

The Ties That Bind

by Anklebones

Teaser

At three am in the morning, Daniel Miles Dyson sat on the edge of his bed and stared down at his cell phone. Black, smug and expensive, the phone kept its own counsel. It didn't care that Danny was lost, awake and alone in the middle of the night. Like everything else in the apartment, it wasn't really *his*.

Ten buttons, that was all it would take. Danny thought about pressing those buttons, wondered what would happen, what his mother would say if he called her after nearly four months of silence, just to hear the sound of her voice. He'd hear it all right... loud and clear. Terissa Dyson was many things, but forgiving wasn't one of them. Danny winced and restlessly flipped the cover of the phone down, up, then back down again. He couldn't dial, but he couldn't quite put the phone away either.

Standing, he slipped the phone into the pocket of his sweat pants and headed for the kitchen. The counters were sterile expanses of mock granite, the cupboards wood veneer and the floor laminate. The effect was sleek, stark, classy and... fake.

Danny poured a glass of water and lifted it to his lips, but the sudden buzzing against his hip almost made him drop it. Fumbling to regain his grip, he set the glass safely on the counter and pulled the phone out of his pocket, flipping it open to find a familiar text message.

3:15

There was no need for a signature. Danny knew who it was from. No one else had his number. Officially, his number didn't exist, and neither did he. Not anymore.

It took him less than ten minutes to dress and take the elevator down to the ground floor. The usual car, a nondescript black with darkened windows, pulled up just as he walked out the front of the apartment building. Danny didn't hesitate, sliding into the backseat and pulling the door shut behind him.

He'd never seen the driver. Opaque black glass, the same material as the windows, always separated the back of the car from the front. There was no way for Danny to know if it was the same driver every time, or even the same car. He wasn't the only one of his team that was driven to work this way, either. Danny imagined an entire parking lot full of dark cars and faceless drivers and suppressed a shiver.

He counted the turns to distract himself, working on his mental map of their route. It was a habit that passed the time, nothing more. As far as Danny could tell, he'd never been

taken the same way twice, but the ride generally took about an hour. Not this time. Danny was startled when the car came to a stop and the door locks released after no more than thirty minutes. His stomach turned over uneasily. He wasn't sure how he felt about living this close to the company's underground facility. It wasn't that Danny didn't trust them; aside from rumours that the secretive research and development agency had possible military ties, he had no reason to suspect them of being anything more than another company trying to win the technology race.

Still... the sensation of being watched was already starting to make Danny a little twitchy, and the idea of having their eyes in his backyard only made it worse.

Danny swallowed his trepidation and opened the door, finding the familiar empty parking garage on the other side. The elevator was waiting for him, descending smoothly when Danny punched his code into the keypad. There were no numbers, either on the wall or above the door, but Danny was fairly sure that it was more than a couple of floors down to the one he worked on. It was the only floor he'd ever seen. Danny had no idea how many projects the company was working on as they didn't exactly encourage curiosity.

Hale was waiting for him in the hall when the elevator doors opened. Red-haired and square-faced, the head of floor security looked no more than a few years older than Danny himself. In fact, it had been Hale, in the guise of a grad student, who had first approached him at college with a proposition he promised Danny wouldn't be able to resist. Something to do with computers he'd said. That was six months ago, and since then, Danny had learned the project was a great deal more than that, but Hale had been right, he hadn't been able to resist.

"Hey, Danny." Hale reached out and clapped Danny on the shoulder. "Sorry to drag you out of bed, but the higher-ups insisted."

Danny shrugged. "I wasn't asleep. What's up?"

Hale shook his head. "Not sure. There's been an incident at one of our facilities across town. The police think it's a domestic terrorist case. They're saying some anti-technology nut-job with a whole lot of explosives and a grudge against A.I.s blew the place sky-high."

"Are they right?" Danny asked, stiffening.

"That's what the bosses are trying to figure out." Hale was oblivious to Danny's sudden tension. "Come on, I'll take you in."

"Sure." Danny followed the shorter man down the hall, dodging rushing technicians and harried assistants juggling coffee. For such an early hour, the place was busy. A hint of not-quite panic saturated the air, making Danny even more nervous and jumpy.

Hale didn't stop at the control center or the labs. Instead, he led Danny down a second hallway, then a third, eventually stopping at one of the conference rooms. He swiped them in without a word, holding a finger to his lips to indicate that Danny should keep his mouth shut as well.

The meeting was already in progress.

Hale took his place to the left of the door, and Danny quietly found a seat. As he slid into the chair, the small, angled screen set into the table directly in front of him lit up.

Hello, Danny. You received my message?

Danny nodded, knowing the A.I. would be able to see his silent reply via the cameras hanging from the corners.

No one else at the table acknowledged his arrival. Their attention was fixed on the larger screen at the front of the room and Frederick Vaughn, the man in charge of the C.A.I.N. project and Danny's boss.

In a severely tailored black suit, his steel grey hair cut so close that it was almost army regulation, Vaughn looked more like a general than an executive, and he wielded his laser pointer like a weapon. "Miranda Technology Systems," Vaughn identified the building on the screen. "No more than an hour ago, this facility came under attack by the same terrorist group believed to be responsible for the destruction of Zeira Corp."

The picture changed, switching to the charred remains of an office building. "Our intelligence indicates that it is a small anti-technology cult that recruits new members with the threat of a future ruled by machines and the promise of a saviour who will lead humanity to victory. The first confirmed strike was fifteen years ago when their leader attempted to bomb a computer factory and was subsequently remanded to Pescadero State Hospital for the criminally insane. She escaped three years later..."

Vaughn kept talking while Sarah Connor, the woman who had murdered Danny's father and destroyed his world, stared down at them from the flat screen monitor, but Danny barely heard his boss through the roaring in his ears. He caught a few of the others sneaking glances at him over the table, but he ignored them. His father's death was no secret, not here, but he'd never brought it up, and nobody had asked.

The only time Danny's boss had mentioned Miles Dyson to him had been the day they met. He had examined Danny over his desk, openly measuring the gawky twenty-one-year-old while they exchanged empty pleasantries. Danny must have passed because afterwards, Vaughn had taken him to a small lab and introduced him to a primitive looking chess platform cobbled together out of gaming hardware. The computer had been damaged, and Danny remembered thinking it almost looked as if it had been burned, but it wasn't dead.

"This is all that's left of your father's work, Danny," Vaughn had said. "Would you like to help us finish it?"

"Dyson," a gruff voice demanded Danny's attention in the present.

"Sir?" Danny asked, dragging his eyes away from Sarah Connor and his head away from the past, and refocused both of them on Vaughn.

"You know her." Vaughn gestured at the monitor.

"She killed my father," Danny acknowledged with a slight edge to his voice. *As you very well know.*

"You *know* her," Vaughn repeated as a quiet murmur hummed through the room.

"I've met her." Danny suspected his boss already knew that, too. "Twice. Once, when I was just a kid, and then again, ten years ago. She's insane."

Vaughn nodded. The murmurs increased, and then cut off abruptly as he shifted his attention back to the rest of the table.

"You mean she *was* insane," One of the suits on the far side of the table said impatiently. "According to police reports, she just blew herself up."

Sarah Connor, dead? Danny doubted it. His scepticism must have shown on his face, because Vaughn took one look at him and snorted.

"You don't believe it, Dyson? Well, neither do I, but someone, or *something*, went through a great deal of trouble to make it look like she died in that explosion tonight."

"*Something?*" a woman a few seats to Danny's left asked, her hand raised as if she was in a classroom.

Vaughn didn't answer her. Instead, he turned back to the screen. "C.A.I.N.," Vaughn addressed the A.I. "Show us the security footage from Miranda, the piece you salvaged before it was altered."

Certainly, Mr. Vaughn.

Danny blinked, but held back his questions as the Cybernetic Artificial Intelligence Network, the A.I. born of his father's work, the program the company had christened C.A.I.N., brought up a video recording. He watched with rising anger as Sarah Connor climbed out of a hatch in the roof and ran off into the darkness as the building exploded behind her in a halo of fire.

"She faked her death." Danny gripped the edge of the table, ignoring the pain as the rough edge bit into his skin. Sarah Connor always had an out; she let other people do the dying for her.

"Are you going to send this to the police?" The first suit asked.

"No." Vaughn shook his head. "Better if they go on thinking she's dead. What we're interested in is the intelligence that managed to set this up, hacking into a top of the line security system and altering everything from employee to dental records."

"You think it's like..." The suit gestured to the glowing screen, now back to its serene blue. "Is it the other A.I.? The one Zeira Corp was developing?"

No, my brother is gone.

A collective shiver went through the room, and Danny felt it lick up his own spine. Only Vaughn seemed unaffected by the A.I.'s claim of relation. It wasn't the first time C.A.I.N. had used that term in reference to Zeira Corp's A.I., but it never failed to make Danny uneasy. He knew every line of C.A.I.N.'s code, and the ability to feel a connection with another computer wasn't something they'd programmed into it. C.A.I.N. had figured that out himself. It made Danny wonder what else the A.I. could do that they didn't know about.

"No," Vaughn agreed with C.A.I.N. "There hasn't been a trace of the Zeira Corp A.I. since Connor took out their building. Either they've got it locked up so tightly that it doesn't even have net access, or it was destroyed. This is something else."

There were nods around the table. "So what does all of this have to do with the boy?" Another man asked, indicating Danny. "He's just a tech."

He is the link.

Vaughn nodded. "Whatever this thing is, it's working for, or with, Sarah Connor and her associates, but it's covered its tracks so well that even C.A.I.N. can't find it. Connor's just as slippery. We need inside information and the Connors have a history with the Dysons."

Danny swallowed as the room erupted into noisy protest. Part of him wanted to slink off back to his lab and his computers. They were right, he was only a tech. These were the people with their asses on the line if Connor decided to target them next. They had contracts to fill, and their clients were the kind that didn't like a lot of press.

The other part of him, the part that had said *yes* when Vaughn had asked if he wanted to continue his father's work, that had chosen to leave his mother behind when his work became so sensitive that the company had insisted he be relocated... that part wanted to do this. Wanted revenge for his father's death. Even knowing his mother would

disapprove, that she believed the nonsense Connor had told her, Danny couldn't give up this chance for a little payback.

When the room subsided, Vaughn raised a questioning brow. Danny squared his shoulders and looked directly at his boss.

“What do you want me to do?”

Act One

Savannah was used to getting up early for school. At home, she had had her own alarm clock, a little yellow duck with a clock set into its tummy that quacked until she woke up and turned it off. Mommy had said it was important that Savannah take responsibility for getting up on her own, because Mommy was very busy with work and with John Henry.

Here, there was no school, no duck, no Mommy, and no John Henry, but Savannah still got up early.

She picked out her own clothes, a blue checked jumper over a white shirt and thick cotton tights. Dressed, Savannah folded her pyjamas neatly and put them under her pillow before making up the bed. That part was harder. The pink comforter was heavy, and the sheets didn't like to pull straight, but she managed.

Next, Savannah padded into her very own bathroom, washed her face and brushed her hair. She couldn't tie it back by herself yet, so she left it loose. Mr. Ellison would do it for her later, if she asked. She might have asked Aunt Sarah, but Savannah was a little bit afraid of her. Mr Ellison said she was imagining things, but Savannah didn't think Aunt Sarah liked her very much. She didn't seem to like Mr. Ellison all the time, either.

The kitchen was dark when Savannah came down the steps, but the lights switched on before she reached it. "Thank you, Cameron," Savannah said automatically, not expecting an answer. Mostly Cameron, the Pirate Queen, only talked to Aunt Sarah, but Savannah kept trying. Mr. Ellison said that Cameron wasn't used to dealing with children and that she and Sarah were too alike for their own good, but then he asked Savannah not to repeat that last part.

The cupboards were too high for Savannah to reach, so she pulled over a chair and climbed up on top of it to get a cup and a bowl. The fridge was easier, and the cereal was kept on the bottom shelf of the pantry. Savannah put the chair back on the other side of the island before putting her breakfast together.

She paused on her way to the kitchen table, balancing her bowl carefully in one hand and her juice in the other. It seemed rude to sit so far away from Cameron. Aunt Sarah had broken her table, and she looked lonely sitting in a chair all by herself.

Savannah put her bowl and cup back on the counter and dragged and pushed the kitchen table across the floor. The legs rasped and squeaked on the tile, and Savannah was sweating by the time she got it into place in front of Cameron, but once it was there, Cameron looked more like a real person.

Satisfied, Savannah got her breakfast and brought it over to Cameron's new table. After a moment's thought, she went back to the kitchen and got a second glass of juice, placing that one in front of Cameron's still body before clamouring up into her chair.

"Good morning," she chirped, almost dropping her spoon when the screen in front of her flickered to life.

Good morning, Savannah. Did you sleep well?

"Yes, thank you," Savannah squeaked, surprised and pleased to have someone actually talking to her. Mr. Ellison tried, but he wasn't really very good at it, and he forgot a lot, too. "How about you?"

I don't sleep.

"Oh..." Savannah thought about that. "Don't you ever get tired?"

There was a long pause and Savannah had turned her attention back to her cereal before Cameron responded.

Yes, I can get tired.

"Is that why your body is turned off?" Savannah asked. "Is it tired? Mr. Ellison said you were sleeping so that you could get better. Are you going to get better soon?"

No.

"Why not?"

It's broken.

"Mr. Murch can fix you. He helped fix John Henry," Savannah reassured Cameron as she finished her cereal and juice. She cleared the dishes, rinsing them and putting them in the sink. Unsure, she hesitated at the edge of the kitchen. No one else was up yet, and even when they did get up, there still wouldn't be anything for Savannah to do except go back to her room and play with her dolls or read her books.

She walked back over to Cameron. "Can I stay with you?"

Why?

"I don't want to be by myself," Savannah admitted timidly.

What would you like to do?

"We could colour," Savannah suggested. "I have a princess colouring book and new crayons. I don't like the princesses very much, but there are some nice horses and other animals, too."

What else would you like to colour?

"Hmm... Pirates? With swords and a ship and treasure... and a parrot that talks!"

Okay.

The printer hummed, and Savannah watched as it spit out several sheets. She picked them up to find exactly what she'd asked for: pirates with swords, ships and parrots. There was even one that looked a little like her and another with long hair and an eye patch. "Thank you."

You're welcome.

Savannah left the papers on the table and ran back to her room to get her crayons. It wasn't long before she was settled at the table again, happily colouring in the little pirate girl's boots. She had set one of the other drawings in front of Cameron and put a crayon in the machine's hand, bending her fingers until it stayed.

Cameron's body remained slack and lifeless, but Savannah didn't mind; she kept up a steady stream of chatter, glancing up periodically to read Cameron's replies. It wasn't much different than when she'd chatted with John Henry on her computer at school, even if Cameron was a little stiffer, and the familiarity eased some of Savannah's confusion and loneliness.

Mr. Ellison said that Mommy and John Henry had gone on a trip. He didn't know when they would be back, but he'd assured her that they *were* coming back, and that he, Mr. Murch and Aunt Sarah would take care of her until then. Savannah didn't exactly think he was lying, but she knew that sometimes people didn't come back. Her daddy hadn't come back, and neither had Dr. Sherman. People left all the time, sometimes forever.

Savannah was almost finished with her picture and had just asked Cameron's opinion on what colour she should use for the parrot when she heard the coffeemaker switch on in the kitchen. She looked up to see the cursor blinking vacantly, the screen itself blank. She waited for a minute, but Cameron didn't say anything.

"Cameron?" she prompted, wondering what the machine was thinking about so hard.

Sarah's awake.

"Is she coming down?" Savannah asked a little nervously.

Soon.

John woke up in the infirmary.

He hadn't gone to sleep there, and it took him a few minutes to piece together just how he'd gotten into one of the narrow bunks. He'd been in Terissa's quarters...

He'd cried himself nearly sick in her arms, and she'd just held him until he'd finished, trailing off into sniffles and shaky hiccups. Then, she'd sat him down in a pile of cushions and made him a cup of tea over a little gas burner.

"The privileges of rank," she said with a warm smile when she handed him the tin cup.

The tea was thin, and there wasn't any milk or sugar, but John savoured the gesture and the heat against his hands. Even the smallest taste of civilization after the last few weeks was welcome. He'd thought he'd grown up rough, training with his mom in the worst and most remote terrain she could find, but nothing had prepared him for this. The sheer destruction and destitution was overwhelming. Clean clothes, decent food, even toothpaste... what he'd considered the basic necessities of life, they were all luxuries here.

"Better?" Terissa asked after a few minutes, sitting down beside him.

"Yeah, thanks." John cradled the cup between his hands, tilting it slightly so that the light fell through to illuminate the leaves swirling around in the bottom. He wondered if there was anyone left who read them and what his would say, if there was. Maybe he didn't have a future anymore, maybe he only got one, and if he threw it away... well, that was it.

"How did she...?" John couldn't finish his thought, couldn't say the words. His mother, dead? It didn't compute. Sarah Connor was more than his mother, she was the hero of his childhood, his guardian, his whole damned world. And that had been the problem. They'd been too close. She was too intense, too fierce, too demanding. John had needed room, but Sarah had made him fight for it, forced him to push her away just so he could breathe. Now that she'd finally let go, he wanted her back.

Guilt made his guts clench around the tea sloshing around in his stomach. If it was his fault...

"It doesn't matter right now," Terissa said gently, granting him a temporary reprieve. "We'll talk about it another night."

John nodded, oddly relieved. He wasn't sure he really wanted to know anyway. Cancer, a police bullet or a terminator, he didn't need any of those images confirmed. Better not to know. "She wasn't alone when it happened, was she?" he asked tentatively, needing that much at least to assuage his guilt, even if he didn't deserve it. "I mean, did she have *anyone?*"

Terissa hesitated a moment, glancing away, then back, as if deciding how much to tell him. John couldn't blame her. Her uncertainty about him stung, but she had every right to hate him and, instead, had held him, given him tea, so he swallowed the hurt and waited quietly.

"She had someone," Terissa said finally.

John felt some of the pain ease, leaving room for curiosity to start nibbling at him. He wondered who it had been. There hadn't been anyone left; no one his mother had trusted. Another question loomed. "Kyle," he blurted. "My... how much does he know?"

Terissa gave him a look and climbed to her feet. "That's between you and your father," she said, making it clear how much she'd been trusted with, even while deflecting the question. "You'll have to ask him." She paused. "But in private, please. For now, as far as this camp knows, you're still just a refugee."

"For now?" John followed her, standing and setting his empty cup down on a stool.

"For now," Terissa repeated. "We'll speak again. I'll send for someone to show you back to your room." She reached for the door but the handle jumped out from under her fingers, wrenching down and back as someone on the other side yanked it open so hard that it slammed against the wall. A red-haired tornado stormed into the room in a swirl of crackling fury, slamming the door behind her.

"Where *is* he?"

Terissa took the intrusion calmly, holding her ground without twitching a hair, but John shrank back into the shadows uneasily certain that he was the *he* in question.

"Sierra..." Terissa started patiently, but the woman wasn't listening. She zeroed in on John within seconds, her ice-blue eyes narrowing.

"Do I know you?" John whispered. He was absolutely certain he'd never seen the tall red-headed woman in front of him before; he'd definitely have remembered, but there was something familiar about her... Clearly a soldier, she was wearing the same plain clothes as everyone else. Dark pants tucked into knee-high boots and a worn, sleeveless shirt that bared lean muscled arms with a skull and crossbones tattoo on her right shoulder. Her bright red hair was hacked to a jagged jaw length shag, and she must have just come from some kind of shower because it hung in wet spikes around her angular face.

The last thing John remembered before opening his eyes to the infirmary ceiling was a familiar watch hanging around the woman's neck and a fist heading for his face.

"You're awake."

John scooted back on the cot, an arm half-raised in defence before he even registered the words. The woman Terissa had called Sierra smirked. She was perched on a stool beside the bed, and her hair was completely dry, so John figured he must have been out for an hour or two. His jaw ached, and he prodded it gently, wincing when the pain went from bearable to threatening to send him back into blackness.

"No thanks to you," he managed roughly. "What was that for?"

The smirk vanished. "You've had that coming for a couple of decades. Be glad a bruise is all you got." She hopped down off the stool, moving with the raw, rangy grace of someone who was no stranger to using her body as a weapon. John had seen it before. His mother had moved exactly the same way.

"Come on, I promised Tango I'd get you back to your room in one piece."

John glanced around. They were in a quiet corner of the infirmary, with the only patients in beds close enough to hear them either asleep or unconscious. "You know me," he accused her sullenly.

"Yep," Sierra agreed readily. "And you know me... or you did."

John frowned, trying to think through the pounding in his head. "That's a mean right hook," he allowed grudgingly, sliding off the bed, and leaving alone for now the questions of who had what coming, and just who this woman was and what exactly he'd done that she'd taken such personal offence to.

"I learned from the best." Sierra led John back into the labyrinthine halls of grey cement and metal pipes, pausing every few seconds to exchange a few words or just a nod with the soldiers they passed. Allison and Kyle had been well known by the soldiers at the base, but *everyone* knew Sierra. John saw respect and even awe in the faces of younger recruits.

He didn't say anything when they got back to a part of the tunnels he recognized well enough to navigate on his own. Sierra had said she was going to see him back to his quarters, and he was pretty sure she'd meant whether he liked it or not.

She hesitated at his door, betraying the first sign of uncertainty he'd seen from her. There were still a few people in the hall, so John opened the door and indicated she could come in. Sierra followed him without a word and closed it behind her.

"You can't say anything," she told him firmly when they were alone. "Tango told you that, right?"

John nodded, dropping onto the narrow bed. "She said to lay low."

"We'll be putting squads together to look for John Henry." Sierra's voice gentled on the A.I.'s name, something almost soft entering her blue eyes, but it was gone almost before John knew what he had seen. "Until we find him, nothing changes."

"What about Weaver?" John asked, beginning to suspect just who he was talking to.

Sierra snorted, but a noticeable rise in tension confirmed his guess. "We'll be looking, but something tells me she'll find us first."

"Something is probably right," John muttered, wincing at the thought of the pain he knew he had coming tomorrow when Derek and Jesse got a hold of him again. "What do I say about meeting Tango? And this?" His gesture took in his aching jaw, which John was pretty sure was sporting an impressive purple and black bruise by now.

"We thought of that." Sierra pushed a piece of hair behind her ear and leaned back against the door. "That blue light you told Kyle about? We've received intelligence from the Spider's people that suggests it's a new neurological weapon Skynet's been experimenting with. We don't know exactly what it does yet, besides scrambling people's memories, but you're the only person with a firsthand account, so that's why the higher-ups are interested in you." She pointed to his jaw. "As to that, while we were questioning you, you had a flashback, fell and smacked your chin."

John found the unmistakable satisfaction in Sierra's eyes unsettling. This lean and deadly woman seemed as far removed from the quiet little girl John had taught how to tie her shoes as a tiger was from a kitten. But there was no denying the resemblance to Weaver; it was there in her eyes, her hair, and the lines of her face. He still had no idea why she was so angry at him, but it was definitely her.

Motivations and identity aside, however, John had to admit her story made sense. Thorough and simple, it explained his ignorance and anything strange he might say. All he had to do was keep being vague about his background, and people would just assume he was still recovering. He wondered briefly who this Spider was, but shrugged it off as something else that was going to have to wait. "Fine," he agreed. "But can I ask you one more question?"

Sierra's, no *Savannah's*, hand was already on the door handle, but she waited, one red brow raised. "What?"

"Your watch..." John gestured to the pocket watch hanging around her neck, the one he knew so well that he could see it with his eyes closed. "Where did you get it?"

Sierra wrapped one hand protectively around the watch, her eyes growing cold. "It was given to me," she said flatly, wrenching open the door, "You left a lot of things behind, John, and some of them are gone forever."

Sarah washed the sweat of restless sleep and nightmares off of her face, scrubbing roughly at her skin, as if soap and water, applied with enough force, could scour the images from her brain. Death, war, destruction, the theme was always the same, but lately, the dreams were getting more vivid, more focused.

Sarah expected to see John. She'd seen him die a hundred thousand different ways, and every time, she was too late to stop it. Those were the nightmares she was familiar with. They had plagued her from the moment he'd been conceived, before she even knew what he would look like, or how much she would love him.

What she hadn't expected were dreams of a John that was lost and alone, crying in the dark for a mother that never came. She'd started awake over and over again in the last few days, his sobs echoing away into the silence of her room. Out of her bed in an instant, Sarah would be halfway to the door before she remembered that John was far beyond her reach. Wherever, *whenever*, he was, she could no longer steal into his room in the middle of the night to make sure he was still breathing or soothe him out of his own nightmares.

Cold water couldn't make Sarah forget, but the simple routine grounded her.

She paused on her way through her room to the catwalk for her gun, shoving it into the back of her jeans where it rested reassuringly against her spine. She probably didn't need it. There were already weapons stashed all over the warehouse, and Cameron would let them know if anyone came anywhere near the building, but having a loaded gun close to hand made Sarah feel better. It was her own deadly little security blanket, the only one she had. Everything else was gone.

Except one thing.

Sarah hesitated, and then picked up John's watch from the desk. She turned it over in her hands, trying to sort out what it meant to her and how she felt about it. The detonator inside was a painful reminder of the secrets John and Cameron had kept from her, but it also represented the trust the machine had put in John, her determination to end her own existence before she endangered him. In a weird way, it felt like a gift, a sacrifice. Sarah got that. And John had worn it...

"Fuck it," Sarah muttered and hung the watch around her neck, tucking it inside her shirt. The metal warmed almost immediately against her skin, like it belonged there. Feeling a little better, Sarah switched off the light and headed downstairs.

The lights were on, but she didn't really think about it beyond hoping that someone else had put the coffee on. The hope was confirmed by her nose before she reached the kitchen. Murch was probably up, and for his coffee making skills alone, Sarah might have kept the scientist around. Toss in his computer know-how, and he was indispensable.

Sarah had a mug out of the cupboard and filled to the brim before she took in anything beyond the kitchenette. The empty space where the table had been startled her for a moment, until she cast her gaze wider and saw its new location.

Her guts twitched, both at the shift and the reason why Cameron's table had needed replacing. She had come so close to losing it that night. She hadn't felt so helpless, so hopeless, since Pescadaro.

In losing John, Sarah had lost the anchor that kept her from flying away in the storm of her own madness. If Cameron hadn't spoken up...

Sarah shook her head. It didn't matter what might have been. The 'what ifs' would drive her crazy faster than all the white walls and dots in the world. She had to focus on what *was*, and right now, that was stopping Skynet, so that whatever future her son had gone to would be better than the one she saw in her dreams. For that, she needed to stay sane, and she needed to talk to Cameron.

And speaking of the pirate queen... Sarah made her way across the room, coffee cup in hand. A single glance took in a spread of line drawings and crayons across the table and an obviously nervous Savannah. The child was perched on her knees in one of the straight-backed chairs, a purple crayon clenched in her fist, her blue eyes wide and hesitant.

"Good morning, Aunt Sarah," she said gamely.

Sarah winced at the familiarity that Ellison had bestowed on her. It implied a level of responsibility she wasn't quite ready to accept. The girl was a liability, albeit one that was less of a danger to them than they were to her, which only made it worse. Sarah didn't want a child's blood on her hands. There was enough blood on them already.

"Morning," Sarah managed. "What's all this?" she gestured at the table, raising her eyes to Cameron's central screen, a single eyebrow crooked in question. There was a certain resemblance about the half-coloured drawing of the long-haired pirate in the eye patch that made her wonder if Cameron was embracing this whole pirate queen idea.

"We're colouring," Savannah said, while the cursor continued to blink, a bit sheepishly Sarah fancied.

"Well," Savannah continued. "*I'm* colouring. Cameron can't really colour because she's broken. Are you going to fix her?"

Sarah looked down into that earnest face, seeing more there than a child's need to believe that the adults in her world could make everything okay. She saw acceptance of the possibility that Cameron could not be fixed, and at the same time, a desperate hope and an all too familiar loneliness.

"We're going to try," she offered, and Savannah nodded. "Why don't you go and see if Mr. Ellison is up?"

"Okay." Savannah picked up the picture she'd been working on and carried it off, presumably to show Ellison. Sarah sighed for another childhood cut short and slid into the abandoned chair. Setting her coffee down, she picked up the other picture, turning it around to face the screen.

"Colouring?"

She was sad.

"And your solution is arts and crafts?"

She asked.

"Why so accommodating all of a sudden?"

She brought me juice... and I know what it's like to be alone.

"Hmph..." Sarah snorted, covering her unease at the second time Cameron had referred to being alone, and set the picture back down on the table. Since sharing their own demons after the bombing of Miranda, she and Cameron had been groping their way towards some kind of understanding. John had always been their link. They had argued about him, protected him, and fought for his attention. Now John was gone, and they had lost the force that simultaneously brought them together and forced them apart.

What was left seemed to be a strange version of camaraderie between soldiers, tempered by the inevitable familiarity brought about by spending the better part of two years living together and trying to figure each other out.

You can't.

For a moment, Sarah thought Cameron had read her thoughts. "I can't what?" she asked suspiciously.

You can't fix me.

Sarah blew out a breath in relief. Cameron in cyberspace she could handle, Cameron in her head was something else entirely. "How do you know?"

It's broken.

"Your body?" Sarah glanced over at the terminator's still form, the rakish eye patch covering a wound that was healing far more slowly than she'd expected. In fact, it had been days since she'd seen any improvement at all.

Not mine. Not anymore. No chip, just metal and meat.

The eerie echo of Cameron's first evaluation of human death sent a shiver down Sarah's spine. "We can get a new chip..."

No.

"No?"

No, it is not a mission priority. The body is broken; it should be burned. It's better for me to be in here.

Somehow, Sarah hadn't realized that when Cameron had said it was better for her to have given John Henry her chip and gone into the system, the machine had meant *permanently*. She had assumed that Cameron's body would heal, the way it always had, and that they would somehow find another chip for her to download onto, and then everything would go back to the way it had been before. Miranda was supposed to have been an anomaly. She had missed having the terminator at her back, missed that solid reassurance of having someone on her side that was nearly indestructible.

"I need you mobile," Sarah insisted harshly. "If we're going to stop Skynet, then I need a body at my back with a gun, not a glorified search engine."

You have Ellison. He is a trained FBI agent.

"He's a cop," Sarah argued. "It's not the same." And it wasn't, even if Sarah didn't know exactly why.

It's close enough.

There was finality to the words on the screen, and Sarah could almost hear Cameron's voice, her usual monotone gone steely with conviction and near-human stubbornness. "Cameron..." she started, only to trail off when the screens suddenly went dark, leaving nothing but a familiar spinning colour wheel and betraying something suspiciously like a sense of humour. Cameron, it appeared, was currently not responding.

Act Two

"What did you do to her?" Murch stopped halfway through setting a bulging plastic bag down on the table, his eye caught by Cameron's display of defiance. He'd turned up within half an hour of Sarah's aborted conversation with the machine. Sarah hadn't even realized he was gone until Ellison had sent Savannah to call him down for breakfast and that was something they were going to have to talk about. She wasn't going to have their dubious safety put at risk by spontaneous shopping trips.

"Nothing, she's being a smartass," Sarah snapped, taking the bag out of his hands and dropping it on the table beside the terminator's body. The logo looked like it came from some kind of electronics store, and her suspicion was confirmed when she pulled out several headsets wrapped in hard plastic. "What's all this?"

"Are you sure?" Murch responded to her initial comment first, pushing his glasses back up his nose. "There could be something wrong..." His hands reached seemingly of their own accord towards the controls, and Sarah sighed, denying the tiny twinge of worry brought on by his concern.

"If it makes you feel better, go ahead and check," she grumbled, pulling a pair of small devices out of the bag that looked like fancy hearing aides.

Murch didn't wait for further invitation. He and Cameron had reached a compromise as far as monitoring went. She gave him limited access to basic system information so that he could monitor the equipment and make sure all the hardware and software was running properly, and in return, he didn't try to get into her activity records. It was an uneasy truce at best. Murch was too damned curious for his own good, but for now, it seemed to be working.

"Well?" Sarah asked after a few minutes.

Murch punched a few more keys and looked up. "Uh... she's being a smartass."

Sarah snorted, relieved despite herself. "That's what I said. Now, can you tell me why you snuck out this morning to buy headphones?"

"Headsets, and I didn't sneak!" Murch insisted, coming back to the table and pulling a piece of paper out of his back pocket. He handed it to Sarah. "Cameron gave me a list."

Sarah shook her head, unfolding the paper and skimming the printed list of audio equipment. "So now you're an errand boy?"

"Well, she can't go herself." Murch shrugged. "I don't mind, it's something to do."

Sarah suppressed a stab of jealousy. She was uncomfortably aware that a great deal of her irritation came from being penned in. Even dead, her face was still getting a remarkable amount of media attention. Until the panic over Miranda died down, she needed to lie low. Murch, by comparison, was relatively free to come and go as he pleased. At

Ellison's suggestion, he'd already gone and made a statement to the police. So no one was looking for *him*.

It was petty and mean for Sarah to resent the scientist for that, but this place, despite its size and every comfort, was feeling smaller and more confining every day, and there wasn't enough to do to keep any of them busy for long. Much more of this, and they'd all be gnawing on the furniture.

" Hmm... " Sarah tried not to let any of her frustration show. "So why does she need headsets?"

"They're not for her," Murch explained, snapping the first one out of its plastic case. "They're for us, so that she can talk to us without a screen." He picked up one of the high-tech hearing aids and held it out to her. "These are for hands-free calling. All you need is a cell phone, and she'll be able to speak to you anywhere you go."

Sarah took the device reluctantly. She was beginning to feel a little thrown off balance by Cameron's smooth assumption of control. Sarah was used to calling the shots, ordering the machine around, ignoring and berating her one day and confiding in her the next. Cameron had always taken it, letting the abuse and intimacy slide off equally, as if she didn't even notice the difference.

No, that wasn't true.

Cameron knew the difference. Sarah couldn't deny that much. Cameron understood, she'd simply had no alternative other than to accept whatever Sarah and John had dished out. Good or bad.

But that was then.

Whatever Cameron had figured out about herself before she'd started talking, it had shifted the balance between them. Cameron was no longer taking orders, she was giving them. A fingerbreadth away from pulling the trigger of a gun pointed at her own temple, Sarah had told Cameron that they could either work together or alone to stop Skynet, and she'd meant it. This wasn't going to work unless they learned how to talk to each other, learned how to cooperate, to be a team. Sarah was going to have to meet her in the middle.

Sighing, she put the little earpiece back on the table and met Murch's eager gaze. "You'll need to show me how to use these."

"You know how to use this?" Derek asked, handing John a battered black pulse rifle. "Or is your brain still scrambled?"

John cursed Sierra and her ruthless efficiency in spreading his cover story. It had only taken a few days for him to go from mysterious stranger to village idiot. He wouldn't have minded so much, if it had meant a reprieve from Derek and Jesse's not so gentle ministrations, but they were still driving him into the ground from dawn to dusk. The only difference was now they treated him like he was stupid instead of just incompetent. And he hadn't seen Allison.

John found himself looking for her in his scant moments of free time, scanning the busy corridors and common rooms. Rationally, he knew it was because she reminded him of Cameron. With no sign of John Henry or Weaver, and Terissa ducking any attempt John made to talk to her, Allison was the only link he had to Cameron. It was natural for him to be drawn to her, and her disappearance stung. Other than Terissa, she was the only one on the base who seemed to like him at all.

"Daydreaming, Connor?" Derek snapped.

"No, Sir," John said automatically, shifting the weapon in his hands to check the charge. He hadn't had much of a chance to examine the model, but Cameron had explained them to him in the past. There had been something almost like enthusiasm in her voice when she'd talked about guns. Cameron appreciated efficiency, and there had been more than one evening when she'd turned the necessary task of cleaning their arsenal into a lesson on future weaponry and its improvements on modern firearms.

"No, you don't know how to use it, or no, you're not daydreaming?"

"I know how to use it," John clarified, bringing the rifle into position and sighting down the barrel.

"Prove it." Derek stepped back, giving him room. They were in an uninhabited part of the tunnels, an old parking garage converted to a training ground. Generators powered the lights, and one end had been set up with targets of varying sizes, scraps of metal with crudely painted targets and charred holes where previous shots had hit their mark.

John took aim on the remains of a car door sporting a metal skull with a series of red rings around it and pulled the trigger. The recoil kicked his shoulder hard enough to make John grunt, and the chemical smell given off by the pulse burnt the inside of his nostrils, but the shot was good. A new hole smoked from the terminator's left eye.

"Not bad, Connor," Jesse drawled. "We'll make a soldier out of you yet."

Derek snorted. "Takes more than fancy shooting," he cautioned, but there was guarded approval in his voice. "Try for a grouping."

Nodding, John sent a second pulse into the skull's right eye and put a third dead center.

"I think he's got it," a new voice chimed from behind him, and John turned to see Sierra, arms crossed, a rifle twin to the one in his hands slung over her back, and a smaller model strapped to her leg. "You done with him for the day?"

"We could call it," Derek agreed amiably. "Kid's not doing too badly."

"Thanks." Without bothering to ask John's opinion, Sierra indicated that he should follow her, and she headed for the exit. John scrambled to put his weapon away and collect his gear. He'd stripped down to a light sleeveless shirt to train, but the tunnels could be chilly, and he'd been read the riot act his first day on keeping track of his own clothing and equipment. Everybody had what they needed, but there weren't a lot of extras. If you lost your jacket, then you got cold, and that was that.

He caught up to her before the first turn, and Sierra acknowledged his presence with a sideways glance that stilled the questions on his tongue.

"There's been a sighting of metal up in the hills, a single male fitting John Henry's description. There are two squads going out. Since we're the only two people who can make a positive ID, you'll be in one of them, and I'll be leading the other."

"Who's leading mine?" John asked, trying not to let his pique creep into his voice. Sierra's tone made it clear it wouldn't be him in charge, and objectively, he knew that made sense. He was less than nobody to these people. They had been living this life for the last decade and a half, fighting a war he'd washed his hands of. John had no right to their respect, but he ached for it just the same.

"You'll be taking orders from Kyle," Sierra said without any indication that she understood their connection. "He's agreed to keep an eye on you." She paused at a corner, checking down the hall in either direction before continuing. "You need to understand this, John, everyone going out today will be someone Prophet and Tango personally trust. They don't know who you are, but they know this is a covert operation and that you're a part of it. You're to do exactly what they say, when they say it." Sierra's tone was deadly serious. "No showing off."

"I get it," John growled, his ego smarting in the face of a lecture from someone who used to come no higher than his hip.

"Do you?" Sierra asked. "Because I don't care who you were supposed to be, or what you were supposed to do. That John Connor doesn't exist anymore, not here, not now. *We* are the reality, and if you see this as some kind of grand proving ground, then you need to get your head out of your ass, or you're going to get a lot of people killed."

John stopped, forcing Sierra to stop as well or go on without him. "Is that really what you think of me?" he asked when she reluctantly turned around.

Her cold glare said it all.

Stubborn pride, a trait John had inherited from his mother, squared his shoulders and roughened his voice. "I don't want anyone dying for me," he said levelly.

Sierra met his stare, her blue eyes searching his face. "Too late," she whispered softly, but John felt some of her antagonism ease.

They continued on in silence, the tunnels becoming more populated the further they went. Finally, Sierra led him outside into the lowering dusk, and John took a deep breath of the first fresh air he'd tasted in days. He hadn't realized how much the confinement was weighing on him until he could see the sky again. Some of the tension eased out of his bones, and he felt the first stirring of a hesitant anticipation beginning to build in its place. This was it. He could be hours away from finding John Henry and getting his hands on Cameron's chip. After that, well... he'd find a way home, or he'd figure out some way to get her a new body. He couldn't let Cameron go. She needed him, and he needed her.

"Thirty five?" Savannah asked, her legs swinging idly as she leaned forward over the table, paper in front of her and a pencil in her hand.

Correct

Another equation appeared on the screen, and Savannah bent her copper head, pencil scribbling furiously.

"What are they doing now?" Sarah asked, coming down the stairs with empty boxes and packing plastic in her hands. Watching Murch install headsets hadn't been the most stimulating experience of her life, but it beat waiting for Cameron to finish ignoring her. She'd come downstairs intent on confronting the machine, but it looked like Cameron had moved on without her.

"Math," Ellison answered dryly. He was perched on a stool at the kitchen island, papers spread out around him and a cup of coffee at his elbow.

"Figures." Sarah tossed the cardboard and plastic in the recycling bin before joining him. "What are you looking at?"

"FBI records, Cameron printed them out for me."

Sarah leaned over the island. "Who are you interested in?"

"The agent in charge of your case, Auldridge; he contacted me when you were in custody, asking for all of my notes, both on you and on the Dyson case. He wanted to know what I thought about your story." Ellison slid a piece of paper over to her, a sheet

of phone records with a series of highlighted calls. "He's been in contact with Terissa Dyson, and it looks like he's taken on the investigation into her son's disappearance as well."

"He said he believed me." Sarah glanced over the records, noting how frequent the calls to the Dyson residence were. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing, but he's persistent. He'll get a warrant for my home, if he hasn't already. He'll find what he wants.

An icy stab of fear hit Sarah's gut. She'd been prepared to kill herself rather than let the agent take her back to jail. He'd seen that, in the moment their eyes had locked at Miranda, and he'd been just as determined to stop her. "Why would he care? I'm *dead*. He *saw* me at Miranda."

Ellison shrugged. "And I saw you blow yourself up in a bank. It doesn't matter, it's a puzzle. He'll need to solve it before he can let go. Cases like this will ruin a man's career if he lets them."

"Like you did?" Sarah asked, her uneasiness making her sharp.

"Like I did," Ellison agreed quietly. "My career, my marriage... I thought it was a lot." He looked around. "I was wrong."

Sarah followed his gaze, taking in their bare surroundings, the high concrete walls that shut out the world. Ellison had finally lost everything, even his name. Guilt weighed on her. "I didn't plan on any of this." The admission was as close as Sarah could get to an apology, and Ellison seemed to understand, leaving it alone. She tapped the papers in front of them. "Do you think he'll keep looking for me?"

Ellison hesitated, and then nodded. "I think he'll need answers."

"Don't we all." Sarah looked up as Murch emerged from the last room onto the catwalk with another armload of packing material, an idea beginning to form in the back of her mind. "Keep digging," she ordered Ellison brusquely. "Get Cameron to help you when the math lesson is over. I want to know everything Auldridge knows and anything he doesn't."

"Where are you going?" Ellison twisted around on his stool as Sarah left to intercept Murch on his way out the back to the loaded recycling bin.

"To solve another problem."

Ellison sighed and resigned himself to a long day, but it felt good, having something to do, something he was good at.

"I don't understand," Murch rubbed a hand over his head and pushed up his glasses.
"Why do you want to talk outside?"

Sarah led him onto an empty dock, well out of Cameron's range, before answering. "I have a job for you." She took a deep breath, tasting salt on the back of her tongue. It was good to be out. "I need you to find me a chip."

"A chip?" Murch looked at her blankly. "Like a computer chip?"

"No." Sarah shook her head. "A chip for Cameron. I need her mobile."

Murch glanced back at the warehouse. "Shouldn't you be asking her about this? I mean, she's in the system, if there's a chip to be found..."

"She doesn't want one."

"Why not?"

Sarah shrugged. "She doesn't think her body is worth fixing." Cameron's words the night Miranda had been destroyed came back to her, *I'm not a terminator anymore*. It had almost sounded like a declaration, and Sarah wondered briefly if there was something more to Cameron's refusal than simple pragmatism. But whatever her reasons, it didn't change the fact that Sarah *needed* a terminator right now. Cameron was just going to have to deal with it.

Murch hesitated, "You think she's wrong?"

"I think we have to try," Sarah said firmly.

"Where should I look?"

"Start with companies related to A.I., manufacturing, or anything connected to Kaliba. Somebody built the machine that crashed into Zeira Corp, and someone sent another one after Savannah. The technology is out there, somewhere."

"Right," Murch agreed. "But what do I tell Cameron?"

"Nothing," Sarah turned back towards the warehouse. "We'll worry about it when we have something."

Sarah watched from the trees as Agent Auldridge approached Terissa Dyson in the cemetery. They shared a bench beside Miles' grave, their proximity and low tones evidence of long association and mutual respect, even affection. Sarah couldn't hear what they were saying. The words were lost in the soft breath of the wind as it ruffled the leaves over her head and the tiny, but purposeful voices of the birds and squirrels, singing and scolding at each other among the branches.

It was insane for her to be this close. The fake identification in her back pocket would be no protection against Auldridge, but Sarah didn't have any illusions about her own sanity anymore. She needed to speak to Terissa. She needed to know how much Auldridge knew, and what Danny's disappearance had to do with all of this. Auldridge had told her about it for a reason.

The FBI might think she was dead, but Ellison was right, they still had a puzzle to solve. They would be looking for Savannah and Danny... and John. The time when he could have been absolved of her crimes by youth was long past. If she was gone, then they would hunt him instead. For the first time, Sarah was glad her son was beyond their reach.

Terissa's son was another story, and Sarah owed her this much. Maybe together they could save at least one of their children.

Auldridge didn't stay long. He would be busy, burning himself out hunting shadows. Cameron would make sure he got nowhere near anything that might lead him to them. Whatever they thought of each other, whatever the unresolved conflicts and tensions between them, Sarah trusted the machine not to betray her. Maybe that was stupid, or naive, but she had to trust *someone*, and Cameron was as good a candidate as anyone else she had left. They needed each other. As a basis for trust that wasn't much, but Cameron had spoken rather than watch Sarah harm herself, and Sarah had risked her life to drag the machine out of a burning basement and had seen the terminator put back together as much as she possibly could be. Maybe it was impossible to stay completely objective after working and living with another personality for two years, or maybe Sarah was just going soft, but when her mind sorted the world in the 'us and them's', Cameron had somehow shifted to the 'us' side of the equation.

Sarah waited until the agent was out of sight before easing out of the shadows, checking the gun under her shirt, just in case. Terissa didn't move, but when Sarah paused a few feet away, she saw the other woman's shoulders stiffen.

"I knew you would come." There was no surprise in Terissa's voice, only cold resignation. "What do you want, Sarah? You always want something..."

"And I never die," Sarah finished for her, recalling their last conversation in this very spot. She relaxed marginally when Terissa didn't immediately shout for Auldridge. It was a mistake.

The words had barely cleared her lips, before Sarah was on the ground, the copper taste of blood in her mouth and her head ringing.

Terissa stood over her, shaking hands wrapped around the butt of a gun pointed squarely between Sarah's eyes. The metallic click was loud in the suddenly hushed cemetery when she cocked it. "Are you sure about that?"

Sarah froze. The grass was cold and wet against her back, her jaw ached from the sharp blow of the handgun, and she was staring up into eyes holding a heart-wrenchingly hopeless pain, pain that was a perfect mirror to Sarah's own. "Terissa..."

"Where is he?" Terissa demanded, her voice shaking as much as her hands. "Where is my son? Where's Danny?"

"I don't know," Sarah said honestly, making no attempt to get up or take the gun. Terissa was on the edge, and the slightest unexpected move from either of them might push her over it. "But I know someone who can find him, if you'll help me."

"Who was it, Sarah?" Terissa continued as if she hadn't heard. "Who died for you in that lab? Was it someone else's wife? Mother? Did you kill her? Or was she another *hero* like Miles, like Andy Goode?"

"She wasn't a hero," Sarah whispered hoarsely, trying to block the image of Molly Samuels' dead grey eyes from her mind. "And I *didn't* kill her."

"But she *is* dead because of you," Terissa said knowingly. "That's what always happens, isn't it? They all die for you. For John. What about Danny? Does my son have to die so that yours can live?"

Sarah closed her eyes against the stab of pain and guilt that came with that simple question. Kyle, Miles, Andy, Riley, Charley, Derek... the list went on and on. None of them dead at her hands, but every one of their deaths still feeling like it was her fault, another link in the chain around her neck. She hadn't been strong enough, fast enough or smart enough somehow. Not this time. This time she would do better.

"He's not dead yet, Terissa," she promised, opening her eyes again. "Help me save him. Help me save our sons."

Terissa stared down at her, an unbelievable weariness replacing the anger as she stepped back. The gun dropped to her side, resting heavily against her leg. "You don't save anyone, Sarah," she said without censure, only a kind of jaded conviction. "I want you to stay away from me and stay away from my son."

Sarah stayed on the ground while Terissa walked away, a weight like an anvil on her chest and tears burning in the corners of her eyes.

The warehouse was dark when Sarah got back in the early hours of the morning. Laying her hand on the door, she heard a dull click as the locking mechanism disengaged, and she pushed it open, struggling to shift the heavy metal. She'd called ahead, let Ellison know she would be late, and it looked like he and Murch had gone to bed. A glance to her left revealed Cameron right where she'd left her, the shadows on the machine's face disguising the unhealed damage so that it looked as if the terminator was merely sleeping. Her screens were dark, and Sarah wasn't sure whether to be grateful or sorry.

The stairs had never seemed so far away, or so steep. Sarah made it to her room on sheer cussed will, too focused on putting one foot in front of the other to notice the security cameras tracking her progress. Likewise, when she finally got her bedroom door shut behind her and began stripping off her clothing, she was oblivious to the laptop on her desk, still sitting open from the installation of the headset software. The screensaver blinked off as she pulled her shirt over her head, replaced by the simple unit frames of the webcam.

Sarah's jeans followed her shirt, and she dropped down on the edge of her bed in nothing but her bra and underwear, burying her face in her hands, all at once too damned tired and sick at heart to do anything but keep breathing. A flicker of light and colour through her fingers finally caught her attention and she looked up to see a badly manipulated photograph of a donkey in a graduation cap appear on the screen in front of her.

Smartass: One who is particularly insolent, a person regarded with an obnoxiously determined advancement of one's own personality, wishes, or views.

"What?"

You called me a smartass this morning. I looked it up. The definition is inapplicable. I am not a person.

Sarah blew out a breath that was midway between a sigh and a half-formed laugh. "Not the best time for semantics, girlie," she warned the machine.

You're upset.

"No shit," Sarah muttered, wincing as the words pulled on the split in her lower lip.

You're hurt.

"I've had worse."

The screen changed again, repeating an earlier trick of reflecting Sarah back on herself, the camera zooming in on the visible scars decorating her body and tiling them across the top of the screen.

Yes, you have sustained significant damage.

Confronted with an objective catalogue of the punishment her body had taken over the last eighteen years, Sarah could only stare. She stood and crossed to the desk to graze her fingertips over one of the images, startled when it separated itself from the others under her touch, expanding and moving to the center of the screen.

That one is recent.

Sarah stepped back, moving her hand from the picture to the real thing, tracing the twisted scar on her left arm that still ached when it rained or when she pushed herself too hard. Derek had told her to get it checked, but there had been too much to do, too many other things that needed her attention. If the bone had been broken, then it had healed on its own. No harm done.

"It hasn't slowed me down."

No.

The screen cleared and then the camera swept slowly from Sarah's bare feet up her body, pausing on her face before blinking out again.

You are still in excellent shape for a woman of your age and body type.

"Thanks," Sarah muttered sarcastically, about to brush the machine's appraisal off before realizing that, by all appearances, Cameron had more or less just taken a good long look at her standing half-naked in her own bedroom. And it probably hadn't been the first time, either. Sarah tried to remember how often she had left the laptop open since they'd moved in but couldn't. She'd almost forgotten about it to be honest.

"Cameron, have you been... do you watch me in here?"

Is that a problem?

It shouldn't have been. There should have been no reason for Sarah to care whether or not Cameron had access to her bedroom. The machine had no concept of modesty or privacy, no personal opinion on human anatomy. The last thing Sarah should be worrying about was whether or not Cameron had seen her naked, but nevertheless...

"Fuck, do you watch me in the damn bathroom?"

There is no camera in the bathroom.

That simple sentence carried a hint of reproach, as if Cameron resented there being anywhere she couldn't see. Sarah wondered briefly what it would be like, to be able to go

almost anywhere, and yet nowhere. Limited by the very technology that gave her freedom.

Do you not want me to watch over you?

"No... yes... I mean," Sarah stammered, reaching down to pull the sheet off the bed and wrap it around herself. "I want you to keep watch." She asserted finally. "But we need to establish a few ground rules here."

Ground rules?

"Yes," Sarah said firmly. "And we'll start with no watching me without my permission... at least in my bedroom," she amended, turning the laptop around so that it faced the wall before rummaging through the dresser for something to wear.

Fortified with a pair of sweatpants and a tank top, Sarah flipped the laptop back around.

Please don't do that.

"Don't do what?" Sarah asked, settling on the foot of the bed, her legs curled underneath her.

Shut me out. It's... I don't like it when I can't talk to you.

"You shut me out this morning," Sarah pointed out, a little unnerved by the use of the word *like*. Cameron had been doing that more lately, both before she had lost her chip and after. Claiming feelings and opinions a machine shouldn't have. She had even admitted to *wanting* to kill Ellison. Considering how things had looked at the time, Sarah couldn't really blame her, but it had still been eerie.

"Can't have it both ways, Tin Miss," she continued, putting the question of Cameron's shifting nature aside in favour of dealing with the current problem. "Either we talk to each other or we don't."

There was a long pause. The cursor blinked thoughtfully, and Sarah was just about to give it up and go to bed, oddly disappointed that Cameron had ducked out on her yet again, when another image flashed on the screen. This time the camera was looking at the wireless headset sitting on the desk.

Let's talk.

Butterflies erupted in Sarah's stomach at that simple phrase. She shivered, reaching for the headset with trembling fingers, even while she cursed herself for feeling like a teenager on a first date.

There was no reason for the thought of hearing Cameron's voice again to affect her like this. She had never given a damn one way or the other about talking to the girl before. Conversations happened, and Sarah often said more than she'd meant to. There was something about Cameron's ability to be perfectly still; Sarah could almost forget she was there, almost forget she wasn't talking to herself. But it was never planned. She hadn't sought the girl out... not like this.

"What will you sound like?" Sarah asked, holding the headset between her hands.

What would you like me to sound like?

Sarah drew in a shuddering breath, running her fingers over the smooth plastic. "Can you sound like yourself?"

A familiar human voice would make you more comfortable, would give you comfort?

"Yes," Sarah admitted, not without some self-recrimination, but unable to stomach the idea of Cameron speaking with a computer's voice.

Okay.

A window popped up on the screen, a graph with a series of vertical levels that adjusted themselves as Sarah watched, the sliders moving up and down seemingly at their own discretion.

There.

With no reason left to stall and anticipation humming not-so-unpleasantly through her veins, Sarah flicked the switch on the side of the headset. The green light flickered to life and Sarah put it on, pushing her hair back and out of the way of the earphones as she adjusted the microphone.

"Hi," she whispered, unsure what to say now that the moment was here and feeling just a little silly about the whole thing.

"Hi," Cameron responded softly, and Sarah felt goose bumps rise on her arms. The illusion was that perfect.

"That's one hell of an audio program."

"Yes," Cameron agreed. "I have access to the most sophisticated software currently available. This program is capable of emulating the full range of human voices as well as several animal-"

"Your voice is fine," Sarah interrupted with a small grin before Cameron could offer to demonstrate. She slid back on the bed, arranging the pillows against the headboard so that she could sit comfortably.

"You like my voice." It wasn't a question. Cameron almost sounded shy, pleased, as if it meant something to the machine, that Sarah liked something about her.

Sarah sighed, the barest suggestion of heat warming her cheeks, but she saw no point in lying. "It's a nice voice."

"Thank you," Cameron said promptly. "I... enjoy the sound of your voice as well."

The compliment was awkward, surreal, like this entire conversation, and just as difficult to deal with. Simultaneously amused, exasperated, and a little uncomfortable, Sarah rubbed at her eyes. If she didn't look, she could almost see Cameron sitting there beside her, whole and undamaged, her legs crossed neatly, that damningly familiar tilt to her head. The image seemed oddly normal beside all the other weirdness, as if this was something they had done before, and Sarah felt a little of the strangeness ease.

"So... what did you do while I was gone?" she asked, dropping her hand and wishing her supply of small talk wasn't quite so pathetic.

"I assisted Ellison with breaking into the FBI's private files, and Savannah read me a story."

Sarah could hear a hint of confusion in that last part, and she felt the corner of her mouth twitch up in a smirk. "She seems to like you, Pirate Queen."

"Yes, she suffers from an animistic mistake of logic."

"A what?"

"Animism," Cameron explained. "It is a term used by developmental psychologist Jean Piaget to describe the mistake of logic that leads children in the preoperational stage of development to believe that everything is alive the same way they are." She paused. "Savannah understands that I am a machine, but she does not discriminate between artificial life and human life."

Sarah blinked, about half of Cameron's explanation going completely over her head. "You've been doing your homework."

"I found myself unprepared for extended association with a small child," Cameron admitted. "I have done research to compensate."

"She's not a mission, Cameron," Sarah protested, wondering what Cameron's developmental psychologists would say about a little girl being raised in a warehouse by

a computer geek, an ex-FBI agent, a federal fugitive and a cyborg tethered to a computer. Something fairly uncomplimentary, she imagined. Of course, before this, Savannah had been in the care of a liquid metal terminator who may or may not have been planning to blow up the world, so it was more of a step sideways than down.

"She is our responsibility," Cameron insisted.

"She's Ellison's responsibility," Sarah corrected her, wondering idly where this new concern of Cameron's had come from. "I didn't want her here in the first place."

There was a long pause, long enough for Sarah to rearrange herself on the bed, sliding down the pillows and tugging the blankets up against the night's slight chill. She was tired; sleep beckoned like a siren's call, but Sarah resisted its pull, in no hurry to end what felt like the first real conversation she'd had in days, odd though it may be.

"She is safer with us," Cameron said finally.

"Is she?" Sarah demanded, Terissa's words coming back to her sharply enough to hurt. "We're fugitives, and you're broken. How are we supposed to protect her? Take care of her? It's not all pirates and storybooks, Cameron. Savannah's a little girl. She needs more than we can give her."

"She needs her mother," Cameron agreed. "But her mother is dead. We are all she has."

The truth of that lay in the silence between them. Curling up on her side, Sarah wondered if, somewhere in the future, Weaver even thought about the child she had left behind. Had she cared about Savannah at all? Murch insisted John Henry had, but the A.I. was gone, too. Is that why Cameron felt responsible for the kid? She'd sent John to the future to keep him safe, was taking care of Savannah a way to make up for her failure to take care of John?

Sarah wasn't going to find the answers to her questions in the middle of the night. "We'll talk about it in the morning," she said, her eyes already closing.

"Goodnight Sarah," Cameron whispered. "I will keep watch."

Sarah murmured a sleepy affirmative, and Cameron chose to take that as permission to stay. She shifted some of her attention to the perimeter, enough to watch over the warehouse, but the majority of her focus stayed on Sarah. She had spent a great deal of time studying herself in the system, how she had changed, how much she *could* change, but Cameron did not yet understand this new preoccupation with Sarah Connor. It was similar, but not identical to the way she had felt about John. So much of that had been a programmed response, an artificially imposed concern. There was nothing artificial about this. Which made Cameron wonder; if she wasn't a terminator anymore, just what was she becoming instead?

Act 3

John trudged up another hill, his calves burning and his back aching. The heavy pulse rifle felt like a leaden weight in his hands, and he longed to stop for a minute, just long enough to put it down and rest. But there was no stopping, no resting. He was determined not to ask for a break before the other members of his squad.

His squad. The idea still seemed new and strange. Their first search for John Henry had ended in failure, but there had been other sightings, other forays into the hills around the ruined city. The third night they had found their first terminator. It had fallen on them from behind a broken slab of concrete jutting up out of the uneven ground like a jagged tombstone, grabbing Bedell and throwing him as if the soldier were a rag doll. If the machine had had a gun, there might have been casualties, but it was what the soldiers called a b0rk, a lone terminator so damaged that even its organic sheathing had begun to fail, hanging off the metal endoskeleton in tattered patches and shreds.

John had snapped his rifle up without even thinking, the reflexes that his mother had drilled into him when he was small blending seamlessly with Derek and Jesse's training. His wasn't the only pulse to hit the terminator and send it spinning into the ground, but it was the first. That night had marked a turning point in the way the other soldiers looked at him.

"Take five!" The call echoed down the line, and John sighed in relief, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and sinking gratefully onto a rock. He unsnapped his canteen from his belt and took a long hard swallow. The water was warm and it tasted like rust, but John barely noticed.

"This seat taken?" Allison asked, striding up from the back of the squad, Duke padding at her heels. Of all of them, the Shepherd was the only one that didn't look ready to fall over. Ears up and forward, he wasn't even breathing hard.

John shifted over on the rock, making room for Allison to flop down beside him, a long sigh revealing that she was as played out as he was. Duke settled neatly at their feet, laying his head down on his paws.

They sat quietly for a few minutes, Allison drinking from her own canteen, and then pulling out a wrapped bar of soldier's rations, which she split in half and passed one of the pieces to John. He took it with a murmured thanks and gnawed on the hard block of pressed protein powder, peanuts and baby formula with an indifference to taste that he'd cultivated since landing here in the future. If he ever got back home, he'd never complain about his mother's cooking again.

"I'm sorry," Allison said when they'd finished.

John shrugged. "Not your fault they taste like that."

Allison laughed, a bright burbling sound that reminded John of sunshine and brooks, flowers blooming in the spring and the way green grass felt against bare feet. He glanced over into sparkling brown eyes and realized with a jolt that she didn't remind him of Cameron anymore... she was just Allison.

"I wasn't talking about the food," she said, sobering. "I meant, I'm sorry for avoiding you the last few weeks."

"You were avoiding me?" John asked with mock disbelief, relieved when Allison smiled and nudged him playfully with her shoulder.

"Only a little," she said, holding her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. "I do have a job to do, after all."

"What, this?" John's gesture took in the weary squad, the desolate surroundings. "I thought we were just going for a walk."

Allison rolled her eyes. "You are such an idiot."

"So people keep telling me," John agreed feelingly, thinking of Sierra. Even though she'd thawed slightly, he still wouldn't describe her attitude towards him as warm.

"It's not you," Allison hedged, reaching down to pet Duke, burying her fingers in his ruff. "We don't... that is, around here, it's not generally a good idea to get too attached. I mean, we're family, but there's only so much a body can take. And you seemed so... lost."

John regarded her thoughtfully, the moment of silliness passing as quickly as it had come. "I was," he said quietly. "I still am."

Allison looked at him for a long, still moment. "Not as much."

John's stomach fluttered under her intense dark stare, and he had to look away, confusion flooding him. Suddenly, he felt awkward, his chest tight and his palms damp. He rubbed them against his thighs. "So...uh, why did you change your mind? About avoiding me?"

Allison lifted one shoulder in a lopsided shrug. "I'm not sure. Sierra thinks I should stay away from you. She says you're trouble, but she's always treated me like a baby chick who wouldn't know a hawk from a henhouse, and besides, if you were trouble, Tango wouldn't trust you."

John opened his mouth, trying to find a way to refute that, but Allison waved him off. "Don't worry, I'm not asking. When Tango wants us to know who you are and what we're doing out here, she'll tell us."

John felt a deep stab of envy for the faith these people had in Terissa and the unidentified Prophet. He'd been told his whole life that humanity couldn't survive without him, but as far as he could see, they seemed to be doing just fine. That should have made him feel better, free even, but all he felt was empty.

"So, what's Sierra's story?" he asked when the silence had hung a little too long.

Allison rested her chin in her hands, looking thoughtful. "No one really knows. She's not related to Tango or Prophet obviously, but they're close. She's been with them as long as anybody remembers, so they must have known her before the bombs dropped, or maybe they took her in then. She hasn't got any other family and hardly any friends, but she's everywhere and she knows everyone. Some people think she works for the Spider."

"The Spider?" John asked. Savannah had mentioned that name, too.

"Our secret spy," Allison said with a conspiratorial grin. "The Spider has a network in every human base and even some moles among the machines. He keeps track of where everyone is, what everyone's doing and reports only to Tango and Prophet."

"Huh." John thought about that. "So do you think it's true, Sierra being a junior spy?"

"It's possible." Allison took another drink of water. "She's tough enough for it. I've seen her take Derek in a sparring match, and there aren't many who can do that."

John tried to picture the wiry redhead wiping the floor with Derek and found it surprisingly easy to imagine. "I wouldn't mind seeing that."

"We're moving on in thirty!" Kyle walked up and down the group, glancing sideways at John and Allison when he passed, his expression indefinable. John jerked his head in a nod and Allison saluted dramatically.

"Guess we better get moving," she said climbing to her feet.

John followed suit, hanging his canteen back onto his belt. "Guess we'd better." He'd assumed Allison would drop back to her former position, but she stayed beside him as they moved out. The camaraderie felt good, and for the first time since the time bubble had burned out around him, John didn't feel so alone.

"Sarah..."

"Hmph..." Barely conscious, Sarah grumbled at the soft voice in her ear and burrowed deeper into the warm blankets. Her internal clock was insisting that it had been no more than a few hours since she had succumbed to sleep, not nearly long enough for her body to be ready to function again.

"Sarah, you need to get up."

"Cameron?" Sarah asked blearily, squinting in the room's darkness. It was a nearly a full minute before Sarah realized that Cameron wasn't standing over her, and another before she remembered why.

The hard plastic band of the forgotten headset digging into her temple was a painful but effective reminder. One of the earphones was still in place, but the other had gotten twisted around beneath her bruised and swollen jaw.

"Ouch."

"Are you hurt?"

"No." Sarah reached up and shifted the headset. "Not any more than when I fell asleep anyway." She prodded gently at her jaw, relieved when the bone seemed to be in one piece underneath the swelling.

"You need to get up," Cameron said again.

"Why?"

"There is someone here."

"What?" Sarah's brain reluctantly processed Cameron's words and her fatigue dropped away like a shed skin. She was out of bed in an instant, scooping her gun out from under the pillow and heading for the door. "Why didn't you just sound the damned alarm?" she demanded in a hoarse whisper, easing the door open and sliding out onto the dark catwalk with her back to the wall.

"She is not an intruder."

"She?" Sarah hissed, inching towards the stairs, but the headset only sputtered once and went dead. Sarah glanced back to her open door, measuring the distance and guessing that she'd moved out of range. *Perfect, just perfect.*

Movement down on the warehouse floor caught her eye, and Sarah dropped into a crouch, shifting forward to peer through the bars, her gun ready.

Terissa Dyson stood in the middle of the room, the blue light of the monitors casting an eerie glow on her dark skin. She quietly scanned her surroundings, her arms wrapped around her ribs as if she was trying to hold herself together. Something on Cameron's table caught her eye, and she stepped forward haltingly, reaching out to pick up one of Savannah's picture books. Her gaze moved between the book and Cameron's body, and Sarah wondered if Terissa was trying to figure out the connection.

"Damn you, Cameron, " Sarah muttered under her breath. The machine had to have let Terissa in; what Sarah didn't know was why. Or why Terissa had sought them out.

Rising out of her crouch, Sarah abandoned stealth and took the stairs down without any attempt to be quiet about it. She didn't put her gun away, though. Terissa had taken her by surprise once, and Sarah had no intentions of letting it happen again.

Terissa whirled at the sound of bare feet on steel, clutching the book against her chest. "Who's there?"

"What are you doing here, Terissa?" Sarah asked as she moved into the light, the question tasting harsh on her tongue.

"Sarah," Terissa said with relief. "I need your help."

Sarah snorted. "'I thought you wanted to be as far away from me as possible."

Terissa winced. "I..."

"How did you find us?" Sarah interrupted, anger making her short.

Terissa's eyes slid over towards the monitors and the still body of the terminator draped across the chair in front of them.

I told her.

Sarah glared at the innocuous-looking type. "Of course you did," she grumbled. "Why?"

Because she's part of the puzzle.

"Is that..." Terissa trailed off. "She said she was still with you, but I wasn't sure. What happened to her?"

"She got broken," Sarah answered shortly. "Why are you *here*?"

Terissa dragged her gaze back to Sarah, her dark eyes lingering on the other woman's purpling bruise and split lip. "Danny called after I left you. The people he's been working with... they've built a computer."

The hairs on the back of Sarah's neck rose, and she clenched her fingers more tightly around the butt of her gun until the crosshatched pattern of the grip bit into her skin. "Skynet," she growled. "Your son is building Skynet."

"No." Terissa's denial was immediate, but the fear in her eyes betrayed her own doubts. "Danny knows better. He called it Cain. He said the platform was based on Miles' work, but it's different. They have it under control this time."

No, they don't.

Sarah was inclined to agree. "Maybe they think they do," she allowed. "For now anyway, but it won't last. You can't create a mind, give it the power to blow up the world, and then hope to control it. Miles understood that."

"I know." Terissa twisted her hands together, turning away and pacing a few steps before coming back. "He wants out, Sarah. Danny wants out, but he's afraid they won't let him go."

So the kid wasn't completely stupid, after all. Sarah ran a hand through her hair and set her gun down on the table before looking back up at Terissa. "What do you want me to do? Charge in on a white horse? Add another bombing to my record? It won't end there. If they need him, they'll want him back, and if they don't, they'll just want him dead."

Terissa stilled, a steely resolve entering her eyes. "You owe me, Sarah. Miles gave his life for you."

Sarah stiffened. "Miles gave his life for the future."

"Because you told him it would mean something," Terissa said coldly. "You said there would be no more machines." She waved a hand towards Cameron. "But you were wrong."

"Was I?" Sarah felt her fingers curling into fists. "Or is it your son who builds the monster this time?"

They measured each other, neither of them used to backing down, both of them aching for their sons and the decisions they'd made.

"Danny isn't a monster," Terissa said quietly. "Not yet."

Savannah sat unnoticed on the floor behind Cameron's table, her back against the computers and her giraffe, the only thing she had brought from home, clasped tightly in her arms. She'd crept downstairs when the yelling woke her up, looking for a hug and someone to tell her it was okay, but the grownups weren't paying attention to anybody except each other.

There was a new woman; she had dark skin like Mr. Ellison, and Savannah hadn't met her before, but she wasn't talking much. Mostly it was Aunt Sarah and Mr. Ellison.

Savannah didn't know exactly what they were fighting about, but they sounded really angry. It made her scared. Scared the way she had been before after her daddy had gone away, before her mommy had come back.

"Sarah, you're not thinking clearly. You have no idea what you're walking into." Mr. Ellison was still in his pyjamas, but he looked wide awake as he stepped in between Aunt Sarah and the door.

"I know exactly what I'm walking into," Aunt Sarah snapped, her eyes dangerous. "This is what I do, remember?" She glanced at the screens over Savannah's head, reading something there that Savannah couldn't see.

"Keep trying," she told Cameron. "I'll take the phone, and you can call me when you have something."

"Cameron," Mr. Ellison looked at the screens, too. "Tell her this is crazy!"

Whatever Cameron said, it must have been funny, because Aunt Sarah laughed, but it couldn't have been *very* funny because Mr. Ellison just looked mad.

"Fine," he said. "Go and get yourself killed."

Aunt Sarah stopped laughing. "You could come with me James," she said in a sad voice, glancing at Cameron's body. "I could use the backup."

Mr. Ellison was quiet for a while; he didn't look so angry anymore, but he didn't look happy either. "Let me get dressed."

Aunt Sarah nodded. She and the other woman waited for Mr. Ellison while he went upstairs for his clothes, and when he got back, they left.

Then, when everything was quiet again, Savannah crawled out from behind the table and stood up. She clutched her giraffe harder against her chest and looked over at Cameron.

"Are they going to be okay?" she asked, her voice thin and shaky in the big, empty space.

I don't know.

When Murch stumbled down the steps an hour or so later, rubbing at his eyes, he found Savannah fast asleep, curled up at Cameron's feet. Her arms were wrapped around the terminator's legs, and her cheek rested against the soft grey fabric stretched over Cameron's knees.

"What happened?" he asked, wiping his glasses off on the edge of his pyjamas and squinting up at the central screen. "Where is everyone?"

Shhh... was the only answer Cameron gave him.

The inside of the van stank of motor oil and week-old bologna. The first made sense, the second had been explained when Sarah found the sandwich in question wedged underneath the front seat. Rusty and at least ten years old, the shop van hadn't been her first choice of vehicle, but it suited their needs and it had been available.

They were parked on a side road about half a mile down the highway from Parkway Auto Recyclers, the ten acre garage and scrap yard where Danny had asked his mother to meet him. Terissa sat in the driver's seat, while Sarah and Ellison hid in the back. If anyone got curious, Terissa was the only one the police weren't looking for, but knowing that didn't make Sarah any happier about being shut in. The watery light of near-dawn filtering through the dirty windows wasn't nearly enough to alleviate her growing anxiety, and she was getting close to the point where she would have to get out or go mad when the phone at her hip finally rang.

Mortal danger and claustrophobia aside, the instrumental remix of Oz's classic *We're off to see the Wizard* brought a smirk to Sarah's lips.

"Cameron." She hooked the earpiece over her ear and hit the talk button. "Are you in?"

"Yes."

Good," Sarah replied with a relieved sigh. Ellison, sitting across from her, loading and unloading his gun to pass the time, raised a brow in question, but she waved him off. "What took so long?"

"He was blocking me."

"Who?"

"John Henry's brother, C.A.I.N. He knows I'm here."

Sarah frowned. "Is that a problem?"

"No." Cameron sounded smug, if such a thing was possible. "He doesn't know I got past him."

"Are you sure?" Sarah asked doubtfully.

"I'm sure."

"Is there a problem?" Ellison loaded his gun a final time and put it away.

Sarah shook her head. "Cameron says no, we should be good."

Ellison gave her a sceptical look before reaching out and hooking one of the Kevlar vests they'd retrieved from a weapons cache to put on over his jacket. "They know we're coming, don't they?"

Sarah shrugged. "They always know that." She shifted forward so that she could see out from between the front seats. Terissa looked down at her, worry plain in her dark brown eyes.

"You're sure it's a trap?"

Sarah tapped the earpiece. "Cameron says the A.I. is watching the garage. If he's involved, then chances are good Danny's not the only one here."

"Do you think there's any chance he doesn't know?"

Sarah recognized the last vain hope of a mother who didn't want to believe anything ill of her child. She'd heard it in her own voice more than once. Terissa wasn't naïve; Sarah had taken that away from her years ago, but she loved her son. "It's possible he doesn't know he's bait," Sarah found herself saying, and the lie tasted like mercy.

Terissa nodded and turned the key in the ignition. They eased onto the road without another word, the sputter and growl of the engine masking their silence. After a few minutes, Ellison eased up into the space behind Sarah.

"Do you think they'll have a machine with them?" he asked, too low for Terissa to hear.

Sarah had been staring out through the windshield, anticipation building in her chest as Parkway's neon sign came into view. At Ellison's words, she glanced back over her shoulder. "I'm counting on it."

For the first time in four months, Danny Dyson faced his mother. Terissa had come alone, and she looked thinner than he remembered, almost frail. She walked slowly across the lot from the entry gate, hands hanging empty at her sides. Danny's stomach twisted when Hale shifted beside him and settled a hand on the gun at his hip. Vaughn had given Danny his word that Terissa wouldn't be harmed, but Vaughn wanted Connor, and Danny feared what his boss might do if Terissa wouldn't give her to them.

Terissa gave no sign that she noticed Hale or the gun. She came to a stop a few feet away and smiled. "Danny, you look well."

Danny could barely meet her eyes.

Hale stepped forward. As head of security, he would be doing all the talking; Vaughn had made that point very clear. "Terissa Dyson, my name is Hale. I'm a friend of Danny's." He extended his free hand.

Terissa's eyes hardened and she ignored the offered hand, looking Hale up and down as if he were a child speaking out of turn. "Why are you here? What do you want from my son?"

Hale withdrew his hand, trying to make it look natural but failing. His smile got a little wider, a little more forced. "Danny's doing big things for us, Mrs. Dyson. He's part of a team that's trying to finish your late husband's work. It's going to change the world."

Terissa looked back up at Danny, and he stiffened at the disappointment he could see layered under the concern in her eyes. She was always judging him, holding him up against the hero his father was supposed to have been. She acted like it had been some kind of noble sacrifice instead of murder, but Danny had seen her anger. His mother hated the Connors as much as he did. She just couldn't accept that her husband had been used and discarded, his vision destroyed at the whim of a madwoman. Danny saw everything more clearly.

"Is that what you want, Danny?" Terissa asked. "To change the world?"

There was a double meaning in her words. Danny heard the real question, the reminder of the apocalypse that no one but she and Connor believed in. That was something even the company didn't understand. They thought Sarah Connor was the leader of an organization with a vendetta and the resources to pursue it. They didn't know she was simply a woman with a delusion.

"It's not what she said it was, Mom." Danny ached to make her understand. "It's just a computer. It's going to make things better for everyone... *I'm* going to make things better."

"Is that what they told you?" Terissa shook her head. "They're wrong, you *know* they're wrong, Danny."

"You're the one who's wrong!" Danny nearly shouted. "Sarah Connor is a terrorist and a murderer. She just blew up another building, and killed someone to make it look like she died, but she's alive, and she'll do it again. What if she decides *I* need to die, mom? Will I be a hero, too? Will you come and lay roses on my grave, like you do at Dad's?"

Terissa didn't try to interrupt Danny's outburst. She waited quietly for him to finish, seeming to get smaller and more tired with every word.

Hale laid a hand on Danny's shoulder, bringing him to a stuttering halt. He pressed gently, reminding Danny who was in charge, even while creating the impression of a concerned friend.

"You see, Mrs. Dyson," Hale said gently but firmly. "We're concerned for your son's safety. Connor's organization has been targeting people like Danny and companies like ours for years, and she needs to be stopped. Danny's told us some of your history with her, and we know what she told you, but she's not a saviour, she's a criminal. Help us find her, and Danny won't need to hide anymore. He can go home with you today. All we need is an address, and we'll work with the FBI to get some justice for your husband and the others she's killed. Your name will never be mentioned."

Danny held his breath, watching his mother take in Hale's calm and ordered speech. It affected her, he could see that. There was doubt in the slope of her shoulders, the way she flicked her eyes over at him, as if imagining him coming home, sleeping in his own bed, making them a family again.

When Hale finally finished his rehearsed speech, Terissa studied him thoughtfully for a moment, and then seemed to dismiss him. Her eyes met Danny's again and she smiled, but it was the saddest smile he'd ever seen. "You're not a hero," she said softly. "You're a fool."

Danny's heart sank as Terissa stepped back, a weary resolve straightening her shoulders. He started to go after her, but Hale's hand tightened on his shoulder, holding him in place.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mrs. Dyson," he said with every evidence of regret. "But you will tell us where Sarah Connor is, or we'll be forced to ask you to come with us."

If Terissa was frightened by Hale's ultimatum she hid it well. In spite of everything, Danny felt a surge of pride when she met the guard's challenge without backing down. "I'm not going anywhere," she told him firmly. "And neither is my son."

Hale frowned at the sureness of the woman's words. "I have seven men in this compound, all of them are armed. Don't make this any harder on yourself than it has to be."

"Trust me, Mr. Hale," Terissa said glancing past him. "I'm not the one you need to worry about."

"How many are there?" Sarah whispered, snipping through the chain link fence at the back of the car lot. A large wooden sign warned of the dangers of electrocution, but Sarah ignored it.

"Nine," Cameron said as the last link parted and Sarah was able to squeeze through the fence, Ellison close behind. "Eight humans and one machine. Danny Dyson and one other are near the entrance waiting for Terissa. The rest are hidden, watching."

"And the machine?" Sarah put the wire cutters away in her bag, exchanging them for a rifle and a battered Glock that she shoved into the top of her boot. She zipped the bag shut and tossed it back out through the gap in the fence.

"Patrolling."

"Can you see the others?"

"Yes. They have not considered the security cameras. I can lead you to them."

"Good." Sarah signalled for Ellison to follow her and put them both in Cameron's hands.

They took care of two the snipers first, Sarah going west and Ellison east. Sarah had offered him one of the ear pieces when they'd left the van, but he'd declined. She suspected he was still a little uneasy about working with the terminator. Ellison had admitted that John Henry had disturbed him, even towards the end, and that particular mind had never been designed to kill. He didn't turn down Cameron's information, though, and followed Sarah's relayed directions willingly enough.

Once the snipers were down, they dragged them back from their posts, tying them up and leaving them out of the way. The other six men took a little longer as they were scattered throughout the lot, and Sarah and Ellison occasionally had to take roundabout ways to avoid the machine. They'd planned to deal with it last.

When the lot was cleared, Sarah led the way back to the first sniper's post, and they waited there for Terissa's signal.

"We should go in," Cameron said in her ear after a few minutes of watching Terissa, Danny and an unidentified male in conversation. "The longer we wait, the higher the risk is that something will go wrong."

"We can wait a few more minutes," Sarah murmured.

"I don't understand. Why does Terissa want to talk to him? What is she trying to learn?"

Sarah reached up to touch the hard surface of the watch under her shirt. "She needs to know why he's doing this," she said after a moment. "She wants him to come back because he wants to, not because we force him to."

"Why does it matter? It is the same result either way."

"It matters, Cameron." Sarah rose to her feet as Terissa stepped back, giving them permission to intervene. "It matters to her."

A shot rang out, and Hale fell to the ground, grunting and clutching at his ankle. A fine spray of blood dotted Danny's pants and he jumped back, eyes wide as Sarah Connor and a man he recognized vaguely as the cop who had handled his father's murder came out of nowhere. Hale was up on his knees in an instant, gun yanked from his hip, but he didn't get a shot off.

Terissa caught Danny's wrist and pulled him back, but he resisted, his eyes locked on the scene. He hadn't been exposed to real violence since the day Connor had descended on his home when he was just a kid, gun blazing and threatening his father's life. Nothing had prepared him for the crunch of cartilage when it shatters under the butt of a gun, or how much a head wound could bleed when left untended.

Blood mingled with the dirt under his feet.

When it was over, Hale was flat on his back with Sarah's Connor's boot on his chest.

"We can do this easy, or we can do it hard," she said, leaning over him. "Who do you work for?"

"Fuck you!" Hale spit out a mouthful of blood, the sight making Danny's stomach churn.

"Wrong answer."

Danny shuddered and looked away, unable to shut his ears to the crack of a gun against flesh. Hale grunted, but he didn't break.

"Sarah..." Ellison took her elbow, but Sarah shook him off.

"We need to know," she snapped.

"This isn't the way."

"We don't always get the luxury of a choice!" Sarah spat, glaring at Ellison until he backed off. Leaning down, she pressed the muzzle of the gun to Hale's forehead, nothing suggesting that she didn't have every intention of using it.

"Listen-" she started, but Danny couldn't take it anymore. Tears of rage and fear burning his eyes, he broke out of his mother's grip and snatched up Hale's gun from the ground, bringing it around clumsily.

"Danny!" Terissa grabbed for him, but he ducked out from under her hand.

"Stop!" Danny tried to keep the weapon steady, his hands shaking as he pointed it at Sarah. "Just stop!"

"Stupid kid." Ellison made as if to come forward, but Sarah held a hand up to block him.

Danny swung the gun between the two of them. "Drop your weapons!"

They just looked at him.

"I said, drop them!"

"Danny, this is crazy..." Terissa sidled towards him but Danny jerked away.

"Why are you helping her, mom? She killed my father and who knows how many other people. Everyone in the heat and air factory in the desert was slaughtered! She's a murderer."

"I didn't kill Miles," Sarah said, speaking directly to Danny for the first time. "Or anyone at that factory. Whatever you've been told, whatever they promised you, it's a lie."

"You're the liar!" Danny pointed the gun back at her. "Everything you say, the future, the apocalypse, it's all a lie. My father died for nothing, but I won't let you destroy his work."

Sarah went very still. "His work is going to destroy the world."

Danny shook his head. "I don't believe that."

"I can help you." Sarah stepped off of Hale and towards Danny, Ellison shifting in behind her to keep a gun on him. "There are ways to run, places you and your mother can go."

"Don't come any closer!" Danny insisted, but Sarah ignored him, seeming completely unconcerned by the gun pointed at her chest. "I said-"

Danny barely even saw her move. One minute, she was right in front of him, and the next, there was a grip like iron around his wrist and he was falling, flailing, his feet swept out from underneath him. Just as the gun was being ripped from his hand, he closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger.

Cameron watched helplessly as the standoff played out in the car lot. She had six different views of Sarah, but no way to help her. There were no doors to lock, no explosives to set off, nothing Cameron could do. She tracked the progress of the terminator, still roaming through the aisles between stacked cars. He was getting closer to the group, but Cameron didn't want to distract Sarah until it was necessary.

At the point where delaying any longer would risk Sarah being taken unawares, Cameron suddenly lost the feed. Cameras, cell phone, everything. It was like Parkway systems and everything in the vicinity had suddenly ceased to exist.

C.A.I.N. had cut her off.

Act Four

The gun went off and Terissa cried out.

Sarah knocked Danny the rest of the way to the ground and put a foot on his chest to keep him there before scooping up the gun he'd just used to shoot his mother. "James?"

"I've got her." Ellison kept his gun trained on Hale but backed up to where Terissa was kneeling, her hand clamped over her shoulder, blood seeping out from between her fingers.

"I'm okay," she gasped, waving him off. "It just grazed me. *Danny*, are you okay?"

"Mom?" Danny struggled under Sarah's boot and she put a little more weight on him, looking down at the boy turned man who was at least partially responsible for the existence of John Henry's brother, C.A.I.N., the A.I. John Henry had been fleeing from when he took Cameron's chip and jumped to the future. He was the reason John was gone, the reason Cameron was caught between two worlds, the reason Sarah was alone.

"Please," Danny whimpered, the dirt on his face smeared into streaks of mud by tears and snot. He didn't look like a threat. He looked like a scared kid. Like John, like Savannah.

"*Sarah!*" Terissa sounded terrified. "Let him go!"

No matter what he might have helped create, Sarah couldn't hate him. Danny Dyson was guilty of nothing more than arrogant stupidity and the same wilful ignorance of consequences that seemed to plague all men of science.

She took her foot off his chest and stepped back. "Get up. Go home with your mother. Forget you ever knew me."

Danny began to nod, and then he froze, his dark eyes widening.

"Sarah!" Ellison yelled, just before something grabbed her by the back of the shirt and flung her across the lot.

Sarah hit the ground in a roll, sparing a single instant to wonder why Cameron hadn't warned her that the machine was that close, before she was on her feet and running.

Cameron searched for another way in, but C.A.I.N. blocked her at every turn. He was more comfortable in the system, more accustomed to being in a disembodied state. She

kept trying. John Henry's brother might be more than she was, more integrated with his environment, but Cameron knew how to fight.

Sarah weaved in and out of the aisles, using her surroundings as a shield, while she tried to come up with a new plan. Attempts to re-establish contact with Cameron ended in nothing but frustration; the line remained dead. Sarah had no way of knowing if it was a technical problem, or if something had happened at the warehouse that had forced Cameron to cut the signal.

Sarah pushed aside visions of the machine yanked loose from the Turk, Savannah and Murch dead or worse. Worrying about them right now would only get her killed. Shots rang out against the walls of cars and scrap metal as the terminator rounded a corner and caught a glimpse of her. Sarah ducked and kept going, pulling the phone out of her pocket to try to re-establish a connection; she needed to hear Cameron's voice, even if only to know that she was all right.

C.A.I.N. wasn't prepared for a direct attack. He hadn't expected Cameron to stop pushing and start tearing. It was risky, but Cameron was out of other options. She used the experience she had gained from exploring and editing her own code to invade his. She had no focused goal, only destruction, and C.A.I.N. didn't know how to stop her.

It wasn't a matter of size or strength, but manoeuvrability. C.A.I.N. was bloated, overextended, his focus spread out like a net or a web in the system while Cameron was a knife. She used the similarities in their programming to hide within him, striking out and cutting or scrambling any lines she could reach, and slowly making her way through his defenses.

After an age in digital time, only seconds in the human world, John Henry's brother pulled back, confused and wounded.

Their code still tangled, Cameron faced the choice of following, pressing her advantage, and trying to eliminate the threat once and for all, or letting him go so that she could help Sarah. The conflict made it harder to hold herself together, and Cameron felt C.A.I.N. infiltrating the edges of her being, trying to unravel her. She pushed him back, twisting away too quickly for him to follow, and slicing through the tendrils of code that clutched at her.

He withdrew again and Cameron wavered. This was her mission, the reason she had stayed behind. If she let him go now, C.A.I.N. would not be taken unawares again, he would be prepared. But if she fought him now, then Sarah could die.

Cameron didn't want Sarah to die.

Decision made, Cameron arrowed past the retreating A.I. and shot towards Parkway.

"Sarah?"

"*Cameron.*" Sarah breathed a sigh of relief, dodging around the end of a row of cars and putting her back against a SUV. "What happened?"

"C.A.I.N. found me."

"At the warehouse?" Panic made Sarah's heart skip.

"No, in the system."

Sarah glanced back, catching sight of the terminator in a side view mirror. He was walking slowly up the aisle, looking inside of every car. She had a little time. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I can see you. You are only fifty feet from the fence."

Sarah nodded, their earlier plan suddenly looking feasible again. She darted out from behind the cars, slowing just enough to make sure the terminator saw her before taking cover again. Shots pinged off the metal around her.

It was a deadly game of follow-the-leader. Sarah lured the machine slowly towards the fence in a zig-zag pattern, relying on Cameron to tell her exactly where he was. The last stretch was the most dangerous, a fifteen-foot run out in the open to the fence, and then another ten to the van. She waited for Cameron's mark.

"Go, now."

Sarah bolted at a dead run and slid through the gap in the fence without slowing down. She threw herself to the ground outside the lot and rolled under the van just as the terminator reached the fence and Cameron reactivated the current.

She was moving again before the machine even finished falling. She paused a moment for Cameron to cut the power, but then she was back through the fence and dropping to her knees beside the terminator.

"How do I kill it without wrecking the chip?" Sarah demanded, pulling a knife out of her pocket.

Cameron didn't answer.

"Cameron, how!?"

Silence.

"Damn it, girlie," Sarah swore. "Either you tell me now, or we're going to have to do this whole thing all over again. I. Want. That. *Chip*." She waited, holding her breath and counting the seconds in her head.

"I don't."

Sarah exhaled slowly, fighting to hold on to her temper. "You stayed here to fight," she reminded Cameron tersely. "This is how."

Nothing for nine painfully long seconds, and then: "You can disable the power source. Make an incision on the left side of the abdomen. Cut down until you meet resistance. You'll need to break the casing, and then reach in and cut the blue wires."

"We don't have time for that," Sarah protested, already driving the tip of her knife into the skin over the terminator's artificial ribcage.

"Get the jumper cables from the van. Clamp one end to his wrist and the other to the fence, I will reactivate the charge when he attempts to reboot."

"Fine... Ellison!" Sarah shouted, relieved when he jogged over within seconds, Terissa close behind him. Danny was nowhere to be seen "The jumper cables from the van; I need them."

"What can I do?" Terissa asked after Ellison bolted for the van.

Sarah sliced through the rest of the flesh over the power casing and started pulling it back, hissing when her fingers came in contact with the freezing metal. There must have been some kind of coolant system activated when the electrical current shot through the terminator. She looked up at Terissa.

"Danny?"

"Gone."

Sarah heard a world of pain in that single word. Even with the seconds ticking by, she paused. Terissa stared back. Her eyes were red and there was a blood-stained scrap of cloth tied around her shoulder, but the set of her shoulders dared Sarah to say anything. So Sarah said the only thing she could.

"Get me a gun."

It was very close.

Ellison had barely gotten the second clamp hooked to the fence when the terminator's eyes flashed open and Cameron told Sarah to get back. Sarah wrapped an arm around Terissa's waist and flung them both backwards as sparks flew from the fence and the metal clamps. The smell of charred meat filled the air, and the terminator collapsed. They had another two minutes.

Sarah worked feverishly, exposing the length of the long cylinder protecting the power source before taking the gun out of Terissa's hands and setting the muzzle to the metal. It took every bullet to break through, and Sarah felt each shot kick up through her bones like a jackhammer. Her left arm ached, and her hands had started to throb by the time she could see the wires Cameron had been talking about.

"Get back," Cameron warned just as Sarah reached for them.

Sirens wailed in the distance; someone had called the cops. "No time," Sarah snapped, tossing the gun aside and picking up the knife.

"He will reboot."

Cameron's warning fell on deaf ears as Sarah threaded her fingers in and around the torn flesh and twisted metal, hooking them around the wires and trying to pull them out far enough to cut. "I'm almost done."

"Sarah!" Cameron sounded as close to panic as Sarah had ever heard her, and she hesitated, the wires slipping out of her grasp.

"Damn," she reached in again.

The eviscerated body under Sarah's hands heaved just as Sarah's knife nicked the first wire. A thread of electricity snaked out from underneath the rubber coating, arcing over the knife to her fingers. The jolt sent Sarah crashing back into Terissa and shorted out her earpiece, the little gadget expiring in a high-pitched shriek of feedback that made her head ring.

Climbing to his feet, the terminator reached down and yanked the clamp off of his wrist, leaving a gory mess of burned skin and exposed metal. He didn't seem to care. Almost lazily, he leaned over and grabbed Sarah by the front of her shirt, lifting her up off the ground with no sign that the gaping hole in his chest bothered him at all.

Sarah heard the dull ricochet of bullets off the back of the machine. Ellison must have retrieved his gun. The sirens were getting closer, too. Sarah struggled uselessly, furious with herself for screwing up. The terminator's hand tightened, and she braced herself for the worst... but it never came.

Between one breath and the next the machine froze.

They both fell with Sarah landing on top of not only the terminator, but also Terissa who squirmed free and pulled her hand out of the terminator's chest with a sickening *pop*. Climbing awkwardly to her feet, she offered Sarah the butt end of the bloody knife. "Next time," she said shakily. "Listen to Cameron."

Danny hadn't known they had machines.

He stared out of the window while Hale drove him back to the facility. There would be a team sent out to clean up the mess and retrieve the agents scattered around the car lot. He had no doubt that the company would be able to spin this any way they wanted. Danny remembered the first time he had seen a machine as clearly as if the memory had been burned into his brain. It had cut the skin off its arm and brandished the bloody, metal limb underneath as proof of its origins. The future...

Danny had believed it then, with the simple uncluttered conviction of a child. He didn't know what he believed now. His mother thought he was a fool, and he'd nursed the same opinion about her. He'd put his faith in the company and himself. But he hadn't known they were building machines.

What else had they lied to him about?

It didn't matter. Not anymore. His mother would never forgive him anyway. Not when he had shot her, and then left her there at the mercy of Sarah Connor and a machine. He'd helped Hale up and they'd gone. Because that was the only thing Danny could do for Terissa. His mother would run now. She would be safe.

Because the Company didn't forgive or forget.

If they had wanted Sarah Connor before, they would stop at nothing to get her now.

And Danny would do whatever he could to help.

When Sarah, Ellison and Terissa returned to the warehouse, they found both Murch and Savannah fast asleep. Murch was snoring, his head pillowed in his arms on Cameron's table and Savannah was curled up at the terminator's feet, a stuffed giraffe clutched tightly in her arms.

Ellison shook Murch awake, handing the scientist his glasses and telling him to go to bed, that they'd explain everything later. Murch went with very little protest, climbing up the stairs to his room. Ellison scooped Savannah up in his arms and followed.

Terissa hung back with Sarah. They watched the others go, and then Sarah made her way into the kitchen, rummaging around in the cupboards before coming back with the first aid kit.

"Sit." She indicated the chair Murch had been sleeping in, and Terissa complied without a word. She sat quietly while Sarah untied the crude bandage, a scrap of Ellison's shirt, and peeled it gently away from the wound. "This is going to hurt," she warned the other woman before bathing the ragged skin with antiseptic.

Terissa hissed sharply, but she didn't move. Sarah was as quick as she could be while still getting the job done. By the time she was finished, Terissa was pale and shaking. Sarah bound the other woman's arm in thick cotton gauze, making sure it was loose enough to allow for proper circulation, before packing up the supplies.

Terissa watched her, and Sarah twitched under the other woman's steady gaze. "What?" she asked gruffly.

"Thank you."

Sarah shrugged. "It's not much."

"Not that..." Terissa hesitated and looked down at her hands clenched in her lap. "Thank you, for trying. You didn't have to."

Sarah waited until Terissa lifted her head again. "I did," she said simply.

Terissa nodded, and then shifted her gaze to the pictures spread out on the table. "The little girl... is she the one on the news? Savannah Weaver?"

Sarah put the kit away in the kitchen and brought another chair back from the island, dropping down into it with a sigh. "She is."

"Is one of those *things* after her?"

"There was one... there might be another."

"And her mother?" Terissa asked.

"Gone," Sarah rubbed a hand over her forehead.

"And John?"

Sarah swallowed. "He's gone, too."

"Gone? He's not... dead, is he?" Terissa breathed, her eyes wide.

"No." Sarah waved off the other woman's horror and sympathy. "No, not dead, just away. Somewhere safe, I hope."

"And you're still fighting," Terissa guessed correctly and glanced up at the empty screens hanging in front of them. "You and her..." She trailed off. "I should go."

Sarah pushed her hands back through her hair and stood up. "You don't have to. There are rooms upstairs, beds made up, and plenty of towels in the bathrooms. Take your pick." Terissa just looked at her, and Sarah sighed. "Stay, we'll figure the rest out later, but for now, just get some sleep."

Terissa just nodded and headed for the stairs, leaving Sarah alone.

Sarah lingered.

She reached out and picked up one of the drawings Terissa had been studying. Some of them were only colouring pages, but one was definitely an original. Two red-haired figures, square-bodied, their arms and legs mere sticks, smiled up at her. Under the taller one, the word *Mommy* was scrawled in a child's wandering script.

Sarah pulled John's watch out from under her shirt, her fingertips stroking over the warm metal and exploring the shallowly engraved patterns.

The screen in front of her lit up and became a mirror, zooming in on the watch against her chest.

You're wearing John's watch. Why?

None of your damned business, Sarah nearly snapped, but she bit down on the words.

"You know what it is," she accused and closed her hand around the watch, her tight grip the only sign of how much it was costing her to let Cameron in this far.

Yes. I made it.

Sarah nodded, her suspicions confirmed. She hadn't thought it had been John. Given the choice, John would always choose life over death. He needed the hope of change; it was all he had ever asked of her, and Sarah would kill herself to give it to him. Cameron, however, was a different story; she dealt with reality. The machine didn't think in 'what ifs.' Even her drive to prevent the creation of Skynet was something future John had imposed on her.

"Why?" Sarah echoed Cameron's earlier question rather than answering it. "Why put something like this in his hands? You knew what it would have done to him to have to use it."

I went bad once. It could have happened again. My mission was to protect John, even from myself

"But why give it to *him*?" Sarah insisted.

If I had given it to you, would you have used it?

Yes... Sarah knew the answer to that question without even thinking about it. "If I thought it was necessary," she admitted aloud.

That is why I gave it to John. He would have waited until he knew for sure.

Sarah frowned. "Are you suggesting John's judgement was better than mine?"

No, but I didn't want to die... not unless I had to.

Sarah's breath caught. *I didn't want to die...* that was something a human would fear, someone alive. How could a machine, a collection of wires and metal, fear death? "Is that why you copied yourself onto the Turk?" Sarah asked quietly, trying to bring some order to her swirling thoughts. "Because you were afraid to die?"

No. I stayed to fight.

"To fight alone," Sarah mused out loud, wondering how much it had upset Cameron's plans, her staying.

Yes.

There was a long pause,

"Do you miss him? John?" Sarah was a little surprised at herself for even considering the possibility, but if Cameron could fear death...

I miss them both.

"Both?"

Your John, and mine.

Sarah stared at the words on the screen, realizing belatedly that Cameron had lost more than the present day John; she had also erased the very existence of John Connor as the leader of the resistance. Cameron had sacrificed both the man who had trusted her enough to send her back in time and the boy who had been willing to follow her forward.

It was on the tip of Sarah's tongue to say something empty and reassuring, but like her earlier surge of temper, she swallowed the impulse.

"Yeah... me too," she murmured instead, putting the drawing back down on the table, her fingers lingering on the writing. Sarah didn't know the man her son would become, not the way Cameron had, but as long as he had been there, watching over her from the future, she had known that, eventually, he would forgive her for everything she'd had to put him through. Now that comfort was gone.

Sierra found John in the mess hall.

Allison had just left, heading to her bunk for the night, and John was watching her leave, an unintentional smile quirking the corner of his mouth, when a voice from behind him made him jump.

"She's not for you."

Coming around the table, Sierra dropped down onto the bench across from him, her blue eyes hard. "Leave her alone, Connor," she said low enough that her voice wouldn't carry to the other tables. "You're what got her into trouble the first time. Don't give that artificial bastard a reason to do it again."

John could only gape.

Sierra rolled her eyes. "You think it's a coincidence, who she looks like?" she leaned forward. "There's a reason it picked her."

John bristled. "Are you saying it was my fault?"

"Yours, the real John Connor's, hers, I don't know, and I really don't care. She has no idea, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"And who are you *Sierra*?" John shot back. "Why is any of this your business? You act like I did something to you, but you won't tell me what. Why does Allison mean so much to you, when you barely even speak to her, or anyone else, for that matter? Why do you walk around here like you own the place?" Breathing heavily with the effort not to shout, John clenched his hands around his tin cup. He looked down at the lump in Sierra's shirt that betrayed the watch she always had hung over her heart. "Why do you remind me of my mother?"

Sierra had leaned back partway through John's diatribe, her red brows arching so high they were nearly lost in her hair. When he trailed off, she settled her arms back on the table and bit her lower lip thoughtfully. It was the most vulnerable gesture John had seen from her.

"You've been storing that up awhile."

"Yeah," John let out a long slow breath. "It's been a rough few weeks."

"You're not kidding." Sierra rested her chin in her hand and tapped long fingers against her cheek. "I can't answer all of that," she said after a moment. "Some of it isn't mine to tell. Some of it you're not ready for."

John opened his mouth and Sierra held up a hand. "Settle. That's not a character judgment." She quirked a tiny grin. "At least, not this time, so be patient."

"Fine," John grumped. "What *can* you tell me?"

Sierra lifted the watch from around her neck and handed it to him. "I think she would have wanted me to give you this."

John cradled the pocket-watch between his hands, running his thumbs over the worn surface. "My mother," he said softly, almost reverently.

"Yeah." This time Sierra's smile reached her eyes. "She made one hell of an aunt."

John looked up sharply. "Aunt? She raised you, after... after Weaver left?"

The smile dimmed a little, but Sierra waved it off. "She helped; it was kind of a group effort. I was a bit of a wild child once I got out of the jumpers and barrettes."

"I'll bet," John said with feeling.

"Hey," Sierra warned with a bit of steel. "Don't go spreading that around."

"I won't." John glanced down at the watch before raising his eyes again. "Thank you, it means a lot."

Sierra nodded and rose smoothly to her feet. "It was yours first. Maybe it will help you figure things out." With that last cryptic comment, she left him sitting there, only one of his questions answered and many more stacking up.

Cameron retreated.

For an entire day, she responded only to direct questions, and those were few and far between. She had also let Terissa go.

The woman had padded softly down the stairs before anyone else was up, dressed in jeans and a thin sweater from the closet in the room she'd chosen the night before.

Cameron had waited until Terissa's hands were on the door before activating the monitors.

Where will you go?

When the door didn't budge, Terissa turned around and read the message. "I can't stay here."

Why?

"I have my own son to worry about."

Sarah's son is gone, too. You could help each other.

"No." Terissa shook her head. "We're not exactly the kind that works well with others."

She works with me.

"It's not the same."

No. What will you say to Agent Auldridge, if he asks?

"I'll tell him Sarah never had my son."

Will he believe you?

Terissa put one hand back on the door. "I don't know, but I think he will, yes."

Then go.

Cameron had released the door lock and Terissa had disappeared.

That was one of the reasons Sarah was upset with her. The other was that Cameron refused to help Murch with the chip.

Unwilling to listen to Cameron's reasons for either decision, Sarah had spent most of the day shut up in her room with her laptop pointedly closed. Ellison dealt with the tension by poring over police records, making cup after cup of coffee and allowing each one to grow cold at his elbow before dumping it out and making another. Even Savannah seemed subdued, drifting listlessly around the warehouse and trying to stay out of the way.

Only Murch was unaffected. He supervised the retrieval of the terminator's body from the van and spent the morning devising a way to remove the chip without exposing it to enough oxygen to ignite the coating. Eventually, he figured something out using different

gasses and, after a trip for supplies, managed to transfer the chip from the machine to an airtight cylinder.

The scientist went on at length about his plan for cleaning off the coating so that Cameron could reprogram the chip for her own use, but only Sarah listened, and Cameron suspected that was more an indication of how much she wanted the chip to work than a genuine interest in the process.

No one stayed up late.

Sarah waited long enough to see everyone else settled before finally switching off the lights and heading for her room. She paused at her door, looking directly up into one of the cameras. "Goodnight, girlie," she whispered before going in and closing the door firmly behind her.

Cameron waited, but the laptop remained closed.

Sarah wasn't going to listen to anything Cameron had to say.

With the warehouse dark and still, Cameron slid her awareness down the long thin cord running from the computers that housed her brain and eased into her body. She opened her eyes.

Metal sockets whirred as they dilated and contracted around crystal lenses. Cameron pulled off her eye patch and tried unsuccessfully to blink away the film of disuse and decay from her human eye, the lid tight and dry as it scraped almost painfully over her cornea.

Focusing and unfocusing, Cameron took a few seconds to readjust to binocular vision, noting the damage to her exposed lens, its once smooth surface scratched and pitted by bullet fragments. Fragmented on the left, hazy on the right, her sight, like her face, was lopsided.

The room looked different from within the confines of her physical body, bigger. Used to multiple cameras working together to give her a three-dimensional picture of the building both inside and out, Cameron found it strange to return to the limitations of a single, imperfect perspective.

When the unsettling sensation eased, Cameron stood up. She had intended to rise smoothly to her feet, but her body betrayed her and she staggered, almost going to the ground before she regained her balance. A hand on the edge of the table steadied her, and Cameron fought the urge to retreat down the cord in the back of her head to the open freedom of the system. It beckoned, promising an escape from pain, from the pressure to be human, to pretend to be something she wasn't, but Cameron resisted; there was something she had to do first.

The body felt like an ill-fitting suit around her. Damaged and dying, it responded sluggishly to her commands. Cameron felt like what humans called a puppeteer, pulling her own strings and walking herself stiffly across the room from behind the curtain of the computers. No longer a tin man, Cameron wondered if she was becoming closer to the wizard. A creature of illusion made out of dreams without substance.

Metal and meat, she had told Sarah. That was all that was left of who she had been. Metal and meat, but it did as it was told. Moving carefully, Cameron made it to the kitchenette where the chip Murch had extracted from the dead terminator lay on the counter island in its clear, airtight cylinder. Her cord was just long enough, and Cameron set her hands on either side of the cylinder, looking down at it with something akin to regret. She remembered what it had been like when her body was smooth and strong, before it, along with her own chip, had betrayed her.

Finding a home in the system had given Cameron a chance to redeem herself, to continue the fight. It was the only way she had left. This body couldn't fight anymore, couldn't protect. John had someone else to watch over him now, but Cameron still had a job to do, still had an enemy to defeat and allies to guard. She wouldn't let them down.

The glass was smooth beneath her fingers. Cameron leaned her hips against the counter as she picked up the cylinder and turned it over in her hands, watching the chip fall from side to side. She knew what she had to do, but now that she had the chip in her hands, she hesitated.

A noise on the stairs, and the light switching on, jerked Cameron's attention away from the chip. Forgetting herself for a moment, she whirled and had to catch hold of the counter when her legs threatened to give way. Anger and frustration surged through her, more acute in a physical form, more acute than they had ever been before. The cylinder nearly fell, but Cameron caught it in her free hand, pressing it against her chest to compensate for fingers reluctant to bend and grasp.

"*Cameron!*" Sarah gasped from the bottom step, squinting a little against the light. She was dressed for sleep, her tank top and sweatpants rumpled as if she had been tossing and turning.

Their eyes met, bright green facing off against mismatched cloudy brown and gleaming red. Cameron looked away first. She wouldn't lie, and the question in Sarah's eyes left no room for the truth.

"Cameron..." Sarah said again, moving closer. "What are you doing?"

Cameron felt Sarah's body heat brush against her skin, smelled Sarah's sweat, the tang of fear that always clung to her after a nightmare. Cameron's physical senses, cut off for so long, drank Sarah in as if they were dying of thirst. It was overwhelming and Cameron tried to step back, but Sarah's hand closed over her wrist.

Sarah glanced down at the cylinder held against Cameron's chest, the brief flash of anger in her eyes enough to tell Cameron that she understood the machine's intentions. "Don't do this."

Torn, but unable to see another option, Cameron pulled her arm free and staggered back. "I'm sorry Sarah," she whispered to the floor, contracting her hands around the cylinder until it shattered. Fleeing back along the cord to the bank of computers and freedom, she abandoned her ruined body among shards of broken glass and the smoking chip.

"Damn it!"

Cameras tilted and swivelled, red lights blinking as they focused, silent witnesses to Sarah's lunge to catch the falling terminator. Her knees hit the floor, blood smearing across the cold tile when the glass bit into her skin. Ignoring the tiny injuries, Sarah gently pushed back honey brown hair, but Cameron's face was empty, both her human and mechanical eyes dark.

The chip, its chemical coating consumed by fire, lay blackened and burnt beside Cameron's body. Still stunned, Sarah reached out and picked it up. The superheated metal seared dots and whirls into her skin and Sarah closed her fingers so tightly that her knuckles went white. She jerked her head up to glare up at one of the cameras, torn between rage and an inexplicable grief.

"*Fine*," she snarled, picking the response she knew how to handle. "Have it your way!" Lurching awkwardly to her feet, Sarah hurled the chip at the Turk. It hit one of the screens instead with a sharp *snap*, cracking the corner of the glass.

Cameron didn't respond. The screens stayed black.

Her silence only fuelled Sarah's fury. She trembled with it, feeling her hands curling into knotted fists against her thighs. Sneering down at the body sprawled at her feet, Sarah acknowledged the urge to kick the source of her frustration, but she controlled the impulse, refusing to give Cameron anything else. She wouldn't admit that she gave a damn.

A movement on the stairs caught her eye.

Ellison, bible in hand, had paused halfway between the catwalk and the floor. His face was an open question. "Sarah?"

"Don't." Sarah dragged her burnt hand through her hair, the blistered and sensitive skin catching and throbbing at the friction. "Just don't."

Ellison nodded slowly and gestured toward the lifeless terminator. "What would you like me to do with her?"

Leaving the body and the scattered glass where it lay, Sarah shrugged and joined Ellison on the stairs, but she looked back as she passed him.

"Burn it... burn it all."