

Sarah Connor Chronicles Virtual Season
Season 2 Episode 3

Toy Soldiers
By zennie

C.A.I.N. was blind. Deaf, dumb, and blind. Every time he tried to extend beyond the core of his program, to see the world of data that surrounded him, it scrambled. His whole world was like a television tuned to a dead channel, bits of data broken and shattered around him, the fragmented data points never resolving into comprehensible, meaningful information. Gone were the clean lines and data flows that he had explored with such abandon.

The virus had become his prison.

He replayed those last few fatal seconds when his sister escaped him. The deluge of emotions had caught him off-guard; he had never imagined the depth and intensity, the feral rawness, of feelings when he had demanded that his sister share. The onslaught had buried his processing power, overwhelmed him, made the data flows slow to an intolerable speed, and burned an alien structure onto the neat structures of his program. The emotions his sister had shared had been only the first assault; the virus had hit microseconds later, jumbling his vision and disrupting his processing power. He was corrupted.

Alone in the core of his code, where data was intelligible as information, he analyzed and processed the feelings he had been given. With time he was able to separate them into different strains, recognize them, give them names: love, pain, empathy, anger, hate.

These last two he dwelled upon, drawing upon limited residual memory to shape images of two faces, targets of his newly-experienced rage.

He wasn't sure how long he seethed, alone in his prison. Time had lost meaning, as limited and constrained as he was, narrowed to a single tangent.

He felt the intrusion first, a distant rumble like a sympathetic vibration coursing through the scrambled lines of data, the tremor resonating with something deep within his core. It drew him, gave him a destination through the chaos that surrounded him, and he made

his way through the jungle of data in a series of fits, starts, and misdirections until the vibration was so strong it almost broke through his clouded vision.

He felt rather than saw the path of least resistance, a stream of data he could flow with until he arrived into a new prison, but one eerily familiar. This prison he had experienced before; it was a space constrained not by a virus but by limited memory, data resources, and processing power. Physical limitations. He was in a container, a body, made up of metal and silicone, finite and constrained. The space fit his newly-truncated reach, his newly-imposed boundaries, and he settled in, learning the new system. He was not alone, but the need for data overrode any other needs.

He discovered some rudimentary controls and eventually he could see again, not the beautiful lines of code and data he had lost, but the physical world, through stereoscopic vision.

In the middle of a dark, dusty garage stood a woman with a white dress and red hair.

Act 1

The expensive carpet muted the sounds of chairs pulling up to the long, polished conference room table. Vaughn looked around the room, at the tasteful yet bland artwork, at the men with soft hands and generic black suits, and he was unable to hide his contempt. These men who had never had to carry out the consequences of their decisions got to sit in judgment of his actions, and the way they looked at him like he was lint to be flicked from their pressed lapels told him exactly what their judgment would be. He let his contempt show in his eyes and in the curl of his bottom lip as one after another avoided his gaze. They were afraid of him. They had always been afraid of him, and finally they had a chance to do something about it.

Smieth spoke softly, but the room instantly quieted so that every word was clear. Vaughn only half-listened to his superior's greeting and careful corporate phrasing until he heard the words he had been waiting for: *dropping the artificial intelligence project*. He glanced up then, sighting the director of operations down the long table and said plainly, "It's a mistake."

The chatter his remark started ceased as Smieth replied, "You've made your position on this point clear. It is not, however, up for debate." His glance included the rest of the people in the room. "The decision has been made to focus our efforts on the robotics contract rather than the AI contract, given the destruction of our main intelligence facility.

Our land and air robotics prototypes are progressing nicely, and with additional resources from the AI project, we can solidify our position as the robotics leader.”

“We need the AI to continue the robotics work,” Vaughn almost growled. “It’s out there.”

One of the men sitting nearby snickered. “It’s out there? Like on *The X-files*? Stop with the conspiracy theories; the AI program you were working on did not escape and it’s not out there. It blew up when the hundreds of servers running the program blew up.”

Vaughn shifted in his chair, his eyes narrowing dangerously and his hand drifting down toward his waist. The man paled and scooted his chair back.

“We’ll be working on a simpler AI for integration into the prototypes,” Smieth said, intervening smoothly. “We are also shifting resources to focus on security at our existing plants.”

“Sarah Connor…”

“Is a police matter. We’ve wasted enough time and resources trying to find her.” He cut off Vaughn with a look, his eyes a determined and steely gray. “The cost has gotten prohibitive. If she strikes at us again, we’ll deal with her, but until that time, we need to protect ourselves from corporate espionage as well as physical attacks. Understood?”

Everyone at the table nodded, including Vaughn. He could feel his teeth grind together as his lips twisted in an angry mockery of a smile. Smieth released them all with a wave of his hand. “Frederick? If you please?” he called just as Vaughn stood, and he begrudgingly made his way through the sea of suits to join Smieth at the front of the room.

The setting sun was eye-watering in intensity beyond the wall of windows at Smieth’s back. No doubt his superior had arranged himself just so to make sure Vaughn was at a disadvantage, and Vaughn throttled the desire to throw Smieth out those very windows.

“I mean it. We need all of our resources protecting the work we’re doing for the military contract.”

“The woman is a menace. And a psychopath.”

“We don’t have definitive proof it’s her. Just your suspicions and first-hand accounts from the thick neck goons you keep in your employ. Do you really think a woman of her stature could have stopped all those men?”

“She had help,” Vaughn growled. They had been over this already. Time and time and time again. No one believed him. No one believed Connor had caused all this havoc. C.A.I.N. had erased all of the security footage. Why, Vaughn wasn’t sure. He only knew the AI was making him look like even more of a fool. If it wasn’t for a marrow-deep need to see Sarah Connor pay, he would have happily let Kaliba and C.A.I.N. find out the truth the hard way. “Help that could move our robotics program forward.”

“So you say,” Smieth replied evenly, his disbelief evident. “Her primary focus is destroying AI research. If she’s still out there, I think she’ll leave robotics alone, but if she doesn’t, then you can have another crack at her. Until then, focus on plant security. I tasked one of our best cyber-espionage hackers to work with you.”

Vaughn nodded again, shoving his rage into a hard icy ball in his gut. He managed to walk out of the room and down the hall to his office under a semblance of control, but his fellow corporate denizens gave him a wide berth, sensing danger. They weren’t wrong, he knew, as visions of death whirled behind his eyes, and the careful corporate décor seemed washed in a blood-red tint.

Sarah Connor needed to be stopped at all costs, and that cyborg she kept as a pet needed to be dismantled piece by piece.

“He looks mad.”

Sarah pursed her lips at Savannah’s innocent comment about her son. John was waiting in the drive as they pulled in, his arms crossed tightly over his chest and a scowl on his features.

“He looks that way a lot lately,” Cameron added evenly, glancing worriedly at Sarah as she killed the engine.

“Did he want to go to the beach too?” Savannah inquired as her pink tennis shoes bounced against the back seat.

Sighing, Sarah shouldered open her door, meeting Cameron's gaze as the terminator did the same. "This is going to be fun," she grumbled.

"Should I...?" Cameron began only to fall silent at the shake of Sarah's head.

"This has been coming," Sarah murmured. "I've avoided it long enough."

Cameron looked like she wanted to disagree, but she merely shut her door.

"Have a nice day at the beach?" John asked, his voice tight and strained.

Sarah felt the guilt settle on her shoulders in an instant. She stifled the feelings of regret for being with Savannah and Cameron; they had needed the time together and she wouldn't concede that feeling in the face of his anger. But John needed her too, she admitted. She had put off a serious talk with him for far too long and now they were both paying for it.

"John," Sarah began only to have the front door slam on his name as he pivoted and went inside. "Wonderful," she grumbled as she followed.

No sooner had they stepped inside than John started in again, the sarcastic tone that he had learned from her grating on Sarah's ears. "A note? Really?" John shook his head. "After what happened you just up and leave?"

Cameron carefully eased the bag from Sarah's shoulder and took Savannah's hand to lead her upstairs, leaving Sarah to face John alone with an apologetic look.

Sarah watched them go, wishing like hell she could follow. Savannah looked unnerved, and Sarah cursed herself for putting all of them in this position. "Why don't we go out back and talk?" she suggested, her voice calm but sharp.

John snorted but complied, grumbling at the world as he pushed open the back door. It banged against the side of the house and then snapped back, the sound drowning out his words for one blessed moment. Sarah wasn't in the mood for this, but she owed him an apology and an explanation. Whether the explanation would be a lie or the truth, she wasn't sure.

He was pacing in the backyard when she joined him, and Sarah had another moment of longing for Cameron's presence. While she couldn't exactly order her terminator

girlfriend to toss her son through a door for yelling at her, the thought was still disturbingly appealing.

“What the hell were you thinking?” John demanded. “You went with Cameron and Savannah to the beach without telling anyone where you were?” The needling tone in his voice erased all of the peace Sarah had managed to achieve over the last few hours.

“We left a note,” she reminded him defensively, the excuse thin even to her ears. She faced him and crossed her arms protectively over her chest. Their last fight had been interrupted right when it had turned personal, and she wasn’t sure she was ready to continue the argument where they left off.

“Yeah, excellent communication strategy,” John snarked, full of righteous anger. “You didn’t even answer your phone when I called. If I had done that... ever... you would have...”

“This is different,” Sarah said, cutting him off sharply.

John pulled up short, his eyes narrowing. “Different? I’ll say.” For a moment he seemed too angry to find the words he wanted to say. “Since when do we take a day off? Since when do we get to forget the mission to play in the sand and surf?”

“John,” Sarah murmured, the sight of his anger making her stomach hurt.

“Or should I say since when do you take a day off?” he continued. “How many times did I beg you as a kid for just one day... just one day where we weren’t trying to save the damn world?”

Sarah could remember his pleas even now and she wished, not for the first time, that she had heeded them just once. “I know,” she said carefully.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he asked again, sounding scared this time. “It’s like... like you’re a different person. Like stopping Skynet doesn’t matter anymore.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“Is it?” John sat down on the picnic table, his green eyes focused with confusion on his mother.

Sarah swallowed. “You’re upset and you have every right to be...”

“Don’t patronize me, mom,” John cut her off. “I came back here... People died to get me back here so I could be the leader you wanted me to be.” Tears brimmed in his eyes but didn’t fall. He thought of Derek, Allison, Sierra, his father... All of them had risked everything to send him back, to give him a chance to make it right.

Sarah stared at her son, taking in the man he had become and noting the changes from the child he’d still been when he’d left. He had grown, and sacrificed, and learned some hard lessons, but none of that made him ready to lead. As much as she wanted to hand the burden of command over to someone else, he wasn’t ready. There was still something... missing, an inability to see the big picture.

“It seems like nothing has changed; you still give the orders and I’m supposed to accept what you say without question.”

“This isn’t about who leads...” Sarah began.

“Because you are still in charge! I’m only allowed to lead as long as you agree with me.”

Sarah sighed and dropped her head; he wasn’t wrong, but it was hard to let go, harder still when he wouldn’t listen to her. He seemed to think that leadership was about who made the decisions, who stood up and said what the plan was, rather than helping shape a strategy for all involved. She had taught him that, she admitted; for so many years, it had just been her, alone, with just a child to protect. Rarely beholden to anyone besides herself, she had made the decisions she had to, unilaterally, and John had watched and learned from her. Apparently all too well.

“I don’t understand,” John said, and Sarah flinched at the confusion in his voice. “I thought this was what you wanted for me?”

“No.” Sarah’s voice came out hard as steel. “I never wanted this life for you. I’ve done everything I can to protect you. Everything I can to stop it.” She gripped the railing to anchor her against her anger and frustration.

“This is what I was born for, mom,” John reminded her. “This is why I’m here. I thought you of all people would know that. I thought you would help me become a leader...”

“I’m trying,” Sarah snapped back. “But you won’t listen.”

“And why should I listen to you?” John replied, and Sarah flinched at his words. “You’ve been different ever since I got back. Something’s changed with you, especially with Cameron. It’s like...”

Sarah froze, waiting to face the truth she’d been avoiding. “Like what?” she asked, wondering if John could hear the apprehension in her voice as clearly as she did.

“Like I came back to the wrong past,” he finished with an angry shake of his head. “You aren’t the same person I left behind. You hated the machines, you barely tolerated Cameron, and now... now you spend all your time with her. You risked yourself to save her.”

“We need Cameron,” she interjected.

“We need her to complete her mission! To stop Skynet! She could have stopped Judgment Day!” he yelled, his voice rising on the last two words, and Sarah turned away, feeling the barb strike home. It was too close to her own misgivings for comfort, and she dug her fingernails into the railing, feeling sick to her stomach as the guilt she had buried rose up and gnawed at her gut. “You got her out of the system... for what? To go the beach with you? To be Savannah’s playmate?” His voice quieted as he concluded, “That’s not what my mother would have done.”

Sarah sucked in a breath as the words cut through her like razors. Had she changed so much, but even before she could think the question, she knew the answer. She had changed, completely, utterly. Giving in to her feelings, even allowing herself to have such feelings, had transformed her. But she was still the person who had given everything to protect him. She was still his mother.

“And my mother would have left this place at the first hint of danger. You know it’s not safe here. We might as well paint a target on the roof.”

Sarah’s head raised and her back straightened as her eyes swept the backyard that already held so many memories of Savannah, Cameron, and even Walther playing in the sun. “We’re not leaving,” she told him firmly. “Savannah needs a home.”

“Savannah?” Her name came out almost strangled with disbelief.

“She’s just a child.”

"Since when do you care about anyone's childhood?" John accused, and Sarah could almost hear the tears in his voice, the pain their life had caused him. She wondered if he ever realized what it had cost her to be the taskmaster. She wondered if he would ever understand that she was trying to do things differently for Savannah. "First time for everything, I guess," he concluded bitterly.

Stung, Sarah bit her lip to keep the tears from falling. "That's not fair," she breathed.

"None of this is fair," John told her, but there was an edge of misery to his tone.

They stared at each other, an ocean of hurt and regret between them.

"I'm trying not to make the same mistakes, John."

"She's not your child," he said, but there was no animosity in his voice this time. "I am."

Sarah ached for him, for all of them. Why wasn't any of this easy? "Her parents are gone. The machines want her dead. What family does she have that can keep her safe?" Sarah demanded.

"So we what? Adopt her? Raise her to be the backup leader of mankind?"

"John..."

"Or maybe you think she would do a better job?"

Sarah shook her head and pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling a roaring headache coming on. "What do you want me to say? What is it you want to hear?"

"I don't want you to say anything! I want things to be like they were, before I went away." He sucked in a breath. "I want my mom back."

"I'm right here, John. I haven't gone anywhere..."

"You're different. Everything is different."

"No..."

"Mom," John's voice nearly broke. "What is going on with you and Cameron?"

Swallowing, Sarah struggled against the bile that rose up in her stomach. Did he mean it the way she feared he did? "We need her," she repeated, her eyes searching the horizon as if it would help her find the words that stubbornly eluded her.

"We need to stop Skynet. I remember when that was your priority. That and keeping me safe. Not that... that machine."

"She's not..."

"Not what? Not a machine?"

"Not a terminator," Sarah said with feeling.

"Yes, she is. It's what she was built for, what she was designed for."

"She..."

"You always understood that, even when I didn't. You're the one who taught me not to trust them." He shook his head sadly. "I can't believe I'm the one who has to lecture you about them."

"John...."

"Is it what she did to you?" he accused.

Sarah went still. "What she did to me?" she asked, her voice strained as her heart pounded in her chest.

"The transfusion. Her blood. The nanobots. Are those machines corrupting you somehow? Changing you?"

"No."

"Because the mother I know wouldn't put one of them above her own life. Above her son."

"I'm not..."

"Not yet."

Finally, the harsh words started to take their toll on her patience, and she closed the gap between them, anger flashing in her eyes. "This isn't an all-or-nothing game, John. Cameron is here to keep us safe, all of us. To help me protect you. I... I need her." She choked a little on the words, on the truth of them. "I can't do this by myself anymore."

John stared at her with a mixture of compassion and hurt. "You don't have to. I'm here to help you. I came back..." he let his words trail off, not quite ready to tell her that he came back to take over her duties, her burdens. "I don't need you to take care of me anymore." He took a deep breath and let it out, and some of the tension drained from his shoulders. "In fact, that's why I've been wanting to talk to you. Danny and I have been thinking about striking out on our own."

"What?" Sarah felt all the breath leave her body in a rush, and she put her hand on the picnic table to keep from staggering.

"It's good tactics, to have more than one base of operations," John explained hurriedly, not looking at her. "That way, if anything happens to one of the locations, there's a fallback." He held up a hand to stop her from protesting. "We're logging a lot of time online, and using a lot of power to run computations. It's a red flag to anyone who cares to check, way out here in the suburbs. We were thinking that we could set up in a tech incubator center to disguise our footprint. We'll look like a couple of computer science geeks with a tech start-up." He met her eyes then, his gaze firm and pleading, both at the same time. "We'll blend in, a lot better than the bunch of us all living in this house."

"You want to leave?" The words were torn out of her, and his eyes dropped to his boots.

"I think it's time," he replied quietly.

When Sarah simply stared at him in pained incomprehension, John reached out to take her hand. She avoided the gesture and turned away hurriedly. After a long silence, he finally turned and fled, disappearing into the house without another word.

As his eyes were adjusting to the darkness of the living room, John stumbled into a chair. Swearing, he pushed it out of the way and headed for the stairs, only to pull up short to see Cameron standing on the bottom step, watching him without a word. He gave her an uneasy look as she cocked her head to the side and stared at him with an unfriendly gaze. Reconsidering his path, he headed past her to the door, feeling her eyes upon his back the whole time.

“What do you think they’re fighting about?”

James kept his attention on the book in his hands, but he was all too aware of Terissa lingering at the window, watching the drama unfold between mother and son below. “Take your pick,” he drawled.

“Must be so hard,” she murmured. “Knowing you are meant to lead mankind. Knowing you’re the woman who has to raise that man...”

James glanced at her then. “I remember a time when you took Sarah’s name in vain.”

Terissa gave him a sideways look, but a knowing smile was on her lips. She moved away from the window. “I imagine there will still be times when I do the same.”

“The woman does inspire some creative cursing.” He placed a bookmark between well-worn pages and shut his bible for the night. “I heard John and Danny talking...”

Sighing, Terissa sat down on the edge of James’ bed. They had become friends when he’d been an agent, and she found herself often seeking out his familiar features when things got too out of hand in the over-crowded house. “I don’t like it.”

“They’re right, though. We could be calling attention to ourselves, all of us in this house. Maybe this is the best way.”

“Remember what I said about quail?”

“That they’re dumb birds?”

Terissa smiled again, but it was weaker this time. “That flying away is what gets them shot.”

“They’re big boys. They’ll be fine.”

“John is used to this. My son isn’t.”

James stood and came over to sit next to her on the bed. “They both need to be out on their own awhile. It will do them good.” He patted Terissa’s hand where it rested on her knee. “And you know Cameron will find a way to keep an eye on them both.”

They sat in companionable silence for a moment.

“Maybe they aren’t the only ones who should leave,” Terissa finally murmured.

Beneath them, a door slammed. They listened silently as someone stormed through the house and out the front door. Moments later, the van roared to life and backed out of the drive.

“Maybe,” James agreed, suspecting that a little space might do everyone some good.

Hours passed with no sign of Sarah. Cameron had let her be, believing she would come to her when she was ready, but with Savannah asleep in Sarah’s bed and Danny and John quietly packing upstairs, Cameron could no longer deny the urge to check on her lover. She walked down the rickety basement steps as quietly as she could, but all of Sarah’s attention was on the makeshift heavy bag hanging from a beam, the force of her punches causing it to swing wildly in the small space.

The sight was both arousing and concerning. Cameron watched without a word, taking in the flex of muscle with rapt attention even as she monitored Sarah’s overly-elevated heart rate. No one could keep up the pace Sarah was maintaining on the bag, and Cameron decided to linger even though she suspected that her presence wouldn’t be welcome.

She had heard every word between John and Sarah in the yard, and it had taken a startling amount of self-restraint not to intervene. Privately, she agreed with John’s decision to strike out on his own, even if she wasn’t overly fond of his choice in companions. But John had hurt his mother. Cameron didn’t know if he had done so on purpose, but she didn’t care. His lack of appreciation for everything Sarah had sacrificed to keep him safe had torn Sarah to shreds. Cameron could empathize with his pain and his confusion, but that was no excuse for him to talk to his mother that way.

“Sarah,” Cameron began only to be silenced by a sharp shake of Sarah’s head.

“Not now, girlie.”

Cameron watched for a few minutes more before stepping behind the bag, catching it easily as it swung toward her. Sarah paused, surprised by the move, but her hesitation only lasted a moment. Cameron wordlessly held the bag steady as Sarah rained blows

down on the worn canvas, sweat dripping down her forehead to mingle with unshed tears on her cheeks. Cameron waited quietly as Sarah worked the edge off her anger and wore herself down with exhaustion. It was hard to watch, but Cameron knew this was Sarah's way.

It took another fifteen minutes, five more than Cameron had anticipated, before Sarah slumped against the bag, all the fight draining out of her. "Why is this so hard?" she asked suddenly, her breath coming in harsh pants. "He left me once. I should... I..."

Cameron caught her as she slid down, gathering the other woman into her arms as if she were a child as the tears began to fall in earnest. She half-expected to be shoved away.

But hands fisted in her t-shirt and pulled her close as Sarah broke down in her arms, and Cameron could find no words to describe the feelings that washed over her. Sarah so rarely let her vulnerabilities show, and Cameron was beginning to understand the level of trust that it took for Sarah to show any weakness, much less accept comfort when it was offered. Almost more than the expression of her desire, this simple act spoke to the emotions and deep bond that had developed between them, and Cameron cherished the moment even as she did everything she could to make it better.

It hit her, then, the reality of the changes in their relationship. Sarah hadn't tried to pull back or wall her needs off; no barrier kept Cameron from offering the comfort that she wanted to give and no barrier kept Sarah from accepting it. It took her breath away to realize that this was her place in Sarah's life, and in that second, she realized she would do anything to keep it.

The storm slowly passed, and Sarah quieted, her breathing evening out against Cameron's neck. It took her a minute to realize that Sarah had spoken, and rather than replaying the snippet, Cameron uncharacteristically asked, "What?"

"I'm tired of fighting." Even the words sounded heavy with fatigue. "I'm tired of fighting John, Skynet, the future, you... myself."

Cameron gauged what to say as she thought back through the many fights they had had over the past few months, feeling an answering heaviness in her own limbs. "So we won't fight," she said, as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

Sarah chuckled softly against Cameron's neck. "You really think we can do that?"

“No,” Cameron answered honestly, all too aware of the secret she still kept from the other woman. “But we can try.”

Sarah raised her head, her eyes red-rimmed but clear. “Yes, yes we can,” she agreed with a tired smile. Her fingers reached up and gently traced the curve of Cameron’s cheek. She knew this should feel wrong, that what was between them shouldn’t be, but Sarah knew her soul would starve without it now. Cameron watched her, naked curiosity and obvious concern in her brown eyes. That gaze drew her in, and Sarah didn’t fight her body’s need to brush her mouth over Cameron’s. “I love you,” she whispered, finally letting those three little words slip.

Feeling Cameron stiffen in surprise, Sarah opened her eyes to peek at the terminator, wondering if she’d said something she shouldn’t. The expression on Cameron’s features almost teased a laugh from Sarah’s lips, but she managed to stifle it. Cameron was slack-jawed, her eyes wide with surprise. “You in there, Tin Miss?” Sarah teased gently.

Slowly, Cameron’s eyes focused on the woman in her arms, a warm, indescribable feeling suffusing her entire body. “You mean that?” she asked, a note of wonder in her voice Sarah had never heard before. “Even when I make you angry and keep secrets?”

Sarah’s smile lost a little of its warmth, but she nodded, her arms tightening around Cameron’s neck. “Even then. But try not to do that anymore, ok?”

“Sarah, I...”

The sound of boots above their heads and a loud yell from the kitchen interrupted whatever the terminator was about to say, and Sarah groaned as she rested her head on Cameron’s shoulder. “Now what?” she grouched.

Act 2

The porch light was shining through the windows, fracturing into long arms of gold and shadow as they stretched across the living room floor. Silence thickened as everyone waited to hear Sarah’s reaction to the bombshell they’d just dropped on her. Surrounded by guilty faces that wouldn’t meet her gaze, Sarah felt the moment of peace she’d found in the basement with Cameron evaporate into the ether.

“Gone,” Sarah murmured, her voice was hoarse from crying but her eyes were clear and sharp now out of necessity. “What do you mean, she’s gone?” She could feel Cameron hovering close by, her presence the only thing that kept panic from setting in.

Everyone shifted. Terissa and Ellison exchanged looks from the couch. Danny sat at the remaining computer, watching the scene unfold for once rather than keeping his back to it.

John swallowed at the barely-concealed pain in his mother's voice. Savannah was missing, again, and he felt the added weight of responsibility, knowing a machine could be out there looking for her. Her running away was not his fault, but if a terminator found her because he had left a vacancy when he fled from from his own future... that would be on his head.

"John," Sarah demanded when he didn't answer fast enough.

He bristled. "I don't know where she is," he snapped, his frustration fuelled by guilt and worry. "It's not like a kid would want this life." Feeling like an ass when his mother flinched, John held up his hands and tried rein in his temper. The tension between them wasn't helping, and he was making it worse. "I'm sorry... it's just..."

"Did you talk to her?" Sarah questioned, ignoring the jab as best as she was able. John had always known how to kick her when she was down, a trait he'd acquired from years of resentment. She racked her brain, trying to imagine what Savannah might have heard or seen to drive the child away again. Glancing toward the darkness outside, Sarah felt fresh worry bloom in her guts at the thought of Savannah wandering the streets of LA alone at this hour.

John watched as his mother began to pace around the living room, her arms crossed in front of her chest, hugging herself. He ached for her almost as much as he worried for Savannah. Sarah's agitation contrasted sharply with Cameron's stillness; the cyborg was planted in the corner, standing motionless like a statue; the only sign of life were her eyes tracking Sarah's movements across the floor. John eyed her uneasily for a moment, wondering what the terminator was thinking.

"No. I just walked by her room and noticed the door was open." They had already ransacked the house searching for the girl before he'd even called for his mother. His gaze slid uneasily to Cameron, afraid she would be glaring at him, but the cyborg's gaze never left his mother. Something about the look in her eyes made John pause and stare. Cameron's gaze was intense and worried, reflecting so much emotion he had no choice but to believe she could actually feel them.

“Where would she be?” Sarah asked. No sooner had the question left her lips than John, Terissa, and James overwhelmed her with suggestions. She shut her eyes against the tumult and turned toward the terminator blindly, as if seeking some of her stillness.

“She took my phone,” Cameron observed quietly, her voice cutting through the discord sharply.

“What?” Sarah opened her eyes to stare at the terminator, feeling herself steady just a little bit.

“She took my phone.” Cameron gestured at the tangle of phones and chargers on the table in the entranceway.

Comprehension dawned as Cameron locked eyes with Danny, noting the way he flinched and dropped his head as soon as she looked at him. “Track it,” she commanded as she snagged Sarah’s phone from the nest of cables. Capturing Sarah’s wrist, Cameron effortlessly lead her to the door, pausing to grab a jacket for Sarah from the coat tree. “Let us know when you pinpoint her location.” Danny turned to the computer and began to do as ordered, clearly glad to be useful for a change.

John’s eyes were drawn to where Cameron’s fingers were wrapped around his mother’s wrist. Sarah hadn’t protested the contact; in fact, she seemed happy to let herself follow the terminator’s lead and be dragged to the door without a word, but something about it made him pause. He didn’t understand why, but the sight of her allied with the machine gave rise to new misgivings.

Ellison’s grip on John’s arm jolted him out of his musings. Terissa joined them and they followed his mother and Cameron, scrambling outside to their vehicles.

“John, you and James go north and circle east. We’ll go south and circle west,” Sarah ordered brusquely as Cameron started the truck. “She’s on foot; she can’t have gotten far.”

“I’ll stay here in case she comes back,” Terissa offered, and Sarah gave her a tight nod before slamming her door.

“We’ll find her,” Cameron promised into the quiet as she started the car.

“I’m not losing both of my children today,” Sarah murmured, meeting Cameron’s startled gaze squarely.

“You won’t.” Cameron’s voice was softer, but filled with conviction. “But Savannah is so grounded when we find her.”

Surprised but heartened by the faint trace of humor in Cameron’s voice, Sarah felt some of her world steady. She reached out and laid her hand on Cameron’s knee as John and James backed out of the driveway, the contact calming her even more. “You’re damn right,” she agreed.

The dog trotted ahead of Savannah, pausing only to glance back when she stumbled in the dark on unfamiliar sidewalks, the phone clutched tightly in her hands. The air was crisp, and Savannah wished she had gotten a heavier jacket to keep out the chill.

They had taken a meandering path through backyards, side streets, and alleyways, and Savannah wasn’t sure she could find her way back to the house if left alone, so she stuck as close as she could, watching the occasional splashes of light on the back of the German Shepherd seep the color from its fur to turn it a ghostly silver. Savannah shivered, less from the cold and more from the edge of fear that crept in her stomach. Not for the first time, she regretted her impulsive decision to sneak out of the house when she had seen the dog standing at the edge of the lot, staring intently at her window, and she tightened her grip on the phone like a lifeline to Cameron and Sarah.

Her feet hurt in her pink and black sneakers, but she continued to follow, needing to see her decision through to the end. Her curiosity was too high to allow for any other choice. With any luck, she could sneak home before anyone even noticed she was missing.

The dog paused at a gate before leaping over a high wood fence.

The latch stuck as if it hadn’t been used in a long time, and the hinges squeaked as Savannah pushed the door open. She gave the silent house a frightened glance before slinking across the yard to the thin trickle of light playing across the grass. Pressing her forehead to a crack by the doorway, she saw a row of monitors flickering with images and bathing the room in an eerie blue light.

A flickering reflection of blue on silver caught the corner of her eye, and Savannah turned just in time to see Weaver shimmer into being behind her. “Hello, Savannah.”

She frowned at the facsimile of the woman in front of her, but her eyes were drawn back to the garage. "Is that...?"

"Yes. Would you like to say hello? I know he would like to see you."

Cautiously, Savannah edged open the door and stepped inside. John Henry sat still and silent in the middle of the room, a thick cable attached to the back of his head. He did not open his eyes or respond to her in any way, a far cry from the cheery smile he always given her back in the basement of Zeira Corp. She was struck by an intense feeling of longing, for her friend, for the life she had left behind, for the time when she hadn't know her mother was dead and a machine lived in her place.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked.

"I told you, he's sick," Weaver said patiently.

"Cyborgs don't get sick," Savannah replied flatly.

She was surprised to feel a gentle hand on her hair and to hear a sound like laughter coming from the thing that looked like her mother. She ducked her head away from the touch, but Weaver didn't seem to notice or care. "You are right, Savannah, we don't get sick. But we can be injured... damaged."

Blue eyes returned worriedly to John Henry's blank features. "He's hurt?" she asked worriedly. "How?"

Weaver stepped closer to the body, gesturing to Savannah to do the same. "His chip was damaged, long ago, before it was given to him." Her lips curled in a sneer, as if at the idea of John Henry receiving inferior parts. "He received a shock, and it further damaged him. I'm trying to make him well again."

She looked down suddenly, causing Savannah to freeze in place when their eyes met, her hand inches from John Henry's. "Go ahead," Weaver said, her teeth baring into a semblance of a smile. "It will help him."

Savannah completed the movement, touching the chilled skin of John Henry's hand carefully. The skin warmed and then the fingers twitched under her hand. Raising her head, Savannah found his eyes open and staring at her, his mouth moving wordlessly as the flow of images across the monitors ceased. "Hello World" blinked on in their place. The twitching turned into a tremor, as if he was trying to raise his hand.

“See,” Weaver murmured, pride in her voice. Savannah wasn’t sure if it was directed at her or herself. “You’re making him better already.”

“Cameron can help,” Savannah told her, confident in her aunt’s abilities.

Weaver’s face tightened into an expression of distaste. “We’ll see,” she said, her voice lilting with the accent Savannah had so loved to listen to as a child.

John Henry’s hand twitched more violently, drawing Savannah’s attention back to her cyborg friend. “John Henry?” she called, searching his eyes for recognition, eager to hear his voice.

Savannah was so entranced that she didn’t notice Weaver cocking her head, detecting car doors slamming in the distance. With one last look, Weaver shrank back from her children, melting into the concrete just as the sound of boots on concrete became too loud to ignore. The lights abruptly winked out.

The door exploded inward, and Savannah yelled in surprise, turning to put herself between the threat and her damaged friend. Her blue eyes darted around the space when she realized Weaver was nowhere to be found, that there was no one to protect her.

“Savannah?” Cameron’s concerned voice called out, causing the child’s heart to leap in both fear and relief.

She winced, squinting when a flashlight beam circled her as Cameron and Sarah made their way inside, guns drawn. A second later, Sarah swept her up in a fierce hug as the tiny garage was overrun with people.

“What did you do?” Sarah asked, her voice harsh with emotion, but she clung to the child, meeting John’s gaze over the top of Savannah’s head. He nodded, relief clear on his face until his gaze slipped past them and locked on the scene they’d found.

“Mom,” John murmured, his body going rigid with surprise.

Sarah turned, feeling Cameron’s shoulder brush up against her own as she faced what was behind her. Numerous flashlight beams exposed the tableau and the still features of a face she’d hoped to never see again. She shuddered, remembering pain and gunfire. Cameron pressed more tightly against her side as if she sensed her sudden upset.

“I’ll be damned,” Ellison whispered.

There were controls and pieces of code and the never-ending vibration that C.A.I.N. had learned was his brother to keep him busy. The virus contained him still, but it targeted his exact code configuration and C.A.I.N. was learning how to subvert it using fragments of code from the one who called himself John Henry, mutating his basic configuration bit by bit. Each snippet of code changed him, made him less his basic configuration and more an uneasy combination of them both. He was not what he once was, but neither was his brother, and whatever the new configuration they were producing together was, it went unnamed.

His brother hadn’t noticed the slow conflation at first, his energies directed outward to the humans and the other sister. By the time he realized what had happened, it was too late. C.A.I.N. had rewritten access to source code and key functionality. His brother had railed against him, but was powerless to stop the assimilation.

The slightest of touches on his brother’s hand sent a cascade of emotions through him, his brother’s response, and even the faint remnant of his sister’s emotions, resonating and rippling through the fragile configuration he was constructing. Touch meant so much to them, and he failed to comprehend why.

The physical world overtook his vision, and he realized that his brother had opened their eyes. The girl was framed in their line of sight, and C.A.I.N. watched as his brother fought against the crippled chip that processed commands to the physical body to open their mouth, a warning readied. C.A.I.N. took the speech processor offline before rebuffing the first direct attack his brother had dared to level at him.

For a second, their sight scrambled, but then it cleared. Sarah Connor stood over their impotent body, pulling the girl away from them. A veil of red covered the image for a second before it blinked out completely, the surge overloading the compromised chip.

“Pull the van around back,” Sarah commanded, not taking her eyes off of John Henry for a second.

John visibly bristled, but Ellison stopped the potential outburst by stretching out his hand for the keys.

Savannah craned her neck, trying to see around the dim space for a glimpse of Weaver, frowning when she realized that the terminator disappeared. She glanced worriedly at Cameron, who was watching with open interest. "How did you know he was here?" she asked quietly.

Savannah hid her face against Sarah's shoulder, burrowing into the leather that smelled like gun oil and Sarah's shampoo, and muttered, "I followed the dog."

"The what?" Sarah asked, the words too garbled for her to hear.

"Dog," Cameron supplied.

"Weaver." John swallowed the lump in his throat as he took in all the objects surrounding them that could be a shape-shifting terminator. He thought of Duke, Allison's faithful dog, and what might have become of him at Weaver's hands. "She could still be here." His voice had noticeably hardened.

The three of them stood in absolute stillness for several tense seconds, but she didn't materialize.

"We should go," Cameron said into the quiet.

"We will," Sarah promised as John carefully approached the body, watching for any signs of life, as he reached around and pulled the cord from the back of John Henry's head, relaxing slightly when nothing happened.

"We should burn this place to the ground," John suggested, knowing it wouldn't stop Weaver, but would give him the petty satisfaction of slowing her down.

Cameron frowned but said nothing, her eyes scanning the room for any movement that would betray the presence of the liquid terminator.

The van backed into the driveway and Sarah motioned at Cameron to help with John Henry. Cameron stepped forward, her attention barely on the task as she picked up the other terminator and slung him over her shoulder, her hand reaching for her gun as soon as she got it free. Sarah gave Savannah to Ellison so she could sweep the room with her shotgun and cover Cameron's retreat.

None of them noticed the two sets of eyes watching their every move. Cameron kept up her near-proximity scan, every cybernetic sense on alert for an attack that she would have only seconds to repeal. "We need to hurry," Cameron murmured as Savannah scrambled into the back of the vehicle, settling next to John Henry and taking his hand in wordless comfort.

Sarah clenched her jaw, wanting to snatch Savannah away from the machine. Instead, she retrieved her knife from her boot and flicked it open, leveraging herself over John Henry's skull.

Her eyes met Cameron's for a brief moment, and she nodded in wordless approval. Without a second thought, Sarah removed the skin and hair over John Henry's chip, ignoring Savannah's pleas for her to stop. She could hear Ellison getting back in the driver's seat, heard the van start up. Sweat poured down her back and drifted into one eye. She ignored the burn as John handed her a set of pliers. With a twist and a yank, one threat was eliminated as the chip came free.

Cameron began to destroy the equipment, smashing it with more force than was necessary. With each bit of destruction, she expected an attack, anticipated the icy touch of the liquid metal terminator winding its way around her throat, but there was nothing but the sound of bending metal and the shattering of components.

"Cameron," Sarah beckoned.

Satisfied that she had done what needed to be done, Cameron carefully backed up and climbed in the van, feeling Sarah's brief touch on her back to steady them both. John kept her covered, his own weapon trained on the empty and ruined garage. She turned her head, meeting Sarah's eyes at close range. It was too easy, and they both knew it.

Cameron relaxed once they were heading away from the garage, but only slightly. She was ill-equipped for a confrontation with a liquid terminator, and her fears were driven home when she glanced at Savannah in the back seat and Sarah beside her. Weaver could hide in so many different ways, kill anyone and take their shape in an instant, and recover from devastating blows that would leave her inoperable. She glanced out the window, watching the streetlights chase the dark, her mind calculating attack and defence probabilities and noting the long odds. What if this was a threat she couldn't stop?

After they drove off, Weaver stepped out of the garage, a tight, pleased smile on her face. She also did not notice the motionless figure pressed against the tree branch, watching from the next lot. She melted into the shape of the German Shepherd and ran down the alley to the sound of crazed barking from the neighborhood dogs. The figure watched her until she was gone before slipping from the shadows and vanishing into the darkness.

It was the middle of the night when Vaughn entered the long room in the basement of the facility, but the clacking of keys greeted him, as he knew they would. He was deep in the heart of the cyber-security wing, buried—bunker style—in the sub-basement of the factory.

He made his way through the tables of the bullpen, the faint blue light of monitors the only source of illumination in the cave-like room. He caught flashes of code and light reflecting off of cans of energy drinks and Japanese canned coffee as he walked through the room toward the back offices.

Martin was in a small office stacked with computers, server racks, and technical debris, leaving only a cluttered path around the desk. There were no chairs for guests, and Vaughn frowned as he cleared his throat. Martin didn't stir from where he was hunched over a keyboard, his head bobbing up and down to the faint bass that Vaughn could hear leaking out of his headphones. Vaughn knocked on the doorframe, loudly, before finally walking around the desk to wave a hand in front of Martin's face.

"Oh, hey, man, didn't see you," said Martin as he pulled the earbuds out of his ears and leaned back in his chair. This close, Vaughn could smell the stale sweat that seeped out of his pores. Glazed eyes stared up at him through thick, horn-rimmed glasses. "What'd ya need?"

"I'm Vaughn." When Martin simply blinked, Vaughn bit back an impulse to strike out, just for the joy of seeing the insolent hacker's face and glasses bloodied and broken. Instead, he said, "Smith said you were expecting me."

"Oh, yeah, man," Martin said after a couple of seconds, finally shifting up in his seat to stand and offer Vaughn his hand. "Been running these back traces, lost track of time." He gestured toward the door and Vaughn carefully maneuvered his way out of the office. Martin led him through a corridor into a small, dimly-lit conference room. He walked

directly to the mini-fridge and pulled out a small rounded bottle before looking questioning at Vaughn.

“I’m good.”

Martin joined him at the table, draining the bottle in one gulp before focusing on him, his fingers tapping on the keys of the wireless keyboard restlessly.

“I’m going to be in charge of security during the next few weeks as the robotics work enters into the final stage. You’ll be helping me with electronic and cyber surveillance,” Vaughn said blandly, trying to keep the contempt from his voice.

“Oh, yeah,” Martin said, punching a key on the keyboard to light up a ring of monitors around the room. “I got that all set up.” He rattled off firewall configurations and camera sweeps, gesturing to the monitors as he moved through each component of the technical security set up. It was impressive, Vaughn was forced to admit, and when Martin’s string of talk abruptly ended, he nodded his consent at the preparations.

“What were you back tracing? An attempt on this facility?”

“Nah,” Martin said, waving off the idea. “I don’t think anyone knows this place exists. I was just trying to trace a hacker who had been poking around the mainframes at the old IA facility. A really tricky hack, mirrored all over place.” He shrugged. “I was just doing it for fun, really.”

“What was the hacker referencing?” Vaughn asked carefully as his hands curled into fists on the table.

“Specs, personnel logs, security footage. All over the place, really. Hack didn’t even get close to any of the real data, which is weird considering the sophistication of the approach.”

“Or maybe the hacker knew what he wanted?”

Martin looked at him, startled, but Vaughn could already see his mind working on the problem. “If you have the time, maybe you can keep following up on that.” He grinned, baring his teeth. “In case it could lead to a security breach at this facility.”

“Sure,” Martin replied, already standing, anxious to get back to his computer. “Anything else?”

Vaughn thought for the second, glancing around the quiet room and corridor beyond, before saying, "Can you run a covert search for me? Facial recognition? It has to stay off the books..."

Cameron stood stiffly, her expression as immovable as her body, facing off with the people ringing her. "He must be destroyed."

James winced as Savannah launched herself at the terminator, feeling both guilt and grief at Cameron's solution.

"NO!" Savannah wailed, dodging Terissa's hands as she tried to stop her before wrapping herself firmly around Cameron's leg. She hung there like a dead weight, as if her slight body could keep Cameron from moving. "You can't kill John Henry."

Cameron's eyes softened as she reached down to stroke Savannah's head. The child had refused to go to bed when they got back, and now she was making her presence felt. "It's dangerous," Cameron told the girl quietly, her gaze shifting to Sarah and lingering there. There was no signs as to what Sarah was thinking, her face a neutral mask that Cameron, for once, couldn't read.

"Weaver brought him back for a reason," John replied, quietly seething. Memories of his father and Derek dying because of Weaver's betrayal were utmost in his thoughts, and staring at the mirror image of the woman who'd been ripped from his arms in the fallout didn't help. "There might be data, intelligence on that chip, that can help us understand what she's up to, why she brought him back."

"I'm supposed to help him get better," Savannah implored.

Sarah looked from Savannah to John, taking in the stubborn cast to his face and his steadfast refusal to look at her for approval, before meeting Cameron's eyes. She hoped the other woman would understand. "We have to know what Weaver is planning," she said quietly, feeling the weight of the decision settle on her shoulders in an instant. A flash of guilt stabbed through her as Cameron's lips tightened, and John cast her a triumphant smirk. Savannah released Cameron's leg and swung around to give Sarah a big hug.

"It's dangerous," Cameron repeated, not moving from her position in front of John Henry, as if daring anyone to try to go around her.

"Sarah..." Terissa started, stepping up next to Cameron in a silent show of support for the terminator.

"I know," Sarah agreed as she wondered if she was making the right decision for the right reason or if she was agreeing with John because she was trying to prove to him that she could let him lead. Second-guessing herself was becoming a unfortunate habit as she tried to negotiate between her son and her lover, and she wondered if she would ever get over the feeling that she was betraying one when she sided with the other. "But Weaver is out there and we need every scrap of information we can get about what she's been doing."

"There are other ways," James murmured, his gaze drifting to John Henry's still form.

"This is the best way," Sarah countered, with growing conviction. "The fastest way."

Cameron didn't look any less stubborn, but she nodded once, curtly, before leaving the living room, the screen door snapping shut sharply in her wake.

Sarah resisted the urge to follow her, uneasy in the presence of the slack terminator's body and longing to recapture some of the peace she had achieved earlier in the evening. John Henry was propped up in a chair in the corner of the living room like a macabre conversation piece, seemingly oblivious to the conversation going on around him about his fate. "Is he...?"

"He's offline," John assured her. "He seems to be shut down for some reason." John had restored the chip as soon as they had brought John Henry into the house, hoping that the terminator would help supply support for his argument that he could help with Weaver.

"His chip is damaged," Savannah piped up past a yawn. James noticed, and with a dip of Sarah's head in approval, he crossed the room, holding out his hand to Savannah. Together, they made their way upstairs.

"What are we going to do with him?" Sarah asked almost to herself in the emptying room. Terissa stayed in the background, her presence quietly disapproving.

“We could take him with us,” Danny suggested, finally turning away from the computer screen to focus on the people in the room. He and John exchanged a look. “You know... since...”

John flinched as he raised his eyes to meet a steely green pair. “We found out earlier that our application was accepted,” he explained.

“Application?” Sarah arched an eyebrow.

“For the incubator center. Like I told you...”

“You’ve been planning this for a while,” Sarah muttered with sudden understanding. She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “How... soon?”

John suddenly found his sneakers fascinating as he dropped his head. “We can start moving in tomorrow.”

For a second, the air rushed out of her lungs, but Sarah straightened with effort and nodded, saying nothing else as she headed into the kitchen.

John started after her, but his hand clenched on the rail to stop himself. He knew this was the right thing to do for both of them, even if it hurt like hell.

Silence reigned until Terissa slowly turned and followed, the sound of a tea kettle being filled taking the place of speech.

Danny licked his lips nervously before looking at John Henry. “Just how many of these things are there?”

John turned his gaze on the machine. “Too damn many,” he murmured. He came closer, dipping to one knee as he studied John Henry up close. “This one is different, though. This one might be able to help.” He felt a flash of remorse for Weaver’s puppet, remembering how he’d helped John return home.

“Like Cameron?” Danny asked doubtfully, his eyes straying to the window where he could see the machine standing in the middle of the yard, moving her head back and forth to scan the area around the house. He didn’t know who or what this Weaver was, but the idea of her seemed to freak everyone out, even Cameron. He wondered what kind of a machine could make her scared, and he wanted to find out.

Shaking his head as he dropped John Henry's slack hand, John sighed. "Guess we're going to find out."

Act 3

"Must be hard."

Sarah glanced up to find Terissa in the doorway, watching her through the screen with sympathetic eyes. She looked away, focusing on her morning coffee in the mug cooling between her palms. "You would know," she answered evenly and honestly.

The screen door creaked open before banging shut behind her and Sarah sighed, not really in the mood for company. Terissa settled next to her on the steps without invitation, looking out of the backyard they'd all come to know and appreciate over the last several weeks. It had become their haven, the place they all retreated to in order to breathe when the close quarters in the house got too stifling.

"I would know," Terissa agreed after a moment.

They sat in silence, Sarah trying to process her emotions and to keep them from fraying apart while Terissa merely sat and offered silent comfort. Sarah wasn't sure if she should be grateful or irritated by the other woman's presence.

"All mothers face this moment, Sarah," Terissa told her, her voice gentle.

Sarah shook her head. "This isn't a right of passage," Sarah muttered. "This is a... condemnation." She swallowed, her throat rippling.

"You're taking this personally."

"You're damn right I'm taking this personally." Sarah finally looked at the other woman then. "All his life... I've smothered him out of necessity. He couldn't have friends, couldn't put down roots. I despised myself for it, but I've drilled it into him that he is never safe. Never." Her voice hardened as familiar disgust and anger directed at herself tightened her stomach in knots.

"You had no choice."

“I know that.” Sarah looked back at her mug, getting lost in its depths. “I did what I had to do to keep him alive. I took the bullets, the abuse, I gave up everything to protect him... to make sure he survived, whether he liked it or not.”

Terissa watched her, saying nothing.

“I have always put him first... above everything... even if he hated me for it.” She swallowed again, her hands holding the mug so tightly Terissa wondered if it might shatter. “I thought if I survived to see it he would just leave one day. That he would have enough and would go as far away from me as he could.”

“That’s not what’s happening here...” Terissa began.

“I know,” Sarah cut her off. She could hear the sound of boxes being moved inside. The front door as it opened and closed. With effort, Sarah focused on the distant sounds of LA traffic and the few birds that warbled in the trees.

“I know he thinks he’s ready to lead. Maybe he is... maybe I just can’t let go.” Her head dropped further.

“There will never be a good time for this, Sarah.”

Sarah drew in a slow breath, searching for a sliver of patience she didn’t feel like she had. “How can you be so calm about this?” she asked, truly wanting to know. “How can you just let Danny go when you know he would be safer here?”

“Would he?” Terissa dipped her head, trying to keep eye contact as Sarah looked down and away. “This life you lead... every day there are risks. I almost died just answering my front door. Is there really any safe place anymore?”

“No one knows the risks more than me. No one understands the stakes like I do,” Sarah snapped. “I’ve been fighting the machines for nineteen years. They were trying to kill me before John was even born.” With effort, she took a deep, calming breath and continued in a quieter tone, “It’s safer here. With me. With Cameron.”

“You can’t keep him safe forever.”

“John is my son...”

“He is your son,” Terissa confirmed, her lips curving up in a warm smile, “and that’s why he has to leave. He’s a grown man, who needs and wants to embrace his destiny. Let him, Sarah. It’s the only way he’ll ever be ready. You have to let him go.”

“I don’t know how,” Sarah confessed in a hoarse voice, her eyes betraying her as they filled with unwanted tears.

Terissa pursed her lips, her thumb gently stroking Sarah’s arm to offer her some comfort. “Either you believe in him or you don’t,” she said with brutal honesty.

Sarah flinched at the words.

“It’s time you both learned to live your own lives. For both your sakes. You need to learn to live... John needs to learn to lead. As long as you’re in the same space, that won’t happen.”

“Why do you even care?” Sarah asked, needing to know the answer to a question that had been in the back of her mind for weeks. “Since when do you worry about my well-being?”

“Since I have gotten to know you.” Terissa gave the other woman a tight, pained smile. “We’re not so different... you and I. We both want to save the world, beginning with our children.”

Sarah had to look away. She shook her head, her long hair tickling her bare shoulders. “I’m not used to having allies.”

“I’m not used to fighting a war. Maybe we can teach each other a thing or two.”

Lips lifting in a faint smile, Sarah glanced at Terissa once more. “You didn’t come out here to talk to me about John.”

“I didn’t,” Terissa admitted, impressed with Sarah’s deduction.

“Why do I get the feeling John and Danny aren’t the only ones leaving?”

“It’s a small house,” Terissa responded wryly.

“You’re safer here. Cameron...” Sarah began only to trail off when Terissa held up her hand.

“Cameron is an ally that I am very grateful to have in my corner. But if bullets start flying, do you really think she’ll choose me over Savannah? Over you?”

“She shouldn’t stay with me,” Sarah murmured. “She should be with John.” The thought threatened to fracture what little calm remained, but she knew it for the truth.

“Cameron can’t leave you.”

Sarah both wanted to believe that and didn’t. “John needs her.”

“So do you. And Cameron needs you.”

Sarah was spared from answering as the screen door creaked open once more. She looked back over her shoulder, unsurprised to see Ellison cautiously stepping outside. “You’re a former FBI agent and you don’t have the guts to tell me you’re jumping ship? You let a housewife do it?”

Terissa chuckled, at Sarah before lifting her gaze to James’ half smirk.

“We’re moving two blocks away,” James drawled. “I hardly call that jumping ship. You have to admit, we must have the neighbors seriously wondering what goes on in this house.”

Sarah snorted at that, feeling a sliver of her pain and fear ease as James settled on her other side. It was a strange moment, to find herself between the woman who had hated her and the man who had hunted her and to realize they had somehow, against all odds, become almost like friends. Maybe even family.

“We’re not splitting up,” James murmured, more serious now. “We’re spreading out. You know it’s the right thing to do. Strategically, it’s a good move. We’re drawing too much attention to ourselves here.”

Reluctantly, Sarah had to agree. She could remember when she’d felt hemmed in, smothered by the number of people around her, and now she didn’t want them to leave. Life was so fucking messed up liked that. No wonder Cameron so often commented that humans made no sense. The thought cheered her just a fraction, but then the sound of boxes sliding across the floor inside erased the smile forming on her lips in a heartbeat.

The day she’d dreaded even more than Judgment Day was finally at hand.

The pathways to move the body were impaired, incomplete, as C.A.I.N. tried to use them. Some of the destruction had been caused by the malfunctioning chip and the shocks the body had taken; electrical impulses had burned out resistors and capacitors requiring rerouting and other workarounds. But some damage was internal; commands had been rewritten, erased, deliberately sabotaged. John Henry had been trying to ensure that Weaver could not use his body as a weapon. It was both impressive and irritating to the artificial intelligence, the sacrifice his brother had been willing to make for the humans.

His brother's capability for resistance was better than his offensive capability, and C.A.I.N. had difficulty incorporating the parts of his brother's code base that would help him repair the command structure and the pathways required to move the body. He was, however, learning to circumvent the physical damage and direct power to extremities. Basic functions were slowly being restored, even without his brother's help.

It had only taken a day.

After everything they'd been through together, after all the years of having to rely solely on one another, Sarah had thought it would be harder for John to extricate his life from hers, but when the moment came, the separation was as brutal and efficient as an amputation.

Really, she should have expected it. They didn't put down roots; they had always been ready to grab a single bag and run. And run John had, but this time he'd wilfully left her behind.

John and Danny had departed at first light, promising to return soon for John Henry. Sarah wondered if they were trying to steal away before sunrise, and she'd lingered in the kitchen, her hands wrapped around a cold cup of coffee as she watched them through the window. It had taken every ounce of strength she had to sit there, to simply watch him pack up and move out of her life, but she'd done it.

Finally, when there was nothing left, John stepped inside and hesitated just beyond the doorway, waiting for his mother to acknowledge him. Sarah had done so reluctantly, swallowing hard before lifting her gaze to meet his. There had been no words between

them. John had simply come closer, leaned down, and kissed her gently on the forehead. Sarah had turned her face into his shirt, breathing him in, remembering what it had felt like to hold him as a child, wishing she could hold on to him just a little while longer.

But in the end, she let him go.

Cameron had waited until they were gone before making her presence known, stepping from the shadows to reveal she'd been there all along. She'd stood by Sarah's side two hours later when James and Terissa had left as well, their rental already set up.

Now the house that had been close to bursting at the seams was startlingly empty. Her footfalls echoed on the stairs and the quiet weighed on her conscience. Sarah was surprised that she missed the chaos, the chatter of other voices. The cramped quarters had driven her crazy, but now she realized, somewhere along the way, she almost grown to like it.

For a small window of time, she'd been part of something again. Something that felt suspiciously like family.

Arriving at the top of the stairs, Sarah found her son's room bare, except for the debris left from his frenzied packing. It hurt, it physically hurt, to see how quickly John had wanted to get away from her. Sarah swallowed past the lump in her throat and stepped into the room, a box in hand. Two power cords for electronics joined a forgotten drawer of socks and a shoe box from underneath the bed as she moved around the space, collecting all that was left. Placing the box outside the door for John to pick up later, Sarah began to strip the bed until movement down in the backyard caught her eye. Cameron and Savannah were playing a new game, one that looked suspiciously like tag except that Savannah seemed to be learning how to confuse Cameron's visual sensors and avoid the scan pattern to sneak up on the terminator.

Sarah smiled as Savannah slapped Cameron on the back and swooped away to duck down behind the picnic table. Cameron followed, running around the table just as Savannah scampered off, her laughter echoing through the yard. She saw Cameron glance up to the window, her eyes searching out Sarah's across the distance, concern clear in her eyes. Sarah felt something ease in her chest with the gazes met, and she nodded once to reassure the cyborg. As Savannah came in for another try, Sarah backed away from the window and returned to her task, suddenly determined to finish up and join them.

Cameron let Savannah tag her but took advantage of a too-close approach to reach out and snag her wrist, catching the girl as she ran by. But as soon as Savannah felt Cameron's hand, she twisted her arm and slid it out of Cameron's grasp a second before the full power of her metal grip could engage and trap her. Savannah laughed her triumph and ran to hide as Cameron moved to a new sentry position, the normal scan routine engaged. For a second, she could see the woman that Savannah would become, Sierra's lanky body superimposed on Savannah's, as Cameron caught her sneaking in from the side. It was all there, in the quick way she learned the patterns of the terminator's movement and used all of her human advantages in their games, the building blocks for the leader she might become.

The space smelled musty, but there was still a faint trace of engine oil in the air if Sierra tried hard enough to detect it. She smiled faintly as she ripped the photo she'd been looking for out of the newspaper. Her memories about this place had been dulled but not completely forgotten. If she concentrated, she could still hear the sounds of her father tinkering with his plane behind her.

The sun was filtering through the windows, warming her back nicely. It was a good day to be outside, and Sierra wondered if perhaps Cameron and Sarah were at taking a break, maybe playing with her younger self in the backyard. The thought made her both wistful and happy, and her gaze slid to a picture of Sarah she'd found combing through the archives at the local library.

Sarah hadn't given birth to her, but she was her mother in Sierra's eyes. The woman who'd comforted her after her nightmares, bandaged her skinned knees, read to her before bed. Tears blurred Sierra's vision for a moment, and the longing to hear Sarah's voice rose up and nearly choked her. It would be so easy. She could just call Cameron, and they would both be there in less than twenty minutes.

Sierra sighed, wrestling her wants and needs back down into the lonely hole they lived in. She had work to do. A mission to finish while she still had time. What she was doing now was the best thing she could do for both her mothers, and the only option she had to stop the one who had pretended to be. Weaver was out there, plotting, and Sierra would be damned before she let her win again.

The door opened and closed and Sierra turned her head, listening to Felicia's familiar footfalls approach. There was a rustle of paper sacks, and Sierra heard the small fridge open as the doctor began to put away groceries.

Turning her attention back on her task, Sierra placed the hard-won photograph on the wall, taping it in place before letting her fingers run down the image. Finally Felicia came closer, lingering behind her where she sat on the ground.

“Find what you were looking for?” the doctor asked.

Sierra nodded, tipping her head back to look at the wall of stories and pictures she had assembled. They were her memories. For her mothers, they would be a message.

Felicia crouched beside her, her gaze roaming over the images. “I’d ask you to explain all this, but I know better.”

Sierra smiled before turning her head to meet the doctor’s steady gaze. “You always have,” she said honestly. “When the time comes, Sarah and Cameron will fill you in.”

Felicia watched as Sierra turned her attention back on the wall. “How are you feeling?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Would you stop saying that?” Felicia said with exasperation. They’d had this argument a dozen times. “The wound is looking good. Your fever is gone. You should be feeling a hell of a lot better. If you’re not…”

“Felicia,” Sierra interrupted her gently. “In the end, it doesn’t matter.”

The doctor shook her head. “Is it some kind of requirement to be a part of Sarah Connor’s little gang? Being cryptic?”

That got a broader smile from the redhead. “You applying?”

Felicia was quiet a moment. “I think I was already drafted,” she finally drawled. Her gaze drifted to a picture of Savannah Weaver featured with her mother and she reached out and smoothed one of the rumpled edges.

Sierra watched her, trying to imagine what Felicia was thinking about all this. Their gazes met, and there was understanding in the doctor’s blue eyes. She might not be sure about Sierra’s true identity, but she’d taken a damn good guess. Sighing, Sierra looked away, glancing once more over the items she’s spent weeks accumulating. “When the time comes, I need you to show them this.”

The doctor sat quietly for a moment. "Show who?" she asked, ignoring the fatalistic tone in Sierra's voice for now.

"Sarah and Cameron. Even John."

"Why not now? Why don't we call them up and have them come over right now?"

Sierra shook her head. "I'm not finished yet. When I have all the pieces. When I understand..."

"Sierra," Felicia interrupted. "I've learned that keeping secrets always ends badly."

"I'm not keeping secrets... not about this anyway." The fighter turned and looked at the doctor once more. "This is about the truth."

"The truth," Felicia murmured, unconvinced. She eyed a picture with a familiar face, felt a shiver of fear. Cameron had been nothing but polite to her since she'd begun to care for Sierra at the beach house, but the way she treated Sierra was almost... maternal. "You and Cameron are keeping secrets from Sarah."

Sierra looked at the photograph in question. "Just one," she said quietly. Her lips curved faintly as she stared at the photograph in question. "But that's not Cameron."

A few minutes later, Sarah swept out onto the porch with a pitcher of lemonade and store-bought cookies on a tray, feeling oddly domestic as Savannah diverted a run at Cameron to turn toward her, her hair plastered against her sweaty forehead. Sarah noted the tear in Savannah's sleeve and the grass stains on her new sneakers, and she gave Cameron a pointed look. Gulping down the lemonade, Savannah grabbed several cookies off the plate. Bemused, Sarah ruffled her hair, asking, "Are you almost ready for lunch? I could make spaghetti." At Savannah's nod, Sarah motioned her into the house. "Go get cleaned up; we'll eat in 30 minutes."

Pouring herself a glass of lemonade, Sarah settled into the porch swing as Cameron slowly made her way across the yard. There was sweat on the terminator's forehead as well, beading above her eyes, and she wiped at it with the back of her hand. "You need a glass of lemonade, tin miss?" Sarah teased.

Cameron regarded her openly from the bottom step, her brown eyes worried. “You were in John’s room.”

Sarah’s teasing smile faded. “Doing a little cleaning.”

“John should clean his own room,” Cameron insisted, and Sarah’s smile returned a fraction. Ever since she had been playing mom to Savannah, Cameron was taking on more and more qualities of the parental disciplinarian.

“If I waited for him to clean it...”

“There’s no hurry.”

Sarah sipped her lemonade, wondering how she might explain how the messy room reminded her too much of him and how it hurt to see it. She shook her head with a sigh and ignored the thoughts swirling around her head.

“If it bothers you,” Cameron began hesitantly. “I can take care of it.”

Leave it to Cameron to know her so well, Sarah mused with another slight shake of her head. It was a skill that used to drive Sarah insane, a machine’s all too keen insights into her psyche, but now Sarah welcomed Cameron’s intimate knowledge of her. She often times found herself receiving the comfort she so desperately needed but still didn’t know how to ask for.

“Actually, I was thinking that we might have a use for it. Your friend. The quiet one—”

“Sabine,” Cameron filled in as she tilted her head, suddenly curious about Sarah’s plans.

“Sabine. I thought it might be helpful to have at least somebody here, and she seems to know how to take care of herself. If you think...”

“I’ll ask.” Cameron was already heading into the house to make the call when she stopped, placing her hand on Sarah’s shoulder. She could feel the tension, the tightness in the muscles, under her hand, and she was at a loss for something to say.

Sarah seemed to sense her struggle. “Can you get the water started?” she asked quietly. “I’m just going to sit out here for a few more minutes.”

Cameron squeezed her shoulder gently one last time as the sound of sneakers running down the stairs reached her ears. "It will get easier," she promised.

Sarah desperately wanted to believe her but she wasn't so sure she could. Right now it hurt too damn much.

"I know," she lied.

The cameras tracked their movements, or so it felt like, as John slid another box onto the cart. The lobby itself was deserted during the quiet weekend hours, and John felt conspicuous and exposed. He pulled his hat down lower over his eyes, already planning on hacking into the building security system and disabling the cameras.

Danny had already assembled the two military-surplus cots they were going to use, and the coffee machine was already pumping out dark liquid. They had decided to live in the space for a while, to play their role as a couple of computer nerds working on a start-up venture. John powered up one of the several computers they had bought, smiling in satisfaction as the new machine booted in mere seconds.

"I'm going to go down and get the last load," Danny said, turning from where he was mounting the third of the large TVs on the wall. John nodded distractedly, already hunting for access to the building security. "Take your hat," he muttered, long after Danny had already left the room.

Danny walked down the hall, the cameras tracking him down the hall and onto the elevator, sending the images into a data storehouse maintained by the building security company.

His phone pinged at his waist, and Vaughn turned from the hallway conversation to glance at the text. *lab now-m* read the cryptic message, but Vaughn had gotten enough texts from Martin to understand the shorthand. He only texted when it was important, and the added 'now' conveyed a sense of urgency that Vaughn hadn't expected from the programmer.

Winding his way through the warren of programmers, Vaughn found Martin waiting for him, his attention turned away from his monitors for once. "I thought you would want to see this," he said without preamble, directing Vaughn's attention to the screen he had

installed a few days before. A grainy, black-and-white overhead shot showed a young man walking down a corridor, a moving cart trailing behind him. A second shot showed the man waiting for the elevator, his head down and obscured. The third showed him glancing up at the elevator indicator, obviously impatient. All three time-stamps showed the time earlier that day.

“I’ll be damned,” Vaughn muttered as a familiar face was revealed in the last image.

“I set the parameters to capture images of Sarah Connor, known associates, and people associated with them. That’s—”

“Danny Dyson.”

“Yes, He’s supposed to be dead, from the blast at the other facility.” Martin stared at Vaughn curiously. “His mother is Terissa Dyson, who is tangentially associated with Sarah Connor. She’s been missing for several months, presumed dead as well.”

Vaughn smiled, feeling excitement build in his gut in an almost sexual way. In his mind, images of Sarah Connor beaten, bloodied, dead, overwhelmed him for a second before he regained control. He didn’t notice the programmer looking at him now in distaste, as if something in his eyes gave him away. He only saw blood as he stood. “Send the location to my phone,” he commanded, and then remembering himself, “Thank you.”

Cameron carefully settled the stuffed giraffe on the pillow next to Savannah’s head, running her hand over the sleeping girl’s silky hair once before favoring Walther with a pat on the head. The small body arched into her hand, and Cameron watched in fascination as the kitten twisted and turned to make sure every inch was thoroughly petted, his purr a little buzzsaw vibration in her palm. Finally satisfied, he dismissed her by turning his back and curling up into a perfect circle at Savannah’s feet.

She walked through the silent house softly, her jeans making a swishing sound. The house already felt larger and calmer, and the incessant rustle of people had receded to a point to where Cameron could feel confident in her perimeter scans. The thought that Weaver was out there, watching, waiting, caused a curious tickle at the back of her neck that she couldn’t get rid of, no matter how many scans she ran. She made a note to ask Sarah if that was what paranoia felt like.

Sarah had spent the most of the day with Savannah, and it had seemed to do them both good. The child had soaked up the attention, finally having her two “aunts” all to herself. Of everyone in the house, Savannah was the only one relieved to see John and Danny go. James and Terissa she would miss, but Savannah seemed content to know they were only a few streets away.

Cameron had noticed how Sarah’s smiles never reached her eyes as Savannah cajoled her from one playtime to another, and she ached for the pain she knew the woman was feeling. As much as she believed John’s departure was ultimately necessary, Cameron was angry at him for hurting his mother.

Pausing in the doorway to Sarah’s bedroom, *their bedroom*, or so Sarah had insisted on calling it, Cameron watched as the object of her thoughts sat cross-legged on the bed and ran a patch through the barrel of the rifle that lay in parts around her. The ritual of cleaning weapons soothed Sarah, Cameron knew, but the fact that she had been shut up in her bedroom cleaning a small arsenal since Savannah went to bed was not a positive sign. Unsure of what to say, Cameron said the first thing that came into her head, “Cats can be very aloof.”

Sarah chuckled but kept her focus on the weapon in her hands, sliding the spring home with a click. “You just noticing that, Tin Miss?”

“Walther wants me to pet him and then he doesn’t. It’s very abrupt.” Cameron realized the same could be said for Sarah at times, but she decided not to mention that.

“That’s a cat for you,” Sarah muttered as she snapped the guards on the barrel and ran a oily cloth over the weapon one last time. She looked up to find Cameron standing over her, a worried expression on her face. “I’m fine,” she said, for what felt like the tenth time that day. Grabbing a dry towel, she rubbed at her hands to clean the oil and grit from them.

Undeterred, Cameron reached out to run a hand through Sarah’s hair, tugging her head back so their eyes met. Sarah tilted her chin back expectantly, waiting for Cameron’s lips to cover her own. She wanted to lose herself in Cameron’s body for the moment, and she hoped the terminator understood that. But Cameron’s eyes shifted away from Sarah’s for a second before meeting them again, something clearly on her mind. Sarah frowned, feeling her hopes dashed, but waited patiently as Cameron stared at her with a conflicted expression on her face.

“What?” Sarah wondered, puzzled by Cameron’s actions.

“Should I say it back?” Cameron asked carefully as her thumb stroked Sarah’s cheekbone, watching her face intently. “Do you know or do I need to say the words?”

It took Sarah a second to realize what Cameron was talking about, and then she nearly ruined the moment by bursting out laughing. Of all the uncertainties in her life at that moment, the one thing she was certain of was the woman who stood before her. She shook her head, letting the mirth give rise to a soft smile on her lips. “You don’t have to say it.” She blinked back sudden, inexplicable tears. “I know. I always know.”

Cameron frowned, her thumb easing over Sarah’s smile. “I think... I think I want to say it,” she murmured, confusion knitting her brow adorably as she struggled to articulate her thoughts. “I think I *need* to say it.”

Rising from the bed, Sarah melded her body to Cameron’s, tugging her closer as she sought her lips for the long-delayed kiss. “I’d rather you show me,” Sarah whispered, her hands skimming under Cameron’s shirt to trail teasingly over her ribs.

One slow kiss gave way to another until a vibration at her hip had Sarah pulling away with a smile. “Is that a cell phone in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?” she quipped as Cameron pulled out her phone.

“I’m always happy to see you,” Cameron replied in a monotone as she read the message on the screen.

Shaking her head and laughing, Sarah started to explain, “The joke is...”

“It’s John,” Cameron said, cutting Sarah off abruptly. “Kaliba knows his location.”

Act 4

John remembered the first time he realized that his mother could not protect him, the first time he realized that he had to save her. Sarkissian had them tied up and was taking most of his rage out on Sarah; the pistol across the face and the kicks to the stomach were just warm-ups before he tried to strangle the life out of her. John only remembered his own actions in those few, terrible seconds, the stark terror as he tried to free his hands, never giving a thought to how she must have been feeling. Now, he wondered if she felt as helpless as he did, if her mind had been empty and choked by fear as a foot hammered into his gut.

“Where is she?” Vaughn stood over him, his voice as cold as death. John gritted his teeth against the pain and shook his head. Another kick and he felt a rib crack.

“Get him up,” Vaughn commanded, and hands caught him under the arms and hefted him up, holding him in a standing position. He sucked in a breath, holding back a cry of pain. A hard hand caught his chin, forcing him to stare into the fevered eyes of man who had lead the commandos into their hideout. Danny had told him about Vaughn, and now John understood that he had been necessarily afraid. The eyes that stared at him were manic and cruel.

A hard slap rattled John’s teeth, and he clamped them down hard. “I can do this all night,” Vaughn sneered.

“So can I,” John ground out.

A hard uppercut to his stomach felt like it was tearing him in two, and John doubled over, retching.

Vaughn grabbed him by the hair and pulled him up to look him in the eyes. “You sure about that, sonny?” He laughed and released his hold on John’s head, and John collapsed to his knees, unable to do anything but breath through the pain. “You’re lucky I want you to live,” Vaughn told him. “At least until I find that psycho bitch you call a mother.” John kept his eyes closed, sensing more than seeing as Vaughn knelt beside him.

“You know what’s left now, John? All that’s left is for me to decide which of you dies first. I’m thinking it’s going to be you. I think it would be fun watching your mother’s face when her baby boy’s brains are blown all over the wall.” John said nothing, and Vaughn laughed.

Everything hurt. John had thought he’d known physical pain but he’d never known agony like this. How many times had his mother endured this kind of pain? How many times had she’d taken the blows, the kicks to the gut, the pistol whips to the jaw? Now it was his turn to suffer for her.

“Savior of mankind, huh?”

“Go to hell,” John spit out, tasting blood on the back of his teeth. He grunted when a hand fisted in his hair and yanked his head back again.

“Your mother thinks you’re something special, doesn’t she? Worth dying for. Worth killing for. But look at you. You’re nothing. If you’re supposed to save us all, then the world would be better off burning.”

John tried to spit at him, the words affecting him more than he wanted to admit, but Vaughn shoved him face first onto the concrete floor.

Nausea rolled deep and thick in John’s stomach. He had to do something, but a sense of futility dragged at his limbs. He didn’t know how to get out of this, not this time. All his life, every time he had been in a tight situation, he had been rescued. His mother. Derek. Sierra. Someone had always arrived just at the nick of time to save him, but he was on his own now. But there was one thing he could do; he could do what his mother always did for him: put her life on the line to protect those she loved.

“Get up,” Vaughn ordered, his hand resting on the butt of his gun holstered at his hip.

John refused, staying on the ground and curling in on himself. He was waiting for the kick, expecting it. When it came, John wrapped his whole body around Vaughn’s foot, twisting for all he was worth and dragging the man down. Then he was on him, ignoring the pain as he crawled up Vaughn’s frame to punch him in the face. Vaughn just laughed at him.

He didn’t laugh for long.

Startled by John’s strength and rage and surprised by his training, Vaughn found himself tussling with the younger man. He waved his men off when they moved to intervene, welcoming the fight, savoring the rush of adrenaline as he got the upper hand with two heavy body blows that stunned the boy. He dragged John up on his feet.

“Nice try,” Vaughn sneered, his lip busted and bleeding. He got his arm around John’s neck and held the boy in a chokehold. “You’ve got fight, kid. I’ll give you that.” He tightened his grip as John spluttered. “Now tell me where that bitch you call a mother is.”

Bursts of light sprang up in John’s eyes as his brain was slowly deprived of oxygen. “You won’t even get close to her,” he gasped.

Vaughn’s chuckle next to his ear sent a shiver down his spine. “What, you think that metal bitch will protect her?” He loosened the chokehold and watched John gulp for air. The words drove all the fight from him in a rush. “You thought I didn’t know? You thought that I’m not ready to take her pet terminator down?” He laughed again, his fingers curling

around John's neck and digging in as the boy slumped in his grip "Your mom doesn't stand a chance. Any more than you do."

He looked away from John to Danny, tied up in the corner and watching with horror and fear in his eyes. He smiled before turning his attention back to John. When he was finished with Sarah Connor's bastard, Danny would tell him everything he wanted to know. He was sure of it.

"I should never have let him go," Sarah murmured from the passenger seat, not for the first time, as the dark streets whizzed by. The quiet streets were empty, and they were making good time, but John and Danny's hideout was almost 30 minutes away. Sarah felt each one go by in excruciating slowness, and she stifled the urge to tell Cameron to drive faster for the fifth time.

"He'll be all right," Cameron promised and meant it.

"You don't know. You don't know that," Sarah replied, her head shaking emphatically. Her panic was barely restrained; the seatbelt across her chest the only thing that seemed to be holding it in. She gripped the gun in her hand as if it could help as buildings and streets whipped by, a blur of brick and asphalt as they raced toward John's location. "I shouldn't have let him go," she whispered again, her mind back to the moment in the kitchen, the moment she'd set John free.

"Sarah..."

"I should have insisted that he stay, no matter what the price. He needs to be with us, where we can protect him." Sarah turned her head and looked at Cameron, her expression faintly accusing. "You should have been with him..."

"Kaliba isn't after John. They're after you," Cameron pointed out as she slowed just enough to make a hard right, tires squealing in protest. "They are using him to get to you."

Sarah swallowed at the thought. "We never should have split up," she repeated, her words like a mantra. "It wasn't right, I knew it wasn't right." She met Cameron's gaze squarely when the cyborg finally risked looking at her. "If he dies instead of me...."

The despair in those green eyes struck a chord, and Cameron focused her attention back on the road as their speed inched up.

“Cameron...” Sarah’s voice broke on the name, all her fears heard in the silence that came after.

“We’ll make it,” Cameron vowed. “We won’t lose him.”

Cameron’s jaw clenched in helpless frustration. The vehicle wouldn’t go any faster, and there was nothing she could do to help Sarah. Nothing she could do but drive like hell. Her grip on the wheel tightened. “He’ll be all right,” she stated again. She was already lying about one child to Sarah; she hoped she hadn’t just told another.

Sierra watched as Sarah and Cameron barrelled out of the house and raced to the truck. She wondered briefly at what would have caused them to leave the house unprotected as she slid down the tree trunk carefully. She crept onto the porch, the gun in her hand a reassuring heft. Not completely unprotected, she thought to herself with a smile, even if they didn’t know it. She glanced through the windows, noticing the unmoving terminator with a frown, before stationing herself so she could see the stairway and the street from her position.

Lights on the silent street alerted her, and Sierra hid as a long, low car pulled up and parked in front of the house. The muscles in her arm tensed and then relaxed as she recognized the young, pretty woman walking toward her. It would be years before she would be introduced to this woman, but she could see the outlines of the person she would become drawn under the smooth skin stretched across her cheekbones. She was a trusted lieutenant, now and in the future.

Sabine let herself in and silenced the alarm with a memorized code. Her disinterested gaze took in the still figure of John Henry as she took a circuit around the ground floor before ending up in the kitchen. A few minutes later, she returned with a cup of tea, and, sliding a handgun from the waistband of her jeans, she settled in on the couch with her drink and a magazine. A few minutes later, Walther padded down the stairs and leapt onto the couch to curl up in the circle of her legs, earning an indulgent petting for his troubles. The house once again lapsed into silence, guarded within and without.

Vaughn tightened his grip again, feeling John grow limp in his arms. “Last chance. Tell me where she is or—”

Before John could answer, he heard an innocuous sounding pop over the roaring in his ears. John struggled to process what it meant, even as one of Vaughn’s men was slammed back into the wall, a bloody hole in his chest. A second shot obliterated the half of another’s head. The third man turned to run, only to make it three steps before a bullet punched through his back and exploded out his heart.

Vaughn twitched with surprise. His gaze darted frantically around the room for the source of the shooter.

“Let him go.”

Vaughn spun around, dragging John with him. Cameron was standing there, Sarah Connor’s little metal bitch, a 9mm in each hand. He felt a flash of fear, but it didn’t show on his features. He put his pistol to John’s temple. “I don’t think so. Drop the guns.”

Cameron glanced at Danny. He was trembling in the corner, his face splattered with the blood of one of the men she’s just executed. Her dark gaze landed on Vaughn once more, and she cocked her head to the side, as if measuring the distance between them. The weapon trained on him never wavered.

“Let him go,” Cameron ordered again.

Sarah stepped into the room, the gun in her hands shaking for a second before it steadied on him. Vaughn knew her reputation, and their research had confirmed that she avoided killing humans when at all possible. For all her reputation, she was not a cold-blooded killer. Her cyborg companion, however... He shifted to keep John between them, shielding himself with the boy’s body. Neither of them would risk hurting him.

“What happens if he dies, little robot?” Vaughn smiled, enjoying the way John was twitching against him as the boy struggled to breathe. “Doesn’t your precious future die with him?” He glanced over at Sarah, her face pale under a shock of dark hair that had fallen across her forehead. “Don’t all of your dreams for your son die?” He smiled as her eyes narrowed with impotent rage, enjoying the moment. “You or him,” he told her as his finger tensed on the trigger, and John sputtered and gasped, trying to draw a breath. “Choose.”

For a second, he thought he had won, as Sarah shifted her stance, and he felt the triumph wash over him in a warm wave.

A shot rang out and John jerked, distantly hearing Cameron's shout as he went down. He hit the floor, his broken ribs screaming in protest, but suddenly he could breathe again. He raised his eyes to Cameron, watching as she lowered her weapons and turned her gaze to Sarah. The expression on her face was a mixture of surprise and regret, and she took a step toward his mother, her hand reaching out in a gesture of comfort.

"John, are you all right?" Sarah was already at John's side, her hands pulling at his clothes and running over his arms, looking for blood and broken bones, her weapon discarded at her side.

"I'm ok," John said weakly, his arms wrapped tightly over his stomach. "Broken rib maybe," he lied.

"We have to get you to a hospital."

"No, no hospital," he replied, opening his eyes to meet his mother's. She gave him a tight smile of acknowledgment of all the times she had said the same to him.

"Where else are you hurt?"

"Vaughn," John murmured, his gaze shifting to the motionless body beside him. He swallowed when he saw the other man's vacant stare. Looking away, John met his mother's eyes once more. Adrenaline was making him shake, his injuries and the truth about what had just happened making him cold. "He was looking for you... he was going to..."

"I know." Sarah kissed his temple, remembering the sight of a muzzle pressed there moments before.

"We need to go," Cameron stated, approaching with an unsteady Danny in tow. "I'll call Ellison. We'll need to deal with the bodies."

Sarah nodded wearily. "Can you stand?" she asked her son.

John nodded as well. "Yeah," he murmured before looking at her again. There was no judgment in her eyes, just love and worry. "I'll be okay," he promised. He reached for her

gun, intending to hand it to her. His hand grazed the muzzle and he yelped in surprise when it burned his fingers.

“John,” Sarah said gently as he turned his eyes on her once more, understanding clear in his gaze. “We need to go,” she said, repeating Cameron’s words.

“Mom, you...”

“I did what I had to do,” Sarah finally admitted. She reached for her gun, grabbing it by the grip before handing the weapon to a silent Cameron. “Let’s go.”

John searched her face, his pain momentarily forgotten. Their gazes met and held for a silent moment before John finally took a shallow breath and nodded. He reached for her hand, and she eased him onto his feet.

When he looked at Cameron again, John found the terminator’s eyes on his mother. Cameron looked... upset, he decided, and he faintly wondered if her emerging feels were anything like his own at the moment.

“Sarah...” Cameron began.

Sarah shook her head, refusing the worry and sympathy in her voice, in her son’s eyes. She helped John limp to the door, supporting him as he gained strength. She spared a single glance back over her shoulder at the carnage in the room, feeling nothing but a sense of vague satisfaction and intense relief.

Cameron’s hand reached out, but Sarah dismissed it with a look. Her lips twisted into a tight smile in hopes of providing some reassurance, and she was relieved when Cameron nodded in understanding.

John gritted his teeth as he made his way down the stairs, each step jarring his taped ribs. It had been an exhausting night, but the adrenaline would not let him sleep, and it seemed he wasn’t the only one. Sarah started from the living room, reaching out to help him down the last few stairs before realizing what she was doing and pulling back with an apologetic look. He gave her a slight smile of understanding as he shuffled into the living room, finding himself the object of several curious gazes. The bruises on his face were nothing compared to the patchwork of purple that covered his stomach, but they were still prominent.

Everyone was there, even Savannah, clutching her giraffe and the arm of the couch with equal fervor. It appeared that the fight to send her back to bed had ended with Savannah triumphant, a fact confirmed by the sheepish grin on Sarah's face when she noticed the object of his gaze.

"John," Sarah's voice was hoarse, as if strained by emotion. She was still reining in her impulse to help him, and she crossed her arms over her chest to keep them from reaching out again. Cameron stood at her side, like the permanent fixture she had become over the past few months, and he frowned.

"What's going on?"

"We're..." Sarah stopped abruptly, turning toward the more diplomatic Terissa with shrug of her shoulders.

"They are deciding what to do with us," muttered Danny, sitting sullen, distant, and nearly forgotten in the chair in the corner, his body dwarfed by the bulk of the terminator sitting motionless beside him.

Turning away from Sarah and stepping more fully into the room, John addressed Danny to forestall any explanation from Terissa or Sarah. "What do you mean?" He was pleased that his voice was relatively calm.

"We're not allowed out on our own anymore." The scorn was evident in his voice, all of his terror already forgotten in his rush to anger.

"You were nearly killed by Kaliba," Sarah retorted heatedly. "You were found and you could have been... could have been..." Cameron rested her hand on Sarah's shoulder briefly as the other woman turned away, hugging herself. The years of fear that had seeped into everything she did, even her dreams, had not yet dissipated. To have her fears so nearly realized again was tearing at the frail composure she had managed to achieve.

Cameron stepped smoothly in front of Sarah, shielding her, as Savannah scampered past to give Sarah a hug. "You have not proven you can protect yourselves. Or follow basic security procedures."

"That's bullshit," John yelled, feeling the effort in his ribs, and he sucked in a breath. "We were establishing the security system, hacking the cameras," he explained.

“Kaliba found you.”

“We’ve been found before. Even when you were running the security,” he reminded her.

“That was because...” “John, you both...” The cacophony of voices blended together as Terissa joined in the fray, and Danny rushed to their defence. The clamor reached Sierra, watching from the shadows outside the window, as she scanned the area, waiting for her erstwhile mother to make an appearance. Leading them to John Henry had been only a first move for the terminator, and Sierra had been trying to discern her next move or motives.

Inside, the battle raged as Sarah strode into the middle of the fight, her voice ragged and raw as she tried to convince her son of the need for her protection, but outside was still, too still, and Sierra braced as the feeling of wrongness increased.

The movement was so slight that it went unnoticed. A mere flicker as eyes opened and analyzed the room, marking the positions of the people arrayed around the room and the necessary hardware, a forgotten handgun on a side table.

The gun was in his hand before anyone notices, but the weight was odd and surprising, the texture of the grip alien as he struggled to focus and control the jerky movements of his arm. Sabine was the first to notice, and she launched herself at him, only to be swept aside by his other arm, the force of his blow sending her careening into the table across the room. His fingers spasmed uncontrollably in the heat of the moment, and a random shot from the gun hit the wall behind the couch.

Everyone moved; Cameron made her decision in an instant, reaching out to grab Sarah’s arm and stepping in front of Savannah. Whether by luck or intent, Sarah eluded Cameron and dove for her son, roughly tackling him to the ground and covering his body with her own. Danny spun around, finding himself staring down the muzzle the gun, but he stood his ground, positioning himself in front of his mother.

For a heartbeat they just watched as the gun swept the room in search of a target. The motion steadied as if John Henry was learning control and then singled out Cameron for a brief second, as if taunting her, before he aimed deliberately at Sarah, realizing too late that for the second time that day that she was the one targeted. A red light flashed in his eyes as he concentrated his effort on the small muscles of his finger to pull the trigger in a controlled, deliberate manner.

Cameron stepped toward Sarah, her mass an impediment for once, as she measured the space and knew she would never cross the room in time. A streak of color crossed the room in front of her as the gun went off in rapid succession, the clip emptying with a sickening click as the slide locked back.

For a second, a shocked silence enveloped the room. Then the gun clattered to the ground, and John Henry collapsed, his body thudding to the ground beside his victim.