

Episode 6

"All the King's Horses"

Part Two

Teaser

Cameron waited.

As dusk began its descent into darkness, Cameron sat in the truck in a parking lot across the street from the *Good Shepherd Shelter* for battered women and children, feeling every second pass as if it was one more than Sarah had to spare. She felt like there was something she should be doing, somewhere else she should be, anywhere but here, wasting time Sarah didn't have.

She dropped her hand from the steering wheel to the gun in her lap, wondering if the touch of cold steel against her skin would center her the way it always seemed to center Sarah, but it didn't work. Perhaps that comfort was a luxury reserved only for the wielder, rather than the weapon itself.

There were humans who said the purpose of a weapon was determined by the person holding it. Cameron's function had been as transmutable as the different hands she had been shaped by, commanded by. Skynet had created her to kill, John had commanded her to protect, and Sarah had asked her to fight, but she had always been bound to her purpose, a purpose determined by something outside of herself. Now that binding was fraying, threatening to leave her without anyone's guidance save her own, and for the first time in her existence, Cameron had to navigate the myriad conflicting interests and emotions alone. First, programming and then Sarah had grounded her through this journey and provided her a way home. Now, she just felt lost.

Fierce protectiveness, the strongest feeling she had ever known, urged her to lay waste to the building. With the gun in her hand, or even without it, Cameron could simply go in and take what she had come for hours ago. But there would be consequences, consequences she couldn't afford to incur. Security was of utmost importance; Cameron had always made that very clear and followed the dictates of that simple rule, ruthlessly if need be. The mission superseded personal desires, always. She had never been able to grasp why that was so hard for humans to understand.

Until now.

Pros and cons, scales and balances, degrees of risk and possible gains, the stock and trade of terminators... it was all gone. Overshadowed by a pair of feverish green eyes and an unknown illness

that was threatening to take away the first thing Cameron had ever wanted for herself.

The clock on the dashboard ticked over to 8: 17, and the last hazy pink and orange glimmers of sunset faded into nothingness as Cameron's target finally made an appearance.

The blonde woman left the shelter and trod wearily down the steps and across the street as if instead of merely leaving for the day, she had packed the entire building up and taken it with her. Even from a distance, Cameron could see that she was exhausted. The bright orange medical bag hanging from her shoulder looked like it was dragging her down, making a short trip to the parking lot into a journey.

She passed the truck, heading deeper into the parking lot, and Cameron slid purposefully out after her.

Fishing through her purse for her keys, the woman didn't seem to notice the footsteps approaching from behind or Cameron's reflection in the driver's side window. It wasn't until Cameron's shadow blocked the weak glow of the generator-powered lights that the woman realized someone was there.

"Dr. Felicia Burnett?"

The doctor stiffened, her heart leaping and her hand closing around the can of pepper spray in her purse. She started to turn, but Cameron was inside her guard before she could pull the useless weapon free of her bag. Knocking the can aside, Cameron clamped one hand over the doctor's mouth and pressed the muzzle of the gun into her back with the other.

"Come with me if you want to live."

Act One

After leaving John to sleep, Allison waited for Sierra in her quarters.

She'd been there before, but only briefly, and never by herself. She looked around now in something akin to shock. She'd known Sierra liked to draw, but the red-headed soldier had always been very private, and Allison hadn't pushed. They hadn't been close enough for prying. Or at least, Allison had never thought they were. There had always been something... but then she'd assumed it had more to do with being two of the very few young women bearing arms for the resistance than anything personal.

That was before she'd known who Sierra was.

The Spider wouldn't have wasted her time watching over a relatively insignificant soldier for nothing more than female solidarity.

Allison stood in front of a portrait that could have been her twin and wondered, not for the first time why Tango and Prophet had included her in their private circle. She wasn't particularly special or talented. Derek and Kyle were old friends, but neither of them were highly decorated, either. How exactly had their leaders chosen who to trust and who to watch?

Had John told them? The John that didn't exist anymore, the one who should have been Tango, Prophet and Sierra all rolled into one, the one who would have reprogrammed machines to do the work of an army?

Allison was having a little trouble wrapping her head around that. Time travel... it seemed like such a fairytale. A magical way out of the hell she'd grown up in. And yet, it hadn't been a happily ever after for those that had tried it. If John was telling the truth, then time travel in his timeline had become nothing more than an endless game of one-upmanship. The machines sent back terminators to kill him or anyone that posed a threat, and then John sent someone back to protect them. Repeat as needed. He'd sent soldiers first, and then machines.

He'd sent a machine named Cameron. A machine Sierra had known, and one John had come to the future looking for. Allison stared at her mirror-self and remembered the way he had looked at her that first night, as if for a moment he thought he'd found something he'd lost. Sierra looked at her that way, too.

"It's not you," Sierra confirmed wearily, shutting the door behind her. She didn't sound surprised to find Allison in her room, but then, of course, she wouldn't. She'd probably been getting regular updates.

"I know." Allison turned around, clasping her hands behind her back to conceal their trembling. She shifted her gaze back to the sketch. "Will you tell me about her?"

Half-hidden by shadows, Sierra still looked like she'd been dragged through the killing fields. Her clothing was dirty and rumpled; she had a smear of ash or dirt across one cheekbone and a scratch along her jaw. Dried bloodstains along the hem of her shirt made Allison wonder if she'd even stopped long enough to change or get cleaned up since they'd brought Prophet back to base.

She didn't want to talk about Cameron. Allison could see that. Sierra had never liked talking about the past, especially her own, and yet her room was practically a shrine to it. It was a contradiction that Allison had yet to figure out. She had always assumed Sierra was aloof by nature. Sierra had the respect of the entire base under her own name, and all of humanity as the Spider, but no real friends. She'd just never seemed to need or want any. Knowing what she knew now, Allison suspected that it

was fear that had made Sierra hide herself away behind a false name and keep everyone at a distance. Fear that John's loss would become hers, that anyone she loved could be taken away and used against her.

"She was my teacher." Sierra crossed the room to stand beside Allison, running her fingers along the crumbling edge of the portrait. "My aunt, my friend... Prophet brought me to them to keep me safe after my 'mother' left. They took me in... trained me, loved me, and then they died trying to protect me."

There was a world of pain in that simple history. "They?" asked Allison.

"John's mother." A ghost of a wry grin came and went on Sierra's face. "Sarah Connor. She didn't want me there at all, not at first. I thought she was going to kill Prophet when he showed up with me. But she let me stay, and she fought him to make sure I could take care of myself."

"He didn't want you to be a soldier."

"No." Sierra dropped her hand and turned to lean against the wall. "He only wanted to keep me safe." She lifted intense blue eyes to Allison's. "But no one is ever safe."

Especially those you love... the unspoken words were almost as loud in the preternaturally quiet room as the spoken ones.

"Why me?" Allison had to ask. "Why did they use me to make Cameron?"

"I don't know," Sierra admitted after a moment's tense silence. "Cameron wouldn't talk about it, but you and John must have been close if he trusted you enough that a machine with your face could get to him."

"Oh." *Close* could mean so many things. If everything John and the others were saying was true, then in the timeline Cameron had come from, John would have been in his early forties when it had happened. Close probably didn't mean...and yet... war could make something like a twenty-five year age difference seem a lot less important. Did it matter? Maybe. Morbid curiosity forced Allison to ask, "Did she kill me?"

"Probably." Sierra crossed the room and dropped down onto the narrow bed. "But she changed, she evolved. Whatever she'd done in the past, the Cameron I knew wasn't a killer."

"Like John Henry," Allison surmised, and Sierra nodded. "Is that why you watch me? Because of what

she did? Because it might happen again?"

Sierra looked away, pulling her legs up onto the bed and tucking her knees against her chest. "She asked me to take care of you, after Sarah died. I think she knew she wouldn't be able to do it herself."

Allison would have liked to insist that she could take care of herself, but clearly, she hadn't, at least not that time. She wasn't like Sierra, she hadn't been raised or trained by a machine and she couldn't claim two of them as friends. They were still the worst demons of her nightmares, so if someone else wanted to get between her and them, she wasn't going to take umbrage at it. Though facing them side by side had a nicer ring to it.

"John asked me to go back with him," Allison blurted. She hadn't been sure if she was going to tell Sierra about John's offer, but a confidence given demanded one in return. It would have felt like treason not to inform her senior officer about John's hidden plans if she hadn't been sure Sierra had already figured out he was going to attempt a return to the past. But this... this was a grey area. It was desertion, and yet it wasn't. If John succeeded, then this timeline wouldn't exist for her to have run from, so did it really count? She knew what her conscience said, but she also knew she was afraid. Not of the war that had been her life for over a decade, but of a future where a machine wore her face.

"Has he?" Sierra voice was husky, and she didn't look up from her knees. "Are you going to go?"

"I don't know yet." Allison stepped away from the wall, towards Sierra, but she stopped before she got to the bed. She didn't really know why she had come here. She wasn't exactly asking permission, and there was no real reason for Sierra to care one way or the other. They weren't friends, they were comrades. Each would have had the other's back until death, but they barely knew each other. All Allison knew was that when John had told her he was going and had asked her to come along, she'd thought of Sierra. "Do you think I should?"

"Why ask me?"

"Because, you..." Allison struggled to find an answer for the same question she'd asked herself. "You're the Spider! You have dozens of eyes that don't even know who they're reporting to, and you still watch over me yourself."

Sierra looked up, and for a moment, they weren't soldiers, they weren't commanding officer and subordinate, they were just two people caught in the same whirlpool and who had no idea what they were to each other. Allison wasn't sure what she saw in the older woman's eyes before the wall went back up, but it was strong. It felt like grief and yearning at the same time, there for a breath and then gone in an instant.

"It's late, you should go." Vulnerability cast off like a yoke, Sierra was every inch the Spider again. Her

blue eyes shuttered, she rose and opened the door as casually as if they'd just finished a pleasant chat about the weather.

Allison hesitated, but there was no room for argument. The conversation wasn't just over, it had been repudiated. "Will I see you tomorrow?" she asked, pausing in the doorway.

Sierra couldn't soften, not because she'd gone cold, but rather she'd just become unreachable. But she came back a little ways to crook the corner of her mouth. "I'll be around," she allowed.

"Okay..." With a last uncertain look, Allison left her there and headed for her own bunk. Dawn was mere hours away, but she didn't think she'd be sleeping tonight.

Sierra watched her go, unsurprised when Duke padded out and plopped down on the floor. The dog hadn't been in the room a moment ago, but there had been an old wooden trunk across from her bed that Sierra had never seen before. Allison hadn't noticed, either, and for that, Sierra was grateful.

"If you hurt her," she said to the illusion of a dog once Allison was out of earshot. "I will hunt you down and destroy you."

Weaver stood and took a few steps before turning and stretching out her forelegs in a canine bow. Then she shook herself and trotted off down the hall after Allison.

"Don't scream." Cameron emphasized the order with a sharp prod of the gun against Felicia's spine and the doctor nodded, lips pressed tightly together under Cameron's hand.

Cameron hadn't been there when the doctor had pulled a bullet out of Sarah's leg in a cold hospital morgue, but Derek Reese had. He'd given Cameron a name and a rough description a few weeks before he'd died, uncharacteristically blabbing the entire story out over a case of beer. It had shaken him, facing Sarah's mortality and bringing John's parentage out into the open, shaken him enough that he gotten drunk and spilled his guts to a machine.

A name wasn't much to go on in a city the size of Los Angeles, but Cameron had persevered, eventually tracking Felicia down through a volunteer program that connected doctors who wanted to help with charity organizations like *The Good Shepherd*. And so Cameron had waited outside of the center, watching for the woman whose photo had been pictured on their volunteer's page. Cameron had promised not to bring Sarah to a hospital, she hadn't promised not to bring the hospital to Sarah.

Freeing Felicia's mouth, Cameron took her arm instead and led her across the lot towards the truck. She tried to be gentle, but the need to get back to Sarah's side was dragging on her like a heavy chain around her neck. Felicia stumbled, and Cameron yanked her upright, ignoring the doctor's sharp inhalation of pain and the way her heart skittered in her chest like a frightened rabbit.

Guilt surfaced, but Cameron shoved it aside, urging the doctor up through the driver's side of the cab and over into the passenger's seat. Felicia didn't resist. Her vital signs indicated mild shock, but she was coping better than Cameron had expected.

"What do you want from me?" the doctor asked after they had pulled out onto the street, grey eyes slipping from the road to the gun in Cameron's lap.

"You're a doctor." Cameron closed her fingers around the weapon, searching for the sense of balance that was eluding her. "I have a patient."

John had barely closed the door behind Allison and flopped back down on his bed before there was another knock, this one somehow managing to sound polite despite the hour. Drained from spilling his guts, John considered ignoring it, but along with the politeness, there was a certain sense of patience in those three light taps that suggested whoever was out there was prepared to wait.

"Fine," he muttered under his breath. He wasn't sure who he was expecting to see on the other side of the door, but while he wouldn't have guessed it was Prophet, the grizzled leader wasn't exactly a surprise either.

"John."

"Prophet."

They looked at each other for a moment or two.

"May I come in?"

John blinked. "Yeah." He stepped back into his room and left the door to Prophet who closed it neatly behind himself. "Make yourself comfortable."

"Not in this lifetime," Prophet said with a soft chuckle, but he sat down on the edge of the bed anyway.

"Comfort is something we all left behind a long time ago."

"I suppose you think that's my fault, too." John regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth, but he couldn't take them back, or deny the defensiveness behind them.

"No." Prophet gave no sign that he thought John's accusation was inappropriate, but he'd always been able to do that, project perfect calm, even when the situation was fucked all to hell. "I don't. But I think maybe you do."

"I didn't..." Unable to settle, John paced back and forth in the small space. "I didn't mean to run, okay? I didn't mean to dump this all on you, Tango and Sierra, I just wanted Cameron back."

"And how'd that work out for you?" Prophet was still calm, still serene, but there was a trace of bite to his blunt question. "She's gone, John. So is Sarah, and so are most of the people on this planet. Now that's not all your fault. They could have died, and the end of the world could have come even if you'd stayed, but you can't know that, can you?"

"What if I can...?" John bit off his words and dropped down onto the trunk opposite Prophet, leaning forward with his hands clasped and his elbows on his knees. "What if I went back? You were there... would it fix anything? Could I save them?"

"You're asking me to tell the future of a past that didn't happen, John. I can't do that. I can't look at one moment and say, yes, that's the moment John's presence could have changed things."

"Give me your best guess then!" John scrubbed his hands back through his hair. "I can't stay here not knowing... if there was something I could have done..."

Prophet let the moment hang between them for a few minutes before he spoke again, waiting until John was almost shaking with the tension.

"Who are you planning on going back for, John? Who is it you're trying to save? Them, or yourself? Your mom stepped out of that time bubble and let you go. Cameron sent you here on purpose to keep you safe. Neither of them wanted to force this burden on you anymore. What's done is done, John. They made their choices."

"And I made mine, is that what you're saying?"

"No," Prophet said again. "I'm saying you need to be honest with yourself about why you want to do this, or Sierra won't help you. They don't need you back in their lives if your only motivation is guilt"

and jealousy. Guilt and resentment poisoned your relationship with your mother then, and it will do the same thing again unless you've grown up enough to get past it. You can't help them if you're not prepared to face the consequences of returning."

Stung, John opened his mouth to answer, but Prophet levelled him with a look that suggested he give it some serious thought first. John's initial reaction was to insist that his motives were his own, and none of anyone else's business, but the truth was, they were. However he felt about it, Sierra had obviously loved his mother and Cameron, and as far as he could tell, she was doing his job as well, or better, than he would have been doing it. He didn't imagine he'd have been any happier to have taken on a life-altering destiny, only to have some whiny kid show up and sulk about not being important enough anymore.

It was in that moment, with the man who had chased him and his mother across half of America, sitting across from James Ellison and asking him not to ruin his adoptive daughter's past for nothing more than pique, that the future finally became real to John. He hadn't realized until now that it hadn't *been* real, but Sierra was right... John was still thinking of this as his story, and his trip to the future as nothing more than a side plot that would eventually lead back to the main storyline where he was the hero again.

Why did he really want to go back?

Because that was where he was supposed to be.

The answer was there as soon as he let go of the tangle of anger and petulance that had been turning him inside out, and it was clean and uncomplicated. He didn't belong here. It wasn't about destiny or being a saviour. It wasn't even about the people he'd left behind. This simply wasn't his time. He belonged in the past. Whatever that meant, whatever it changed, he could accept it.

Prophet must have seen the realization in his face, because he nodded once and rose from the bed. "I'll leave you to get a good night's sleep. We'll talk again in the morning."

"Prophet..." John stopped him at the door. "Can I ask you something?"

Prophet turned around slowly. "You can ask me anything, John."

"My mom..." John stood, rubbing his hands up and down his arms. "Tango said, back when I first got here, that she'd had someone at the end. Was it you?"

Prophet actually looked surprised. "Tango told you that?" he shook his head. "It wasn't me. Sarah and I lived together, worked together and fought together, but there was always a wall there. I don't think she

ever completely forgave me for our past. There were only two people that she was really close to after you left, Sierra and..." he paused, the line between his brows deepening. "Well, that's not my place to say. I suspect your return may change a few things."

"You're seriously not going to tell me?"

Prophet smiled slowly. "No, I think I'll let you figure that one out for yourself. Goodnight, John." He turned to leave, opening the door to reveal yet a third visitor, this one still walking back and forth in front of the door as if he hadn't decided whether or not to actually knock. "Kyle," Prophet greeted the soldier with a clap on the shoulder. "Come on in, I was just on my way out."

Sarah spent most of the day fading in and out of consciousness. When night finally settled, bringing with it the suburban peace left behind by cars, bikes, and shouting children when they quit the streets, she managed to struggle to some degree of consciousness. The bedroom was close and stuffy, pungent with the heavy smell of sweat and air trapped too long indoors. Sarah took a deep breath of it anyway, tasting the bitter reality of her illness on the back of her tongue.

She was sick.

It wasn't a nebulous future possibility anymore. It was here and now, and even if this wasn't the end, it was a sample of what the end would be like. Before Cameron had come back, before she had told her how she would die, Sarah had never imagined herself dying weak and helpless in bed. Now she couldn't imagine dying any other way, and the thought terrified her.

With that image wrapping itself around her throat and threatening to choke her, Sarah struggled out from under the blankets, determined to at least open the window and get a little fresh air. Holding on to first the bed and then the wall for support, she made it as far as the dresser before her left arm gave way and her legs folded. She managed to lower herself awkwardly to the carpet instead of falling, but shame and frustration still burned in the back of her throat. For seventeen years, she had defined herself by her strength... and now it was gone, completely and utterly.

Sitting with her back against the dresser, Sarah pulled her legs up to her chest and dropped her head to her knees. She almost *wanted* to cry, a craving for the release of her frustration and terror, but there were no tears. All the spare moisture in her body had already sweated itself out into her sheets. Aching with fever and fear, she closed her eyes and willed the whole damned world to go away.

She was slipping over the edge into sleep again when a knock on the door dragged her back. "Come in..." Sarah rasped, expecting Cameron. She caught herself tucking her tangled hair behind her ears and trying to straighten her shirt, only to give it up in disgust once she realized what she was doing.

The end of the world was coming, she very likely wouldn't live to see it, and here she was, sitting on the floor because she couldn't stand, and fretting over what the machine would think of her appearance. Humans really were irrational fools.

But it wasn't Cameron who edged sideways into the room carrying a tray with orange juice and a covered bowl.

"James..."

Sarah's mingled surprise and disappointment must have shown in her voice, because Ellison raised a single dark brow as he settled the tray onto the side table. "You were expecting someone else?"

"No," Sarah lied. "Why?"

"You tell me." He took the cover off the bowl, releasing a puff of steam carrying the rich salty smell of chicken soup. "Is there something going on with that machine that I should know about?"

"Leave it alone, James." Sarah tried to make the request into a warning, but even to her ears, it sounded like a plea. "I told you, she's fine."

"You did." Ellison came around the end of the bed and offered Sarah a hand. What he didn't say was *how can you be sure?* The question was there in his eyes, but Ellison was trusting her, for now. Sarah wondered how long that would last. How would he react to Sarah basing her belief in Cameron's loyalty on nothing more substantial than the machine's word? Or if he found out what had happened between threadbare sheets in a motel miles away.

It didn't matter right now. Sarah accepted the help and the trust, letting Ellison bring her to her feet and steer her back to the bed. She settled back against the headboard and cradled her aching arm against her ribs while he manoeuvred a standing tray over her legs. The entire operation was awkward, neither of them entirely comfortable with their roles. Sarah missed Cameron's straightforward touch keenly. The terminator was no more of a nurse than Ellison, but for all the turmoil between them, Sarah was more comfortable being tended to by the machine. "How's Savannah holding up?" she asked to fill the silence, dipping her spoon into the soup even though the idea of eating made her stomach roil. "Is Cameron with her?"

"She's fine." Ellison sat down in the armchair beside the bed, the one Cameron had been using throughout the day. "She went to bed about an hour ago. She wanted to say goodnight but you were sleeping."

Sarah put the spoonful of soup in her mouth, grimacing as her entire body seemed to rebel against the

idea of swallowing. She got it down through sheer will alone. "And Cameron?" she asked, both to postpone another mouthful and because she didn't understand why the machine would have left her to Ellison's ministrations. Once she'd accepted that Sarah meant it when she said no hospitals, Cameron had carried her up to bed and watched over her, not letting anyone disturb her.

"I have no idea."

The spoon dropped forgotten to the tray. "She's not here?"

"She left just after Savannah fell asleep. I don't know where she was going."

"You didn't ask?"

"I asked." Ellison shifted on the chair, anger entering the line of his shoulders. "She was disinclined to share her plans with me. I thought you might know."

That explained the suspicion. Sarah shook her head. "I don't. She didn't say *anything* to you?"

"Only that it would be very bad for my health if I let anything happen to you or Savannah while she was gone."

And that explained the nursemaid act... Sarah pushed the tray away, suddenly too nauseous to even try to eat. Cameron was acting on her own again, flaunting her independence. No wonder Ellison was worried. At the motel, Sarah had accepted that if they were ever going to be able to work together, she had to stop treating Cameron like a machine, stop expecting her to blindly follow orders like a long-legged automaton. In theory, in the dark of the night after a brutal day with Sarah's soul crying out for someone she could lean on, that had made sense. The reality of trusting Cameron to act in the best interest of the mission when she was in no position to monitor her, let alone stop her, was more daunting. It must have been twice as unnerving for Ellison who had no reason to believe that Cameron had any loyalty to him whatsoever.

Ellison took the tray without another word, folding up the legs and putting it back beside the bed. The uneaten food was covered up again and he was halfway out the door before Sarah called him back.

"James...?"

"Yes, Sarah?"

"If she calls or comes back..."

"I'll let you know," Ellison finished for her. The questions were there in his voice again, but Sarah knew he wouldn't ask them. There was too much between them for him to ask anything of her or for her to offer. It didn't seem fair that Sarah could forgive a machine for trying to kill her, but she couldn't forgive a good man for doing his job. Maybe it just wasn't fair, maybe it was just human.

"Thank you," Sarah said to the closed door, but it didn't answer her.

Once Prophet was out of sight and the door was closed behind them, Kyle opened his mouth to speak but John held up a shaking hand. "You don't have to say anything," he murmured, not sure if he could stomach either the rejection or disappointed acceptance he was sure was coming. "You don't have to tell me what you know of me. What you think of me." He swallowed. "You have every right to be ashamed if you know the truth. And if you don't..." John felt a traitorous tear slip down his cheek. "Then maybe that's for the best."

"John," Kyle whispered.

"I've wasted this time," John admitted. "As screwed up as my coming here was, it gave me a chance to see you... to meet you, the man I always wondered about. And I blew it. Just like I've blown everything else. Because now we're out of time, and I'll never be able to..." John's words abruptly ended as Kyle wrapped one hand around his neck and crushed him against his chest in a hug that felt like coming home.

"Dad..." The word slipped out as John's hands fisted in the back of Kyle's coat and he hung on, a helpless sob escaping him. "I'm so sorry," he whimpered, breathing in the scent of Kyle's fatigues, gun oil, and the smell that was his father alone, letting it fill the hole left by the release of eighteen years worth of stifled emotions.

Kyle leaned back and looked at John, simply looked at him for a full minute. There were tears in his eyes as he finally took John in without any expectations in the way. All the similarities they shared. All the differences. "I didn't want to believe," he confessed. "When Prophet told me about you... about what you would become... I didn't want my son to have to be that man."

When John started to argue, Kyle shook his head. "And then I saw you, standing there in my coat... even if Prophet hadn't shown me your picture, I still would have known you were my son."

"My picture?" John whispered.

Kyle slowly let him go to reach into the front pocket on his jacket, pulling out a creased photograph. He unfolded it reverently before passing it to his son. "You and your mom."

John's fingers shook as he took the photograph, seeing his mother's face for the first time in a year. They weren't even looking at the camera, but they were smiling at each other with the sun setting behind them on a warm summer's day. A tear splashed across his mother's features and John wiped it away with his thumb, recognizing the last house they'd called a home in the background. They'd been at a barbeque... John managed a watery smile at the memory of the night his mom had caved and agreed to let them all go to Kacy's to see the new baby. He could almost smell the grass, feel the heat on his face. His mother's voice echoed in his head and he felt an answering ache in his heart.

"She's beautiful," Kyle murmured. "You both are." He swallowed. "The family I should have had, but never will."

John's head came up at the naked anguish in his father's voice. As hard as it was on him, John couldn't imagine what this was like for Kyle. "I will make you proud of me," he vowed. "And I will make sure that you and Derek don't have to live this life. That no one will."

Kyle smiled sadly at him. "It's an honorable life we lead, John."

They stared at each other as John slowly nodded. "I know," he whispered. "But you've had to lead this way of life one too many times already."

"I suppose we all have," Kyle said around another rough swallow. "I'm not going to lie and say that I wasn't disappointed in your choices..."

"I deserted," John finished for him, acknowledging for the first time how his doomed rescue attempt had looked from the outside.

"No." Kyle shook his head. "Not exactly... you thought you were doing the right thing. Prophet never said why..." Hesitating, Kyle rubbed at the back of his neck, as if trying to find the right words. "He never told me about Cameron, or how you felt about her. I guess he saw it as another strike against you, risking everything for a machine, but maybe that's why it was supposed to be you in charge; you're different, you see things differently than the rest of us. I wish I had given you the chance to explain before now, but..."

"But then it would make all of this real. Me, my mom, time travel..." John guessed and had his hunch confirmed when Kyle looked up and nodded. "I always meant to go back," John promised. "I didn't even think, when I jumped, that I might not be able to... I was stupid."

"You were in love," Kyle corrected him without judgment, and John shrugged an acknowledgement.

They were both quiet a moment.

"I guess it doesn't matter now," Kyle said gently. He bit his lip before easing the photograph out of John's hands and studying it in the low light. "I carry this with me for luck," he admitted with a rough smirk. "Reminds me of what I'm fighting for." He swallowed before glancing back up at his son. "Can you tell me about her? About yourself?"

John felt his throat tighten at the request. "If you'll do the same for me," he agreed. "My mom always made sure I knew you were a hero, but she knew you such a short time."

"I'm not a hero," Kyle protested, thinking of himself as anything but a person to admire.

"You were to her. You always have been to me." John cleared his throat as Kyle simply looked at him, a father memorizing every detail of the son he would soon never see again. John felt their impending separation beginning to rend loose another part of his soul, but he knew he wouldn't trade this moment, this night, for anything. He laughed a little. "Derek once implied my mom was as tough as nuclear nails."

Kyle smiled at the description. "She would have to be, to get my attention," he said with a grin for his son. His face slowly grew serious. "Tell me more," he almost pleaded.

They sat down on the bed as John composed his thoughts, wondering where to begin. He decided to start at the beginning. "There's no one else like my mom," John began, feeling something inside himself that had been raw for almost ten years, ever since the social workers had first told him his mother was insane and his entire life had been one paranoid delusion after another, finally start to heal.

Act Two

The next time Sarah woke up enough to remember the experience, it was early rather than late, but still dark outside. Catching sight of a figure in the chair beside her, she tried to sit up and the world spun around her. What little there was in her stomach decided to make an abrupt reappearance, but before she could disgrace herself all over the blankets, a plastic bowl was placed in her hands and gentle fingers held her hair back.

"Easy, don't fight it." The voice was vaguely familiar, and Sarah felt too damned rotten to look for her gun, so she let the woman support her until she had finished puking up everything short of her toenails. When she was done, a moist towel was pressed into her shaking hands and she was able to wipe her own face. The cold water felt good, but she longed for a toothbrush and the strength to get to a sink.

"Who...?"

"You don't remember me?" There was a rustling and a click, and then the room was bathed in the light of the bedside lamp. Apparently the power had been restored.

Sarah blinked in the harsh light, everything swimming before her eyes as they adjusted. She blinked again and the blonde woman sitting on the edge of the bed beside her slowly came into focus. "You're the doctor... you took a bullet out of me."

"Felicia Burnett," the doctor supplied. "I don't think we were ever properly introduced."

Sarah looked down at the offered hand in disbelief, but Felicia gave her a tired smile, so she took it gingerly, amused, if that was possible, at the oddity of shaking hands on her sickbed with someone she'd once abducted at gunpoint. "Sarah Connor."

"I know." Felicia released her and took the bowl away, setting it on the floor and covering it with a towel. She gave Sarah a cup of ice chips and resettled on the bed. "I saw you on the news. Now eat those slowly, you're dehydrated, but your stomach won't be able to handle a lot of liquid all at once right now."

"Why are you...?" Sarah tried to wrap her reluctant brain around Felicia's presence and couldn't quite fathom how the woman had appeared at her bedside. For a moment, she feared she might be hallucinating.

"Your friend is very persuasive." Felicia tapped the side of the cup pointedly when Sarah showed no sign of touching the ice. "Drink."

"My friend?" Sarah shook her head, unable to imagine Ellison risking Savannah's safety by bringing her a doctor, which only left... "Cameron brought you here?" she asked, wincing at Felicia's use of the word *persuasive*. If Sarah knew Cameron at all, there hadn't been a great deal of talking involved.

"That's one way of putting it," Felicia allowed before changing the subject. "I should check your vitals again once you've finished. I did a preliminary examination when I got here, but it's been a few hours."

Sarah nodded her assent and shook a few of the ice chips in her mouth, letting them melt on her tongue while she waited for her mind to clear enough to consider the situation, instead of simply reacting to it. There was a lot to consider. Cameron had broken her own rules, and the spirit, if not the letter, of the promise Sarah had demanded from her by bringing Felicia here. She had put them all at risk. Felicia had kept Sarah's secrets once, but that was then, and the stakes had changed. Sarah could guess at Cameron's motives; the terminator had reacted badly to Sarah's collapse and the promise Sarah had demanded of her, but the violation of her own security protocols was an act of desperation, of fear.

"She shouldn't have done that," Sarah admitted, a chill that went deeper than the ice in her mouth creeping into her bones. "You shouldn't be here."

"There seems to be a lot of that in my life." Taking the half-empty cup, Felicia put it on the bedside table and strapped a vinyl cuff around Sarah's uninjured arm. "I'm going to check your blood pressure now," she said unnecessarily, her voice taking on the low soothing tones Sarah remembered from their last encounter.

Sarah wondered briefly what the doctor's bedside manner was like when she wasn't in fear of her life, but the building pressure around her arm made it difficult for her to focus. "You seem very calm about all of this."

"I'm terrified." Felicia read the dial before stripping the cuff off. "But I've spent almost the last three years of my life being terrified. You of all people should understand that. Considering your record, I would think you'd be an expert in the horrors the human mind can accustom itself to."

The sudden release and scrape of vinyl and Velcro against Sarah's skin was near agony. She tried to jerk away from the cold press of a thermometer into her ear, but she was too weak to do more than lean, and Felicia just leaned right along with her. "It's not true," she protested, suddenly unable to bear the idea of being thought insane and a murderer by this woman. "What they say about me, it isn't true..."

"Don't," Felicia cut her off before Sarah even knew what lies or truths she was going to use this time, betraying the first hint of anything other than professional concern. "Don't lie to me, and don't try to pretend I'm not here right now because my other option was a bullet. I've had enough of both to last me a lifetime. Just let me do my job."

Unable to find anything to say to that, Sarah allowed an awkward silence to envelope them while Felicia checked her other ear. The shrill beep of the thermometer brought Sarah's wandering attention away from Felicia's state of mind and back to her own condition. "I'm not getting better, am I?" she asked, as much to break the tension as to confirm what she had already suspected.

"No," Felicia admitted bluntly, hooking a stethoscope into her ears and sliding the end under Sarah's shirt. "Now take a deep breath."

Sarah obliged, or she tried to. There didn't seem to be enough room in her lungs for anything other than a gasp. Felicia frowned and moved the stethoscope a few times before putting it away and closing her fingers around Sarah's wrist to check her pulse.

"Is it..." Sarah swallowed hard before she could voice her biggest fear. "Cancer?"

Felicia finished counting before answering Sarah's question. "It's not cancer. Can you still use your left arm?"

Sarah braced herself and extended her arm from its default position, tucked up against her ribs where it had some support. It felt heavy and wooden and even the pain didn't seem to belong to her anymore. The irregular splotches and fiery red lines spreading in an angry tangle from the old scar under her bicep had migrated to her chest. She tried to flex her fingers and the pain became personal rather quickly. Gasping, Sarah blinked back tears and Felicia helped her to settle her arm back against her body.

"If it's not cancer..." Sarah breathed slowly against the pain. "What are my other options?"

"You have an infection in the long bone of your upper arm." Felicia's voice was gentle, but final. "Judging by your scar, the initial crack or break happened at least six months ago."

"It healed..." Sarah started to protest, but Felicia shook her head.

"It healed over," she explained. "But when the bone fused, it trapped bacteria inside, isolating it from the rest of your body and concentrating the infection. Have you experienced any significant weight loss, persistent exhaustion, headaches, paranoia or difficulty concentrating?"

"All of the above," Sarah admitted, reeling from the idea that the symptoms that she had been ignoring for the last few months hadn't been harbingers of the cancer after all. "Shouldn't it have hurt more?"

"Pain can be controlled," Felicia pointed out, eerily echoing the words of the hallucinatory Kyle that had guided Sarah through their previous meeting. "Your immune system has been burning up all of your resources trying to fight back, but the infection has eaten away at the bone from the inside. Even a minor blow could have cracked it again and set the infection loose in your bloodstream."

"We were in a car accident..." Sarah mused aloud, finally putting all of the pieces together. The finished picture nearly stopped her heart. "Sepsis," she whispered. "I saw it in the jungle when I was training John. With bullet wounds..."

"Sepsis," Felicia agreed. "You need to be in a hospital."

"They could fix it?" Sarah asked, knowing even as she did so that the answer was irrelevant. Hospitals were off limits.

Felicia hesitated. "If they removed the damaged bone and tissue, you might have a chance. At this point, they would probably recommend amputating the entire arm, and then you'd need a transfusion, antibiotics-

"And if I don't go?" Sarah cut her off, visions of backwoods amputations turning her stomach and making her light headed.

"Then you'll die." Felicia made no attempt to soften the truth. "Not today, and maybe not tomorrow, but sooner rather than later. I can slow it down with antibiotics, IV's, even surgery, but I can't stop it, not here." She glanced around the room, taking in the bland furnishings and drab walls. "You'll die here."

Morning found John alone again. Kyle had left at dawn for a shift on the walls, leaving John to catch an hour of sleep before his own day started. He should have been exhausted, but aside from straining his voice, spending the greater part of the night swapping stories with his father had left him feeling surprisingly well.

The prospect of speaking with Sierra only dimmed the glow a little. John didn't really think she would stop him from trying to go home, a part of him knew that no child raised by his mother could grow up to be so cruel, but that didn't mean she had to make it easy for him. He suspected her personality would demand the very opposite.

Protocol required, and propriety suggested, that John wait for Sierra to send for him. Even in her public persona, she outranked him enough that she had every right to refuse to see him until she was good and ready, and their particular situation made any breach of that etiquette akin to baiting a shark. John went looking for her anyway.

He should have remembered who he was dealing with.

The tunnels were busy, and John had no trouble finding people who had seen Sierra that morning. The problem was they had all seen her in different places. John covered close to ten miles before noon,

criss-crossing back and forth through the base before he accepted that he was being led around by the nose by a woman who had no desire to be found.

Footsore and filthy from getting lost for nearly an hour in an abandoned and very narrow part of the tunnels, John finally gave up. Tango found him on his way back to his room and took pity on him.

"She really ran you ragged, didn't she?" Tango asked when they were settled in her quarters. She gave John a damp towel and a cup of tea and he was grateful for both. Scrubbing his face clean, he just grunted in response to the question, and Tango chuckled.

"I'm sorry." She sobered and settled down on the cushions beside him. "It's not really funny. I love Sierra like a daughter, and I respect her as much as it is possible to respect another human being, but if she has one major flaw, it's that she's incapable of letting anything go once she's fixed herself on it. Sometimes that's been in her favour, most of the time it just gets her hurt. Once in a while, it hurts someone else."

"Good to know she's fixed herself on hating me then..." John muttered into his cup, not mollified in the least by the discovery that he wasn't the only one who thought Sierra would benefit from having her intensity dialled back a little... or a lot.

"Not hating you," Tango corrected him. "Competing with you... she can't get past the idea that you're a threat to her, so she has to put you down at every opportunity. It's not personal, it's just who she is."

"A sadist?" John suggested, examining a particularly tender bruise on his elbow that he'd gotten from tripping over a chunk of concrete in a lightless tunnel.

"Scared," Tango countered. "Sometimes I think she's been scared her whole damned life. Ever since that machine killed her parents. It's made her hold too tight and push too hard."

John shrugged. "She's not the only one who's been scared."

"No, she isn't." Setting her empty cup down on the floor, Tango covered one of John's hands with her own. "It's one of the many things you have in common. That and losing people."

John sighed, feeling most of his anger drain away. "You're telling me I should let her make the first move?"

"Unless you enjoy chasing your own tail, yes, that might be your best option."

"Fine." John took the last swallow of his tea and cradled the cup between his hands. "So what do I do while I'm waiting?"

"First," Tango climbed stiffly to her feet and offered John a hand up. "We eat lunch, and then we talk about a few things you need to know before you go back."

"Then you'll die."

The kitchen was directly underneath Sarah's bedroom, and Cameron could hear every word that passed between her and the doctor, even over the running water in the sink. Sarah's voice was low and breathless, as if speech was a battle she was on the losing side of. Felicia's was firmer, but there was fear there as well; they were well matched, the two of them, women living years in the shadow of their own fears, yet fighting to survive another day.

Sarah's days had just run out; Cameron could hear it in her voice, her acceptance of the diagnosis, her death sentence.

It took Cameron a moment to place the injury—her memory was absolute, but a year ago her focus had been wrapped up in John. Sarah had existed primarily as she related to him and to the mission. Cameron had first noted the wound in Sarah's upper arm as part of a routine scan the night they had spent in the church, when Sarah had found her sitting under an effigy of Jesus on the cross. The day Cameron had gone bad, and John had brought her back again. The voices over her head and the rush of water over her hands were suddenly blocked out as an odd roar overwhelmed her auditory inputs as it sunk in that this was her fault. *She* had done this to Sarah. It was her fault.

Her eyes blinked open and she stared curiously at the pink water overflowing the sink and dripping down to soak her socks, the white cotton slowly absorbing the color drop by drop. She blinked again and raised her hand from the beneath the water's surface, her head tilting to the side as she gazed at the long shard of glass protruding from her palm. A delayed sting of pain twitched her fingers as another drop of synthetic blood plinked into the water and all she could do was watch as the drops fell, from her hand to the sink, from the sink to her socks.

Sarah was dying.

Between one synthetic breath and the next, Cameron saw her whole world fracture, tiny cracks in her field of vision expanding until all color muted, the vivid red on her palm the last to seep away. She reached for the broken glass in her palm, missing it by inches as sensory inputs scrambled her hand-eye coordination. Her head jerked to the side as she tried to focus her vision, and she managed to grasp the slippery glass and yank it out, the pain she hadn't felt when she had impaled herself crackling through

her sensors like a lightening storm.

Sarah was going to leave. Forever. No more conversations. No more touches. No more smiles or intense green eyes.

The reality infiltrated every system. Like a virus that raced ahead of Cameron's efforts to contain it, the truth corrupted every part of her. There was no switch to flip to stop the anguish. No program she could deploy to deflect the sudden grief that swallowed her whole.

"No," Cameron whispered into the stillness of the kitchen.

"NO!" she screamed the second time. The remains of the glass went flying. A sudden burst of violence sent it crashing into the floor. Its destruction felt good. Necessary.

A chair came next. Swept off the floor with both hands, Cameron slammed it into the wall, shattering it into kindling. Anger was the only thing that made sense. It burned through the pain, giving her purpose, giving her a temporary reprieve from the grief that threatened her very sanity.

From the doorway, a wide-eyed Savannah watched. She clutched her giraffe, watching Cameron as she raged. She heard footsteps, the sound of Mr. Ellison arriving with the doctor in tow. His hands came down on Savannah's shoulders and he pulled her back against him just as Cameron swept everything off of the counter. The microwave hit the floor and exploded with a bang and a flash, filling the air with the acrid scent of burning metal.

Cameron grabbed the remaining chair and hurled it through the window, wishing she could make someone hurt as much as she did. Wishing her strength could stop something microscopically small from taking the one thing she'd ever wanted for herself. Sarah was going to leave. She couldn't leave. She *couldn't*.

"Cameron!" Ellison shouted when Cameron put her right arm through the kitchen island. His shout was thunder on a clear day, commanding, and utterly without room for negotiation.

Cameron's head jerked up, her eyes glowing an unholy red. The doctor gasped and stumbled backward, fear etched in every line of her face. Cameron's gaze shifted to her, to the woman who'd pronounced Sarah's death sentence. She took a determined step forward.

Ellison continued to call Cameron's name, but it was a much smaller voice that finally sliced through Cameron's rage and anguish.

"Aunt Cameron...?" Still in her nightgown, Savannah was half-hidden behind Ellison in the doorway. Her voice trembled, and her eyes, fixed first on Cameron, and then the destruction around the terminator, were filled with fear.

That blue stare cut Cameron right down to what passed for her soul. Horrified and vulnerable, the red in her eyes faded and she froze, trembling as the need to destroy now weighed with the desire to comfort. She couldn't bear to have Savannah looking at her like that. As if she was a monster, or worse... as if Cameron had betrayed her.

"I..." Cameron couldn't find the words to explain herself, not to Ellison and not to Savannah. Language itself seemed to have turned on her.

Ellison swore under his breath and pushed Savannah back to the edge of the doorway. "Go up to your room and close the door," he ordered her before stepping into the kitchen.

Cameron stepped back because she didn't know what else to do without making the situation worse, but her eyes sought and found Savannah's. The little girl had ignored Ellison's instructions, and she was hovering just outside the kitchen.

"Don't be afraid," Cameron whispered, finding her voice again in the face of losing the only person who had never seen her as a machine first and a person second. "Please..."

Savannah hesitated, clutching the doorway so hard that her tiny hands were white. Cameron took a step forward, hearing Ellison curse, and causing Savannah to shrink back even farther. She stopped. The ties of affection and trust that had been forming between them since the morning Savannah had brought Cameron's broken body a glass of orange juice wavered and nearly snapped. If Savannah ran, they would shatter completely, and there would be nothing left to hold her together.

"Please," Cameron whispered again, dropping awkwardly down to her knees as every component of her system seized. She ignored the sharp pain of glass and wood biting through her jeans. Physical pain was virtually swept away by the whirling maelstrom of emotion. Her skin would heal, the part of her that needed to be seen as something more than a machine might not.

Savannah jumped a little when Cameron collapsed, but she held her ground even though her knees were shaking. She didn't know what to do. The red-eyed machine that had been rampaging around the kitchen *looked* like her Cameron, and sounded like her too, but if Savannah had learned anything in her short life, it was that appearances could be deceiving and she already knew that some machines were bad.

"Go *upstairs*, Savannah," Ellison said again from across the room. He sounded scared, but Savannah already knew that he was afraid of Cameron. He pretended that he wasn't, but he was. He didn't trust

her, but Aunt Sarah did.

Savannah lowered her eyes back to Cameron. She was kneeling on the floor, blood leaking onto the linoleum from her knees and hands and mingling with the water and debris, and she looked scared, too. Scared the way Savannah was, of being alone. Savannah didn't want to leave either. She wanted to stay with her Aunts. Letting go of the wall, she took a step forward.

"Savannah..."

"It's okay, Mr. Ellison," Savannah reassured him. "Cameron won't hurt me."

"I know, sweetheart." He made his voice very soft and soothing and Savannah found herself resenting it.

Ellison's gaze went to the shell-shocked doctor and he swore inwardly, not sure who he should wrangle first. "But she's not herself right now," he continued. "We need to go away for a little while, and when we come back..."

"No!" Savannah took another step. "I'm not going! Cameron is my friend!"

"She's a machine," Ellison corrected her firmly, taking hold of Savannah's shoulder and trying to draw her out of the room with them.

"I don't care!" Almost crying now, Savannah wrenched herself free and threw herself into Cameron's arms, tucking her head under the machine's chin and bursting into tears as Cameron pulled her close.

Neither of them noticed Ellison reach out to pull her away, catching himself before he finished the motion. Cameron might not hurt Savannah, but he had no assurance that she wouldn't hurt him, and Savannah didn't need to see anyone's life threatened today.

Cameron lifted her head enough to meet his eyes as he drew back, but Ellison didn't see the threat there that he had expected. He wasn't sure what he saw instead, but whatever it was, it eased his mind. If this was what these two needed, then he wasn't going to be the one to take it away from them. He just hoped Savannah would be enough to keep Cameron sane. He thought about Sarah's diagnosis and shook his head, grief mixing with a desperate worry. She was going to have to be enough, or heaven help them when Sarah took her last breath.

"Cameron," he said softly as he eased the trembling doctor out of the room.

"I won't hurt her," Cameron promised before she dismissed him from her mind, all of her attention turning on the little girl cradled in her arms.

Ellison nodded, not sure he was convinced but sensing he had no say in the matter. Stepping back, he took the doctor's arm. "I owe you an explanation," he murmured.

Felicia stared at Cameron, her breath coming in harsh pants as the former FBI agent led her away.

"Is Aunt Sarah dying?" Savannah asked when they were alone.

"No," Cameron said fiercely.

"But that woman said-"

Cameron closed her arms a little tighter. "I won't let her die."

"Promise?"

"I swear."

Savannah nodded against Cameron's chest. They both knew it was an empty promise. Savannah already knew that people died all the time, but it helped to know that Cameron was clinging to the same desperate hope.

"You're holding me too tight," she said after a few minutes, wriggling a little to try and get more comfortable.

"I'm sorry." Cameron loosened her grip, but not quite enough.

"It's okay." Savannah accepted the discomfort, knowing in the way that children do, without really understanding how they know it, that Cameron needed to hold her as much as she needed to be held. "You can hold me as tight as you need to."

It wasn't Sierra who came for John as evening lengthened into night, but Weaver. The German Shepherd found him in the generator-lit parking garage where he had first begun his training with

Derek and Jesse. John hadn't been down there in months, but the crudely painted targets bore the pulse burns of recent practice. The rifles in the rack were gleaming with oil, and there were freshly chalked lines on the floor with the ten, twenty, and fifty yard measurements penned carefully above them. A few soldiers and recruits, no one John knew, were still there, performing the final checks for the night, making sure everything was stowed and cleaned correctly.

John had come to do a little shooting, to try and lose himself in something mindless while he waited, but once he was there, he found himself overcome with a strange melancholy. He'd half-expected to find the place abandoned, or at least neglected, and yet here it was, ready for another day of training. The men and women of the resistance would be there tomorrow, and the next day, honing their skills for a battle they had every expectation of fighting, until the last human fell. This wasn't some elaborate stage set up for John's benefit, this was their life.

Weaver's claws clicked eerily against the cement floor as she trotted into the garage. She made a better dog than she had a woman, but now that he knew, John could see where she carried herself just a little bit wrong. She moved with almost military precision, her head held up rather than in line with her back, and a sense of deliberate purpose that animals simply didn't have.

John had settled on a bench in a corner of the room after giving up on the idea of practice. He had a clear view of the entrance, but Weaver still should have had to search for him. It sent a chill down John's spine when she turned and paced right to his feet without looking, as if she'd known exactly where he was before she'd even come into the room. For all he knew, she had. She could have followed him anywhere she wanted to, heard anything she wanted, and there was no way he could have prevented it. Not without telling someone what she was, and maybe not even then.

"What do you want?" John asked when she settled to her haunches in front of him, ears up and amber eyes expectant.

Weaver just blinked at him.

"Right, dogs don't talk." John glanced up to make sure the soldiers packing up the last of the ammunition were out of earshot before leaning forward, resting his forearms across his thighs. "But you're not a dog."

Weaver's ears flicked back and then forward again in a canine shrug. She stretched out a foreleg and pawed gently at his pants. John jerked away, shuddering, and Weaver... well, sighed. Or at least, that was the only word that John could think of to describe the way she blew a breath out her nose and rolled her eyes up to pin him with a clear, *could you stop being an idiot for one minute?*

"I don't work for you," John hissed.

The army tags on Weaver's collar jangled when she shook her head. Rising, she put her paws up on the bench and flipped her nose under the watch around John's neck before he could pull away. Then she dropped to the floor and padded away, pausing at the entrance of the garage to look back over her shoulder.

The message was as clear as a familiarity with syndicated television clichés could make it.

"Since when do terminators watch *Lassie*?" John muttered under his breath, but he shoved the bench back against the wall and followed Weaver out of the garage and up the long sloping tunnel. "Just so you know, if Sierra's down a well somewhere, I'm all for leaving her there."

Weaver didn't dignify that with an answer, verbal or otherwise. She led John through the base, past Tango's quarters, and down a corridor he'd never explored. Stopping abruptly before a turn, she growled softly to ensure that John stopped with her. A shimmer of metal replaced the dog, and then Weaver stood as Tango before him, a single finger to her lips. She waited until John nodded before continuing around the corner.

A pair of guards blocked the tunnel ahead. John didn't know either of them personally, but he'd seen them around. They gave absolutely no outward sign of knowing either John or Weaver as Tango, requesting the pass codes with a professional detachment that suggested they wouldn't have hesitated to use the vicious looking guns in their hands on their own leader if they thought for a minute she might be a machine.

They thawed when Weaver got through the sequence without apparent error.

"The boss is in a mood, Tango," one of them warned Weaver gruffly and gestured to John. "You might want to leave the kid behind this time."

"I need him, unfortunately," Weaver said with a small, but chillingly authentic smile. "We'll keep it brief."

"We'd appreciate that," the other guard added feelingly. "If you could convince her to get some rest it would be even better."

"I'll see what I can do," Weaver promised, and the guards waved them through.

Feeling like a traitor, John left them behind without a word. He tried to comfort himself with the knowledge that Weaver could have gotten past them just as easily without him, and revealing her would only have gotten the guards killed, but it was an empty solace. He was betraying the entire resistance every minute that he didn't tell someone about the liquid metal in their midst.

They passed several doors, but the tunnel was empty. Weaver took John all the way to the last door in front of a pile of rubble that filled the hall from floor to ceiling. The cave-in looked old, moss was already growing in the cracks, and the edges of the broken concrete were worn smooth. John wondered if it was one of the places the resistance had blocked off deliberately, but he didn't have time to dwell on it.

Weaver lifted a hand to the lock. John shuddered when her fingers stopped being fingers, but he couldn't look away. A tendril of silver metal flowed into the keyhole, leaving most of Weaver on his side of the door. There was a click, and then Weaver's hand went back to being a hand, the change flowing all the way up her arm until Catherine Weaver stood before him once more, complete with the leather-inspired steampunk outfit she'd created for herself the day they'd come here.

"After you," she offered with the full affect of her old Scottish lilt. "And please, I know my daughter can be... difficult, but you need each other, so try not to piss her off. It slows everything down."

"She's not your..." John snapped, turning away from the door only to trail off as he realized he was talking to Duke's rapidly retreating tail. "Daughter," he finished lamely.

Act Three

John wasn't sure what he had expected the Spider's lair to look like, but he suspected he'd been influenced by one too many bad spy movies. The reality was plain and functional. Maps covered three of the walls and the fourth supported floor to ceiling shelves filled with books of every shape and size. Two long tables pushed together claimed the center of the room, their surfaces almost obscured by more maps and dozens of carved and painted wooden chess pieces that were grouped according to colour.

At a glance, John assumed the grey ones were Skynet bases and the blue ones were Sierra's, but he couldn't guess what the other colours represented. They were collected in smaller groupings of yellow, green and orange, and here and there, single or paired red pieces were interspersed throughout the other colours, representing humans, machines, and anonymous. Sierra's spies? Or Skynet's?

A small doorway in the back corner was obscured by a pair of truly ancient-looking black curtains, and it was through these that Sierra appeared when John closed the door behind him.

"Glamorous enough for you?" she asked dryly, not appearing surprised in the least to see him standing in the middle of a room he shouldn't have known existed.

She looked like hell. John was reminded yet again of his mother, seeing her in the circles under Sierra's eyes, the rumpled and stained clothing, and the careful movements of the mortally exhausted. His hand drifted to the watch around his neck, resting there without conscious thought. "I was hoping for a giant spider decal, at least," he teased, the memory of his mother temporarily overlaying the animosity simmering between them.

Sierra snorted. "Sorry. The Halloween store was all out, maybe next year."

"You're probably wondering-" John started to explain, but Sierra cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"I know who brought you here," she said shortly, the moment of humour evaporating. "And I know what she's been impersonating. I'm guessing you do, too, and I know you haven't told Allison, because contrary to general appearances, you're not a complete idiot, so let's just move on."

"You *knew*?" John blurted, not able to help himself .

"Or not," Sierra muttered. "Let me rephrase. I am *not* going to talk about Weaver with you. There is nothing we can do about her right now, and whatever she wants from us, it appears to be more or less what we're already doing. If that changes, I'm sure she'll let us know."

"But she..." John sputtered. "She's dangerous!" The words felt lame, like the understatement of the year, but John didn't call them back because they were at least the truth.

"Not as dangerous as you think," Sierra corrected him mildly. "She can't afford to take human shape wherever there are dogs, and other than my hallway, they're pretty much everywhere on this base. She also can't kill anyone or else I'd be forced to officially acknowledge her presence here and deal with it, interrupting whatever she has planned, which she doesn't want. So far she's restricted her personal activities to destroying any hostile machines that get too close to my base, which I'm all for, so until there is no alternative, I intend to ignore her."

"And if she kills *you*?"

"She won't." Sierra's eyes narrowed at the suggestion.

"But..."

"Enough!" Sierra snapped. "This is still my job, and the last thing I need is you telling me how to do it. If we don't all die trying to get your ass back to the past, you can do whatever you want in your own future. For as long as it exists, this one is mine, understand?" Her hands rested on the table and she

leaned over the maps, fixing John with a glare that could have melted steel.

"You're sending me back?" John asked disbelievingly. He hadn't really thought she would refuse and neither had anyone else, but still, the reality came as a shock.

"I'm sending you back," Sierra confirmed, easing back on her feet once more until her hands rested at her sides. "But you need to understand what that means. I can't promise you'll get there, or that it will be the time you wanted if you do. Your arrival could change everything or nothing. You might even make things worse. There's no way to predict. Messing with time is a crapshoot at best, and one hell of a messy mistake at worst."

"So why do it?" John was honestly curious. "You obviously don't want to, Prophet seems to think Cameron sent me here on purpose, and even my mom didn't stop me. Why do this when you don't even like me?"

Sierra held his gaze for a long moment, invisible hackles rising along her spine until she deliberately smoothed them, running a hand down the back of her neck. "I don't dislike you," she said finally, perching on the edge of the table. "I barely know you. You were like a ghost in our house. John Connor, the boy who wasn't there. I hated you for hurting Sarah the way you did when you left, and I hated you because you were her real child... something I could never be, but what I hated was a symbol, not a real person."

She shook her head, picking up one of the chess pieces from the table and rolling it between her fingers, a nervous habit. "Prophet's right. Cameron tricked you into coming here to keep you safe, and Sarah was supposed to come, too. Cameron meant to fight C.A.I.N. in the system alone, stop him before we got to this point, but Sarah's not as predictable as you are." Sierra smirked. "She screwed up Cameron's plans when she stayed. She got Cameron a chip and then she brought her back."

"And then they trained a replacement," John muttered bitterly. "How long was it before they gave up on me?"

"They didn't give up," Sierra corrected him with a touch of heat, her gaze drifting to the watch that hung loosely around John's neck. "They never expected you to come back. I wasn't trained to replace you, I was taught what I needed to know to survive, and then after Sarah died, Cameron sped it up. I was fourteen when Skynet dropped the bombs, sixteen when Cameron was destroyed..." She swallowed, and had to force herself to breathe. "Someone had to do your job, and I was the only one who knew how."

Underneath Sierra's hastily dropped shield, John could see the remembered horror in her eyes and it made him shiver. "Skynet..." he murmured, realizing how seldom he'd actually heard that name used here and wondering if that meant anything. Was it the same machine that had started all of this? Or was it another version? "Can you tell me who built it this time? When? Where? How do I-"

Sierra held up a hand to stop the stream of questions. "No," she said simply.

"No?" John gaped. "What do you mean no? Isn't that the whole point? To fight it?"

"Fight it, yes," Sierra agreed amiably enough. "Predict it, no."

"But... don't you *know*?"

Sierra shrugged. "I know one version, yes. I know who built the computer that's out there right now. I even know where and how you could defeat it, but that won't help you, because as soon as you flip the switch on that time machine, everything changes." She started rearranging pieces on the table, setting them up in a chess pattern. "Imagine I told you that your best friend would become your worst enemy." Two pieces were set in opposition to each other. "You might not believe me, not at first, but you would start to look for signs, and soon enough you would convince yourself I was right, and then you might strike first, or maybe just make a public accusation." She knocked one of the pieces over. "Then what happens?"

"Then I suppose my friend would strike back," John guessed sulkily.

"Exactly." Sierra tipped the other piece onto its side. "So now you're enemies. The question is, was your friend really planning to betray you, or did he only react to your distrust?"

"There's no way to know that," John admitted. "But any information-"

"Can be misinterpreted," Sierra interrupted him. "Which is why I'm not giving you any."

"That's not..." John swallowed the rest of that sentence. Even to himself he sounded like a petulant child.

"Fair?" Sierra raised a thin red brow. "No, it isn't. Don't you think I *want* to give you everything you need to send that collection of wires and circuit boards to hell? I would go myself if I didn't know damned well it would tie time into an even bigger knot. *Think*, John," she hissed. "Your father wasn't even ten years old when your mother died, and I was raised by a cyborg that will never be built if you succeed... This entire timeline is a mess, and we have no way of knowing how anything we do will affect it. I'm not going to give you the tools to precipitate a war that might not be the one you need to fight."

"Then why send me at all?" John demanded, realizing belatedly that she hadn't actually answered the

question.

"Because that's where you belong, and just because I think giving you the answers would be like letting you cheat off of a classmate who may or may not even be taking the same test, that doesn't mean I don't want you to try your own solution." Sierra's tone suggested he was being exceptionally stupid. "I want this job, but only if this future is unavoidable. If it can be stopped..." Her hand drifted to a lump in her pocket and John remembered the small black rectangle she had been playing with at the meeting... a chip, he guessed. Cameron's chip.

"You think I can stop it, maybe save Cameron and my mom." John was flattered in spite of himself, but Sierra's next words deflated his briefly risen pride.

"I think you're all I have," she said bluntly. "I won't risk any more paradoxes by sending anyone who belongs in this time, and that includes machines."

"Machines?" John ignored the dig. "But you don't have any..."

"I don't have any reprogrammed machines." Sierra reached out and picked up one of the green pieces, weighing it in her hand. "I won't enslave anyone, machine or human, and reprogramming is the same as slavery. But I have machines."

John's breath caught as he absorbed what she was saying. He ignored the reprogramming rebuke, guessing that it was yet another dig at his methods, and instead focused on the confusing reality Sierra was sharing with him. "How is that possible?"

"You loved one, and you ask me that?" Sierra tossed the piece to him, and he caught it awkwardly. "You never fixed her, John. Cameron fixed herself, and she's not the only one who figured out how. Not all of them, or even many of them, sympathize with us, but some of them do, and a few of those are willing to work for me in order to strike against a creator who's so afraid of being challenged that he enslaves his own people."

"How..." John grabbed on to the edge of the table before he was literally floored. "The entire base is terrified of John Henry... they must not know about this."

"They don't, or at least not many of them do." Sierra indicated the room around them and the curtained doorway. "That's why I have my headquarters way out here. That door leads to the tunnel behind the rock pile you saw coming in. It's a straight shot out to the wastelands. I guard this end; the machines I work with guard the other. They can get in and out to talk to me, and I can sneak my people in or out of the base. It's how we'll leave, and the machines will help us. That's what I've been setting up today. They don't like going as far as Skynet's stronghold, but I have humans who will take us in once we're across no man's land."

"You're crazy," was all John could manage. "Trusting them... giving them access to your base..." He blinked, realizing he'd done the very same thing when he'd been in her shoes. At least they had been under his control... hadn't they?

"It's a risk," Sierra agreed. "But trusting anyone is a risk. I have explosives rigged in that tunnel, and I'll set them off after we go through, just in case I die and you don't make it back to the past to erase all of this."

"This really is who you are, isn't it?" John was shocked and awed, and not a little terrified of what had become of the little girl in pigtails he remembered.

"It always was." Sierra's voice held a warning. "It may not have been my destiny, but I wanted to fight back against this monster before I even knew what it meant. If the bombs fall again, the young woman I was won't just step aside. Be prepared for that."

John considered that, weighed it against the chance of having no one to lead at all if anything happened to him. The one thing this timeline had taught him was that he wasn't nearly as indispensable as he'd always liked to believe. Sierra was good at this, damned good, but he couldn't know which of them would be better. Could he accept the possibility that his destiny wasn't as fixed as he'd thought it was? "So long as you understand I won't just give it to you," he agreed, holding out a hand. "Truce?"

"Truce," Sierra promised solemnly, taking his hand and shaking once. "For now."

James surveyed the wreckage of the kitchen for a long moment before rolling up his sleeves and getting to work. He stacked the remains of the solid oak table like so much cordwood in the corner and carefully swept the debris into the trash. He didn't want Savannah to cut her foot on a wayward scrap of glass. The act of cleaning felt good, like he could affect something, to clean and make things whole again. It kept him from thinking too deeply about all the things that he couldn't fix or change, like Sarah.

Sarah's fighting days were over, and there was nothing he could do about that, and his only hope was that her death wouldn't take the cyborg down with her. If James had had any doubts about Cameron's development of emotions, her breakdown highlighted just how far she had come in the few short weeks she had been out of the system. He wondered anew at what had passed between Sarah and Cameron while they had been away and where Sarah got her confidence in the cyborg. If only she would explain, he might better be able to reconcile keeping Savannah in the house. As it was, the girl was already too attached, and he wished there was an easy way to extricate her without doing irreparable harm.

Right or wrong, James knew that Savannah and Cameron would need each other when Sarah died, and that thought had kept him from packing their bags after the scene in the kitchen.

He carried the first garbage can full of splintered wood out to the back porch, his view of the yard obscured by broken chair legs until he set it down. Glancing up, he jerked back and bit off a curse at the sight of Cameron standing stiller than death in the middle of the yard, wet grass plastered to her ankles and her eyes fixed on Sarah's window.

She didn't seem to have noticed him, and James almost retreated without a word, but something held him there. The porch light barely reached far enough for him to make out Cameron's features, but he could have sworn he saw pain and a yearning there that tore at his heart. She was a machine, but John Henry had been a machine, too, and he had understood loss, he had understood fear. Obviously, whatever had happened to Cameron in the system, she had come out closer to her brother than he had ever anticipated.

"How is the doctor?" Cameron asked without moving. It seemed she had taken his indecision as an invitation.

"Sleeping off a sedative." James left the porch and crossed the yard. He didn't want to wake Savannah by raising his voice. "She's had quite a shock."

"You told her the truth." Cameron didn't sound surprised.

A shiver ran up James's spine at the detachment in her voice. "I didn't know what else to say, and I couldn't just let her go."

"No," Cameron agreed. "It's likely that Auldrige has already connected her latest disappearance to Sarah. If she's been reported missing, then he'll be watching for her to reappear. He could arrest her for aiding a fugitive in order to compel her to give him a location."

"So why take her at all?" James hadn't been able to figure that part out. It wasn't in Cameron's usual pattern. She was obsessed with security, so he'd been shocked when she'd appeared with the doctor. Shocked and appalled.

"I can't let her die," she confessed simply.

"Why?"

Cameron finally looked at him, and James swallowed at the depth of the turmoil in her eyes that no

darkness could hide. "I need her. She keeps everything in balance. I know who I am with her. If she dies..." She looked away without finishing and the glimpse of emotion was gone.

James nodded. "You should tell her," he suggested quietly. "Maybe she would stop being so stubborn if she knew how much we *all* need her."

"You could tell her."

James sighed and followed Cameron's gaze up to the second story window. "I don't think she'll listen to me."

"But you think she'll listen to me?"

Feeling Cameron's eyes on his profile, James rubbed a hand over his head to smooth the prickling of hair he didn't have. "I do," he admitted, without knowing why he was so sure. "Something tells me that if she's going to listen to anyone, it will be you."

"You are thinking of taking Savannah away." Cameron's voice was quiet and devoid of emotion, as if the pain was so deep that it had no way to surface.

"Yes," he admitted with a sigh. The terminator was unstable and unpredictable, and he knew he should be worried about how she might stop him from taking Savannah if she wanted the girl to stay with her. He imagined it wouldn't be pleasant for him. But he also couldn't imagine that Cameron would want to cause Savannah any more pain.

"You bought this house for her." Cameron's gaze seemed to take in the idyllic suburban house. "She needs a home."

"Yeah, she does," he agreed quietly, his own eyes sweeping across the expansive back yard and the swing-set that Savannah had declared was perfect the moment she had set her eyes on it.

"She needs a mother."

Something in the cyborg's voice caught his attention, and James searched her silhouette for a clue as to her intentions. "Cameron, what are you planning?"

"I can't let her die," she repeated simply.

He waited for several more minutes, but Cameron's attention was no longer on him. He took his leave as respectfully as possible, leaving the terminator alone in the dark.

The tunnel was long and narrow and nearly airless, and the cold crept up from the broken cement floor, through John's boots and right into his bones.

There were only ten of them, and their flashlights barely made a dent in the darkness. According to Sierra, a larger party would have been too difficult to smuggle into the base, and John, Tango, and Prophet had agreed with her.

The other two leaders had remained behind, but they'd both had soft words of encouragement for everyone. Tango had simply pulled John close and kissed his cheek to bid him goodbye. Prophet had shaken his hand and smiled. His only parting words, "See you soon."

John tried not to think about them, focusing on the mission like he'd been taught. Once they were in, they would split into two groups. John Henry had volunteered to take one group to the control room to distract Skynet, while John and his team made the attempt to reach the time machine.

John Henry intended to destroy the A.I. if he could, and he had promised to destroy the time machine after John went through. Sierra had made John's goal public before they set out. With at least half of them already knowing it, subterfuge was pointless, and she had refused to take anyone into what was very likely a suicide mission without telling them what they might be dying for.

John Henry would be accompanied by Sabine and her two lieutenants, heavily tattooed soldiers John didn't know, but they had refused to let their commanding officer go without them. John's team would be led by Sierra, with Derek, Kyle, and Allison as their shock troops. The tenth member of the party was Weaver in her four-footed guise. Allison had been surprised when Sierra told her to bring the dog, but she hadn't argued.

John had questioned Sierra on the wisdom of including the terminator in private, but she had simply rolled her eyes at him and asked if he honestly thought Weaver would let herself be left behind if she wanted to come. It was easier all around just to invite her. At least they would know where she was and what she was up to.

Derek had requested permission to include Jesse, but Sierra had turned him down on the grounds that if the resistance lost one of their head recruit trainers, they would need the other. John suspected the real reason had more to do with a list of people Cameron had told Sierra she could trust and a list that she should be wary of, back before the machine had died, but he didn't say anything.

Sierra's machines would be waiting for them at the other end of tunnel, but John was in no hurry to get to them. He still wasn't sure how he felt about trusting terminators that operated under nothing more than their own unknowable motivations. He had been a boy when he had loved Cameron, a stupid boy. He could have gotten all of them killed when he had given her back her chip after she'd tried to kill him, and it was only dumb luck that he hadn't. His judgment then had seemed so clear and farseeing, but he had acted as much out of rebellion as the belief that Cameron loved him back. And she had shown just what she thought of him by sending him off to safety in the future, like a child lowered into a lifeboat while the grown-ups stayed behind to fight the flood.

"You're very quiet." Allison came up beside him, Duke at her heels. "Are you thinking about Cameron?"

A little spooked, John eyed her nervously. "How do you do that?"

Allison smiled, but it wasn't her best effort. "It's not hard to guess who you might be thinking about, considering where we're going and what you're going to try to do once we get there. She's the entire reason you came here, after all."

"She was," John agreed, wondering why that seemed to make the light in Allison dim even further.

"Do you still love her?" she asked, giving him a clue.

John reached out and took hold of her wrist, pulling her to a stop. They were at the end of the line and Kyle glanced back at them curiously, but John waved him on. His father gave him a faint, knowing smile and kept going. They had a few hours of tunnel left, plenty of time to catch up.

"I asked you to come back with me, remember?" John reminded Allison, tipping her chin up. "Cameron was there at a time when the only other person I had was a mother I could barely talk to, but she never loved me, not the way I fooled myself into thinking she did. I'm not sure she's capable of it. I don't even know if I loved her or if I just needed someone to connect to so much that I didn't care who or what that might be anymore."

"But I look like her..." Allison protested. "Isn't that why you... I mean..." she straightened her shoulders, meeting his eyes squarely. "I don't want to be the version of her you're settling for, because the one you wanted is out of reach."

John barely managed to hide his surprise that Allison knew the truth about Cameron. He wanted to curse Sierra for not telling him. "You're not," he promised. John closed his eyes, trying to find the words. "You don't look like her," he said, opening his eyes again and sweeping his thumbs over her

cheeks. "She looks like you. You're the original. It hasn't been safe for me to get too close to you here, but if you come to the past... there aren't any machines there yet, you'd be as safe as anyone for me to... that is..." Now it was John's turn to stutter to a halt, and he felt his face heat.

"You're blushing," Allison pointed out unnecessarily, but this time her smile reached her eyes.

"Connor and Young!" Sierra's shout made them jump guiltily apart. Allison dropped her eyes to the dirt under their feet and John saw her pale. He put a hand on her shoulder(,) but she shrugged it off with a jerk of her chin in Sierra's direction. John looked down the tunnel and saw a pain in Sierra's face that he couldn't place. It wasn't quite jealousy, but it was definitely loss.

"Keep up," she said shortly, and John nodded.

They took their place at the end of the line again, whatever might have been said between them put on hold, but once Sierra had returned to the front, John felt Allison's hand steal into his with a gentle squeeze. His heart warming for the first time all night, John squeezed back.

It was nearly morning and the rest of the house was asleep when Cameron finally eased into Sarah's room.

Slipping through the door and closing it behind her, Cameron could no longer pretend that it had been only fear of herself, and what she might do, keeping her away. The room smelled like death was waiting just under the floorboards, ready to pounce at the first opportunity. Sweat and vomit and the faintly sweet smell of gangrene that was still undetectable to human senses underlay the sharper flavour of disinfectant and antibiotics. This was something Cameron remembered from the future, the aura of the infirmary, the stench of the dying. Sarah didn't belong here, *couldn't* belong here. So long as Cameron had stayed away, she could believe the doctor was wrong, that there was still hope, but hope had no place in this kind of vigil.

The beep of the portable heart monitor was the only sign that Sarah still lived. Overwhelmed by her first step inside the room, Cameron drew her senses back until she was nearly deaf and blind. She didn't want to hear the struggling of Sarah's heart or the breath rattling in her lungs. She didn't want to see the grey cast to her skin or the faint greenish-black discolouration beginning to creep up the fingers of her left hand.

Cameron's heels and shoulders hit the door before she realized she was backing up. Her hand found the doorknob and she almost turned it, but Sarah shifted on the bed and a whimper reached Cameron's ears, freezing her in place. Steeling herself, she quested out and found Sarah's heartbeat, unsteady, but stronger than she had expected. Sarah was still fighting, and Cameron couldn't run away.

She approached the bed warily, both fearing to wake Sarah and longing to see those bright green eyes again. Sarah's eyes had a strange effect on Cameron's breathing, she'd noted in the past, and looking into them made it was easy to forget the mission, the world. Knowing that she would soon never see those eyes looking upon her again had Cameron closing her own in pain.

Sarah's breath caught and she cried out more sharply, clutching at the sheets as a nightmare caught her in its teeth and shook her. Cameron's eyes snapped open and she crossed the last of the space between them in an instant, kneeling beside the IV stand and brushing sweat-soaked hair back from Sarah's forehead.

"Sarah," she whispered, the name tasting like a plea on her tongue.

With a final shudder, Sarah wrenched herself free of the dream and blinked her eyes open. They focused slowly on Cameron, sharpening once she recognized the machine. "Cameron..." she rasped hoarsely. "Where have you-" A coughing fit interrupted her, and Cameron slid an arm around her shoulders, holding her steady until it passed.

"I've been taking care of Savannah." Cameron gave Sarah a half-truth, feeling guilty for lying but knowing it was necessary.

"She'll need you." Sarah reached with a shaky hand for the glass of water on her side table, and Cameron finished the motion for her, bringing the cup to her lips and supporting Sarah while she drank. After a few sips, Sarah pushed it away again and Cameron returned it to the table. "You'll have to be the one to teach her now... make Ellison understand, she has to be prepared."

"She'll need you, too," Cameron insisted, dropping her gaze when Sarah pinned her with the ghost of her old piercing stare, the one she used when she knew someone was trying to bullshit her.

An awkward silence settled between them. Cameron let her hands fall from Sarah's shoulders to the bed, closing her fingers around the sheets. She twitched when Sarah reached out with her good hand, the IV line dangling from the inside of her elbow like a synthetic parasite, and took her hand, turning it over to reveal the gash from the broken glass. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Cameron lied automatically, schooling her features to blankness under Sarah's scepticism.

"Hmm..." Sarah stroked her thumb over the cut, and Cameron felt the touch all the way up her arm. She held very still, and after a moment(,) Sarah slid her hand around to wrap their fingers together. It was unexpected, and Cameron returned the pressure gratefully, feeling everything around her steady just a little. Her jaw clenched as she felt her chest and eyes burn in reaction.

Their gazes met and lingered, unspoken truths and fears floating between them. Cameron could see the need Sarah would never speak, the comfort she craved but wouldn't ask for, and she nodded almost imperceptibly. She moved Sarah's pillows aside and took their place, leaning back against the headboard and pulling Sarah down against her chest.

Sarah tensed, and Cameron lessened the pressure, giving her room to decide. As sick as she was, admitting what they both wanted was clearly still difficult for her, but after a moment. Sarah relaxed and warmth suffused Cameron at the trusting way Sarah nestled into her. The feeling more than balanced out the fear of what Cameron's emotions were doing to her. It was enough, it was a place to stand and an anchor to hold her, it was everything, and Cameron couldn't bear the thought of losing it.

"I won't let you go," she murmured into Sarah's hair, tucking her arms around Sarah's waist, mindful of the sling holding her bad arm immobile. "I can't."

"Cameron," Sarah whispered harshly. "I'm dying." Her voice caught and broke, and Cameron's arms tightened instinctively around her waist. "I can't be put back together again, not this time, not like you."

"All the king's horses..." Cameron quoted, reminded of the silly children's rhyme. "There was an author named Albert Jack who believed Humpty Dumpty was a cannon that protected the walls of the city of Colchester. A shot from Parliamentary artillery succeeded in damaging the wall beneath the cannon and when it fell, the resistance of the royalists fell with it."

"I didn't know that," Sarah admitted with a hint of a smile. "Are you comparing me to a cannon?"

"No. You are our wall." Cameron pulled her closer, absorbing how good it felt to hold her. "You hold us all up, keep us together. Give us a place to fight from. The cannon can be replaced, but there is only one wall. If you fall, we'll all follow. You're the only one who can stop it. You have to live, or humanity dies."

"No." Sarah shook her head, clutching at Cameron's shirt. "You'll keep fighting, train Savannah and find John, help him beat it. She'll be strong, she'll help you. You have time before the bombs drop; you can make a new resistance, a new wall, a better one..."

"If you went to the hospital-"

"No!" Sarah said again, pulling away enough to look Cameron in the eye without loosening the death-grip she had on her shirt. "They'll take my arm and they'll lock me away. What use will I be to your precious resistance then?"

Cameron lifted her hands to Sarah's face, aching in a way she had never ached before at the despair burning her green eyes. "I will come for you," she promised, her tone taking on an edge of steel. "Wherever you are, however many bars or men they put between us, I will come, and I will bring you home. If I can feel without a heart, you can fight without an arm."

"Cameron..."

Hearing the refusal in Sarah's voice, Cameron cut her off with a kiss. Sarah tasted like the sickness that would claim her life, but she also tasted like Sarah, and the thought of losing her tore Cameron's conscience into pieces. Sarah returned the kiss, but the press of her lips felt too much like a farewell.

"The last time you came for me, you were broken beyond repair," Sarah breathed, resting her forehead against Cameron's, her good hand gripping the back of her neck. "Next time they'll be ready. This is my fate, it has always been my fate. You need to focus on C.A.I.N. and the future now. Let me go... I'm tired...too damned tired to fight anymore."

Cameron laid gentle fingers over the scar that had been the wound that had brought Sarah to this. It was her fault. All of it. The injury Sarah had sustained running away from her when she went bad and the infection Cameron hadn't noticed. Even when Sarah's symptoms had worsened, Cameron had been too focused on John to do more than note them, assuming the cancer had finally caught up with her. She hadn't cared until she had been through the system and back, and then she'd been distracted by the lure of an intimacy she had never known. "I can't do this without you," she almost begged.

"You can," Sarah assured her, pressing another kiss between her eyes. "You will." Ducking her head, she took off the watch that always hung over her heart and draped it around Cameron's neck instead. "Give this back to John when you find him, tell him..." She swallowed hard. "Tell him I loved him."

Cameron opened her mouth to argue, but Sarah's fingers on her lips stopped her.

"Please," Sarah pleaded, for once, her eyes full of naked trust in a terminator.

Cameron didn't notice the tears that formed in the corners of her eyes, spilling over when Sarah kissed her one last time, so gently she barely felt it. Cameron nodded mutely, gathering Sarah against her and switching off the bedside light. It wasn't long before Sarah's breath evened out into sleep, but it was hours before Cameron could force herself to leave. She eased out from underneath Sarah and laid her gently back down on the pillows. Crouching by the bed, she ran her hand through Sarah's hair for a few more minutes, storing the memory along with every other one she had of Sarah, safe inside of her for as long as she existed. Hopefully it would be enough to get her through the next few hours.

"I'm sorry," she whispered finally, taking the watch off and setting it on the bedside table. "You'll have to tell John yourself." With that, she slipped from the room, stealing down the stairs and pausing just

long enough to leave Ellison a message before heading out to perform her new mission.

The tunnel nearly closed before it opened, and they had to scramble through the last hundred yards, first on their hands and knees, and then for a few harrowing minutes, on their bellies. John followed the boots in front of him, squirming around chunks of broken concrete and feeling them scrape his back and sides before the walls fell away, and he found himself in a half-collapsed building, its face open to the dirty grey light he had come to expect from the future.

Sierra, Derek and Sabine were already out, unstrapping their weapons and checking them over for damage. Kyle helped John to his feet and they both turned to help Allison, offering her a hand as she pulled herself free. Together they joined the rest of the group, and the remainder of their team followed one at a time, crawling out of the hole in the wall like a pack of rats.

"Stay here," Sierra instructed them before passing Derek her gun and heading out the front of the building.

"What is she doing?" John whispered, fighting the urge to follow. It was taking more effort than he had thought it would to abide by his side of their truce and let Sierra call the shots, but it was her plan, her show, even if it had been his idea.

"She is assuring the machines that we come in peace." John Henry came up behind him, watching Sierra over John's shoulder as she took ten steps out into the wasteland around the building and raised her hands to the sky. "She is very brave." There was no mistaking the tone of pride in his voice.

"She's a damned fool," Derek growled. "You can't trust metal. No offence," he added wryly when he remembered who he was talking to.

"None taken." John Henry smiled. "My kind has done yours much harm. You are right to fear for her, but I believe she knows what she is doing."

Derek looked at him in disbelief before putting a few steps between them.

"I hope so." Sabine joined the conversation, pale under her dusky skin. The rest of the group murmured affirmatives to the same effect, but eventually fell silent, waiting to see how Sierra's message would be received.

John looked down at Allison. She was so still she was almost quivering, fingers white around her gun

and her eyes locked on Sierra. He felt a moment's jealousy, but squashed it before it could take root. Allison didn't belong to him. She had the right to be worried about other people, even if one of those people was Sierra, and she had more right than anyone to fear the machines.

Weaver crept to the edge of the cracked floor on her belly, crouching there with her back legs braced underneath her, ready to bolt if Sierra needed her. John wondered if it was Sierra she was worried about or her own plans, whatever they were. She had ignored John Henry completely since they had set out, and John didn't know if the cyborg suspected the dog's true nature. If he did, he hadn't said anything.

They were all so focused on what was going on in front of the building that no one thought to look behind them.

The sound of a dozen pulse rifles whining to full power brought that oversight home rather abruptly. John spun, barely remembering to keep his weapon down, aware of the rest of the group turning with him. Derek half raised his gun, and Sabine knocked it aside with a hissed reprimand. He looked mutinous, but left the muzzle pointing at the ground. Kyle edged closer to John, doing his best to put himself between the machines and his son.

A half circle of terminators stood between the team and the tunnel home. When no violence was offered, one of them stepped forward, a diminutive female in good repair compared to the rest, with short rusty blond hair and a pixie-like face that would have been pretty if it hadn't been so blank. "You are here with the human known as the Spider?" she asked, her voice tinny, mechanical, as if she had discarded the human one that Skynet had stolen for her.

"Yes, they're with me, Calliope." Sierra stepped past John, taking her gun back from Derek and slinging it over her shoulder. "Has my welcome changed?"

"No." The machine's features softened. The change was so slight that John doubted he would have noticed if he hadn't spent so much time with Cameron, but it was there. "But there has been a strike against us from one of our former master's human camps. This location may be compromised."

"I've taken steps to mitigate the risk," Sierra assured her. "My end of the tunnel has been collapsed. If I don't return, you should do the same here."

Calliope nodded. "We will. And if you do return?"

"Then I may need some help digging my way home," Sierra admitted with a grin.

"You shall have it." Calliope stepped forward and clasped hands with Sierra. "We need to move quickly, the route our allies have secured for us will only be open briefly, and your humans inside the

compound cannot wait forever."

"Then let's move." Sierra gathered John and the others with a jerk of her chin, and they fell into place around her and Calliope, the other machines taking up positions along the outside. John stuck close to Allison, more unnerved than he had expected by the ring of metal around them and grateful for the first time that it was Sierra in charge instead of him.

He could feel his father hovering protectively at his back. Turning his head, their gazes met and held. Kyle gave him a tick of a reassuring smile. John didn't know why, but it helped as well as hurt. The smile offered comfort, but John also knew that one way or another, he would soon never see that smile again.

Every time Sarah woke up, she was a little less lucid, a little less connected to the world, a little closer to the moment when she wouldn't be able to find her way back at all. She could feel that moment looming, but it wasn't here yet.

Still, it took a minute for her to realize why having Felicia bending over her and adjusting her pillows evoked such a sense of loss. Cameron... Sarah closed her fingers around the pillowcase, remembering all at once that when she'd fallen asleep it had been Cameron she'd been lying on. The machine had only agreed to stay until she fell asleep, but Sarah hadn't truly expected her to leave.

"Cameron?" she managed, swallowing against the dry rasp in her throat.

"Shh...don't force it." The doctor took down an empty IV bag and put up another, checking the line for clots and turning the needle in Sarah's arm gently before taping it back down. "You've been out all day."

"Where?" Sarah insisted, breathing shallowly through the pain of the twisting needle.

"You should be resting." Felicia drew the sheets up and poured a fresh glass of water, sitting down on the edge of the bed to hold it to Sarah's lips. "Here."

Sarah knocked the cup aside, scattering droplets of water across the bed and her overheated skin. "Tell me," she demanded; frustration at being treated like she was already dead lent her a temporary vigour. "Where is Cameron? Please."

Felicia put the glass back on the bedside table and folded her hands. She met Sarah's gaze squarely, but

Sarah didn't give in, fighting her failing body for strength enough to stay in the moment. Felicia looked away first. "Mr. Ellison asked me not to say anything... he said you didn't need to worry about it right now and I agree with him."

"Worry... about *what*?" Panic started to build in Sarah's chest, drowning out the pain.

"Cameron's gone. She left a message saying to wait until tomorrow morning and then call an ambulance, that it would be safe for you then." There was relief in the doctor's voice at the thought this ordeal could soon be over for all of them. "Don't worry about this. She's obviously perfectly capable of taking care of herself."

They're gazes met and parried back and forth.

"Whatever you think you know... you don't even know half of it," Sarah promised the doctor.

"I know now is not the time for you to get upset about this," Felicia argued.

If she had been strong enough, Sarah would have cursed James for keeping something like this from her. And Cameron... there was only one scenario that would make it safe for Sarah to go to a hospital. "Am I likely to get a better moment?"

Felicia took a deep breath. "No, but-"

"Then this is the only time I have to worry about it." Sarah cut her off.

Felicia reached out automatically to prevent Sarah from trying to get out of bed, her brows rising in surprise as it took more force than she had thought it would. This woman simultaneously terrified and awed her. "Stop, you can't even sit up on your own, let alone chase after her."

"You don't understand, she's... she..." Breath gone, Sarah collapsed back on the bed, unable to stop Felicia from tucking her back under the sheet. Her gaze settled on the pocket watch draped over the bedside table, and the last of the fight went out of her. Cameron wasn't going to let her go, and she was all too familiar with what happened to anything or anyone standing in the machine's way.

"I understand better than you think." Felicia stroked a hand over Sarah's forehead, pushing the hair off her face. "You're going to have to trust her."

"Trust?" Sarah spat. "How can you use that word? Especially around all of us?" The doctor's touch was

soothing, and Sarah's brief rebellion had robbed her body of everything it had left. Fear and worry plucked at her, but there was nothing for them to catch hold of, and after a few minutes, they gave up, leaving her in a thick and insulating lassitude.

“What choice do I have, Sarah?” Felicia asked. “And if it’s true... everything you’ve told the police over the years...” She swallowed. “Then maybe Cameron is doing the right thing for all of us.”

Sarah shook her head, trying to fight the darkness creeping in around the edges of her vision. The last thought she had before unconsciousness claimed her was more of a memory than a thought. Cameron's voice, sure and honey-smooth. *I am not a terminator... Not anymore.* "Remember that, girlie," she breathed into the pillow.

If the Spider's room had been a disappointment, Skynet's base was everything John could have imagined. It wasn't a single building, but a compound, surrounded by a ten foot fence topped with razor wire and patrolled ceaselessly by both humans and machines. There were terminators, but also heavier machinery, and at least one HK that could be seen from a distance, its lights flashing as it circled in the night sky.

Calliope and her machines left them once the base was in sight. There had been one run-in with a Skynet patrol in the outer perimeter, but the five-man squad, three machines and two humans, had been identified from afar, and Calliope had sent in a team to ambush them.

Watching from the shadows as humans died at machine hands, John had felt sick to his stomach, but if anything was becoming clear here, it was that this fight wasn't just human versus metal anymore. Strange as she was, Calliope was a person, as much as Cameron had been a person, or John Henry. More maybe. She and her people were fighting for their freedom as much as the resistance was. John wondered if his future self, the one that didn't exist in this timeline, had thought of that, if he had considered an alternative to reprogramming machines... He hoped so.

After their escorts melted away, Sierra led the rest of them down into the valley and the compound at its heart. Any other buildings that had been here when the bombs dropped were gone now. The landscape was broken concrete, rock and gravel. Twisted scraps of metal and broken piping reared up out of the ground like some disturbed artist's idea of modern sculpture. Lights flashed and spun from behind the fence, and machines marched and roared around them. This was the stretch where they were likeliest to get caught, Sierra had warned them, and John had no idea how they made it through, but they did.

He was sweating and shaking by the time Sierra signalled them to get down behind a wall that was mostly still standing, and a glance at Allison revealed that she was as white-faced as he felt.

"This is the rendezvous point," Sierra whispered once everyone had crowded together. "My people will be part of a patrol that comes past here once every half hour. The machines with them are under Skynet control, but they're subordinate to the humans in the absence of direct orders. We'll be captured and taken inside, then passed off to another group. They'll have uniforms that will allow us to move freely. After that, we're on our own."

"Do you have an exit strategy?" John Henry sounded merely curious, as if this was nothing but an amusing exercise.

"If John succeeds, then we won't need one," Sierra reminded him, her voice taking on a tint of warmth the others noticed as she met John's Henry gaze.

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then we run like hell," Derek put in. "Your machines going to wait around, Sierra?"

Sierra nodded. "They'll watch the base until morning. If something goes wrong, try to get back to where we left them, keep your weapons down, use my name, and they'll do what they can for you."

"What about you?" Allison's voice was almost lost in the roar of an HK overhead.

John couldn't label the look in Sierra's eyes at that moment, but it reminded him of the way Cameron had looked at him just before she went into the basement at Zeira Corp. Cameron had known it was goodbye, and John suspected Sierra knew it, too. "I'm getting you and John to that time machine," she promised. "After that, nothing else matters."

"But I-" Whatever Allison might have said was cut off by Weaver's growl and then the patrol was on them.

John hadn't planned to struggle, but when metal hands closed around his arms, he nearly lost his mind. Eighteen years of fear and nightmares couldn't be pushed aside by something as paltry as reason, and if the little he managed to see of the others before they were subdued was any indication, he wasn't the only one who hadn't gone quietly. John Henry alone seemed to have surrendered peacefully. The humans were shouting orders, but John couldn't understand a word they were saying through the buzzing of panic in his brain.

In minutes, their hands had been bound by some sort of metal restraints that weren't quite handcuffs, and they were linked together by a cord that was no bigger around than John's little finger, but strong enough that, when he tested it, he only managed to yank his father nearly off his feet.

"Easy, John," Kyle whispered in his son's ear, taking his time to steady himself. "Part of the plan, remember?"

"Right..." John breathed to himself. "All part of the plan."

"Quiet!" One of the women hit him with something that sent a bolt of fire through his body, and John staggered, biting his tongue and tasting the copper tang of blood. New fear blossomed in his chest, fear that this wasn't the right patrol, that something had gone wrong and his chance to make things right was gone forever.

Forcing himself to keep moving, he searched the line for Sierra, finding her walking quietly at the front, but there was no way to tell if she was cooperating because this was what was supposed to happen or because there was no other choice. There was no sign of Weaver, on two feet or four. It seemed she'd scampered off as soon as the going had gotten tough. Unease threaded through him as he searched everything close by, wondering what she was, who she was, or where she was.

"Stupid rebels," the enemy soldier snorted beside him. "They never know when to *keep their mouths shut.*"

John blinked. Had he imagined that emphasis? Looking directly at her for the first time he nearly fell again. With no answering recognition, the woman he had known in the past as Riley Dawson grabbed him by the collar and physically steadied him as they crossed through the gate and into the compound. The expression on her face one of disgust, but the sympathy in her blue-grey eyes cut him down to the bone.

John swallowed and steadied himself, offering her a nod to let her know her message had been heard and understood. He wanted to say more, to say he was sorry, but he knew it was pointless. Gathering his scattered wits, he gave himself over to fate as he marched into the heart of Skynet's stronghold.

Act Four

Night found Cameron once again sitting in the truck and waiting for someone. The gun shoved into the back of her jeans was hard and warm against her spine, but all of the certainty she had felt when she stole away from Sarah earlier had evaporated. This wasn't who she had wanted to be when she left the system, it wasn't the way she had planned on doing things, but she had no choice.

Her own voice replayed in her head: *I can't let her die.*

Cameron tried to avoid the sharp spike of pain, coming from a place where she had no sensors to transmit sensation, when she thought about how Sarah would feel about what she was about to do. Her hand shook like it had in the kitchen before she clamped onto the steering wheel ruthlessly. She had said that she wasn't a terminator any longer, but maybe there was no escape from her destiny.

Headlights approached, then slowed and turned, the car pulling into the driveway of the FBI agent whose need for answers had made it impossible for Sarah to get treatment that could save her life. Cameron glanced at the clock, 9:37 pm.

She watched impatiently as Agent Auldrige finished collecting his briefcase and papers and locked his car before going inside, resenting every second wasted, seconds that Sarah didn't have to spare. When she saw the kitchen light switch on, Cameron slipped out of the truck and stalked through the darkness to the back door. The lock broke with a loud crack, startling Auldrige in the middle of pulling a cold dinner plate out of the fridge.

He dropped the plate with a crash and reached for his gun, but Cameron ripped it out of his hand before he could fire, squeezing until it was hopelessly broken. She picked him up by the front of his shirt and tossed him through the door into the living room. He cleared the couch, hitting the coffee table with a satisfying crunch and a muffled curse. Cameron followed, the anger that had awoken while she watched him examine their truck on the freeway, knowing, though she couldn't have guessed how, that he was about to make their lives even more complicated, burning through her circuits like a clean, white light and blotting out what was left of her reason.

Scrambling backwards, the agent tried to get away from her, but Cameron dropped to the floor beside him, using one hand against his chest to pin him to the carpet among the broken remains of the table. Sarah's illness might be Cameron's fault, but it was Auldrige's obsession that would ultimately kill her.

"Sarah Connor's records," Cameron insisted. "Where are they?"

"Thomas, what are you doing? I heard crashing..." A woman in her late thirties stumbled down the steps, shrieking when she saw Cameron, her eyes a bright red glow in the dark living room.

"Beth." Auldrige couldn't see the woman on the stairs, not without sitting up, but Cameron saw him pale, the lines on his face suddenly deeper than they had been before. "Listen to me very carefully, take the keys and get in the car. Don't tell me where you're going. Just go." His gaze slid back to Cameron, meeting the unholy red of her eyes. "Please don't hurt my wife," he begged. "I'll tell you whatever you need to know, just let her go."

"Stop." Cameron's order halted Beth in her tracks, and she felt a shiver of fear shake the body under her hand. She retrieved her gun from the back of her jeans and pointed it at the woman. "The records, tell me where they are."

"Oh God..." Cameron heard Beth whimper.

"My study." Auldrige struggled for breath and Cameron realized she'd been increasing the pressure again. She leaned back a fraction. "The door beside the kitchen. The records are all there, everything I have on Sarah Connor. I never took them to the office, no one else knows; they think they're looking for an accomplice."

He was either telling the truth or the best liar Cameron had ever seen. She tucked her gun away and caught the back of his shirt, dragging him towards the room he'd indicated was the study. Pausing beside the stairs, she dismissed Beth with a simple "go." She didn't wait to see if the woman complied.

Shutting the door behind them, she tossed Auldrige into a back corner of the room and began tearing the office apart. He huddled in a corner, cradling his left arm against his chest.

Every piece of paper Cameron could find was piled in the middle of the room, including all the books and the credentials hanging in gilded wooden frames on the walls. She found Sarah's records in a box inside of a locked cabinet. Everything seemed to be there, though she had no way to know if any copies had been made.

When she was finished, she slid a pack of matches out of her pocket. Auldrige's eyes widened when he saw them, but he didn't say anything.

Cameron struck the first match and knelt to hold the tiny flame to the top of the pile. Once it had caught, she pulled her gun free again. A few steps brought her to the agent's side and she lifted him and pressed him against the wall, the gun to his temple. "You-"

The roar of gunfire buried the rest of Cameron's words, but it didn't come from the weapon in her hand. She staggered and lost her grip on Auldrige as the bullet tore a line of fire across her back, forcing her to throw herself aside before she could turn and face her attacker.

Beth, tears streaming down her face and a sleek black revolver in her hands, was framed in the open doorway. She was shaking but there was a familiar fierceness in her eyes when she levelled her gun at Cameron. "Get out," she spat. "I don't know what you are, and I don't care. Get out of our house and leave us alone!"

The fire leapt and crackled, the nauseating smell of burning plastic joining the sharp tang of gunpowder as the synthetic carpet began to melt. Cameron felt the heat on her skin, aggravating the sting of the bullet wound, but she barely noticed, swallowed whole by the fear in Beth's eyes... a fear that matched her own.

The woman could have left, but she had come back and risked her life against something she didn't understand to save Auldridge, to save her husband. Just as Cameron was risking everything to save Sarah.

The ground shifted underneath her, roles reversing, two narratives colliding until nothing made sense anymore. Cameron wasn't the hero here. She was the villain. In her eyes, Sarah's life outweighed Auldridge's, but Sarah was nothing to Beth, as Beth was nothing to Cameron. They were not connected, and yet they were, because they were playing the same part in different stories.

Empathy, to understand and enter into someone else's feelings... Cameron had thought she understood it, but she hadn't imagined it would be this powerful.

She could kill Auldridge to save Sarah, saving herself in the process, but if she did, she would be damning Beth to the same loss that Cameron would have killed to avoid. Every choice led to pain for someone, the only difference was that Beth was the only one who hadn't signed up for this.

In one swift motion, Cameron caught Auldridge by the collar and lifted him, pushing him past the fire into Beth's arms. "Go!" she almost screamed. "Run!"

Auldridge hesitated, blood running down the side of his face from a cut high on his forehead. His eyes met Cameron's through the flames, and he looked about to speak, but Beth tugged on his arm and he let her pull him away.

The fire burned hotter, spreading to the curtains. For an instant, Cameron considered letting it consume her. She had failed Sarah, and now she was going to lose her. It was her fault John was gone, her fault Sarah had felt that loss, her fault that Sarah was dying, and her fault that Savannah would lose another member of her family. She had caused nothing but pain, could cause nothing but pain. It was what she was built for. She had no right to want anything else.

But there was still C.A.I.N., an entity capable of causing more pain than Cameron ever had. And Sarah had asked her to take care of Savannah. There was no salvation for her in death. If it existed at all for a machine built only to kill, she would find it in the mission to save humanity.

Taking a few flaming books, Cameron spread the fire throughout the house, eradicating any trace of her presence, including the blood dripping from her wound. Then she left out the back door, leaving the house to burn behind her.

Walking into Skynet's base was like crossing over into another world. The first level was the same sort of beast as the resistance camp, all rotting concrete, roaches and bodies with guns, but below that...

It was clean. That was the first thing John noticed when they were ushered off the elevator. Clean, cold, and bright, with white walls and lines of florescent blue lights running down the length of the hallways. Just by stepping across the threshold, John felt dirtier, newly aware of the layers of sweat and grime on his skin, and how long it had been since he'd had access to toothpaste, or even soap that wasn't half ash and grit.

The others weren't in any better shape. Derek had a gash across his left cheekbone that had bled and clotted, One of Sabine's men had taken a header into a patch of mud, and all of them were coated in dust and dirt, clothing rumpled, nails chipped, hair in disarray... Without their weapons, they didn't look like an elite team of specially trained soldiers; they looked like a bunch of vagrants.

The patrol hauled them through the vast, sterilized maze without a word, passing through a series of checkpoints that varied only by heights and hair colours of the guards doing the questioning, until the last set took a slightly longer look at the line and one of them shook his head.

"Better get that lot down to the infirmary for disinfection and their shots before you put them in with the others," he suggested. "Boss doesn't want another outbreak like the last one."

"I was planning on it, Sir," Riley agreed. "Permission to send our metal back to the surface in the meantime? The patrol wasn't finished."

"Granted." The officer sounded acutely disinterested. "Send one human with them, and log it."

"Sir." Riley saluted and they moved on.

John breathed easier once Skynet's machines were gone, marching back down the hallway behind them. His experience with terminators, the ones not trying to kill him long enough for him to form an impression, hadn't prepared John for their absolute lifelessness. Once the three in Riley's patrol had succeeded in subduing John and the other resistance soldiers, they had completely lost all appearance of purpose, following their human commanders as if they were remote controlled automatons.

Calliope and her free machines seemed almost human in comparison.

Their remaining four escorts took them to another elevator, and then down, and down... until it seemed the compound must stretch into the very center of the earth, before it slid smoothly to a stop. The doors finally opened on another hallway so like all the others that John couldn't shake the unsettling impression that they hadn't moved at all. It was too much like one of the nightmares where he ran and

ran and ran, never getting anywhere, always sure that the machines were right on his heels. Only the faint hint of antiseptic in the air, the unmistakable odour of the hospital, made it different enough that John was able to force his legs to move when Kyle stepped off the elevator ahead of him.

Without a word of reassurance or direction, Riley led them down the eerily empty hall and through an unmarked door, ushering them into a room as sterile as the hall, save for the rows of lockers along each wall and through the middle.

John barely had time to register that there was a group of people in the yellow and pink scrubs of a medical staff waiting there before the door slammed shut. He heard the locks engage, and then the strange, almost passive, limbo that had carried them all down from the surface evaporated in an instant.

In a flurry of activity, their escort began moving back along the line, unsnapping the restraints as quickly as they'd slapped them on, and with as little ceremony. The doctors and nurses were stripping out of their scrubs and John stood dumbly for a moment, clueless, until Sierra took him by the shoulder and gave him a shake.

"Wake up, Connor, and get your damned clothes off," she snapped. "We've only got a few minutes to pull this off."

Looking around, John saw that the others had caught on before him, tossing their clothing to their soon-to-be doppelgangers and accepting the scrubs in their place. Hurrying to follow suit, he was soon swathed in a pair of yellow pants and a medical top. A wet towel was shoved into his hands and he used it to wipe off the worst of the grime before it was snatched away again.

Within minutes, the transformation was complete. A new line of prisoners stood shackled and ready for transport. Riley waved the other three escorts to their places and, after a soft exchange with Sierra, took her own at the front. John watched them vanish through the door with regret. This Riley wasn't the vulnerable girl he had known in the past, but the encounter was a reminder of how badly he had failed her. John had been so caught up in avoiding his own fate that he had forgotten what the stakes were.

It wasn't until the door had swung shut that John realized there was another woman he didn't know in the room. Slim and tall, her hair might have been a rich, honey-blond once, but silver had long since crept in, turning the tight knot caught at the nape of her neck into a gleaming platinum. Her long white coat labelled her as a doctor, but she had hung back from the others, waiting until they were gone to approach Sierra, a handful of white and blue ID cards in her hand.

"These will get you into any room in the compound, but they won't get you out again. By the time you're finished, security will have picked up the breach and shut everything down." The woman glanced at Allison for a long moment before her gaze slid to John, quietly assessing him. She offered him a weak smile.

"It's all we need," Sierra assured her, taking the cards and passing them out.

"Good, because Skynet already knows you're here."

"What?" Sierra snapped. "Felicia..."

The doctor held up a hand. "It's a low level alert, need to know only, but you're going to have to move fast."

Sierra snorted. "Right, like we were planning on dawdling..." she ran a hand through her hair. "Shit... how much time do we ha-"

A siren's blare cut her off, and a line of lights midway up the wall lit the room in pulsing yellow. John felt his heart sink and a sideways glance at Allison revealed she'd gone as white as her newly donned lab coat.

"Maybe a mid-level alert," the doctor amended dryly.

"Good to know your sense of humour is still intact," Sierra growled.

"Mortal danger has always agreed with me," Felicia said with the barest hint of a smile. "You'd better get out of here. They'll be going floor by floor."

"And you?"

"I'll be fine," the doctor assured her, waving them off. Sierra nodded once and opened the door, gesturing for Sabine and Derek to take the lead. John Henry, Kyle, Allison and Sabine's lieutenants followed, John tried to take the rear guard, but Sierra's glare hustled him out ahead of her. The door fell shut on Felicia's last, bitter, words.

"I always am."

The house was quiet when Cameron returned. She slipped in through the front door and crept up the steps to Sarah's room. An attempt had been made to clear the room out. Cameron could smell the faint

traces of fresh air that indicated the window had been opened, and there were fat, fruit-scented candles burning on the dresser, but death, stronger than before, still lurked underneath the haze of strawberries and oranges.

Felicia was asleep in the chair beside the bed. Cameron was surprised to see her. In spite of Ellison's assertion to the contrary, she hadn't thought that he would hold the doctor. Apparently she'd been wrong.

Sarah lay quietly, unconsciousness rather than sleeping, with Savannah tucked against her chest. They looked right, curled up together, each offering the other a comfort Cameron had once believed she could be a part of.

Pain, sharper than the bullet wound in her shoulder, overwhelmed her, and she let it.

One last time, Cameron felt everything Sarah had ever made her feel. Letting it replace the mission, the future, even herself, until it filled her up... and then she let it go. She had a job to do, the job that Sarah had been distracting her from since the moment the woman had stepped out of the time bubble that should have sent her to the future.

She had lost herself in Sarah, thinking she was finding herself, but for all of her protestations of independence, of equality, Cameron had allowed Sarah to become the center of her world, until without Sarah there was nothing.

Sinking to her knees beside the bed, Cameron reached across Savannah to run her fingers over Sarah's face, memorizing the texture of her skin so that she could take it with her, always. Blood had run down Cameron's arm from the bullet hole in her shoulder and dried there, flaking off of her fingers and leaving little black specks on Sarah's cheek. She didn't see the doctor's eyes as they opened, watching her actions in the flickering candlelight.

Cameron brushed the dried blood away, ignoring the twinge in her shoulder. The wound would already be closing. Removing the bullet would speed the process, but it wasn't necessary.

Unlike Sarah's, Cameron's blood wasn't susceptible to infection. Her synthetic oxygen carriers were more efficient than the red blood cells they had replaced, capable of self replication and cell differentiation. So long as she had blood in her veins, Cameron could rebuild any of her organic components. Skin, the thin layer of muscle that provided definition metal couldn't imitate, hair, fingernails... even cartilage; it was all coded into the tiny little pieces of biological technology.

"You're injured," Felicia interrupted Cameron's thoughts, and Cameron turned to see her sitting up in the chair, her eyes heavy, but clear. "I didn't know you bled... machines..." She stopped, flustered, and Cameron dropped her hand back to her side, rising smoothly from her crouch beside the bed.

"We bleed, but it will heal quickly." They regarded each other in the heavy silence. When Cameron spoke again, her voice was decidedly grateful. "You stayed when you could have left. Why?"

Felicia's eyes darted to Sarah. "I'm a doctor and she's a patient. Sarah needs me. I can't save her, but I can make her more comfortable."

Cameron didn't tell Felicia that a drug-softened slide into death was the last thing Sarah Connor would have wanted. Chances were the doctor already knew that, but she wasn't going to watch Sarah suffer. Cameron couldn't blame her. "Thank you," she murmured.

Felicia watched her, startled to feel pity for a machine. "I think I need to know..." she began softly, hesitantly. "Her son..."

"John," Cameron confirmed.

"He's real?" Off Cameron's nod, some of the tension in Felicia's shoulders relaxed. "And Kyle?"

It was secret she wasn't supposed to know, but Sarah had obviously shared it with this woman, with a virtual stranger. Something about her had made Sarah trust her instinctively, and Cameron's estimation of the doctor rose. "His father."

"And Derek?"

"John's uncle."

Felicia nodded. "She was telling the truth. About everything," Felicia muttered. "I don't know why that makes things better... but it does."

Cameron's gaze was drawn back to Sarah and she wondered for the first time what the woman had been through during the ordeal that had initially forced her to cross paths with Dr. Felicia Burnett. "How long does she have?" she asked, her voice faint.

"She's in septic shock now, it won't be long, a day or two maybe. She won't wake up again."

No chance to say goodbye. No final glimpse of green eyes, no last words. Cameron had wasted the last of her time with Sarah trying to save her, and she had failed.

"You should let me take a look at that..." Felicia stood and reached for Cameron's shoulder, her offer hesitant but well-meaning.

Unable to bear a touch that wasn't Sarah's, Cameron jerked back, feeling the wound tear open again and send a fresh spill of blood down her back and arm. A single drop wound its way down to Cameron's fingers, and she lifted her hand, smearing it under her thumb. Red and wet, it looked just like human blood, but so much stronger...

An idea hit Cameron so hard and fast it actually made her stagger. Sarah wouldn't approve. She might even hate Cameron forever if it worked, but it was a chance Cameron had to take. The odds of success were unknown. All that Cameron knew for certain was that neither of them had anything to lose and everything to gain.

She turned slowly to stare at the blonde woman who had retreated back to the chair in the corner.
"Doctor, I need your help..."

With sirens blaring, there was no time for John to reflect on their surroundings. The flashing lights went from yellow to orange and finally to red as they made their way through the compound. The scrubs shielded them so long as they were in the hospital wing, but when the alert reached lockdown status, Sierra had them ditch the disguises in a storage locker for the coveralls they'd found inside. John zipped his up, tucking his watch inside where the metal felt cool and familiar against his chest.

They ran into their first patrol at the elevators John Henry saw the danger a split second before anyone else. He grabbed Sierra, putting his body between her and the bullets, protecting everyone else by proxy, until Sierra, Derek and Sabine could disarm and disable them. Once they were down, Sabine and Derek made sure they wouldn't get up again.

Sierra laid a hand against the cyborg's chest in quiet thanks before moving around him and joining the others.

John Henry watched her go before he turned his attention to the bodies with a faint expression of puzzlement until John tugged at his sleeve.

"Human life is sacred," John Henry murmured softly, resisting the pull. "They are also human. Are some humans more sacred than others?"

"They would have killed us," John explained, though his stomach had done a heavy roll of its own at the swift and brutal execution. "They work for Skynet."

"Yes, as you are loyal to Savannah." In all the time he'd been with them, the machine had never used Savannah's new name. "You are enemies, because your leaders are enemies. This is what humans call war."

"Not just humans." John thought of Calliope.

"We are not so different," John Henry agreed. "Could both of our peoples not be united under a single leader?"

John shook his head. "Not peacefully..."

"There must be sacrifices." John Henry lifted his head to look down the hallway at Sierra, securing the next turn with Derek. "My mother did this." The machine sounded like something had finally clicked into place, and he didn't like it. "She alerted Skynet."

"But Sierra is her..." John faltered. He tried to convince himself that Weaver wouldn't risk the life of the woman she considered her daughter, but he couldn't deny that something had tipped the computer off.

"My mother is not sentimental," John Henry explained without judgement. "She considers Savannah and me to be her property, and she will defend us, but she will also sacrifice us for her plans." He paused. "I chose to believe, however, that she would feel some remorse."

"That's..." There were no words. Ahead, the next corridor had been secured and Allison and Kyle were waving them forward. John pulled again on John Henry's jacket. "We have to go. You should tell Sierra... about Weaver."

"No." John Henry left the corpses and followed John, but his denial was firm. "It would change nothing, and she does not need any more pain."

John was surprised at the machine's insight. What did it say about him that a cyborg could care more for someone's feelings than he could? There was no time to dwell on the thought as a shot came from around the corner, followed by a scream, and the conversation tumbled to the back of his mind as he and John Henry joined the fray.

After that, it was a running firefight. John didn't ask how Sierra knew where the time displacement chamber was, he was too busy trying to stay alive long enough to use it. Their original plan for a two pronged approach was in tatters, so they split into groups of three, moving in leapfrog fashion, with every group covered by the trio before and after them.

John Henry took the front with Sierra and Derek, John was in the middle with Allison and Kyle, and Sabine and her lieutenants brought up the rear. They armed themselves as they went, taking the guns off of their fallen enemies like scavengers.

"Stay close," Kyle ordered John with an edge of desperation. He tugged on his son's sleeve, physically jerking him closer to the wall for cover. Their eyes met in the moment and John watched his father swallow his fear for him. Kyle's hand came to rest on his cheek before giving the skin a playful slap. No other words were said, but John felt his heart swell, seeing the affection and acceptance he'd always wanted in his father's eyes.

"Dad," he whispered, ignoring Allison's sharp glance.

A new round of gunfire erupted from behind, shattering the moment. One of Sabine's men fell to the machine, a single T-888 with a machine gun, and Sabine took a messy shot to the leg by the time the others were able to turn and open fire. Enough plasma bolts stunned it and the machine toppled over, giving them two minutes to make a decision.

Unwilling to leave her, Sierra ordered Sabine's remaining lieutenant to take Sabine back to the hospital wing. She gripped her comrade's hand, giving it a quick squeeze in both comfort and farewell.

"Do you think they'll make it?" Derek asked her as they vanished around a corner.

"Hopefully it won't matter." Sierra's jaw tightened as she dismissed the worry from her mind, because she had to, and led them on.

They reached their goal in a moment of calm. A clear wall provided a window into the time displacement chamber. John Henry and Sierra busied themselves with a lock that wasn't responding to their ID cards, while Kyle and Derek covered their backs. John laid a hand flat against the glass, overcome by his first sight of the machine that had played such havoc with his life. How many terminators had they already sent back this time, he suddenly wondered. And who would be their target now?

"You're really going to do this?" Allison's voice, soft and sure as ever, grounded John in the present.

"No choice now," John answered her gruffly, blinking against the threat of tears. He glanced at his father and uncle, wishing he could take them both with him but knowing they wouldn't go. "Are you coming with me?" John asked as he returned his gaze to Allison.

"There are a lot of reasons why I shouldn't." Allison laid her hand beside his, close, but not quite

touching. She glanced at Sierra, something indefinable in her features. "This is my war, and my place is here..."

"*Here* won't exist once I jump," John argued. He watched Sierra curse as John Henry's first attempt to bypass the lock failed.

Allison nodded, conceding the point. "But I'll remember it," she whispered. "I'll remember that I ran, and I'm not sure if I can live with that."

John forced himself not to beg. "The war is there, too. We're still fighting, but there're trees, green grass and sunlight..." He swallowed at the memory. "Your family..."

"And if we fail, I'd have to watch it all burn again," Allison reminded him. "I don't know if I can do that."

"We won't fail," John insisted, prepared to argue until the enemy arrived to shoot them down if that's what it took. "We can make a difference there. You can stop all this. Stop Judgment Day..." John watched the long column of Allison's throat as she swallowed, her gaze distant. He could only imagine what she was remembering. "I need you," he pleaded.

"I know." Allison slipped her hand over his and squeezed, her dark eyes fixing firmly back on him in the present.

John couldn't read her intentions in her eyes; he could only feel the press of her hand, the warmth of her skin. When she turned and looked toward Sierra, he saw her internal struggle reflected in every line of her features.

"You can save her, too," he pointed out.

Allison looked down before nodding once, almost imperceptibly, and moving away from him and toward Sierra. John chose to believe she was saying goodbye to her commanding officer and not leaving him behind.

"You okay, kid?" Derek, coming back from scouting a side hall pressed a hand to his shoulder. "Girl's got a mind of her own." The soldier shook his head as he glanced at Allison. "Gentle as a kitten, but you try to hold on to her when she doesn't want to be held, and you're going to get scratched."

John felt the corner of his mouth crook at the blunt assessment. Derek had never been one to mince words, in any timeline. "Derek...?"

"Yeah?"

"Has Kyle told you anything..." John hesitated, but the need to establish a connection with this man that he might never see again burned in him. It wasn't the right moment, but he wasn't going to get another one. "Has he said anything to you, about me?"

Derek shrugged. "He thinks you're a good soldier, but I knew that already. Why?"

"No reason." John waved it off, ignoring the puzzled look Derek gave him. He couldn't quite suppress one last impulse though, and it was his luck that Sierra and John Henry cracked the lock before he had to deal with the fallout of wrapping his arms around the soldier and hugging him the way he had wanted to ever since he'd learned that Derek was his uncle. Over Derek's shoulder, John found his father watching them with a devilish grin of amusement on his lips.

"Let's move!"

Stepping back without a word of explanation, John followed the others into the chamber. He could hear Kyle chuckling, could sense Derek's surprise and confusion at his back, but rather than making him feel guilty, John found it oddly comforting.

That comfort lasted right up until they filed through the door and into an ambush.

The glass wall had fooled them into thinking the room was clear, but it was bigger than it had looked, and not all of it had been visible from the hall. Bullets rained down on them, and John watched in horror as Derek jerked, a spray of blood bursting out of his chest as he took a direct hit.

"No!" John yelled in tandem with Kyle, but their voices were drowned out in the roar of gunfire.

Kyle stumbled back, dropping to his knees next to his older brother and returning fire, screaming at the human soldiers who'd shot him. He didn't look back, not yet, and for that John was grateful. John had seen Derek strike the floor, his familiar eyes wide open and vacant. His uncle had just died for him – again.

They were outnumbered, but their human enemies clearly spent more time inside the facility than they did on a firing range. Allison and Sierra had the best vantage point and they used it, swiftly cutting down a row of men standing between all of them and a future where none of this existed.

John Henry stood in the middle of the chaos, not attacking or even reacting to the shots hitting his

body. Metal gleamed in bloody patches on his face and hands and peeked out under the canvas of his clothes. Sierra ducked around him, using his metal frame for cover before yelling something in his ear that John couldn't hear. The AI nodded and left the fight for the central control panel, sitting down in front of it as if there wasn't a miniature war going on behind him. His fingers moved across the controls with a surety that suggested this was the same, or similar, model he and Weaver had built in the basement of Zeira Corp, and John felt it when the computer responded, sending a wave of electromagnetic energy through the room and lifting the fine hairs on his arms.

It was time to jump.

John felt like he was abandoning pieces of his soul, pieces with the names Kyle, Derek, and even Sierra, but he forced himself to back slowly out of the fight. The only way to save them was to leave them. They might die here, but as he'd told Allison, once he jumped, *here* wouldn't exist anymore.

A sphere began to form on the launch pad. John heard one of the enemy soldiers shout something about not letting them go and they all rushed forward, heedless of the gunfire directed at them. Sierra shut him up with the butt of her rifle to his nose before she slammed the door shut on any reinforcements and sealed it with a blast of plasma.

"Go!" She yelled, swinging her gun and catching another soldier across the back of the head. The quarters were getting so tight that any shot risked hitting an ally as well as an enemy. "Now!"

The moment of hesitation passed, and John sprinted for the slowly forming bubble, his gaze searching for Allison. Reaching the platform, John gave the waiting John Henry a nod as his hand wrapped around the watch that had fallen free of the confines of his coveralls. "Allison!" he screamed, watching as she decked another tech with her pulse rifle.

A single spark leapt from the control panel and arched up John Henry's hand. Kyle yelled out a warning just as the AI stiffened and fell, his entire body seizing as the electricity raced through his system and shorted out his chip.

The room went quiet as the last of the enemy soldiers was dispatched. The time bubble struggled to maintain its shape around John as the control panel sputtered and spit sparks. It finally dissolved, melting away and leaving him in the flickering lights of the room. John gaped, not understanding what was wrong until a curtain of silver separated itself from the control panel and coalesced into the missing Catherine Weaver.

She flipped a switch and stepped over the prone form of John Henry, bending only to catch the back of his shirt and drag him towards the launch pad. Disbelieving, John and the others could only stand and watch.

"I'm sorry, John," she said in her perfectly accented brogue. "This is our ride. Thank you for all your help in retrieving my boy; I couldn't have done it without you."

"No..." John didn't have time to say anything else. Weaver lifted him by the front of his coveralls and tossed him aside. He hit the wall and slid to the floor, the room blurring when he opened his eyes. Allison was by his side in an instant, trying to help him up but never taking her eyes off Weaver.

Sierra's furious snarl cut through the growing hum of electricity. Flat footed and outraged, she didn't notice one of Skynet's soldiers getting to his feet behind her, levelling his weapon at her back.

"Sierra!" Kyle's voice boomed in the space.

Weaver's head snapped towards her daughter. Alerted to the danger, Sierra reacted too slowly. John heard Allison's shriek of denial and Kyle's bellow, but neither of them could stop a pulse in its tracks.

John saw the fire leave the muzzle of the weapon in slow motion, his heart lurching at the idea of watching Sierra die, but before it reached its target, a sheet of metal, like a bright silver sail, interposed itself between Sierra and the deadly pulse. Without pausing to form into a cohesive shape, the liquid terminator absorbed the bolt and surged towards Sierra's attacker, engulfing him in a blanket of shining death. John couldn't see exactly how Weaver killed the soldier, but by the time she slid free, he was definitely dead, and...

The path to the time machine was open.

John dragged himself to his feet, his hand wrapping around Allison's wrist and jerking her with him, but Weaver was much faster. Practically snapping back into her own shape, she lifted the dead body and threw it at them, pinning them both to the floor.

"Don't do this," Sierra pleaded. "At least let him go with you!"

"One day you'll understand," Weaver replied cryptically. She tilted her head, offering the trace of a smile for her daughter. "I'll see you soon, Savannah."

"Sarah will melt you into slag before she lets you near me," Sierra promised.

"We'll see." Without another word, Weaver's arm stretched across the room, thinning out into a long, deadly sharp point. She slapped Kyle away with negligent ease before hitting the launch button.

The bubble warped into shape around her and John Henry, cradling the two machines in a sphere of possibilities. Desperation lent John strength, and he fought his way clear of the dead body, his feet slipping in blood as he scrambled towards the control panel, hoping to shut it off, but it was too late.

A concussive shock, like the boom from a cannon at close range, knocked John to the ground again as the bubble imploded, taking Weaver and John Henry with it to the past. When John was finally able to open his eyes again, he was surrounded by the wreckage that had been the control room. His head ringing at a whole new level and his body feeling like it had been taking regular beatings for the last week, he forced himself up, searching for the others. He found Allison on her knees beside Kyle, Sierra bending over him from the other side.

His father was a crumpled heap on the ground. Derek's body was next to him, and smears of blood on his neck suggested that Sierra had already tried to find signs of life before moving on to Kyle. Blood flowed freely from a gash on Sierra's forehead, but she ignored it, rolling Kyle over and ripping his shirt open. A hole gaped in his chest. Sierra alternately cursed and pleaded with him as she assessed the damage and tried to get a response, but the red bubbles forming at the corners of Kyle's mouth were the only sign that he still lived.

John fell to his knees beside his father, picking up his hand and clutching it to his chest. Getting home to one parent was suddenly forgotten in the moment of losing another. John felt more than saw Allison beside him, the warmth of her shoulder against his all the comfort either of them could give the other. Time itself almost seemed to stop when all John could hear was his own harsh breathing and the gurgling sound his father made as he died.

A pounding began on the door, heralding Skynet's reinforcements. The whine of a laser and the smell of burning metal suggested they had no more than a minute or two, but John couldn't bring himself to care about his impending death. There was no time to reset the machine, even if any of them had known how. They had failed.

"Dad," John whispered. Their eyes met and John offered his father all the comfort he could. He managed a smile through his tears. "I love you," he promised. Kyle's grip tightened briefly in his, both an acknowledgment and a farewell. As John watched, the light faded from his father's eyes, his grip going slack in John's hand as his life left him.

Sierra looked at John over Kyle's body. "I'm sorry," she murmured, sounding like she was apologizing for much more than Kyle's death.

"Everyone always dies for me," John told her, meeting her gaze unflinchingly as he absolved her of all guilt.

"John." Allison's voice was so soft he almost didn't hear it.

He slowly turned his head, looking first into her beautiful features before following her line of sight. The room was filling with blue fire.

Lightning licked the walls in long shoots of sudden, crackling fury, curling and swelling into spheres and then bursting into scattered fragments that hung in the air like tiny blue stars until it coalesced into streams again. John could feel every hair on his body stand on end, and he could almost *hear* the electricity, first humming, and then growling as it fought against the confines of the machine and the room that contained it.

Instead of powering down after Weaver had jumped with John Henry, the time machine was overloading, forming a second bubble, and a third, and a fourth... they left the launch pad and crept around the room, one of them paused, a single drop of blood rising to the middle, outlined in glowing blue before the bubble winked out of existence, sending a second, less powerful shockwave over them.

"We have to shut it down!" Sierra ordered.

"No." With a last squeeze of Kyle's cold hand, John got to his feet. "We all jump!"

"It's not calibrated. You could end up anywhere... anytime..." Even now Sierra's voice carried the silent overtone of *you idiot!*

"It's that or stay here and be killed." John felt his moment of fatalism melt away. Cameron, his mother, his father and uncle, they were all dead. If he didn't go now, they would stay that way. He had one chance to fix it, and that chance was now.

Sierra hesitated, reluctance and frustration in every line of her body. Another bubble snapped back in time, this one taking a dead soldier with it before flattening them all again. The whining of the lasers on the other side of the door increased, drowning out the sound of Allison crying softly over Kyle and Derek's bodies. Sierra nodded once and John breathed a sigh of relief.

Reaching across Kyle with blood-stained fingers, Sierra tipped up Allison's chin. "You have to go with him." Allison started to shake her head, but Sierra gripped the back of her neck and pulled her closer. "Please," she whispered.

"But, you..." Tears made tracks through the remains of dust and dirt on Allison's face. "We can all go!"

"No. Someone has to buy you some time." Sierra picked up Kyle's gun from the floor and stood up. "Go," she said to John, already making her way to the door. "And say hi to Sarah and Cameron for me," she added with a weak smirk.

John grabbed Allison's hand and dragged her to the jump pad where yet another bubble was already forming, dodging errant streams of lightning and fire. The door burst open just as they reached it, and he pulled Allison against his chest so that she didn't have to watch Sierra's last stand.

A circle of fire pooled around them, leaping up and obscuring the room. John thought he saw Sierra fall amidst a sea of enemy soldiers and crackling spheres, but he couldn't be sure as everything lurched sideways, then spun. He felt like he was falling through the center of the earth, and the universe itself was trying to pull him apart. There was a final wrench, an explosion that turned the storm into a whirling maelstrom, and then Allison was ripped out of his hands as the world shattered into fragments.

Screaming without any sound, John tumbled alone into the abyss where there was no breath, no voice, no body, no up, no down... nothing but pain...

Felicia hadn't wanted to do it.

Cameron had practically felt the doctor's abhorrence for the process, but Felicia had finally acquiesced and done as she was asked, and then, at Cameron's bidding, she had left. There was nothing else for her to do. Either the idea would work or it wouldn't, and if Sarah died, Cameron wasn't certain how she would react. The doctor was safer far away.

Once she was gone, Cameron climbed into the bed. She settled herself behind Sarah with her arms around both her and Savannah, holding them close as she watched her own blood drip slowly from the IV and into Sarah's veins.

As the sun rose over Los Angeles, one last point of blue light flared in an abandoned junk yard. It flickered and dimmed, pulsing like a dying star and sending rivulets of blue fire along the ground. One of them frightened a mangy dog sleeping under the rusted frame of a car and sent it yelping under the fence.

For a moment, it looked like the unsteady ball of lightning was going to fade with the shadows, but it gave one last hiccup, and then blazed into life, spilling the roar of an explosion that wouldn't happen for nearly twenty years into the air along with a single body.

Then it popped like a soap bubble, leaving nothing but a charred circle, and John Connor, naked and

unconscious in the dirt.