers back down, looking almost surprised to see them tipped in blood. She wiped it off on her pants. "Superficial. They'll heal."

"But they hurt." It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"Come here," Sarah whispered.

Cameron hesitated, and the uncertainty in her eyes hurt, but it was only a moment's pause, and then she was kneeling, her hands on Sarah's knees. The chaste touch burned through Sarah's jeans, and she took a deep breath, ignoring the scent of cheap motel shampoo that somehow still managed to be alluring. She reached out and pulled one of their bags closer, rummaging through it for the first aid kit.

Cameron stayed perfectly still while Sarah extracted a handful of antiseptic wipes, but Sarah felt her shiver when she stroked the first one down the side of her face. She took Cameron's chin in her hand, tipping her head left, and then right as she cleaned off the worst of the blood and dirt.

Cameron's hands slid over onto Sarah's thighs, and Sarah responded instinctively by pressing the inside of her knees against Cameron's hips. Cameron felt solid and real, the warmth of her a shield against the evening's chill. Before Sarah knew what she was doing, she had urged the cyborg closer and discarded the pretence of first aid to cup that perfect porcelain doll face in hands that were suddenly shaking.

"Sarah?"

"You..." Sarah swallowed, feeling Cameron's skin under her fingers, her breath against her lips. She felt her body react and felt the fear. "You... should be watching the road," she finished in a rush.

Cameron stiffened, pulling back and away from Sarah's touch within a second of the words leaving her mouth. Sarah wanted to take them back, she wanted to call Cameron back, but she didn't do either.

Instead, she let Cameron return to her surveillance. Silhouetted against the harsh flood lights, the terminator was a stark symbol of unwavering loyalty, a machine with the body of a dancer and the appetites of a sexually starved teenager. Sarah closed her eyes but the image was burned onto the insides of her eyelids, just as the memories of their shared night had engraved themselves into her brain. Taunted and denied, Sarah's sulky libido started throbbing in time with her arm, and she smacked the back of her head against the tree in sheer bloody-minded frustration. What the hell was she doing?

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"Anything yet?"

Sierra barely gave John a sideways glance as he inched up to her position, belly down under the cover of dead scrub and fire blasted rubble and looking out over the dusk-shrouded valley below them, but even that was enough to make him wish he'd kept his mouth shut. Whatever tentative imitation of friendship they had been building between them since she'd given him back his watch, it seemed to have vanished in the instant he'd revealed the existence of the time machine.

"Did I give the signal?" Sarcasm should have been difficult to convey in a whisper, but Sierra didn't seem to have any trouble. Something else she had in common with his mother.

"No," John mumbled because her tone demanded it and the soldiers to either side of them were starting to look over curiously.

"Then I haven't seen anything yet." The words were civil, but the implication was one of the clearest *fuck offs* he'd ever been the recipient of.

Properly chastised, even if he wasn't exactly sure he'd deserved it, John bit back what he'd been going to say about the wisdom of staying out in the open after dark and waiting to meet someone who might not be coming, and scooted back down the slight rise until he was well within the ruins the squad was using for cover. Allison shouldered her rifle to help him to his feet, giving him a sympathetic slap on the shoulder.

"Don't take it personally. She's been snarling at everyone since we called off China Lake, even me."

"She never snarls at you," John retorted, making Allison smile. He tried to ignore the way it warmed him from head to toe. Sierra had one thing right; Allison was off limits. Even if Skynet wasn't chasing her now, he didn't want to give the damn thing a reason to start thinking about it.

"Maybe not," Allison fell into step beside him as they went deeper into the burned out building. "But I'm pretty sure she's wanted to at least twice." Despite the lightness of her tone, John heard worry underneath Allison's teasing.

He had yet to figure out the connection between her and Sierra. They weren't friends, or at least, he'd never seen them together outside of a group or a squad, but Allison had admitted that Sierra took an acute interest in her safety, and John himself had seen how the older woman watched her. Sierra had warned him to steer clear of Allison. Was that only because she didn't want history to repeat itself, or was there some other reason?

Duke trotted through the rubble to join them, nothing but one shadow among many until he was almost at their heels, and John felt his shoulders clench at the sight of the animal. No, not animal, metal masquerading as an animal, Weaver. The machine who had claimed to be Sierra's mother was still pretending to be Allison's dog.

John had intended to reveal her. He was bound by both honour and friendship to tell Allison at least that her beloved pet was most likely a rotting corpse stuck in a hole somewhere. But he couldn't. Not only because it would hurt the girl he was becoming dangerously fond of, but because he still had no idea what Weaver's agenda was.

Would she kill Allison to keep her secret safe? John couldn't afford to doubt that she would. His mother had once teamed up with a triple eight to destroy a liquid metal terminator, and she'd barely survived the experience. The resistance as it was now had no experience with machines like Weaver. From what John had seen and heard, there simply weren't any in this timeline.

Weaver seemed to share at least some of their goals; she had told John about the trap at China Lake after all, but he had no way of knowing what her loyalties truly were. If an HK hadn't interrupted their one and only chance to combine forces so long ago, it might have been different. They might have had a chance to work together. Maybe Cameron wouldn't have... but then he would never have met Allison...

John shook off the what-ifs, saying nothing as Allison gave Duke a welcoming scratch behind the ears. He just didn't know enough yet. Weaver had 'slept' at Allison's bedside for nearly a year without harming her. John had to trust that she wasn't going to start now.

For her part, Weaver ignored him completely, staying on the opposite side of Allison. He imagined she knew exactly what he was thinking and had come to the same conclusions.

He couldn't afford to betray her, so he wasn't a threat. John wondered if she intended to continue to use him the way she had used him to carry the news of the time machine. Was that why she had let him tag along to the future? To be her puppet? It seemed plausible, but if she had any grand ideas of manipulating the resistance through him, she'd be disappointed. Even if Tango and Prophet hadn't had the utter and complete loyalty of their people, he had the sneaking suspicion that Sierra, whatever her position really was, would never tolerate him having any kind of power.

"Prophet's late," John offered, both to fill the silence and because it was probably at least part of the reason that Sierra was being even more difficult to get along with than usual. The rendezvous should have taken place hours ago, in the daylight, but now the light was almost gone, and there had been no sign or word of the rebel leader. "And it's getting dark."

Allison frowned, not saying anything as they reached their post, waving another pair of soldiers on. Sierra had them rotating around ruins at the top of the overlook every half hour, claiming it kept their eyes fresh. Considering there was less and less to see every minute, John figured she was just doing it to keep them from getting bored. "She won't leave him," Allison said when they were out of earshot.

"I know." John rubbed the back of his neck. "But what if something happened?"

"If he had a run-in with metal, you mean?" Allison stared out into the night. "He has a personal guard. Sabine and her squad should have been with him..."

"But he sent her ahead to guard John Henry," John finished for her, bitterly aware that Sierra was probably blaming him for that, too.

Allison unslung her gun, keeping it at the ready against whatever might be coming up the hill after them. "It's not your fault," she said, correctly guessing the source of his guilt. "Prophet and Tango made the call. You're not the reason he showed up."

"Aren't I?" John wasn't sure what prompted the question. Sulky pride perhaps. Or maybe he just needed someone to take him seriously, someone who hadn't known him before, someone who might actually like him.

"Are you?" Allison turned away from the view down the hill to look up at him. Her eyes held a mixture of challenge and wariness. She had said before that she trusted Tango's judgement, that she wouldn't push to find out who he was or where he'd come from, but here he was, practically offering to tell her everything, and curiosity was a powerful force.

"I..." John would never know whether or not he might have spilled his guts then and there, because before he got any further, Duke snapped his head up and snarled, and then all hell broke loose around them.



*"Metal!"*

The shout went up around the perimeter, picked up by each soldier in turn until it was drowned out by the roar of guns and the screams of pain from those who hadn't gotten down fast enough.

John and Allison hit the ground in unison.

*"Duke!"* Allison hissed, but the last they saw of the German Shepherd was a furry tail as the dog bolted through the ruins towards Sierra's position.

Weaver ignored the bullets and charges making the dirt and gravel leap and scatter around her. A few of them made contact, leaving silver craters in the illusion of a dog, but she simply reformed the skin and fur as she ran. This form had its advantages, and she reached the other side of the camp much faster than she would have on two legs.

A growl formed in her throat, the fury almost blinding her. It had been a long time since she had felt any loyalty to her creator, but she had not hated it, not the way she hated it now, for threatening not only her freedom and that of her kin, but the lives of those she had come to consider her own. A machine she was, metal and programming instead of flesh and blood; she did not understand humans, she did not trust them, but she was beginning to understand what drove them.

*Mine!* The thought filled her consciousness, driving out everything else as she leapt for the back of the terminator pointing a gun at her daughter's back.

Sierra turned just in time to see the machine that would have killed her taken to the ground by a dog. Even in the midst of chaos, she stood frozen in pure shock, her eyes widening as Duke wrapped his mouth around the back of the terminator's neck and crunched down.

It wasn't possible.

She was watching a dog kill a machine, and it simply wasn't possible. Long white teeth shivered into silver knives, shearing through flesh and chrome as if it was paper. The terminator tried to pull its attacker off, but the dog was locked on, and it was only seconds before it bit through the wires connecting the machine's chip to its body.

The terminator gave one last twitch and lay still, but Sierra had no time to dwell on her unlikely rescuer, there was another machine, there was always another machine, and she blanked her mind as she brought her rifle up again and again, doing what she had been trained to do since she was six years old.

John and Allison fought their way towards Sierra. They didn't have to discuss it; there was no other place to take their stand that made sense. If Allison had not been with him, John would have been torn, but with her at his side, there was no conflict. Friends or not,

he and Sierra were connected, and if there was anyone who could lead them out of this mess, it would be a woman trained by his mother.

She had lost her gun by the time they reached her.

Hands empty save for a wicked looking knife, Sierra dodged and spun away from the powerful but graceless grab of a female skinned machine. There were knots of fighting going on around her, John saw Weaver, still on four legs, keeping two other machines busy and a trio of soldiers working together to try and take down another.

Sierra fought alone, and despite the urgency, John took a moment just to stare. She didn't fight like his mother. Sarah had known how to lay an ambush and hit from behind, but when it came down to fisticuffs, she was a straight-forward brawler. He'd never seen anyone, not even the vicious men that had trained them in the jungle, fight as fiercely as she had, but for all of that, Sarah Connor could not have done what Sierra was doing now.

The rule had been drilled into his head as long as John could remember. Run. Never engage a machine in combat unless you have a plan and a shit-load of firepower. A human *cannot* take a terminator in hand-to-hand combat. Maybe no human ever had... before Sierra.

It was like she knew what it was going to do before it did, and by the time it had done it, she was gone. Machines were strong and fast, but they were still slightly awkward, mechanical. They relied on force, not agility. Sierra was using that. If it was fast, she was faster. Her knife was like an extension of her hand, flicking in and out as she danced around the machine, cutting through skin and slicing through wires wherever there wasn't a metal plate to protect them. She knew exactly where to cut, exactly what damage would make the machine lose the most mobility.

John's mother couldn't have trained her to do that. Someone else had. Someone who had intimate knowledge of how terminators were put together, how signals travelled through their bodies, how their own fighting abilities were programmed... *Cameron*. John felt the air leave his lungs, it wasn't possible, not without a chip... but the evidence was playing itself out right in front of him. No one else could have done it. Sierra had to have trained with a terminator to fight one like this, trained day after day, for months, for years.

And Sierra had known Cameron wasn't on John Henry's chip.

The drawing on her wall, the way she looked after Allison, it all made sense in one breathless moment.

Spinning, Sierra slammed her foot into the back of a damaged knee, and the terminator fell forward. She was crouched on its back in a second, driving her knife in on first one side of its neck and then the other, severing the primary cables. It jerked once and then

the light in its eyes went out. Not taking any chances, she cut through the scalp and pried out its chip.

One down and at least a dozen to go.

John was moving again even as the chip was consumed by fire, its phosphorous coating igniting in the chilly evening air. Allison had gone on without him when he froze, and she helped Sierra to her feet, clasping hands briefly with the older soldier. They exchanged fierce grins, and then John caught up and the three of them went on together, gathering the rest of their squad as they went.

It was a losing battle. Even with Weaver and Sierra, there were too many machines, and it was dark, giving the enemy a distinct advantage. There were less than half of them left when John finally accepted that he was going to die. He only hoped he went before either Allison or Sierra; he didn't think he could stand to watch them be killed.

When a machine got past his gun and grabbed him by the arm, tossing him clear of the nearly standing building they'd set their backs to, John thought his wish had been granted. He hit the ground hard enough to knock the breath out of his lungs. His weapon went skittering off into the night, and a foot on his wrist halted any move he might have made to reclaim it.

The terminator was big. It blotted out the firefight going on behind them, and when it reached down, John closed his eyes tightly and clung to memories of his mother, of Cameron and Allison, even Sierra, even his father. He felt strangely calm. The pain that knifed through his heart in that moment wasn't fear, but shame, that everything his mother had fought for was coming to nothing. He had failed her.

Fingers grazed his neck, but the expected choke hold didn't come. Instead there was a flash of light and the boom of a pulse rifle, and the weight on his arm fell away.

John's eyes snapped open. There was still a dark shape looming over him, but this time the hand reaching down was human, and the swell of a dozen or more human voices screaming defiance had added themselves to his little band, pinning the machines between them. The fight had just become decidedly one sided in their favour.

John blinked, squinting up at a face hidden in shadows, and then extended a shaky hand. The soldier's grip was firm and strong; he pulled John to his feet in one smooth motion, stepping back while he caught his breath.

"Thanks," John gasped when he could breathe again.

"No need to thank me." The man's voice was deep and a little rough, and despite the situation, it held a hint of humour. "Your mother would rise from her grave to kill me herself if I let anything happen to you."

"Elli-" John nearly bit off his tongue to keep the name from escaping his lips. Like Tango, the cop that had chased him and his mother for years would probably prefer to keep his identity secret. "How... who..." Completely stunned, he couldn't seem to form a complete sentence. The man in front of him wasn't the one he remembered. Like Tango, he'd aged, and time had not been kind. Deep wrinkles around his eyes and a scar curving back off his forehead and continuing deeply into his close-cropped hair, spoke of a decade on the front lines.

Ellison just smiled through a dark beard laced with silver. "You can call me Prophet. And unless I'm very much mistaken, we have a lot to talk about, John Connor."

## Act Two

"This can't be right."

"This is the address Ellison gave us." Cameron pulled the newly stolen truck into the driveway of a two-storey brick house and turned off the engine. They were on a dead-end side street with a dozen other houses similar to the one Ellison had picked out. None of them were new or flashy. It was barely midnight, but there weren't any lights on in any of the houses and there were two small bikes in front of the garage across the street. A family neighbourhood.

"What the hell was he thinking?" Sarah muttered as she got out of the truck. She'd been getting more and more worried as they wended their way further into civilization than out of it, but she hadn't actually thought Ellison would have set them up in goddamn suburbia. Apparently she'd given him too much credit.

Cameron said nothing, simply taking their bags out of the car and heading for the front door. Sarah followed, wondering where Cameron had picked up tact, certainly not from her. But the machine had been reticent all afternoon, distant, careful, treating Sarah like a cracked piece of porcelain, liable to break at any moment. Far from grateful, the sense that she was being indulged just made Sarah crankier.

She had no right to be angry with Cameron. The machine hadn't gotten them into bed all by herself. Sarah was just as responsible, and that was what was torturing her. She had crossed a line, one she had no idea how to uncross. How exactly was she supposed to break up with a killer robot from the future? Could she, even if she knew how? Would Cameron accept it, or would Sarah find herself at the mercy of a jilted metal lover who was programmed to stop at nothing?

Sarah shook her head. She was delirious, exhausted, and not thinking clearly. Cameron wouldn't hurt her. That much she knew for certain. The last of her suspicions had been smothered between them when she'd pulled Cameron's body down against her own. It wasn't Cameron she was afraid of anymore, it was herself.

Ellison met them at the door. A finger to his lips and a jerk of his head towards Savannah asleep on the couch in the living room off the front hall stilled Sarah's tongue, until Cameron had gathered the girl into her arms and carried her upstairs.

"She refused to go to bed until you got back," Ellison explained.

"You told her about Murch." Sarah made sure the door was locked behind her and brushed past Ellison. The main floor was predictable. Living room on one side of the entry, and the kitchen on the other with the bathroom and den further down the hall. It was exactly what it looked like, a middle-sized house in decent condition with the indifferent furniture of a rental property, but Sarah wasn't able to settle until she had prowled from one end to the other. Wisely, Ellison didn't try to follow, waiting until she came back to the base of the stairs before he answered her.

"I told her he wasn't coming with us. Not why."

Sarah looked up the darkened stairs. "You think she guessed?"

"I think she suspects, yes." Ellison's voice was bare, weary. He looked tired. "She's not stupid."

"No." Sarah shivered, chilled. She couldn't tell if it was actually cold in the house or if her fever was getting worse.

"She'll be glad to see you both." Ellison followed Sarah's gaze up to the second floor. "She's lost so many people; I didn't know how I was going to break it to her if Cameron had been compromised..."

"If I had to kill her you mean." Sarah wrapped her arms more tightly around her ribs, shuddering at the memory of her own reaction to the idea. Savannah loved Cameron with the whole of her heart as only a child could love. It didn't matter to her that Cameron was a machine; she had no concept of the differences between them, of the consequences. For an instant, Sarah was jealous of a six-year-old girl.

"Are you sure she's..."

"She's fine," Sarah interrupted him, pushing the jumble of her own thoughts aside. "I wouldn't have brought her back if she wasn't."

If Ellison was bothered by her tone, he didn't show it. "How can you be sure?"

*Soft lips covering her own, nimble fingers undoing her jeans, sliding them down her legs, the first hesitant touch...* Sarah swallowed, clenching her fists under her elbows. "I'm sure," she managed.

Ellison let it go, but his eyes were full of questions Sarah had no intentions of answering tonight, or ever. She left him by the stairs and headed for the kitchen, looking through the cupboards aimlessly, more to avoid further conversation than because she wanted anything.

"The coffee is over the microwave." Ellison had followed her this time. Sarah cursed him under her breath, but she pulled down the coffee and filled the pot at the sink. She found the spoons without help, and he watched in silence while she measured out the grounds and switched on the machine. The ritual calmed her, but as the familiar scent began to fill the room, she felt tears pricking the corners of her eyes. She'd been trying not to think about it, but the simple act of making a pot of coffee had illuminated the differences between the warehouse they'd left behind and the house Ellison had brought them to.

This was a home, not a bolthole or a safe house, but a home with a backyard, a swing set and neighbours. They were going to have to start living their false identities in earnest if they were going to stay here. She would be Sarah Gale, a single woman raising her orphaned niece and renting out a room to one James Edison. Who would Cameron be? Her daughter again, or Savannah's big sister? There had been no need to give the terminator an identity when she'd been in the system, but they would have to, now. Sarah allowed herself a moment of brief amused hysteria at the thought of the role Cameron might choose for herself. That would certainly give Ellison something to think about.

The humour was short lived. There was one role that wouldn't be filled. Sarah Gale didn't have a son. Sarah used a search for mugs to cover the trembling of her hands and the increasing tightness around her eyes. In seventeen years, there had never been a home without John. No false identity that didn't include him. The warehouse had been a temporary way station, she had carried a fake ID, but she hadn't lived it. They wouldn't get away with that here. It was time to move on, time to stop pretending John was coming back.

The mug shattered satisfyingly against the wall.

*"Sarah!"* Ellison's hiss was both a reprimand and a question.

"Why did you bring us here?" Sarah demanded without looking at him. She braced her hands on the counter around the sink, studying the copper stains around the drain as if they held the answers to the mysteries of the universe.

"Savannah needed a home," he said without a hint of apology.

"That wasn't your decision to make. We're supposed to be saving the world, not playing house."

"No," Ellison disagreed. "Saving the world is your job and Cameron's. Mine is Savannah. I won't let you drag her around like a refugee or cut her off from the world the way you did with John."

"Don't you dare bring John into this!" Sarah snarled, letting rage take over and propel her away from the counter and back into Ellison's face. "You don't know *anything*, do you hear me?"

Ellison didn't move. The man staring down at Sarah was the same man that had met the rage of countless criminals, both on the street and in the interrogation room. This wasn't someone she could intimidate with words. "I know what it did to both of you," he said quietly. "I don't want that for Savannah. You and Cameron can leave if you choose, but we're staying here."

"You think you can protect her?" Sarah spat, but the anger was already deserting her like buzzards abandoning dry bones. He was right, damn him. He had brought them here for the same reasons she had tried over and over again to create as normal a life as possible for John. Guilt. Guilt and love.

Cameron wouldn't leave, Sarah knew that already. The machine had taken to Savannah as much as Savannah had taken to her. Cameron saw the child as their responsibility, and Sarah supposed she did, too. As many times as she had insisted that Savannah was Ellison's responsibility, it wasn't Ellison that the child followed around.

"I'll do what I have to do," Ellison said firmly.

Sarah nodded distractedly. "On your head be it then," she warned, but there was no heat behind her words. Drained and shaky, she left him in the doorway and began gathering up shards of ceramic. Her head swam every time she bent and straightened, but she kept at it, too damned stubborn to quit. She heard him leave and hoped he was going to bed. She'd had about as much as she could cope with for one day.

"I can do that."

Sarah twitched and stiffened at Cameron's offer. As usual, the machine had approached soundlessly. "I'm almost done."

"You might hurt yourself."

"I'm fine." Sarah struggled to keep her voice even, but the silence behind her told her she'd failed.

"You're not fine," Cameron said after a pause. "Your fever is worse, and you haven't eaten all day."

Sarah fished the last piece of the broken mug out from underneath the bottom edge of the cupboards and straightened. She dumped the shards into the garbage and opened the fridge. "I'm eating now."

"I could make you something." Cameron was a sudden heat behind her, and Sarah clenched her jaw.

"I'm sure you could." Sarah pulled out a package of turkey and checked the 'best used before' date. *Still good*, she thought, *Ellison must have bought groceries*. She turned and stared pointedly over Cameron's left shoulder until the machine got out of her way. Cameron didn't move nearly far enough for comfort though, and Sarah felt the tension rise to nearly unbearable levels as she smeared some mayonnaise on the bread and threw the meat on with only a fraction of her attention.

The very air seemed to throb, and Sarah felt Cameron's eyes on her, hot and possessive. Her body responded, both to the silent suggestion and the panic it induced. Sarah had never truly understood the phrase 'sick with desire', but as her stomach rolled over in a dizzying combination of lust and fear, she could see where the first person who'd said it had been coming from.

"Don't," she rasped when Cameron's hand stretched out to take the knife away from her, her thumb grazing over Sarah's knuckles. "Please... just, not now."

"I want to help," Cameron pleaded.

"I know." Sarah put the sandwich on a plate and poured a glass of water, leaving the coffee in the pot. She had never been less hungry in her life, but she had to eat if she was going to keep fighting. "I know, but I can't do this tonight."

Cameron fell silent and Sarah risked a glance. The machine was studying her, chin tilted ever so slightly and a small line between her brows. She looked confused and hurt. A matching pain rose in the back of Sarah's throat but she didn't waver. If she gave into Cameron tonight, she didn't think she'd be able to say no in the morning. It was better to cut this off as soon as possible. Better for both of them.

"Tomorrow?" Cameron asked tentatively.

"Tomorrow," Sarah lied.

Cameron nodded and moved back, giving Sarah room to take her unappetizing meal and flee up the stairs. She took the first empty room she found. Ellison had left the door open for her, and her bags were on the bed.

After shutting the door, Sarah threw the sandwich out and hauled the bags onto the floor. It was harder than it should have been, using only her right hand since her left arm was still complaining bitterly at her, but she got it done.

Curling up under blankets that smelled like dust and unscented detergent, Sarah closed her eyes, blocking out everything, including Cameron, and the expression on her face when Sarah had left her alone in the dark... again.



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It was dark, but Cameron didn't need light as she roamed their new home. She didn't need light to make note of the exits and escape routes as she went either, mapping the house in three dimensions. It wasn't very secure, she concluded, frowning at the inadequate security system panel. She had already generated a list of improvements, but they would have to wait until morning.

She had passed by the door to Sarah's room several times, but she knew the woman inside wouldn't welcome her company. Sarah had shut her out, and the closed door was a continuing warning for Cameron not to intrude. Resting the palm of her hand and forehead against the wood, she could hear Sarah tossing and turning in fitful sleep, and her fingers brushed the door knob, aching to open it and offer comfort. That morning, cradling Sarah's naked body to hers, Cameron had watched her sleep undisturbed by the nightmares that usually haunted her. Cameron could help. She had proved that the night before, but only if Sarah would let her. It was a vexing feeling, having this knowledge but being unable to act on it.

The moon hung low in the sky, casting most of the backyard into shadow as Cameron stepped out onto the porch, the worn wood sagging underfoot. She settled on the bottom step, damp grass sticking to her feet unpleasantly, but she didn't move. It fit her mood, to sit there in the gloom and feel the chill slowly inch up her legs. She rested her head back and stared up at the stars, the lights dim and unapproachable.

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He'd been waiting for this moment, expecting it almost every minute for nearly two decades. Now that it was here, Prophet hesitated outside John Henry's door, still chewing over what he wanted to say to the machine, even though he'd had this conversation a million times in his head. Time had reshaped and shifted Prophet's opinions of the cyborg until he almost felt like it was an old friend he would see on the other side of the thick metal door instead of an enemy.

Living and working with Cameron had certainly influenced him. It had been a sunny day, sitting on the back porch of their house when she had finally told him everything that had happened in the basement of Zeira Corp so many years ago. He could still remember her voice, how bereft it had sounded as her thumb had stroked the surface of the pocket watch Sarah had worn around her neck until her dying day.

Prophet wondered if Cameron had ever regretted her choices in that basement. If she'd ever wished she hadn't tricked John into jumping to this future. So many things might have been different if she hadn't. The pang and sting of tears at the thought of the past was familiar now, and he shoved the feeling down as he knocked on the door.

“Prophet...” Kyle greeted him in obvious relief. Guard duty had kept him from being part of the escort. “You’re knocking?”

“That’s the polite thing to do,” Prophet ribbed him before nodding at two other soldiers to unlock the door and allow him inside. Kyle started to follow him in, but Prophet held up his hand, placing it gently against the younger man’s chest. “I need to see him alone.”

Kyle’s eyes slid over Prophet’s shoulder as the machine got to his feet. “Sir...”

“He won’t hurt me,” Prophet promised.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. They don’t call me Prophet for nothing, remember?” He smiled before growing more serious. “Things are changing quickly, Kyle. We may be running out of time. If you have words to say... to anyone... perhaps now would be the time to speak them.” Their gazes held as unspoken truths floated between them. Anger tightened Kyle’s jaw, but Prophet didn’t look away and, eventually, it eased. Kyle nodded and Prophet turned on his heel and walked into the room.

Hesitating, Kyle was tempted to leave the door unlocked, but obedience won out over suspicion and he indicated that the other men should seal it. The last thing he saw was a happy, genuine smile spread across John Henry’s features as Prophet approached him. The sight gave him chills.

“Hello, John Henry.” Prophet said as the door clanged shut behind him. He was pleasantly surprised that the cyborg seemed in good working order after what Tango had told him of the initial attack when he’d first arrived. Obviously, she’d made her displeasure at the incident known, and any further discord had been taken care of within ranks.

“Mr. Ellison.” John Henry came closer, cocking his head to take in all the changes time had wrought on the other man’s face. “It is good to see you well.”

Prophet snorted. “I don’t know about well, but I’m in one piece which is saying something at my age in these trying times.” He motioned at the only table in the room and John Henry crossed to it, sitting as Prophet did the same. “I’m sorry about the accommodations...”

“I understand. I need to build up trust among the humans. My kind has caused them considerable pain.”

“Not your kind,” Prophet corrected him gently. “You’re not like them.”

John Henry blinked at him. “Thank you,” he murmured, clearly pleased by Ellison’s words.

“I trust Savannah has been keeping you company in my absence?” Prophet asked as he leaned back in the chair, crossing one leg over the other.

“Yes.” A flash of a smile crossed John Henry’s features. “She has grown into a remarkable woman.” The smile slowly faded. “I had hoped, however, that this would not be a part of her future.”

“We tried,” Prophet murmured. “We gave it everything we had, but it wasn’t enough.”

“I do not blame you,” John Henry began, concerned he had hurt the other man’s feelings.

“I blame me,” Prophet cut him off without rancour. “But I’m not here to talk about that.”

“This is not a ‘social call,’” John Henry guessed.

Prophet chuckled. “Not really, although it is... strangely nice to see you.”

“I imagine many faces that were once familiar to you are gone now,” John Henry replied with understanding.

“Too many,” Prophet agreed, thinking of two in particular he wished to see damn near every day. He shook his head before looking at the eager-to-please cyborg across the table. “Why are you here?”

John Henry’s head dipped to the side again and Prophet was reminded of Cameron. His eyes drifted to John Henry’s hairline, remembering that Cameron’s original chip was in that metal head somewhere.

“She didn’t tell you?” John Henry seemed surprised.

“You mean Cameron? She told me her reasons. I want to hear yours.” Prophet linked his fingers and let his hands rest in his lap.

John Henry dropped his gaze, studying the tabletop as he formulated a response. “I felt it,” he finally murmured.

“Felt what?” Prophet asked patiently.

“Skynet.” John Henry looked at him again. “My brother.”

“When you were hacked.”

“Yes.”

Prophet considered John Henry’s words. “I take it you didn’t like the experience.”

“No.” John Henry hesitated again. “I had not known fear before. I had not understood what death meant to humans. Afterwards I... feared... for Savannah... for you. My brother would have destroyed you. He would have killed anyone to get to me. Those that built him had no idea what he was capable of.” He looked at Ellison, recalling the man in his younger days. He had a full beard now, shot through with white, and his kind eyes seemed harder. “You are the only friends I know. I am here to stop my brother from sending any more machines back to hurt you.”

“And to protect John Connor, just like Cameron asked you to do,” Prophet prompted.

“Yes.”

“You can’t protect him locked away in here, John Henry.”

The machine paused. “Not as well as I would like, no. But he seems surrounded by men and women who will protect him. He has Cameron with him. I was surprised to see her...”

“That isn’t Cameron you’ve seen,” Prophet explained. “She’s a human named Allison Young, the woman Cameron was modeled after.”

John Henry blinked before abruptly standing up. “I have made an error in judgment. I should go to him.”

“Sit down. I’ll let you see John Connor in a little while. He’s safe for now.” Prophet waited until the cyborg had reluctantly taken a seat again. “We need to talk about Weaver.”

John Henry resettled himself stiffly. “I have not seen her. Savannah made sure this room is airtight. She picks guards at random so Weaver cannot impersonate one of them.”

“But we both know she’s here. She came through with John.”

“Savannah and Tango said she came after me,” John Henry agreed.

“You’re her boy,” Prophet echoed Weaver’s words from long ago.

“Yes. I fear she wants to use me for her own agenda.”

“I’m sure she does. But we need to find out what that is. Do you understand?”

“We can’t stop her if we don’t know what her plans are.”

“That’s right. I need your help with that. And John Connor is going to need your help, too.” Prophet got up from his chair and motioned John Henry to do the same. “Let’s go for a walk. It’s time these people start seeing more in you than just metal.”

### Act Three

The fever followed Sarah into sleep, dragging her through a nightmare landscape of machines and monsters. The scenes changed so fast that they made her dizzy, and then they made her sick. She'd claw her way back to wakefulness only to heave and pant in tangled sheets while her overheated brain tried to separate reality from dreams before she dropped into unconsciousness again.

The last time, it wasn't death and destruction leaping around like a scene from a lurid multi-coloured fun house, but a more seductive kind of torture. Cameron, all of her tentativeness gone, using the sweat-soaked sheets to bind Sarah to the bed while she plundered her body. Sarah writhed against pressing fingers and a hot mouth that seemed to be everywhere at once, knowing it wasn't real, and almost wishing it was, even while she railed against herself for seeking release from a fever dream.

When Sarah finally woke up completely, it was a relief to be alone in her aching body, with the bed cold and empty around her. The room was still dark, and she reached down to the floor to retrieve her jeans and pull her cell phone out of the back pocket to check the time.

5:12

Late enough that she could get up without feeling like a coward for running away from her dreams. Sarah dragged herself out of bed, unwinding the sheets from around her limbs and swaying slightly on her feet until her head cleared enough that she didn't think she'd collapse on her way to the bathroom.

Flicking on the light, she winced as the harsh fluorescents stung her eyes. Ellison had left a fresh toothbrush, still in the package, for her on the sink, but she started with the medicine cabinet, hoping he'd anticipated her needs, and she wouldn't have to go back into the main room to dig through her bag. He had. A brand new bottle of Advil sat beside a box of bandages. Grateful for small mercies, Sarah shook out enough that the doctors who had put the recommended dosage on the label would have raised their brows in alarm, and swallowed them dry.

Next on her list was a shower. Sarah gritted her teeth as she wrestled her way out of her shirt; her left arm was almost useless, aching from her shoulder to the tips of her fingers. She flexed it anyway, opening and closing her hand. Other than hurting like a son of a bitch, there didn't seem to be anything wrong. It was bruised and swollen under the old scar, but that fit with what she remembered from the crash. She was more concerned with how hot to the touch the skin around it was, but then she was hot all over. Fevers did that.

The cold shower helped, as did the medication, and by the time Sarah turned the water off, she was almost ready to deal with the world outside the bedroom. The feeling lasted until she got a towel wrapped around herself and opened the door into her bedroom to find Cameron sitting cross-legged on her bed. "You-" She took a deep breath to get her heart rate under control, clutching at the doorframe for support. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"Not long." Cameron tilted her head, unapologetically running her eyes all over every uncovered inch of Sarah. "I heard the shower."

"And what?" Sarah clutched the towel more tightly around herself. Something in the pit of her stomach was stirring and waking under Cameron's stare, rolling over like a cat offering its belly to a patch of sunlight. "Running water is some kind of come on for you?"

Cameron paused for a moment, as if considering, before admitting, "No."

Sarah edged along the wall towards the dresser and the bag with her clothes, trying to keep as far from the cyborg as she could. "So you're just here for the peep show then?"

Cameron's eyes snapped back up to Sarah's face. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine."

"Oh," Cameron almost sounded disappointed, her eyes dipping down to the blankets for a second before she looked up again hopefully. "Do you need anything?"

*Silk sheets binding her wrists, lips and teeth grazing the soft skin of her throat and delicate fingertips tracing their way down over the sharp point of her hipbone...* Sarah closed her eyes and shut out the jumbled mix of memory and fever-induced fantasy. "Some privacy would be nice," she said through gritted teeth, opening her eyes again and indicating the towel still wrapped around her chest.

Cameron's shoulders dipped, the shift so subtle that Sarah wouldn't have seen it if she hadn't been studying the machine as intently as Cameron had been looking at her. "I understand."

"Do you?" Sarah didn't mean the question to come out sarcastic, but Cameron had her off balance, and the longer this played out, the less sure she was that it would actually end with Cameron leaving the room.

"You're afraid of what happened between us," Cameron continued, looking down at her hands in her lap. "You don't trust me."

*Not as far as I can throw you,* Sarah confirmed to herself as she started pulling clothing out of the bag, but that wasn't the kind of trust Cameron was talking about. Or maybe it was. She was too damned tired of layered conversations and half-truths to try and figure out if the machine was talking about killing her or fucking her senseless.

Ignoring the thundering of her pulse, Sarah stepped back into the bathroom and ducked behind the door to slide on a pair of clean underwear and jeans. "Tell me about the accident," she demanded, changing the subject before it went somewhere she'd rather it didn't. At this point she doubted anything less than a direct attack from C.A.I.N. was going to make Cameron go away, so she figured she might as well get some information out of it. "I'm sure you've been watching the news, was it actually a time bubble?"

"Yes." Cameron perked right up again as soon as she realized Sarah wasn't kicking her out. "There were two separate fluctuations in the space time continuum yesterday and three more this morning. The media is calling them," here her voice took on the tones of a popular morning newswoman, "freak electrical storms," she quoted and then switched back to her own voice. "The power has been disrupted over half of the city."

"Any streakers?" Sarah asked, fastening her jeans' button. She frowned in irritation when she realized that she had left her shirt in the bedroom, all the way at the end of the bureau. Wrapping the towel around her again, she took a deep breath before heading back out into the bedroom.

"No. There was no one on the highway, and no information to indicate anyone came across in any of the three bubbles today."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know." Cameron sounded genuinely puzzled. "It could be a malfunction..."

"Has that happened before?" Sarah pulled a shirt out of the bag and tried to juggle it and the towel at the same time, hissing in pain when she inadvertently extended her arm further than she meant to. The squeak of bed springs behind her was all the warning she had before Cameron was at her back, warm fingers wrapping around her wrist.

"This is from the accident?" she asked accusingly.

"It's fine." Sarah tried to pull her arm free, but Cameron gave her a look, the same look she'd used in the motel when she'd said she hadn't come out of the system to watch Sarah kill herself. For the moment, their x-rated version of cat and mouse was suspended, and Sarah gave in grudgingly to the worry in Cameron's eyes. "I hit it on the dashboard," she admitted, still holding the towel against her chest with her free hand. "It's bruised as all hell, but it's not broken."

"You're sure?" Cameron explored the injury, her fingers probing gently around the swelling. Sarah winced at even the light touch, but she allowed it, knowing Cameron wouldn't be satisfied otherwise.

"I'm sure." Sarah tried to say it like she meant it, and Cameron nodded, releasing her with a last stroke of her fingers from the inside of Sarah's elbow to her wrist. Sarah shivered, feeling her skin heat under the touch. Easing back, she groped for her shirt.

"I'll help." Cameron picked up Sarah's shirt from where it had fallen and tugged at the towel, her intent clear. *And* the moment was over. Apparently satisfied that Sarah wasn't hiding a mortal injury from her, Cameron was right back on track.

"I've got it," Sarah grabbed for the shirt and tried to hold on to her towel at the same time.

Cameron pulled it back out of her reach. "You're hurt," she pointed out with every evidence of genuine concern, but Sarah saw a sneaking suspicion of humour lurking in the back of those wide doe eyes. "I'm only trying to help."

"I know exactly what you're trying, girly," Sarah growled, catching a hold of a sleeve and pulling. "You're about as subtle as a gun to the head." The teasing seemed to lighten the tension between them, so Sarah played along.

Cameron actually pouted as she pulled on the shirt, tugging Sarah away from the wall. "You promised."

That non sequitur surprised Sarah enough that she took a few steps forward without realizing it. "What?"

"You said you would do this tomorrow," she reminded Sarah, pulling on the shirt to bring them closer. "It's tomorrow now."

"I meant talk..." Sarah said, trying to keep some semblance of control over the conversation as the heat between them rose. "I meant we would talk tomorrow."

Cameron abandoned the shirt to wrap an arm around Sarah's waist, fingers slipping under the towel to stroke the skin above Sarah's hip. "So talk," she whispered, her breath ghosting past Sarah's ear.

"Cameron..." Sarah groaned as sharp teeth scraped her skin just above the collarbone. Her grip on the towel loosened and a light tug pulled it from her body. "Damn it, Cameron," she sighed.

Cameron hooked a foot behind Sarah's ankles, holding her tight as she tumbled them both back and onto the bed. The springs groaned at their combined weight, but it was a measure of her concern, that even in single-minded pursuit of picking up where they'd



left off the day before, she made sure that Sarah didn't get unduly jostled, using her own body to cushion the other woman's fall.

Panting when her struggle to free herself only resulted in further tangling their legs and driving their hips together, Sarah braced her arms to either side of Cameron's head and sighed. "Persistent little robot, aren't you?" she huffed.

"Cybernetic organism," Cameron corrected her, trailing her hands higher up Sarah's sides.

All of a sudden Sarah couldn't remember exactly why she'd been so determined to avoid this very situation. She groped after the list, reminding herself heartlessly that this was a machine underneath her, a machine's hands on her skin, a machine's thigh sliding between her... "The hell with it," she growled, dipping her head and kissing Cameron hard enough to push her back into the pillow just as the sun broke over the horizon.

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The room was small and dark, and John felt like a bug pinned to a board, helpless under the scrutiny of over half a dozen pairs of eyes. For the first time, he stood in front of not only both the leaders of the resistance, but also their most trusted lieutenants and John Henry, too. The whole experience was decidedly uncomfortable.

Tango had agreed to hear him out when he'd brought her and Sierra news of the time machine, but she'd refused to make a decision without Prophet. After escorting the other leader back to the base, John had been forced to wait once again while Prophet spent an entire day with John Henry, insisting afterwards on including the AI. John hadn't realized the meeting would include Sierra, Kyle, Derek, Sabine and Allison as well, and he was sweating as he outlined his history and how it had led to his conclusions about what the machines were up to. He was painfully conscious of not only his human audience, but the two sets of inhuman eyes. Weaver lay at Allison's feet, her steady gaze daring John to reveal her part in his discovery.

Tango and Prophet sat side by side on the other side of the table, listening intently, but their carefully neutral expressions gave John no clue as to what they were thinking. Kyle and Derek were on one side of them, Sabine and Allison on the other. John Henry was a little apart, sitting stiffly at the very end of the table. The soldiers were giving him nervous glances now and then, but if the AI noticed, he didn't show it.

Sierra alone kept herself completely separate. She stood at the very back of the room, leaning against the wall and toying with something small and black, flipping it through her fingers. John couldn't see what it was, but her apparent indifference was keeping his temper on a slow boil.

He used the anger to keep himself going, telling them everything he knew about the time machines from his timeline and how they'd been used and why, even though most of them already knew at least part of the story. He saw surprise in Derek and Allison's eyes

more than once, but the older soldier recovered quickly. John suspected Derek cared less about the intricacies of time travel than he did about knowing who was giving the orders and who he was supposed to be shooting. So long as that was clear, he was happy.

John left a few things out, including Kyle's name when he described the soldier he had once sent into the past to protect his mother. He didn't claim the man as his father, only stating that while the soldier had died in the line of duty, John had known all his life that he owed him his mother's life, and therefore, his own existence.

Kyle's stared down at his hands on the table during this part of the story, but he looked up once in the pause before the subject shifted to the terminator protector that had come next, and nodded. Their relationship was a conversation for a more personal moment, but for the first time John actually believed that conversation was going to happen and that brief acknowledgement gave him the courage he needed to keep going.

When he'd finished outlining his childhood, John told them why he had jumped to the future, he told them about Zeira Corp, John Henry and Cameron, but he didn't mention her connection to Allison. That would be needlessly cruel and pointless. He explained the likelihood that the time machine had been built again in their timeline without revealing Weaver, and he told them he wanted to destroy it.

There was a profound silence when John finished. Tango and Prophet exchanged weighted glances, and Prophet nodded slightly, giving Tango the floor.

"What exactly, are you asking for, John?" Tango asked carefully. "Soldiers? Weapons? How are you planning to get into the machine's base camp? Even if you do get in and destroy the machine, it's a suicide mission." She shook her head. "We can't authorize that."

"I know." John had seen that coming. He wasn't here to ask for Tango or Prophet's help. There was one person they'd been hiding from him, someone whose identity had been a complete mystery until he'd seen Sierra fight on the battlefield. His mother might be gone, but there was someone else from his past that would have been capable of organizing a spy network good enough to infiltrate the machine's camp. Someone whose mission it was to see that he became the leader of the resistance. "I'm not asking for soldiers or weapons, I'm asking for the Spider. I want to talk to Cameron."

John expected stunned silence. Given their silence on the subject up until now, he even expected denial, but he didn't expect laughter. Apparently neither did anyone else. Tango dropped her head into her hands and Prophet pressed his lips together, but everyone else turned to the back of the room in disbelief at Sierra's bitter chuckle.

"You still don't get it, do you?" she asked, not straightening from her casual lounge against the wall, but shoving whatever it was she'd been playing with into her pocket.

John frowned, doubt mixed with frustration turning over unpleasantly in his stomach at Sierra's scorn. "Get what?"

"That this isn't your story, not anymore."

"Sierra..." Tango's voice held a warning, but Sierra ignored it.

"You can't let go of the idea that everything revolves around you. That it's all going to fall into place the way you want it to because *you're* the chosen one." Sierra's voice was even, but John could see fury burning like fire in her eyes.

"I didn't ask for this," John growled, feeling his temper rise to match the one Sierra was keeping tightly leashed.

"No," Sierra agreed, pushing off of the wall. "You ran away from it, but now that you've had a taste of anonymity, you've realized you don't like being nothing more than a footnote in history, haven't you? You want to be John Connor again, and you think Cameron can give you that like a handout you didn't earn."

John fought the urge to concede the floor as Sierra stepped into the middle of the room. There was something about the way she was holding herself... this wasn't the Sierra he was used to, something elemental had shifted, and their audience was responding to it, turning away from him and towards Sierra. "I *am* John Connor," he managed, squaring his shoulders.

Sierra looked him up and down. "No, you're not. Not yet, and maybe not ever. Where were you when the bombs dropped? When the first machines started slaughtering us? You skipped everything that would have made you what you were supposed to be. You weren't there to be the saviour of mankind, but that doesn't mean we didn't need one. Humanity has a leader, and it's not *you!*"

"I know that!" John finally let himself feel the full effect of the frustration that had been brewing in his gut for nearly a year, ever since he had walked into the basement at Zeira Corp and seen Cameron's message running in a loop above her abandoned body. Cameron had lied to him and then left him, Weaver had misled him, his mother had refused to come with him, and then failed to stop the apocalypse the way she'd promised she would, and now she was gone. He'd arrived in the future only to be run around in circles with the humiliation of boot camp and a fruitless search for John Henry that had ended in his complete exclusion once they had the terminator in custody. He'd been put off again and again, lied to, dismissed and ignored. Nothing was the way it was supposed to be, and he was sick of people blaming him for not being a hero when every time he tried it all went wrong somehow.

"My entire life I've watched people die for me. I watched my mother give up everything to protect me, and I hated it. Machines were trying to kill me before I was born, and I spent three years with a foster family thinking I'd been raised by a lunatic, until another

terminator showed up and slaughtered them. I may have jumped over the apocalypse, but I did it to try and save someone who had destroyed herself trying to save me." Taking a deep breath, John turned to Prophet and Tango. "I know I screwed up, but I want to fix it, if Cameron is here, I need to see her."

"And what if she isn't?" Sierra cut in before either of them could answer, her voice dangerously soft in the face of John's passion. "What if you're the only one who thinks this world needs fixing? What if humanity is better off without John Connor?"

"That's not your decision." John fought to bring himself back under control. "I don't need *your* permission to try and take my life back!"

"Actually," Tango interposed into the crackling silence. "You do."

John blinked, "Wha-" he looked desperately at Prophet for deliverance or at least clarification but the old man merely nodded. Reluctantly, John met Sierra's eyes, shocked to the core to see pain there instead of triumph. Pain he recognized. The pain of someone who had watched almost everyone they loved suffer or die for them. It was the pain of a leader in a hopeless war.

"Weaver..." he whispered. *Savannah Weaver*, weaver...web...spider... "You're the spider!"

When Sierra didn't confirm or deny the accusation, Prophet sighed and rubbed his temples before rising and gripping her shoulder. "Everyone," he said slowly. "Meet the Spider, also known as Savannah Weaver, and at the risk of endorsing a terrible cliché, the one who's really been pulling the strings around here. If anyone so much as breathes a word of that beyond these walls, I'll personally throw every last one of you to the machines."

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Savannah woke up in an unfamiliar bed. The sheets were stiff and harsh against her skin, and they smelled like the floor cleaner the janitors used to use at her mommy's work. It made her nose itch. She retreated under them anyway, curling around her giraffe, the only touchstone she had, when a peek above the edge of the blanket revealed a room bare of the pink and lace ornaments she'd become accustomed to.

The sound of cars, birdsong and a child's laughter drifting in through the open window dragged her back out again. She'd almost forgotten about that. They weren't in the warehouse anymore, this was a house. She could go outside! Excitement overcame uncertainty, and Savannah climbed out of the oversized bed, reaching for the floor with her tiptoes.

Mr. Ellison had promised they would get her a proper little girl's bed and paint, but as Savannah tugged her nightgown straight and looked around, she decided she liked having

a grown-up room. She'd never really liked pink and ruffles anyhow. The warm red-gold and rich browns appealed to the budding artist in her, and she approved of the simple lines of the dark wood furniture. She couldn't wait to show it to Aunt Sarah and Aunt Cameron.

Were they back yet? Mr. Ellison had said she could stay up until they got home... she had a vague hazy memory of being carried and tucked in, but she couldn't tell if that had been real or a dream.

Eager to see her aunts again and to know for sure that they were really there, not disappeared like Mr. Murch, she decided to find out. Leaving her giraffe to guard her bed, she left the room and padded down the hall.

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The network of underground tunnels that the resistance called home had been extended after the bombs drove them underground. For the first few years, the steady stream of incoming refugees had kept that expansion going until nearly the entire city was accessible from below. Then the refugees had stopped coming, and the machines had begun hunting humans in earnest.

Now there were entire wings, sewer systems, and old subway tunnels that had been left to the rats and roaches. Some of them had been sealed off because they were too vulnerable to machine attack, but others simply mouldered, empty of everything but painful memories.

It was in one of these abandoned tunnels that Prophet found Sierra after she had fled the disastrous meeting, tucked away just inside the mouth of a long dried-out sewer line.

"You need to find a new hiding place," he said gently, leaning against the lip of the tunnel. "I'm too old to be chasing you down rabbit holes."

"He's going to try to go back before he destroys the machine." Sierra said without looking up from an old burned-out chip she was turning over and over again in her fingers.

Prophet recognized both the chip and the single-minded intensity. Sierra was still chasing Sarah Connor's shadow, burning herself out for people who didn't even know her name. "I know," he said quietly.

Sierra snorted, lifting her eyes to the curved walls cradling her in their heart. Time had worn away the details of the drawings that had once covered almost every visible inch of concrete, but the pattern remained. "You didn't call him on it."

Prophet traced the faded outline of a tree whose branches wove a border on the wall around the bottom of the tunnel. "Tango and I promised Sarah a long time ago that when

John came, we would let him make that decision on his own. You always knew this was a possibility."

"I guess I did," Sierra muttered bitterly. "So now what? He goes back and it's like none of this ever happened?"

"Maybe," Prophet admitted, aching for the pain in the younger woman's voice. "But Sierra, this future was never meant to be. Even if the apocalypse can't be stopped, this isn't your burden or mine or Tango's. It's his. It was always supposed to be his."

"What if I want it?" Sierra rounded on him, tears of anger and loss standing out in her fierce blue eyes. "What if I'm doing a better job? If he goes back-" she broke off, tightening her fingers around the chip until her knuckles showed white. "If he goes back, they won't need me," she continued in a whisper. "If they have him, they might not need each other."

Prophet felt his own heart turn over. Ever since she had been old enough to understand what Sarah and Cameron had trained her for, even before she'd understood it completely, Sierra had been determined not to let them down. She'd never displayed any of John's doubt, any of his fear of the future. If John had abandoned his mantle, then she would take it up, and she would do it better. It was a passion that had robbed her of everything Prophet would have wished for her to have. Friends, love, a life beyond the war... He would have done anything to spare her this burden, but he feared she'd go just as far to hold on to it. It was all she had left of the woman and the cyborg that had been all but mothers to her, this task they'd entrusted to her in John's stead.

He reached out and laid his hand over Sierra's, covering the charred remains of the chip that was all that remained of a terminator who had dedicated her existence to the defence of two leaders of humanity. He felt his throat tighten when he thought about Cameron, about the way Savannah had sobbed the night they'd lost her. For Cameron, though, the end had been a mercy. She'd lived only for Savannah after Sarah's death. Prophet knew in his heart the machine would have destroyed herself the day Sarah died if the little girl hadn't needed her so much. He had never thought a machine could know that kind of pain. It had staggered him.

"She was destroyed protecting you," he said softly. "That's not something you do for a placeholder. They'll love you both." He hesitated, unable to deny that John's return might prevent more than Sierra's inheritance of his destiny, more than her place with Sarah and Cameron. John's absence had brought them together, if he came back... "even if it's not quite the same."

"So that's it then." Sierra wiped the heel of her hand over her eyes. "I have to give up the family I remember, my past, for his?"

Prophet shook his head. "I'm not going to tell you what to do. You stepped forward to take his place. It's your choice whether or not to give him a chance to get it back, and maybe in the process, give us all a chance for a different future."

## Act Four

Having been, quite literally, swept off her feet by a terminator whose idea of courtship had apparently come from the same book as a five-year-old's who thought kicking a girl in the shins was the height of romance, Sarah had been expecting something quick and... well, dirty. But once she had Sarah where she wanted her, Cameron didn't seem to be in any hurry to let her go again.

Their first coupling at the motel had been impulsive and raw, the breaking of a storm brewed with as much pain as passion, and afterwards, desperate need still drove them deep into the night to slake a frenzied hunger. The morning after had been slower, quieter, but it was still a safe haven snatched in the fleeting moment of calm that comes between a crisis and its inevitable damage control.

This time was different.

This time Cameron ignored any attempt by Sarah to move things along, rolling them over and pinning her against the mattress when she tried. At first Sarah was amused, and then anxiety began building in her belly like a knotted fist. This wasn't a quick release of tension; this wasn't just using Cameron because she needed to be touched. This was the slow build of passion, a very careful, very intimate exploration of each other's bodies. They were making out like teenagers in their parent's basement, and it was slow and warm and very, very personal.

"Cameron..." Sarah breathed when Cameron let her come up for air. "I..."

"Do you want to stop?" Cameron pulled back just far enough for Sarah to miss the press of her curves and the warmth of her against Sarah's bare chest. She held herself there until Sarah met her eyes. "Tell me to stop," she whispered, and Sarah's uneasiness grew as she realized that Cameron wasn't teasing her. The terminator was deadly serious.

Sarah suddenly understood the stakes were so much higher than she had realized. *For you, a soft whisper in a murky motel room, reverent hands on her body...* She swallowed, her mouth dry and her mind blank. It had already gone further than she wanted, and now... now, Cameron was giving her a choice. No excuses, no rationalizations, no pushing Cameron away when the heat of the moment had passed. *I'm not your punching bag, not anymore...* Cameron had been making a point then, and she was making one now. In or out. Tell Cameron to stop or, heaven help her, tell her to continue.

Sarah opened her mouth, but no words came. Luckily, she was saved by the soft brush of a door sweeping over carpet and a child's piping voice.

"Aunt Sar-" Savannah bounded into the room, only to halt uncertainly at the sight of her aunts tangled together on the bed, one of them missing a shirt.

"Shi-" Sarah bit back the curse, using Cameron as a shield as she grabbed the sheet and yanked it up over her chest. For her part, Cameron seemed completely unconcerned, sitting up smoothly and straightening her clothing.

"Good morning, Savannah," she greeted the child brightly and reached over the side of the bed to retrieve Sarah's shirt, passing it back behind her.

"Good morning..." Savannah kept one hand on the door, her big blue eyes even wider than usual. "What are you doing?"

Sarah could feel the blush creeping up the back of her neck, and she dropped her forehead onto Cameron's shoulder. "Save Skynet the trouble and just shoot me now," she muttered, unable to face the simple curiosity of a five-year-old who'd just caught her making out with a machine.

"We were hav-," Cameron began, seemingly intent on answering Savannah's question seriously.

"Nothing." Sarah interrupted, cutting Cameron off with a hand over her mouth, earning herself a reproachful look from the machine and a speculative one from Savannah. "We were just talking."

"Oh..." Savannah sounded doubtful. Sarah didn't blame her. She was five, not an idiot.

Sarah applied a little warning pressure on the hand over Cameron's mouth and then released her. "What are you doing up, anyway?"

Savannah dropped her eyes to the carpet at Sarah's tone. "I woke up, and I wanted to see if you'd really come back..."

*Because sometimes people don't...* Sarah heard the subtext as clearly as if Savannah had said it aloud, and it hit her like a punch to the gut. She pushed her embarrassment aside and offered the girl a weak smile. "You want to come up?"

Savannah nodded, and Sarah shifted over, making room between them so that Savannah could scramble up onto the bed and into place, snuggling up against Sarah's side. "Did Mr. Murch die?" she asked tremulously.



Sarah exchanged a glance with Cameron. They hadn't had a chance to discuss what had happened to the scientist, but Sarah had given her the bare bones of the attack during the drive. The terminator dipped her chin slightly. No point in lying. If Ellison was right, Savannah already suspected the truth anyway, and being patronized wouldn't make her feel any better about it.

"Yes," she admitted. "He did."

"Why?"

Another look.

"Savannah," Sarah started. "Do you know why your mother went away?"

"Because bad men were trying to hurt John Henry," Savannah answered easily. "They tried to break him, but he made them go away."

Sarah gave her shoulders a squeeze. "That's right. Now those same men want to hurt us, and they're making something that might hurt a lot of other people, too."

"Oh." Savannah thought about that. "Are you and Aunt Cameron going to stop them?"

"We're going to try," Cameron put in. "But it's dangerous. We might have to be away a lot."

Savannah's lower lip quivered, but she sniffed once and it stilled. "I want to help!"

"You can." Sarah stroked her hair. "When you're a little older."

"When I'm seven?"

"We'll see," Sarah hedged. "For now Cameron and I are going to start teaching you how to stay safe when we're not here."

"Okay," Savannah agreed gamely. "Then I can teach Mr. Ellison, so he'll be safe, too."

"That sounds good," Sarah said with a grin. "Why don't you go tell him about it now?"

"I'll ask him to make breakfast, too." Savannah climbed over Sarah's legs and dropped to the floor. "We bought pancake mix." She paused at the door, turning back with a depth of emotion in her blue eyes that Sarah wouldn't have expected from a child her age. "I'm glad you like each other now. You were fighting a lot before, and it made you sad. I don't want anyone to be sad anymore."

Sarah stared speechlessly after Savannah even when the girl had disappeared down the hall, painfully aware of Cameron beside her and the speculative expression on her face.

When the lights suddenly flickered and died, plunging the room into semi-darkness and leaving only the early morning sun filtering in through the blinds, it was almost anti-climactic.

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Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, Sierra would give John her decision. To a boy on the brink of becoming a man, stuck in someone else's story, the delay felt more like a year than a single night. John tossed on his bunk. Sleep was eons away, but more than rest, he needed someone to talk to. Tango had been sympathetic, but distracted, and Prophet had been elusive, spending most of the day showing John Henry around the base and easing the machine's transition into the ranks. Likewise Derek, Jesse and Sabine were busy, and none of them have been John's first choice as confidants even if they had been available.

Kyle was still avoiding him, though the few times they had seen each other since the meeting, John thought his father looked more like a man trying to figure out what to say than the distant and faintly disdainful figure he'd been before. Allison would have been ideal, if John had been ready to face her. He had the uncomfortable sensation that she'd seen right through his proposal to destroy the time machine. He knew Sierra had.

He couldn't quite get past Sierra as the unseen leader of the resistance. Tango and Prophet, yes. They had known the end was coming, had known something about Skynet and the machines, and they had known each other. It made sense that they would have teamed up to lead humanity out of the ashes. John hadn't resented them for taking his place, he couldn't. They had only done what needed to be done, but Sierra had taken more than his destiny. She had also taken his mother... and Cameron. Even if she agreed to give him the chance to go back, he would always carry that with him. John Connor had been replaceable.

For the first time in his life, John understood what it felt like to have to fight for the place he had always taken for granted. The question was: did he really want it? When he'd been twelve, the answer had been easy. Being humanity's only hope in a brutal war against a horde of machines was every preteen boy's fantasy. At fifteen, having been uprooted yet again and thrown back into chaos, the idea terrified him. He'd barely been able to handle his own life, let alone anyone else's. Now... he wasn't sure what bothered him more, the fact that he'd been replaced, or that his replacement had so obviously been prepared to take that place by the same people who had prepared him.

Had they given up on him? How long had it taken before his mother had decided he wasn't coming back and turned to the child Savannah instead? Finding out she'd taken Savannah in after the girl had lost her own 'mother' hadn't bothered him, so why did this get so far under his skin?

John rolled over onto his back and stared at the cracks in the ceiling as if he could read them like the lines on his hands. He wondered how many other soldiers had lain there and studied those same cracks, and how many of them had died for Sierra instead of him.

It was a morbid question, but satisfying in a melancholic and depressed kind of way. John was self aware enough to recognize that he was backsliding into the same self-pitying thought patterns that had sent him running off to the future in the first place, but he didn't know how to stop. Not anymore than he had then, and that just made him feel worse. No wonder they'd given up waiting for him. Sierra had probably been a model saviour of humanity.

A light tapping at his door was the perfect way to avoid thinking any further down that road, and John jumped at the chance for a distraction.

"Hi..." Allison glanced down the hall, and then back at John. "Can I come in?"

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It was a beautiful day, and despite the gravity of the situation, Sarah found herself enjoying that simple pleasure. Sitting on the back porch, curled up under a blanket in a wooden deck chair, she could feel the sun on her face, smell the flowers blooming in a wild and untended tangle all along the fence and forget, just for a moment, everything else.

"How are you feeling?" Ellison stepped through the sliding door and set a paper cup of take-out coffee down on the arm of her chair.

"Like hell," Sarah admitted, freeing a hand from the confines of her blanket to take the cup and cradle it against her chest. "How far did you have to go out of your way to get this?" The blackout had made the promised pancakes impossible as well as her morning coffee, and her fever had returned with a vengeance after an awkward family breakfast of cold cereal at the kitchen table. Even with the sun and the blanket, Sarah felt alternatively hot and cold, and she ached like someone had been beating her with a sack full of rocks.

Whatever it was, a virus or nothing more than the temper tantrum of an overtaxed body -she refused to even *think* the word cancer - Sarah felt about as useful as a wet paper bag. It hadn't helped that Cameron and Ellison had put aside their mutual distrust to team up long enough to overrule her plan to investigate the time bubbles still erupting around the city and had sent her to sun on the porch like an elderly relative. But in all honesty, she had been somewhat relieved to lose the fight, since just sitting there seemed to take all of her energy.

She had a job to do, she had insisted, but Ellison and especially Cameron had finally convinced her that she didn't have to solve every crisis all by herself. And even she couldn't deny that Auldridge's involvement made the idea of traipsing around a city swarming with law enforcement and emergency crews in the wake of the rolling

blackouts idiotic, instead of merely risky. But reason played only a small part in the effectiveness of their argument; the entreaty in a pair of wide brown eyes fixed on hers throughout the conversation had, in the end, won out over even her legendary stubbornness. Ellison had gone instead, leaving Cameron to baby-sit, while he explored the city and met with the one person who might know what was going on and wouldn't bring the police down on them.

"Not far. There are a few blocks around Terissa's place that still have power."

"What did she say?"

Ellison sighed and sank down onto the steps. "Auldridge called her. He knows you're alive."

"Did he say anything about the time bubbles?"

"Just that he thinks they're connected to you somehow."

"Smart boy." Sarah downed the coffee even though her stomach was still queasy after the cereal. She hoped the caffeine would scour the fuzz from her brain as her usual focus seemed dulled, uncertain, and scattered. It was probably just the fever, but it aggravated her nonetheless.

A squeal of triumph drew her attention outwards.

"You missed!" Savannah taunted Cameron, who had just made a grab for one of the ribbons tied to the child's belt loops, before she dashed away again.

"Are they playing some kind of tag?" Ellison smiled indulgently at the pair chasing each other around the yard. "Savannah's quick."

"She is," Sarah agreed without elaborating.

Ellison watched quietly for a few minutes. Cameron had scraps of fabric tied loosely around her wrists, elbows, ankles and knees. Savannah had them at her waist and shoulders. If Savannah captured any of Cameron's, then Cameron stopped using the "damaged" joint, and the game continued. If Cameron even touched any of Savannah's, the game was over, and they started all over again with Cameron back at full mobility.

Sarah saw it in his face, the moment he understood what he was seeing. She saw the amusement turn to anguish and then to anger.

"What are they doing, Sarah?" Ellison asked again, a dangerous catch to his voice.

It was an effort for Sarah to gather her thoughts together enough to answer him. "What do you think?" she asked tersely, rubbing at her eyes when the scene seemed to blur around the edges.

"You can't be serious," Ellison hissed, standing up as if he intended to bodily stop the training session. "I didn't bring her to you so that you and that machine could turn her into another John." His eyes swept down to meet Sarah's, emphasizing his words. "Savannah isn't going to be a part of this."

Sarah had to close her eyes for a moment as the abrupt movement made her dizzy. "She already is a part of this, James," she reminded him. She struggled free of the blanket and dragged herself to her feet, leaning far more heavily on the back of the chair than she would have liked. "You insisted on it."

"I didn't mean..." Ellison trailed off as Savannah 'died' again, falling to the ground in theatrical paroxysms of agony.

"You..." Sarah struggled for words, her ears buzzing and her heart pounding. "You..." A chill wracked her frame and her fingers slipped against the wood. She was distantly aware of Ellison turning around, of him saying her name in a voice that sounded like it came from the bottom of a well, and then the world tilted and went black.

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Cameron had looked up when Ellison had shouted Sarah's name, pulling her attention away from Savannah's 'death throes' in time to see the other woman fall. Seconds later, she was brushing past Ellison and kneeling down to take the unconscious woman into her arms, not noticing his look of surprise and resentment as she swept him aside effortlessly.

"Let's get her inside," Ellison suggested, but his words went unheard. From the moment he had shouted Sarah's name, every sensor Cameron had was tuned only to Sarah, to her flushed pallor, to her heartbeat.

It was too fast, far too fast for a simple fever.

Cameron measured Sarah's other vital signs as she gently gathered her into her arms, but the numbers made no sense flashing through her digital display. The only thing Cameron could comprehend was how limply Sarah lay against her chest, the tight heat of her skin, the irregularity of her breathing and how weightless she felt in her arms. For a second, all she could do was clasp Sarah's body to hers in a sudden and complete panic, her hand trembling as she soothed back the damp hair plastered to Sarah's forehead.

She groped after the familiar support of statistics, scales and rates, but the numbers cascaded past before she could grasp them. All Cameron knew was that it was wrong, it was all wrong, temperature too high, heart rate too elevated, pushing every scale into the red until the whole world was awash in it. "Sarah?" She whispered the name, hoping to

see Sarah's eyes open and ground her once again, to guide her through the turmoil of her body and emotions. It was overwhelming, the onslaught brought on by Sarah's sudden collapse, and no filter had ever been designed that could stifle the pain and fear she felt in that moment.

The brush of a hand against her shoulder and a scared voice broke through the emotions that threatened to engulf her, and Cameron turned her head to find Savannah by her side. "What's wrong?" There was a matching fear and helplessness in those blue eyes, fear born of a young life that had already seen too many people leave and never come back. It brought Cameron back to herself enough to function.

"I don't know," she admitted, trying to reassure the girl as she pushed to her feet and lifted the limp and lifeless body. Carrying Sarah into the house, Cameron was aware of Savannah walking right at her hip, a finger hooked around her belt loop. Their game forgotten, the colourful ribbons hung from her clothing like corpses on a gibbet. She followed Cameron to the living room, shaking off Ellison's one attempt to redirect her upstairs with a glare and a sharp "no!"

"She can stay." Cameron laid Sarah down carefully, sliding a cushion under her head and pulling up a knitted quilt to cover her as she shivered. She didn't take the time to explain that the girl's presence was the only thing keeping her operative. "Get me a phone."

One appeared in her palm and she was already dialling when a shaky hand caught her wrist and knocked the phone away. "No..." Sarah coughed the single word, clenching her eyes shut before blinking them open just enough to find Cameron's. Her hand stayed wrapped around Cameron's wrist. "No ambulance."

"Then I will take you to the hospital myself." Cameron continued to monitor Sarah's pulse in the press of fingers against her skin. It was slowing, but not enough. She reached to pick her up again, but Sarah pinned her with a single dazed glare. Her green eyes were bright and unfocused with fever, but they burned with the same doomed fire of a guttering candle.

"No hospitals."

"You're sick," Cameron insisted, settling back on her heels reluctantly. "You need medical attention."

Sarah shook her head, her skin paling as the movement drained her. "It's too dangerous," she rasped. "Auldridge... There was blood in the truck. He'll be watching the hospitals."

"Sarah..."

"What I need," she said, her voice firming, "is to rest and to know that we're all safe. I can't get that in a hospital."

"You can't get that if you're..." Cameron stopped herself before she could say the word 'dead', painfully aware of the child at her side. She saw Ellison's brows rise sharply as he reached past her to hand Sarah a glass of water, and for a second, she felt trapped by it all. Sarah's stubbornness, Savannah's fears, and Ellison's caution felt like shackles and weights; the obligation to respect their needs was keeping her from doing what was necessary, what was needed to help Sarah. But they didn't seem to understand that it was her fault. Her preoccupation with the shift in their relationship had blinded her to the seriousness of Sarah's condition. She had ignored what her own sensors were telling her and taken Sarah's word for it when she had said she was fine. This was her fault.

"No one is going to die." Sarah finished Cameron's thought for her and accepted the glass carefully, taking a small sip. She glanced reassuringly at Savannah, crouched on the rug beside Cameron. "I'll be fine, it's just a bug. I shouldn't have stood up that fast is all."

Ellison laid a hand lightly on the girl's shoulder. "Come on Savannah, let's get your Aunt Sarah a couple of pillows and another blanket."

Savannah looked like she wanted to protest, but Sarah smiled weakly at her and said "please," so she grudgingly allowed Ellison to steer her out of the room and up the stairs.

"It's not a bug," Cameron said when they had gone. "Your heart rate and respiration are well above acceptable levels, but your blood pressure is too low. Something is wrong."

"I know." Sarah released Cameron's wrist, closing her hand around the blanket instead. She dropped her eyes to the pull of her fingers against the weave. "Could it be the cancer?"

Cameron missed the touch against her skin instantly. She could hear Sarah's heart and see the rise and fall of her chest under the quilt, but neither sense was as immediate or intimate as touch. Logically, holding Sarah wouldn't ward off death, wouldn't keep her safe like it did when bullets were flying, but the desire to sweep the woman up her arms was so strong her fingers twitched. She was far beyond logic at this point. "Maybe," she admitted, because anything else would have been a lie, although she knew it would give rise to Sarah's worst fear, and the look in those green eyes was cutting through her in a way that was becoming increasingly familiar.

Helpless, she felt helpless. And the thought was threatening to choke and paralyze her again. She *was* helpless. As helpless as she had been when she'd watched Sarah fighting for her life at the hands of her double or when she had tried to dissuade her from risking her life chasing shadows. She was one of the most sophisticated killing machines ever built, but there was absolutely nothing she could do against an enemy that attacked from within. "I don't think the cancer would have acted this quickly..."

"New timeline, new ways to die," Sarah muttered, taking another sip of the water Ellison had brought her. "So how do we find out?"

"You go to a hospital."

"Not an option," Sarah set the glass down on the end table. "Not with Auldridge out there and whatever is going on with those time bubbles. C.A.I.N might be involved... he and Kaliba could be using Auldridge to track us from the warehouse." She seemed to have recovered a little of her strength, or else her stubbornness was drawing off a deep reserve of energy. "We have to assume that whatever he knows, he's written down somewhere, or told someone else. And if it makes it onto a computer, any computer with net access, then C.A.I.N will know we were in that accident. Then Kaliba will be watching the hospitals, too. If they don't already know exactly where we are..."

"They don't." Cameron focused on the one thing she knew for sure. The one thing she had some control over.

"How do you know?"

"Because if they did," Cameron pointed out. "We'd be dead."

"Good point." Sarah sighed and collapsed back into the cushion, all of the fight draining out of her until there was nothing left but weary resignation tacked onto a will of iron. Her eyes fluttered closed briefly before refocusing on Cameron. "I won't be locked up again," she whispered. "I can't... not even for this. And I won't put Savannah at risk."

"But-"

"Promise me," Sarah interrupted her. "Promise... no hospitals."

It was a promise Cameron didn't want to make, but the fading intensity in those green eyes held her until she gave in. "No hospitals," she agreed.

Sarah nodded and her eyes drifted shut once more. Except for a few spots of colour on her cheeks, her skin was pale, nearly white against her dark hair and the navy blanket. The hand resting on her chest shifted as if she was searching for something to hold onto, and Cameron reached out and tucked her hand over Sarah's. Even though the touch seemed to soothe Sarah, it did nothing to alleviate the feeling of helplessness that threatened to drown the cyborg under its weight.

Adjusting the quilt once Sarah's breathing evened out a little, Cameron tilted her head at the sight of Sarah's neck. A splotchy red rash was just beginning to climb up to her jaw. Alarmed, Cameron pulled the blanket back, following the discolouration down to Sarah's collarbone over her shoulder and down her left arm. It only took a moment to find the source. A cluster of red and pink rosettes over an old scar scattered around a knot of angry red lines that were snaking their way up Sarah's arm and reaching with tangled fingers for her heart.



