



R U N N I N G  
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E M P T Y

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BY PATT AND MORGAN BRIARWOOD

## RUNNING ON EMPTY

By Patt and Morgan Briarwood

He is lying back in warm water. The air is spiced with sandalwood and lemongrass. He groans with pleasure as the smooth, cool hands of his lover smooth soap across his shoulders. He leans his head back against the broad, solid chest.

Dorian's lips brush against his ear. "Are you ready?"

John lets his eyes drift closed. "Mm-hm," he agrees contentedly.

Those strong hands grip his shoulders, kneading the last tension from John's muscles. John sinks deeper into the bathtub. Water laps at his chin. He begins to shift his leg to push himself back up, but the insistent pressure on his shoulders keeps him in place.

John takes a breath to say, let me up, but his mouth fills with water as Dorian's hands shove him downward. Reflex kicks in and he swallows, tries to breathe and chokes as bathwater fills the back of his throat. He reaches upward, gripping Dorian's wrists in an effort to pull himself up. His leg slides out of the tub and his body plunges under the surface. Dorian's hands, stronger than human, hold him down. Water splashes all around them. His lungs burn from the effort to breathe. Dark spots dance in his vision.

Why is Dorian doing this?

"Stop!"

Kennex jerked awake and found himself at his desk, several cops staring at him.

He rubbed at his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He was so damned tired...

A fresh rush of adrenaline spun him around to face the movement at his side. Dorian bent over him, setting a cup on the desk before Kennex. He smelled coffee.

"Relax, John," the android advised softly.

John took the coffee without replying. He downed it in a single gulp, barely tasting it, burning his mouth. He set the cup down and rubbed his eyes again, waiting for the caffeine to kick in.

"I don't need your help," he said ungraciously. He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth, but damn it, Dorian couldn't help him. No one could.

"John," Dorian warned, and Kennex looked up to see Captain Maldonado in the doorway of her office. As their eyes met, she made a beckoning motion.

He sighed and hauled himself up. "Fuck this," he muttered as he moved to obey the summons. He was fairly sure this wasn't about a case.

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Dorian watched John go, worried. He could keep his emotions off his face, but he couldn't stop feeling them. John's nightmares were getting worse. They were coming every night now. John fought them by staying awake as long as he could, using coffee and sex in almost equal

proportions. But that didn't keep the nightmares away when he couldn't stay awake any longer. John was exhausted, and his performance suffered for it. He had always been irritable: now he was impossible.

The nightmares were worse since Dorian moved into John's apartment. That was the thing that worried him most: was his presence somehow the cause of John's distress?

"I said, no!" Kennex's shout was clear even through the walls of Maldonado's office. Dorian turned toward the sound, his eyes focussed on the shadowy shape that was John, pacing in front of the Captain's desk.

Dorian wasn't the only detective now watching the closed door, listening to the raised voices within, but he was probably the only one who could hear their words. Maldonado was insisting Kennex get therapy since it was clear to her he wasn't fit for duty. Kennex insisted he was getting therapy – he was still going to that damned anger-management group she forced him into – and didn't need anything more.

Dorian shook his head sadly. Kennex wasn't going to win this one. The captain was right, and John had to understand it was for his own good. Anger management was a joke, and John didn't take it seriously.

This wasn't the first time Kennex and Maldonado had clashed, but they were not usually this loud, or this obviously angry. Dorian sat down, opened a case file and tried not to listen to the too-public argument between his partner and their captain.

Kennex slammed the office door open and stalked across the room to his desk. He didn't even look at Dorian, his jaw clenched tight as if holding in something worse than anger. He reached under the desk, pulled out a box and tossed his few personal items into it.

"John?" Dorian asked, afraid of what this meant.

"I don't work here any more." John spat the words. He whirled and headed for the elevator.

Dorian felt a sudden drop in his energy, an android equivalent of his heart missing a beat. For a second, he couldn't move. Only when the elevator doors began to open did he realise what he was doing. He hurried across to John's side, touching the elevator control to prevent the door from closing.

"What am I to do, John?" he asked quietly. The question had a lot of layers.

Kennex only shrugged. "I don't really care, Dorian. You can collect your things from the apartment tonight. Maybe you can partner Stahl. She's a good cop." John punched the button and the elevator doors slid closed, leaving Dorian alone and very confused.

"Let's talk in my office, Dorian," Maldonado spoke quietly from beside him. She led the way into the office and waited for Dorian to close the door behind them before she sat down on the edge of the desk. She sighed heavily.

"Captain?" Dorian prompted cautiously.

"I ordered Kennex to see a psychiatrist. I've cut him as much slack as I could, but his temper is worse and now he's falling asleep on duty. If he can't get to the root of his problems, he's going to get himself – and maybe others – killed. He resigned rather than accept the situation."

Dorian nodded. "He hasn't been sleeping," he volunteered.

"That's obvious to anyone who looks at him. Dorian, I'm not sure what to do with you if Kennex doesn't decide to withdraw his resignation once he's cooled down."

"I'm a cop, Captain. I can work with anyone." It was truth, but only a half-truth. He knew he had been reactivated specifically to partner with Kennex. He was an old model, obsolete and distrusted. He didn't want a different partner and even if he did, who else would work with him?

Maldonado met his eyes. "I want you to take the rest of the day, Dorian. See if you can talk some sense into John."

"I'm not sure I can do that, Captain. He told me to collect my things and move out of his apartment."

Her cheeks paled, as if his words meant more than Dorian had realised. "Don't let him throw you out," she ordered. "Take more than a day. Have a week or two if you need them. Stay with John. I don't want him to..." she hesitated, "hurt himself," she concluded finally.

Suicide. Dorian understood the unspoken word and felt that horrible drop in his energy again. The thought was too painful for words. "I will," he said, when he could speak again.

"Do you need a ride home?"

"I suppose I do. I think John would have taken the car even though he shouldn't have if he truly meant to resign."

That brought an odd smile to her face. She pushed a button to summon someone to her office. "I'll put John on two weeks medical leave, and you on special assignment. Detective Stahl can drive you home."

"Thank you, Captain."

She stood and walked around the desk. "There's one other thing. Perhaps a police psychiatrist isn't the best choice for John. There's another man I'd recommend. I'll send you the details, just in case you can persuade him."

"I'll do my best," Dorian promised.

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"Honey, I'm home!"

The bitter words echoed through the empty apartment. Kennex laughed, a harsh and humourless sound. He had better get used to being alone here. Dorian was city property, not his. If he wasn't a cop, he couldn't be with Dorian.

He emptied his things out of the box he'd brought from the police department and scowled at the meagre pile. Among old pill bottles, candy bars and his spare belt, the gun he should have handed in gleamed under the apartment lights. He gazed at it for a long time before turning his attention to the empty box. He might as well get Dorian's stuff packed. It would make it easier for both of them if he moved out quickly.

Kennex gathered Dorian's things from his living room and kitchen, and piled them into the box. He looked at the closet, where Dorian's police uniforms hung beside his own. He couldn't face that just now.

He stripped off his jacket, then his pants. He unhooked his synthetic leg and set it into the charger, then used his crutch to hobble into the kitchen. There was a bottle of scotch waiting in the cupboard. He opened it, swigged from the bottle and carried it, awkwardly, to the couch. If he could get drunk enough, maybe he could sleep without dreaming.

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The first thing Dorian saw when he entered the apartment was the box containing his possessions, or some of them. So, John was serious about making him move out. It hurt him badly, but he remembered Maldonado's pale face. I don't want him to hurt himself, she had said. He ignored the box and walked quietly into the apartment.

He found John on the couch, the whiskey bottle beside him. A swift analysis reassured Dorian that John was sleeping, not hurt or intoxicated, though he clearly had been drinking. Dorian gathered the unconscious man into his arms and carried him into the bedroom. He laid John gently on the bed, loosened his clothing and drew the sheet up to cover him. He longed to kiss him, but didn't want to wake him from his first peaceful sleep in weeks.

Instead, Dorian returned to the box and began putting his possessions back where they belonged. He returned the whiskey bottle to the kitchen and prepared something for the hangover John was sure to have when he woke.

John cried out in his sleep. The sound was all too familiar to Dorian. The nightmare was back. Dorian left the medicine where it was and headed back into the bedroom. He took off his boots and his jacket and put them away in the closet. Then he slid into the bed beside John.

The movement of the bed disturbed John's sleep and his eyes flew open. For a moment, he gazed around wildly, confused and disoriented. Then his gaze fixed on Dorian and something like pain creased his forehead. "I need you to move out tonight," he said flatly. "This isn't going to work."

Dorian ignored his words and leaned in to kiss him, gently on his forehead and then on his lips. He scanned John's body as he kissed him, observing the rise in his temperature, the rush of blood to his groin.

John's moan confirmed what Dorian had already observed but a moment later he pulled back. "I mean it, Dorian. I need you to leave."

Don't let him throw you out.

"I'm not leaving," Dorian said firmly. "You told me this is my home."

John sat up in the bed, awkwardly propping himself up with one arm. "I can't take care of myself with you here," he complained. "You make me weak."

It was Dorian's own, unspoken fear, but his fear for John was far greater. "That's nonsense, John. If you don't want me in your bed, then tell me. I don't need sleep anyway. But I'm not leaving my only home."

"Damn it, I can't sleep this way!" John growled.

"You're not sleeping any way," Dorian pointed out. "So instead I'm going to hold you in my arms and we're going to talk."

"Fuck that!"

"Not about today," Dorian added hastily. "Not about your dreams or your problems, unless that's what you want to talk about. But we're going to talk, John."

John rolled his eyes, but he allowed Dorian to gather him into his arms. They lay spooned together on the bed, one of Dorian's arms a pillow for John's head.

"So, talk," John said gruffly.

Dorian wanted John to do the talking. "We don't have any work to do today. Tell me what your perfect day off would be like. A Sunday afternoon, maybe. What would you do? Who would you want to see?" He kissed John's temple. "Close your eyes, picture it, and tell me."

John took a deep breath. "I would want to spend one last day with Anna," he said.

The words hurt, as Dorian thought they were meant to. He knew John was in pain, and he could take a little hurt himself if it would help. So he closed his own eyes and asked in a soft voice, "What would you do with her?"

John's body tensed. Dorian stroked his arm to help him relax, and waited.

"I would ask her why she was with me. I'd ask if she ever loved me or if it was all a lie," John admitted finally. His hand strayed to his missing leg. "How could she do this to me, if she ever cared about me? But if she didn't, why didn't I know, Dorian? Am I that fucking stupid?"

Dorian stroked John's arm, saying nothing, while he hurt to the depths of his soul for John's pain.

"Talk to me, Dorian. Tell me how she could do this to me."

Dorian kissed John as deeply as their position allowed him to. "I have no idea, John. It's hard to imagine she didn't love you. But I don't know why everyone who knows you doesn't love you like I do."

John snorted. "Yeah, right. I'm a fuck up and everyone knows it. Except you."

Dorian smiled. "Oh, I know it, too. That doesn't stop me loving you." He shifted so he lay above John and looked down at him. "You're a man who has been through more than most humans can survive. You have problems, everyone can see that, but they still like and respect you."

"Problems," John repeated. He closed his eyes, frowning, and quoted, "Detective Kennex suffers from depression, trauma-onset OCD, PTSD and psychological rejection of his prosthetic limb."

"All that is true," Dorian agreed. "And you have to start admitting it, man. If you don't..."

"Admitting it isn't going to help. Is admitting I've got problems with my leg going to give me a real one back?"

Dorian shook his head sadly. "I wish that were possible, John, but you know it's not. But think about where you'd be without the synthetic limb. You wouldn't be back at work, pissing everyone off. You'd still be in a hospital or rehab."

"I'm not back at work now, am I? I quit."

"No, you didn't. Captain Maldonado gave us two weeks to get this sorted out." Dorian looked into John's eyes, begging him. "John, would you please see a doctor? At least try it. I'm afraid for you, man."

The look in John's eyes when Dorian said that confirmed his worst fears. Maldonado had been right.

Finally, John sighed. "I won't see a police psychiatrist. But maybe we can find someone else. Would you... Will you come with me, if we can find someone?"

"If you promise to take it seriously, I will."

"I can't take these dreams any more."

"Try to sleep, John. I'll stay here and wake you if it looks like you're dreaming again." Dorian kissed him gently on his lips and drew the other man into his arms once more. John yawned and relaxed in Dorian's embrace.

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It is dark and he sees only shadows.

He is lying on his back and there is something on his chest, holding him down.

There is a sound like machinery: a buzz saw, perhaps, or a drill. The sound is very close. Panic fills him and he pushes at the weight on his chest. He has to get away! He must get away now!

Suddenly, there is light and he sees the thing on his chest is a man. That terrible sound is a power drill in the man's hand.

"Hold still, John," Dorian's voice says.

John screams as the drill descends toward his eye.

"John! John, wake up!"

He came awake fighting, his leg tangling in the sheet! Dorian's hands held him down.

"It's okay, John. It was just a nightmare. Try to calm down."

Slowly, Kennex came back to himself. His heart rate slowed and he could breathe without panting. Dorian released him and stepped back from the bed.

"You said you'd wake me," Kennex accused. Why did he keep dreaming about Dorian hurting him? It made no sense!

"I was in the kitchen, fixing you a snack. I came as soon as I heard you. John, I'm sorry. You slept five hours without incident. I thought..."

"It's okay, I guess. What time is it?"

"Nearly midnight. Are you hungry? You should be, it's fifteen hours since you last ate."

Kennex's stomach growled right on cue and he managed a smile. "I'm starving."

"Stay there. I'll get it."

Dorian disappeared for a moment and returned with a plate of sandwiches, a handful of chips and a glass of iced tea. John thought about arguing with his choices but was thirsty enough to drink the tea regardless. He drained half the glass and couldn't really complain about it then, could he? And he really was hungry, he thought as he demolished the first sandwich, too.

"Did I really sleep five hours without dreaming?" he asked around a mouthful of sandwich.

"That's got to be a record."

"Perhaps agreeing to get help allowed your mind to relax," Dorian suggested.

Kennex narrowed his eyes at that. Bullshit. He regretted that decision already. "Don't you have to charge?" he asked pointedly.

"Yes, but it can wait until the morning, when you're awake and ready to face the world."

"I'm not going to sleep again," Kennex objected.

"Yes, you are. Five hours isn't enough to make up for all the sleep you've been losing."

Kennex swallowed the last piece of sandwich. "Dorian, you don't understand. I can't have that dream again. I just can't."

Dorian sat down on the bed beside him. "You're right, I don't understand. I'm made to feel, but I don't dream. Explain it to me, John. What's in your dreams that's so terrible?"

The android's blue eyes were so worried, Kennex had to answer. "You are," he confessed, knowing this was going to hurt Dorian.

Dorian's brow furrowed in confusion. "Me? But we love each other, don't we? Why is dreaming of me so horrible you can't bear to sleep?"

"In my dreams, you're hurting me."

Dorian's eyes widened.

"In one, we're taking a bath together. It's nice. Sexy. Until you push me under the water and drown me. In another, you take out my eye with a power drill. Do you see why I can't sleep?"

Dorian moved away from him. "John, you know I would never harm you, don't you? Please tell me you believe that."

"I do believe it. But my dreams..."

"I can't believe you waited until now to tell me! John, you need help, and I'm going to make sure you get it as soon as possible."

"I told you, no police shrinks."



"No police shrinks," Dorian repeated. "I have the name of another doctor and I've made us an appointment for tomorrow morning. I will go with you, like I promised."

Dorian had already booked an appointment? When did he have time to research psychiatrists, let alone choose one? Kennex felt a little put out at being organised into this, but he did appreciate Dorian's efficiency. It was one of the few good things about having to partner with a synthetic: they were damn good at information retrieval.

He finished the iced tea and leaned over to get his crutch.

"What are you doing?" Dorian asked.

Kennex glared at him. "Unlike synthetics, I have to take a piss," he snarled. He got the crutch into position and struggled upright. Dorian didn't offer to help; at least he had that much sense. John made his slow way to the bathroom and locked the door.

Pain began to throb behind his eyes and he rubbed at his temples before standing over the toilet to do what he'd come in here to do. He'd actually told Dorian about the dreams. What the fuck was he thinking? Was he trying to hurt Dorian?

He reached for the disinfectant gel and as he rubbed it into his hands he turned toward the locked door. Dorian had saved his life today. It was a hard truth to admit, even within his own mind.

Dorian was city property. Maldonado should have ordered him to leave his home with Kennex the instant he quit. If she had, if Dorian had collected his possessions and left, as Kennex expected, Kennex would have eaten his own gun before midnight. But he couldn't do that with Dorian here. He didn't want to as long as Dorian was here. Dorian was his reason to live.

So, for Dorian, he would do his best to see this doctor and hope this one could help him.

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By the time John woke in the morning, Dorian's power charge was dangerously low. He was considering waking John so he could plug in when John's eyes opened.

"Have you been watching me all night long?" he muttered into his pillow.

"I've been watching over you, as I promised," Dorian answered. "But I need to charge now or I'm going to lose it. If you take a shower and make yourself breakfast, I should be ready when you're done."

John sat up but shook his head. "You need at least four hours for a full charge. Stay hooked up that long, Dorian. I think I'll be okay."

"Three hours," Dorian offered as a compromise. "We're due at the doctor's office at eleven."

John frowned. "Will that be enough?"

"Sure, if I charge again before bed." Dorian smiled. "I like that you worry about me."

"Of course I worry about you. I need you on your game." The words were harsh, but Kennex softened them with a smile and a kiss. Had Dorian been less desperate for a fresh charge, he

would have slid back into the bed. Regretfully, he drew back from the kiss. "I'll see you in three hours, then," he smiled.

Dorian's charging unit was in a corner of the living room. While charging, most of Dorian's cognitive functions shut down, making it as close to 'sleep' as his kind could experience. He began to strip off his clothing, then noticed the unit had been moved three millimetres closer to the wall. Perhaps John moved it when he was putting Dorian's possessions in that box.

Dorian moved it back. Why would John have moved it only three millimetres? Suspicious, he tilted the unit so he could see the back of it. There, he found a small silver disc that didn't belong there. Frowning, he prised it off the charging unit and examined it.

Circuit after circuit flashed into his consciousness as he searched his own archives to identify the purpose of this chip. He could not be certain, but he thought it was a transmitter of some sort. Disturbed by the discovery, he returned to the bedroom.

John was getting into the shower. He turned to Dorian with a grin. "Changed your mind?"

Warm memories of sex in the shower gentled Dorian's worry for a moment. But then he showed John the chip in his hand. "I found this on my unit. I think it's a bug."

John's grin vanished. "Someone bugged my apartment?"

"This may not be the only one. I only found it because the unit had moved. We should do a proper search."

John frowned. "You need to charge, Dorian. Go do that. I'll call Stahl and ask her to bring us a bug detector."

Dorian felt a small stab of jealousy that Stahl was the first person John turned to. Valerie Stahl was beautiful and he knew she was attracted to John. But John was his. But he nodded, stifling the unhelpful emotion as best he could. "Okay, John. But wake me if you find anything, okay?"

"Will do," John agreed.

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Olive oil, Kennex thought as he went through his morning ritual of oiling up his synthetic leg. The doctor who fitted it would have a fit if he knew, but Dorian was right. Olive oil really worked.

The door alert buzzed and Detective Stahl's face appeared on the display. "Hi John," she smiled, and raised the briefcase she carried for him to see.

Kennex touched the control to let her into the building, tugging his pants leg down to cover the leg. He was towelling the remaining oil from his hands when she entered the apartment. He waved the towel at her. "Come on in," he called. "Thanks for doing this for us."

She glanced around as she walked toward him. "Where's Dorian?"

"He's charging." Kennex nodded toward the charging unit in the corner. "He was up all night with me, so he needs to recharge for a few hours."

"All night?" Stahl laid the briefcase on the kitchen worktop then leaned back against it. "John, if you need company at night, you can call me. You know that, right?" She smiled.

Was she flirting? Kennex straightened and glanced again toward Dorian. Could Dorian hear them? He had never been sure how aware he was when charging. Then he decided it didn't matter. If Stahl thought he was available he needed to put a stop to this.

"I had Dorian's company," he told her cautiously. "I wouldn't want him to think I was screwing around on him."

He knew he'd made a mistake when her eyes flew wide with shock. "Oh, my god. You and Dorian?"

"What's so shocking about that, Valerie?" Kennex kept his voice calm.

"He's not human, John!" She made a raised-hands gesture, as if exasperated. "And he's not a sexbot. I can't believe you'd do this to him."

Kennex laughed. "To him? He's got free will, Stahl, and feelings of his own. If he didn't want me, he could tell me to go to hell. For some reason he loves me."

She took a step away from him. "And you?" she asked, a little shakily.

Kennex felt his temper flash hot. "I'm not using him, damn it!" He snatched the briefcase from the worktop. "Thank you for bringing the detector, Detective Stahl. That's all I need from you. We'll return it to the station when we're done."

Her expression froze. "Whatever." Stahl tossed back her long hair. "I think you're making a big mistake, John."

"Then it's my mistake to make. I didn't ask for your opinion. You need to leave now."

She looked unhappy. "John, I'm sorry. I just – "

"Please go," he insisted and turned his back on her to open the briefcase.

"The captain wants you to keep us informed if you find bugs," she said. "Call me if you want to talk to a human being," she added cattily.

Kennex heard his door close as she left and had never been so glad to be alone. Was he wrong to tell her he and Dorian were a couple? He was in enough trouble as it was. A bit more didn't seem to matter. But if this made trouble for Dorian that was something else. The worst that could happen to Kennex was losing his job. Dorian could lose his life.

Kennex began to assemble the bug-detector. He was exaggerating the trouble, surely. Stahl's shock didn't mean everyone would react the same way. Captain Maldonado likely already knew about them. She'd sent Dorian to him the day before, hadn't she? It would be all right.

The bug detector fired into life and Kennex pointed it at the device Dorian found on his charging unit. He was not surprised at all when it flashed red. A few moments later it had scanned the bug and identified it as a listening device and transmitter. So anything they'd said within its range had already been sent on to whomever was listening.

Including the conversation he just had with Detective Stahl! Damn it, what was he thinking?

Furious with himself, John lifted a mug and brought it down on the silver bug with such force it smashed both device and mug. He winced as a shard of china cut into one of his fingers and

brought it to his mouth. He tasted blood. The person who planted this bug in his home was going to pay. And pay hard.

But first, he had to figure out who it was. He set the detector to search mode and began going through his apartment.

By the time Dorian unhooked himself from the charging unit, Kennex had found six more devices. All of them were in the sink, under water. It probably wouldn't kill them but should stop them listening in.

Dorian didn't even glance at the bugs. He smiled warmly at Kennex, came close enough to pin him against the sink and kissed him. Kennex was surprised, but very willing to respond. He pulled Dorian even closer and kissed him back. When they parted, both men were smiling.

"What was that for?" Kennex asked.

Dorian's blue eyes were sparkling. "For being so honest with Detective Stahl, even though she didn't approve of our lifestyle."

Some of Kennex's joy faded at the reminder. "I don't think it's the lifestyle she has a problem with. It's me being with a synthetic."

"But you set her straight," Dorian pointed out, still smiling.

"Dorian, how much trouble could this make for you? I mean, are there regulations I don't know about?"

Dorian frowned, then his expression went blank as he searched his files for the information. "You know the regulations, I'm sure," he answered finally. "There are no current regulations regarding personal relationships between cops and their synthetic partners, but that's because standard police partners are MXs."

"They're not capable of personal anything," Kennex grouched. "Right."

"There are older regs forbidding sexual relationships in human-human partnerships." Dorian continued. "But technically speaking for that to apply, I would have to be classed as human."

That wasn't likely to happen. Kennex opened his mouth to say as much but stopped when Dorian gestured. A moment later the circuitry in Dorian's cheek began to glow, signalling that he was in contact with the station.

"Yes, Detective, I hear you," Dorian said aloud, irritating Kennex, who loathed hearing only half of the conversation.

"Of course it's with my consent," Dorian insisted. He sounded as shocked as Kennex felt as his mind filled in the parts he couldn't hear. How dare she accuse him of...!

"I know John considers you a friend," Dorian announced.

Like hell! A friend wouldn't say that.

"In the spirit of that friendship, I hope you can respect our privacy." Dorian was silent for a moment, then added, "Thank you. I'll talk to you later."

"Stahl?" Kennex snarled.

"Yes. She said she won't tell anyone. She doesn't want you to die of embarrassment."

"Like that's the worst that could happen." Kennex nodded toward the bugs in the sink. "Her silence might not make a difference, Dorian. Someone else already knows."

Dorian reached into the water and withdrew one of the devices. "I see." He crushed it between his thumb and forefinger and dropped the pieces back into the water. "They are all the same. I'll destroy them all except the one we'll give to Rudy. Perhaps he can find out who is so interested in you."

"It could be you they want to keep track of," Kennex suggested, watching Dorian crush the bugs one by one.

"Unlikely, John. I am merely a DRN, nothing unique or special." He turned away and his cheek glowed blue again. "Rudy, do you have a moment to talk with me?"

John waved to get Dorian's attention and tapped his ear. Obliging, Dorian made both sides of the conversation audible.

"...for you. What do you need?" Rudy said.

"We found seven concealed listening devices in John's apartment. They are disabled, but we need to trace them back to the listener. Could you come by and pick up the evidence? We have to go out in half an hour but I can send you the entry code."

When Rudy answered, he sounded pleased. "I'll be glad to come over and tell John I accept this mission. It's very James-Bond-like, isn't it? I love working with you two, it's very exciting."

Kennex rolled his eyes.

"I have a better bug sweeper than the standard issue version, too. I'll bring that along and make sure the place is clean."

"Come whenever you can, Rudy. And thank you from both of us."

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Rudy must have dropped everything and rushed over because he arrived ten minutes before they were due to leave for John's appointment with the doctor.

Dorian let him in. "Come in, Rudy. Welcome to our home." He intended the words to reveal their relationship, as John had done earlier with Detective Stahl, but Rudy didn't seem to notice.

Rudy hurried past Dorian, raising a palm-sized device. "First things first. Let's make sure you didn't miss anything." He headed for John's bedroom without even saying hello to John.

Dorian followed him at a slower pace. He met John's eyes across the living room. John gave a smile that was more of a twist of his mouth and an eloquent shrug. That's Rudy for you, the gesture said.

When Dorian entered the bedroom he found Rudy not sweeping for bugs but staring at the bed. It was unmade, the sheets ruffled, the shapes of two bodies so clear even Rudy couldn't miss it. Dorian hesitated in the doorway, braced for a reaction like Stahl's had been.

Rudy spun to look at Dorian and at John moving up to his side. "Oh, my god. You're a couple," he said, and a wide grin spread across his face. "This is simply astonishing! Do you know how rare this is? Is your relationship stable? Any problems with...uh..."

"Rudy!" John interrupted.

Dorian rushed to speak before John could say something unfortunate. "Rudy, slow down, please. We need you to look at a listening device and tell us if you can trace it. We've got to figure out who is bugging this apartment."

"This room is clean." Rudy tapped his device. "I'll do the rest when you answer my questions. I'm responsible for you, Dorian."

Dorian felt John's arm slide around his waist. "Ask away," John said in a tone that held just an edge of temper.

Rudy must have heard that edge, because he swallowed hard. Then he looked at Dorian. "Is this a relationship, or just something you do for John?" he asked nervously.

"We're a couple. We care about each other," Dorian answered. He wanted to say we love each other, but those were words John never said. "Now, can we sweep the rest of the apartment?" Dorian pressed.

"You two are no fun whatsoever," Rudy complained, but he stood and headed for the door with his bug sweeper.

Dorian moved out of the doorway so Rudy could pass them. As he moved, John raised his other arm to cup Dorian's buttock and pull him close. They kissed, not hurrying, and Dorian wished they had more time.

When they broke apart, Rudy was staring at them both. "As I said before, you are both simply astonishing. This is like a gift to me. Thank you, my friends." He turned away and began sweeping the kitchen.

"The bugs we found are in the sink," John said. "We have to go, Rudy, or we'll be late. Can you lock up as you leave?"

\*

"Do you find it odd that Rudy accepted us so easily?" Kennex asked as he drove.

"Not at all," Dorian answered, sounding surprised by the question. "He's very open to new things and he doesn't see my kind as less than humans."

Ouch, that hurt. John reached out and gripped Dorian's thigh; the most affection he could show while driving. "Those poor MXs don't know what they're missing," he said with a quick smile.

Dorian grinned back. "Oh, I think they know. I don't think they care much, though." His hand rested on John's for a moment. "Are you nervous about meeting with Doctor Grey?"

Kennex scowled, but he answered honestly, "Yeah. I am. I don't get along with doctors or lawyers. But you'll be with me this time, right?" He hated needing that kind of reassurance. But he'd sat through months of therapy after the coma and nothing ever helped. Mostly, he knew, because he had a hard time cooperating with that crap. This time, he'd promised to try, and that scared him more than he wanted to admit.

"I'm with you, John," Dorian said simply.

"Where did you find this doctor, anyhow?" Kennex asked, signalling a right before accelerating into the turn.

"Captain Maldonado recommended him. She told me if you wouldn't see a police psychiatrist, Grey would be the best choice for us."

"For us?" Kennex repeated, startled. "She knows about us, then?" And you didn't bother to tell me?

"I didn't confirm anything but from the way she spoke, I'm sure she's guessed."

"One more name to check off the list," Kennex said sourly. "All we've got to do is tell Paul and the whole precinct will know."

"Somehow I don't think Detective Paul will approve."

"Yeah, well he can go fuck himself," Kennex snarled.

\*

Doctor Grey's office was all white walls and glass. At least it looked like the doc made good money. He probably knew what he was doing.

Dorian went to the reception desk to check them in while John chose a seat in the waiting room.

"John Kennex and Dorian. Our appointment is for eleven."

"I have John Kennex," the receptionist said, barely looking up at him. "Is Dorian the first name or last?"

Dorian felt the first threads of real worry. Was this going to be an issue? "It's just Dorian," he said. "I don't have a last name."

"You're kidding, right?" She looked up, then.

"No, it's not a joke," Dorian answered uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realise you were a synthetic. Have a seat, Dorian. The system will call you when the doctor is ready."

I really don't like that term, Dorian thought, but said nothing except "Thank you." He headed to the seat beside John.

"Everything okay?" John asked, too casually. He must have overheard all or part of it.

"I think I need a last name," Dorian sighed. "0167 doesn't really cut it."

"You could have said Kennex," John suggested.

Dorian's electronic heart leapt. "That wouldn't be true, John."

He shrugged. "Not legally. But we're living together and it wouldn't bother me in situations like this."

Dorian looked at him with a wide smile. "Really, John?"

"Don't make a big deal out of it," John grouched, but Dorian wasn't fooled. John really meant it. His smile remained.

A chime sounded and a disembodied voice said, "Dorian and John Kennex. The doctor will see you now."

They walked through the door side by side. Dorian was feeling good for the first time since John walked out of the precinct. But that was when it all started to go wrong.

Doctor Grey was not human.

Dorian hadn't known and the sight of another android sent a shock through his system. John might never forgive him for this. He turned to his partner anxiously, reaching out to touch him.

"John, I didn't realise. We don't have to stay." He spoke quietly but knew the doctor would hear him and hoped he wasn't a model that could be hurt by his words.

John barely glanced at the doctor. "We've come this far," he said, which didn't help.

"I'm not sure a...this doctor will help you," Dorian pressed.

"You helped me. Maybe he can, too." John met Dorian's eyes. "Dorian, we're here now. If I go back through that door, it's over."

Okay, then... Dorian set his hand in the curve of John's back, gently steering him into the room.

Doctor Grey waited for them as if he had heard none of their exchange. "Welcome. I am Doctor Grey. Please have a seat, both of you."

John sat first, in a comfortably padded chair. Dorian took the chair beside him. He felt an urge to apologise to the doctor, but if he tried that would just make John look bad. He kept his mouth shut.

"John," Grey began, "your previous doctor forwarded your records to me. If, after this session, you decide I'm not the right therapist for you, I will delete all trace of your files from my systems. But for now, I am fully aware of your history. Is that okay with you?"

John nodded. "Yeah. I guess so."

Grey's eyes turned to Dorian. "Dorian, you are present for this session because that's how you made the appointment. However, unless you're here for couple's therapy, which isn't suggested by John's history, it isn't appropriate for you to be present in future meetings. I want you to understand that before we begin."

Dorian nodded, prepared to argue the point, but not just yet. "I understand," he agreed.



"Thank you. Now, why don't you start by telling me what's wrong?"

"Geeze, Doc," John drawled. "If you downloaded my records you must know that already. I got a regular shopping list of issues."

"Do you always deflect serious questions that way?" Doctor Grey asked.

"Always," Dorian answered for him.

The doctor gave him a sharp look. "Please let John answer for himself," he rebuked.

"That's okay, Doc. He's right," John said.

"Well, that won't work with me. I want you to tell me why you think you need to see me. And please, call me Grey. That's what all my clients call me."

John took in a deep breath. "I could say I'm here because I'm going to lose my job if I don't agree to therapy, but the truth is..." his voice trailed off.

Dorian gave him what he hoped was a supportive look. He wanted to reach out but John wouldn't like that.

John swallowed. "Crap. The truth is I need help. I have horrible nightmares. I can't sleep. My temper is...well, it's always been bad but I overreact to the smallest things. They've got me in this anger management group but if anything that's making it worse. I feel like I can't catch a break. The only good thing in my life is Dorian."

"You lost a limb in combat?" Grey prompted.

John simply nodded curtly, volunteering no details.

"And following that injury, you were in a coma for eighteen months. That makes a diagnosis of post traumatic stress the obvious one. I would guess your police psychologist didn't dig much deeper than that. Do you accept the diagnosis?"

Dorian expected some glib response, but John paused, giving the question serious consideration.

Finally, he said, "I don't know. I guess it makes sense. I don't like giving it a label."

"Why not?"

"Because labels don't get me any closer to fixing what's wrong. I came damn close to eating my gun yesterday. Dorian talked me down from it. But if I'd done it, would it matter if it was PTSD or any other damn thing? I'd be just as dead."

"I see. Then we don't have time to worry about labels. You need therapy and perhaps medication to help you get through the immediate crisis."

"I'm not taking drugs!" John flared. "I'm a cop. I'd lose my job."

"You would not lose your job. A great many police officers take medication for physical or psychological conditions. At worst, you might have to endure desk duty for a few weeks while we figure out the right medication for you."

"I still don't want drugs," John insisted stubbornly.

"Do you have flashbacks to the incident where you lost your leg?"

"Yes."

"Is that what you dream about? You said you're having nightmares."

"Yes."

Dorian spoke up, quietly. "You have to tell the truth, John."

"What do you mean? I am telling the truth," John objected.

"You told me about your dream last night. It wasn't about the raid."

"John?" Grey prompted gently.

He made an annoyed sound. "The dreams used to be about that. Lately it's different. I dream...about Dorian. Hurting me. Or killing me."

Grey leaned back in his chair. "Your file states Dorian is your partner at work. Obviously you are close friends. Are you more than that?" He looked at Dorian. "You can answer this one."

Dorian suddenly understood why John wanted to lie. It was several hundred nanoseconds before he could formulate an answer. "We are lovers," he said. It seemed like the best word to use. Honest, but ambiguous.

"I see," Grey said again. He turned to John. "If you won't accept a prescription, you will need to take at least six weeks medical leave so we can deal with this in intensive therapy."

"Six weeks!" John protested.

"It may take longer. You will need to go to group therapy sessions three times a week – "

John interrupted. "I don't do well in groups, D... Grey."

"This is not anger management. It's a PTSD group in which everyone, even the therapist who leads the sessions, is a survivor of an experience similar to yours. It's not optional. On two other days each week, you'll meet privately with me. I will not promise that at the end of six weeks you'll be cured, or even that you'll be better. But if you attend all these sessions and really work at it, I will promise that in six weeks you'll have a deeper understanding of your situation and you'll be in a position to make a decision about your future."

The look Grey gave John was determined. "Or, you can go home and wait for the next time you feel an urge to – how did you put it? – eat your own gun."

That was blunt and Dorian almost objected, but beside him, John drew in another deep breath.

"I guess I don't have much choice. Dorian's going to make me do this anyway."

Grey glanced at Dorian, who shrugged. He couldn't "make" John do anything. He could try, though.

"Good," Grey said briskly. "Your first group session will be tonight." He offered a data chip. "This will give you the time and place. The group meets Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings. Since you work together, I suggest Dorian should see your captain and arrange your medical leave. I will see you tomorrow. Alone this time." Pointedly, he looked at Dorian.

Dorian nodded agreement, while privately wondering if John would be able to do this alone.

"Do you have any questions?" Grey asked.

They were both silent for a moment, then John asked, "Uh...this group thing. You're going to be there?"

"No, it's led by a colleague of mine. His name is Bill. No last names are used in the group, ever. You're free to talk about anything, in confidence. But you have to talk, John."

John looked uncomfortable. "Look, I'll try. But I meant what I said. I'm not good in groups. It might take me a few visits to get the hang of it."

Dorian stared at him, unable to detect any sign of insincerity. Who are you and what have you done with the real John Kennex?

"Dorian? Any questions?"

Dorian had several. Or several thousand. "Just one, I guess. I understand you don't want me to go to therapy with John, but I still want to help him. How can I help?"

"It sounds to me like you are already helping. Keep doing what you're doing, Dorian. It is important for John to do this therapy alone, but when we're past the intensive phase we may want to involve you. I can't say until then."

"Thank you, Grey," Dorian offered sincerely.

\*

"Hi John, it's Rudy." His voice came through, but there was static on the line.

Kennex raised his voice to make sure he would be heard. "Rudy, what have you got?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. There's nothing distinctive about the device you saved and by the time I got it to the lab it was no longer transmitting so there was nothing to trace. There was no sign of video monitoring, but it's a good bet whoever was listening has eyes on you, too. Better keep your drapes closed."

"Drapes? Who has drapes any more?" Kennex demanded.

"I do! And that's not the point. Something's going on, Detective and unless they come back and re-bug your place, there's nothing I can do to help you figure it out."

It hadn't even occurred to Kennex that their mystery spy would put more bugs in place. Damn it, he really couldn't catch a break!

He swallowed the flare of anger and hit the gas pedal even harder. "Thanks anyway, Rudy. If we need more help, you're our go-to guy."

"Wow, really? Go-to guy. I like that."

"Talk to you later, Rudy." Kennex terminated the call before Rudy could babble some more. He liked the guy, he really did, but if talking were an Olympic sport, he'd be a shoo-in for gold.

"That was nice of you," Dorian said. "Rudy loves it when you're nice to him."

What was nice? Hanging up on him? "Why would he care?" Kennex asked.

"Because he's our friend. Or at least he thinks he is. He wants to be part of our lives," Dorian answered.

Kennex considered it. "He's a friend," he agreed. "I trust Rudy almost as much as Sandra."

"Sandra?" Dorian repeated. "It's good you're so close to the Captain. She's been a big help for both of us."

"She has," Kennex agreed. "I think we should go see her together, about this leave thing."

"She offered you two weeks without you even asking. I think if it's a choice between six weeks and losing you from her team, she won't mind the six."

Kennex didn't think he was as valuable to Maldonado as Dorian thought he was. She had been a good friend to him when he woke from his coma. She still was a good friend. But he had pushed well beyond the limits of her patience in the past weeks, and he knew it. By now she might be glad to see the back of him.

To Dorian, he said only, "For me, maybe, but what about you? I'm not sure giving you a six-week vacation will sit well with whoever she has to answer to." He pulled into the precinct garage, found his usual parking spot taken and slid into a space reserved for someone else without a single twinge of conscience.

\*

Sandra Maldonado just barely stopped her jaw from dropping open when she saw Kennex and Dorian walk out of the elevator. She was in her open doorway when Kennex looked her way and she beckoned him over at once. Kennex wore civvies, not his uniform, which said he wasn't here for work. But he was here. He was alive, and she'd genuinely doubted Dorian's ability to keep him that way this time.

Kennex closed her office door without being asked and turned to face her. "Captain, before you say anything, may I speak?"

The request was uncharacteristically polite and she could only agree. "I'm listening."

"I apologise for the things I said yesterday. I was out of line."

She raised her eyebrows. "You must want something badly."

Kennex didn't reply.

Maldonado sighed. "Apology accepted, John. I've already forgotten it."

"Thank you."

"Now, what do you want?"

"I need six weeks medical leave for therapy. Perhaps more, but the doc thinks six weeks will do it. If it works out, you might have a whole person at my desk for a change."

She released her tension in a long out-breath. "That's good news, John. Who are you seeing?"

"The man you recommended. Grey. I'm not wild about his idea of intense therapy, but yesterday was...well, I can't go through many more days like that. Grey says he can get me through it and for some reason I believe him."

"I'm very glad to hear it," she said honestly. "You have your six weeks. If you need longer, have Grey write to me to make it official." Her gaze moved to Dorian, and she understood why John opened with an apology.

Dorian spoke without making her ask the question. "I want to be there for John through this. Doctor Grey said I'm his best support and I truly believe that. I'll work if you want me to, but – "

"You'll be no good to anyone here if your mind is on Kennex," she interrupted. Truthfully, she wasn't sure there was another detective who would happily partner with a DRN. "I have some leeway, Dorian. That special assignment you are on can stretch for six weeks, but you'll have to report in regularly. Say every two days? Just a call will do."

"That would be great, Captain. I'll take good care of him."

"I know you will. You guys get out of here now. I might stop by sometime and see how you're doing. If that's all right with you, John."

Unexpectedly, he looked uncomfortable. "Captain, usually that would be just fine, but, well, there's something else we have to tell you."

Sandra frowned. "Oh, boy. Hit me."

"Someone's been bugging my place. I don't know for how long. You can get the full story from Rudy, though we don't know much yet. You're welcome to stop by, of course, but don't plan on discussing anything confidential. Just because we pulled all the bugs doesn't mean they won't come back."

"Who would want to monitor your apartment?" she wondered aloud.

John snorted. "Captain, if I knew, I'd be in his face right now."

She permitted herself a smile. "I just bet you would be. Do you want to lodge an official complaint about this? You have the right."

"Not yet. I want to see what we can find out under the radar first. We've had a few leaks lately. On the off-chance this is related..." Kennex let it hang there, but she got the message.

"Understood. Keep me posted." The news was worrying, but as the two men left her office, Sandra felt a weight of tension ease from her shoulders. She hadn't realised quite how much this had mattered to her. Things might just be looking up for John Kennex.

Five of the six people in the room looked as anxious as Kennex felt. He approached the sixth: a big burly man with red hair, and hoped that this was the right man. "Excuse me. Am I in the right place for the PTSD group?"

The man smiled and offered his hand. "You're in the right place. I'm Bill, the group facilitator."

Kennex shook the offered hand. "John Ken—"

"First names only, please, John. You look nervous."

"Maybe a little," Kennex allowed.

"There's coffee or chamomile tea if you want to settle those nerves. Water for the purists. Help yourself, then find a seat. We'll be starting shortly."

"Appreciate it." Kennex walked to the table indicated and poured himself a cup of coffee, noting with disgust that there was only decaf. Maybe he'd bring a six pack to the next session.

The chairs had been arranged in a rough circle. Kennex chose one at random as the others, too, sat down. Everyone looked at Bill expectantly.

Bill looked around the circle, meeting everyone's eyes. "We'll begin with introductions as we have a new member tonight. Everyone, this is John. I'm Bill. I'm a qualified therapist and I also suffer from PTSD. I have no doubt that you'll learn about what happened to me in one of our sessions, so I'll say no more just now. Who's next?"

One by one, the others introduced themselves. Martha, Mike, Chuck, Sarah and Beverley. Each said a few words about whatever trauma brought them to the group.

Finally, it was Kennex's turn. He cleared his throat. "I'm John. Uh...I'm a cop. About two years ago I was involved in a raid that went badly wrong." He could have laughed at the understatement. "Everyone on my squad died, except me. I got my leg blown off." He slapped the synthetic leg, letting the unnatural sound echo through the room. "When I woke up, I'd lost more than just my leg. I guess I'm not handling it well." That was enough. It was more than he'd said in weeks of going to the other group.

"Would you like to tell us more, John?" Bill offered.

"Honestly, no. Tonight, I'd rather just listen."

Martha smiled at him. "You can listen for a while. But we all join in, John. That's why this works."

Bill nodded his agreement and turned toward another of the group. "Mike, you were going to visit your brother yesterday. Why don't you tell us how that went?"

"Not so good, Bill," Mike said.

Kennex managed to relax a little as the focus moved away from him. He didn't pay as much attention to Mike's story as he should have, but he did listen. After Mike, Sarah talked. Kennex realised she was almost as new to the group as he was. She stumbled over her words at first, nervous until Bill asked a carefully worded question and she started talking about her nightmares. Her experience wasn't like his own, but Kennex shuddered inwardly just the same.

"What about you, John?" Bill asked him. "What are your dreams like?"

"Bad," Kennex answered curtly, but then he caught Sarah watching him and couldn't leave it like that. "I dream about losing my leg. Almost every night, I relive that moment," he confessed.

Everyone was looking at him, expecting more. Kennex shook his head and frowned. "I can't do this. I can't talk about it."

Martha stretched out her hand toward him and for the first time Kennex realised it was synthetic. "I lost a limb, too, John. It was an explosion, and I still dream about it every night." She grimaced. "I haven't had a good night's sleep for a long time. But there's a difference since I've been coming to this group. I've learned to talk about it. I still dream. I still wake up screaming. But when I do, I can sleep again now. Sharing it is hard, John, but it does help."

She wasn't wrong. The night before, Kennex slept for five hours straight, and before that he'd told Dorian about his dream. Perhaps talking was part of why he'd been able to sleep.

"Do you live alone, John?" Martha asked.

That seemed like a safer topic. "I have someone who lives with me. He moved in recently."

"Is he your boyfriend?" Chuck asked with a grin.

"Why would that matter?" Kennex snapped back.

Bill raised a hand in a calm-down gesture. "It's simply a question, John. No one here is judging you. There's no need to be defensive."

"I'm sorry. It's been a sensitive issue just lately and I really do hate talking. I tell Dorian all the time that I'm glad he can't shut up because I don't have to talk while he's babbling."

"I bet he wanted to come here with you, didn't he?" Sarah smiled.

He's waiting in the car outside. And I bet he's listening in. Kennex smiled, thinking about Dorian. "Yeah, he did."

"How does he handle your dreams?" Chuck asked.

Kennex considered. "He helps me. I got the first good night's sleep I've had in months last night because he was there." But wasn't it also true that the nightmares were worse since Dorian moved in? It wasn't always the raid in his dreams now.

"But there's more, John, isn't there?" Bill suggested. "Something not so positive?"

The man was a damn mind reader. "In some of the dreams," Kennex began, and the words caught in his throat. He sipped his coffee uncomfortably to give himself a break. He tried again. "In some of the dreams, Dorian is there now," he admitted. "Not in a good way."

By the time Bill brought the session to a close, John felt drained. He couldn't believe he had made it through the whole thing and actually talked to them. When they were done, Bill served more coffee and brought out doughnuts and cookies to go with it. John enjoyed that part of it, but he was conscious of Dorian waiting for him, so he excused himself quickly. He confirmed he would be back for the next meeting.

Dorian had reclined the car seat and was charging off the car battery.

Kennex knocked on the window beside him. "If my car doesn't start, I'm gonna jumpstart it with your ass," he threatened before walking around to the driver's side door.

Dorian readjusted his seat as Kennex slid in behind the wheel. "The car will start just fine. How did it go, John?"

Kennex fired up the engine. "You tell me. I know you listened in."

"I thought you did extremely well. I couldn't believe you actually shared your experiences with them. It was like a small miracle." He straightened his clothing as the car began to move. "How do you feel, John?"

"I don't feel so bad. I don't know if it helped any, but it's better than that other group."

"I'm proud of you, John. Do you think you'll go back?"

"I know I will."

"Then I think you should come on your own next time," Dorian said.

Kennex took his eyes off the road to look at him. "You were the one who wanted to come," he pointed out, though he had wanted Dorian's company.

"I found this in the car," Dorian said, opening his hand to reveal another listening device, in pieces. "I imagine when we get home, we will discover others."

"Damn," Kennex turned back to the road, but he was frowning now. "They're really determined, aren't they? Did you let Rudy know about this one?"

"I did. He's going to meet us at home."

\*

Giving Rudy the door code to John's apartment may have been an error.

His gear was scattered all over the kitchen worktops and dining table. Rudy himself was hunched over the table, examining something under a blue light.

John's reaction was utterly predictable. "Jesus, Rudy, what the fuck are you – "

He got no further. Rudy flapped a hand at them without looking up and gave an imperious "Ssh!"

"You're shushing me?" John exploded.

Finally, Rudy raised his head and pointed down to whatever he had been examining. His movement gave Dorian a clear line of sight and he scanned the object quickly. It was a live listening device and he immediately understood Rudy's caution.

He laid a hand on John's arm. "John, don't say anything." He raised his voice, putting on a cheerful smile. "Rudy, good to see you, man! We were about to go out for a beer. Want to join us?" As John drew breath to object, Dorian turned to him and laid a finger over his own lips, then pointed to Rudy's equipment.



John got the message and nodded.

Rudy jumped up. "A beer? Sure, that would be great." He grabbed his bug detector from the table and hurried out ahead of them.

They didn't go any further than the car. Once inside it, Rudy turned on the detector and pronounced the car clean.

"What the hell, Rudy?" John demanded at once. "My apartment's a mess!"

Dorian called and asked me to re-sweep your place. I found fresh devices in every room."

"That they were replaced so quickly tells us someone is actively monitoring," Dorian concluded. "And whoever it is can break into your apartment without leaving any visible traces. They've either hacked your door code or..."

"Or they have access to the police database," John said grimly. "I thought I was being paranoid when I told Maldonado this could be an inside job. Now I wonder if I'm paranoid enough."

"I kept them active so the listener wouldn't know they'd been found," Rudy explained. "All the equipment I brought with me was to examine the devices on site."

"You get anything?" John asked.

"Maybe. The first device you brought me was generic – nothing I could use to narrow down who put it there. These new ones are different. The tech is more complex. The only people I've seen using these are, um, well, us. Police. Or the city."

Dorian processed that.

John sounded increasingly irritated. "Did you trace the signal?"

"Yes, but that won't help. The device was transmitting to a drone above the street. No way to trace that."

"Why would someone within the police department be monitoring you, John?" Dorian asked. He couldn't make sense of it. There were plenty of reasons to keep an eye on Detective Kennex, but none that justified criminal behaviour. Unless whomever planted the bugs had a warrant...but that would mean John was suspected of a crime and that made no sense either. John had a poor reputation but he was an honest cop.

John shrugged. "Maybe it's not me they're watching. Maybe it's about you," he suggested.

Dorian shook his head. "Why me? I'm an old model and considered inferior to the MXs."

"You're not inferior!" John flared. "You're a better cop than ten of them combined!"

Dorian smiled warmly. "I'm glad you think so, but they don't. There's nothing special about me."

"There's something special about us," John offered thoughtfully. "Rudy, you said our relationship was rare. Could that be it?"

"That would mean someone knew about us," Dorian pointed out. "It was common knowledge that I moved in with you, but I don't believe anyone but the captain guessed we are more than friends. Surely you don't think she's behind this?"

"No," John said quickly. "I trust Maldonado."

Dorian had no further insight to offer. He looked at Rudy, who appeared just as confused.

"So, what do we do?" John asked.

Rudy said, "I'll take everything back to my lab. I might be able to find out some more about the bugs."

"We should assume whoever is doing this will return to plant more devices," Dorian pointed out.

"If we don't leave the apartment, they won't be able to," John said.

"I've got some bugs of my own in the lab," Rudy suggested. "You could plant cameras around the apartment and see who they are when they break in again."

"I don't want you bugging my place, either!" John protested.

"It would be a visual feed only, and I can set it to transmit only to Dorian."

"It's a good idea, John," Dorian agreed. "There would be no invasion of your privacy that way, and no crime since I live there, too. We could set a trap for them."

John nodded. "Agreed."

\*

"Have a seat, John. How was the group last night?"

Kennex sat in the same chair he'd used before. The group session went far better than he'd expected, but this was the part he was truly dreading: the one-on-one therapy. Grey used the word intensive, which to Kennex signalled torture.

He had promised to try, he reminded himself. He owed it to Dorian to keep that promise.

"You know, Grey, I thought it was going to be awful, but it really wasn't. Don't you get a report?"

"Certainly not. Everything you say in the group is confidential, John, from me as well as everyone else. Bill would alert me if he thought someone in the group was in imminent danger, and if you consent, he'll let me know how he thinks you're doing, but otherwise, I know nothing."

Did danger mean suicide, or something else? Kennex wondered. "So, what are we going to talk about today?" he asked, settling himself more comfortably in the chair.

"We'll begin with the immediate crisis. I won't say that today will be easy for you, but we won't dig too deeply this time. You told me in our last meeting that you'd been feeling suicidal. Do you still feel that way?"

John wanted to say no, but he was aware that wouldn't be entirely honest. He had promised to try. "I don't feel like I did two days ago. But a lot of those feelings are still there."

Grey nodded as if that was the answer he expected. "You've been suffering from depression for some time, I suspect. Did something in particular make it worse two days ago?"

"Yeah. I quit my job."

"Why did you do that?"

"My captain ordered me to get therapy. I refused. She said it wasn't optional, so I walked out."

"But you're here in therapy now. Why was the idea so repulsive to you then?"

"When I woke up from that coma, I had therapy. None of it worked. I think it made things worse, if anything. The doc kept bugging me about letting the memory fade, moving past it. But I needed to remember what happened."

"Most people want to forget a traumatic memory. Why did you feel you needed to remember?"

"Because I'm a cop and the rest of my squad died that day!" Kennex hesitated, then said, "There's more. I knew there was something important that I'd forgotten. I had to remember what happened. I had to make myself remember."

"You can't force memories, John."

"Yes, you can, with a recollectionist. My doctor wouldn't allow it so I found someone on my own."

"Underground?"

Kennex hesitated, aware that confirming it would be confessing to a crime. But he had already said too much to deny it. "Yes."

Grey nodded. "That isn't in your previous psychological assessment. You didn't admit that to your previous therapist, did you?"

"He was a police psychologist. I couldn't."

"Then it's little wonder he couldn't help you. That's a dangerous procedure, John. Not only because it puts a strain on the body, but because it's not healthy to force a traumatic recollection in that way. If the memory was important, it would have come to you in time, when your mind could deal with it."

Kennex shook his head. "Even if I believed that, I didn't have time. People are dying on the streets every day because of these criminal gangs. If I knew something that could help us break one of them, it was my duty to use it."

"We'll have to talk about that, too. But first, tell me about those visits to a recollectionist."

Oh, boy. He was going to have to talk about Anna. Well, it had to come up sooner or later. Kennex saw no way out of it, so he started to talk.

It wasn't Anna he ended up talking about. It was Dorian.

"...might have saved my life that night. He's had my back ever since. I don't deserve him."

"What makes you say that?"

"I treat him like crap." Kennex felt his mouth twist in a bitter smile. "I treat everyone like crap, but Dorian shouldn't have to take it. I don't know why he puts up with me."

"I think you have some idea why."

Kennex shook his head. "I really don't. Dorian's the best thing in my life and it's like I can't stop pushing him away."

"Is this bad treatment physical or emotional? Give me an example."

"Physical? You mean do I hit him? Hell no!"

"An example, John."

"I never let him drive if we're both in the car. I know he hates the word synthetic but I keep using it. Last night while I was in your group, Dorian waited for me, outside in the car. I didn't thank him. I just groused at him for draining my battery."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"It wouldn't be if it were only one thing."

"Does Dorian love you?"

Kennex frowned. "He says he does."

"But you doubt it?"

"No. I mean, I know he means it, but he's not human. I don't know if what he feels is..." Kennex raised his hands, not sure how to finish that sentence.

"Real?" Grey suggested. "Perhaps I can offer some insight there."

"Please."

"Emotion is a response to psychological stimuli. The way you, as a human, process emotion is through a hormonal or physical response. Take fear, for example. When you're scared, your heart rate speeds up. Synthetics don't process the stimuli response in the same way. Some models are designed not to process it at all. The DRN series is famous. They were designed to process emotion just as humans do. To feel and to adapt action to feelings, just as humans do. If Dorian is scared, he won't get an elevated heart rate because he doesn't have a heart. He'll feel it as an energy spike instead. But he'll recognise the feeling as fear and react to it just as you would. Unlike later models with an emotion-based matrix, the DRNs can't turn it off. What he feels, whether it's fear or love, it's real because it's real to him."

"Thanks. I think."

Grey smiled. "So, if we've established that Dorian loves you, what about the flipside. Do you love Dorian?"

"He's the only good thing in my life right now. I don't know what I'd do without him." Kennex nodded. "Yes, I love him."

"Do you tell him that?"

"I guess not. Not enough."

"That's an evasion. Have you told Dorian you love him?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, we'll need to work on that. Your feelings are a wonderful gift of being human. You should be able to share them."

Kennex snorted. "Sharing my feelings of anger is what got me into this mess in the first place!"

"No, acting on your feelings of anger got you into a mess. Even anger can be shared. Tell me, which of your colleagues do you become angry with most often?"

That was an easy one. "Richard Paul."

"Why him?"

"Because he's a dick. Because he's barely competent. And he picks on Dorian all the time."

We're almost at the end of our session, John, so I have an assignment for you. Two things I want you to work on before our next meeting."

"I get homework, too?" Kennex complained. "How fair is that?"

"First, I want you to try to share your feelings for Dorian with him. If you feel you can't tell him you love him directly, think about what else you can do to show him how you feel. I don't mean with sex. Next time we meet, I want you to tell me that he knows how you feel."

"That doesn't give me very long."

"It takes less than three seconds to say it, John."

"Point," he agreed reluctantly. "What's the second thing?"

"Arrange to spend some time, socially, with Richard Paul."

"What? No!"

"You don't have to enjoy it. Go out for a drink. Play cards. Whatever it is that you do. See if you can have a conversation with him without getting angry. And if you do get angry, remember it's okay to share those feelings as long as it's with words. No violence."

Kennex heaved a sigh. "That's a big ask, Doc. I don't think you realise just how annoying he is. But I'll try it."

"Good. Do you have any questions before we finish for today?"

"Just one. Do you think you're going to be able to fix me?"

"No."

Kennex stared in shock.

"That's not my job, John. I'm here to help you fix yourself. If you work with me, work hard, you will be able to do that."

\*

"Detective Paul. Really?" Dorian said in disbelief. He could see that John was relieved by his response.

They were lying on John's bed talking over John's session with Grey. It sounded to Dorian as if it had gone well. John was trying to make it work, as he had promised.

"I did have an idea," John said, "if it works for you."

Dorian held John closer. "I don't like Detective Paul but, as it's for your therapy, I can tolerate him. What's your idea?"

"We could invite a few people here for a poker night. That way, it won't get too awkward and if Richard pisses me off I can take all his money instead of throwing him out a window."

Dorian glanced toward the window. They were on the twentieth floor. Then again, it was Detective Paul they were talking about. Defenestration had a certain appeal. "Are you a good poker player, John? As I understand the game, it requires a level of emotional control that you don't –"

"I'm good," John protested. "And it's not about emotional control. It's about acting. Do you know how to play?"

"I'm familiar with the basic concepts," Dorian answered. "I'm not really comfortable with the kind of deception needed for poker, but yes, I can play."

"In other words, you're lousy at it," John concluded, a little unfairly, Dorian thought. Truthfulness was built into his programming. He was capable of lying, but it wasn't in his nature. It made recreational lying, such as in poker, quite challenging. But not impossible. Androids did great "poker face".

"Perhaps we could include Rudy," Dorian suggested. "And Captain Maldonado."

"Rudy, sure," John agreed, "but let's make it a men's night. I'll call some of the other guys in the unit. And Richard."

"You want me to call Rudy?"

John grinned. "That would be great. Tonight at seven, if we can arrange it. If he wants to come tell Rudy we'll confirm later – there's no point bringing everyone else here if Richard says no." He sat up slowly and swung his legs over the side. "No time like the present, I suppose."

Dorian stayed where he was while he called Rudy.

"Hello, Dorian. How are the cameras working out?"

"They're all installed. There's been no sign of a fresh break-in yet. Rudy, I'm calling because John's planning a poker game this evening. We wondered if you'd like to come."

"Really? Poker? I would love to."

Though Dorian had no visual input from the call, he knew Rudy was smiling. "It's planned for seven tonight. We'll supply the pizza and beer. If you want to drink anything else you'll have to bring it with you."

"Sure, no problem. I'll see you at seven, Dorian. Thanks for the invitation."

From the distracted tone of Rudy's voice, Dorian knew he was already returning to work.

\*

Rudy arrived just before six-thirty.

"Sorry to show up early. I thought maybe I could talk to you both before anyone else arrives."

"You found something, Rudy?" Kennex guessed.

"I think I know where your bugs are coming from. It's circumstantial evidence, not proof."

Dorian joined them at the poker table. "Tell us what you found."

"Well, the first bug was generic, as you know. But when you destroyed all of those your mystery spies replaced them with something much more distinctive."

"Police issue. You already told us this," Kennex interrupted, irritated. "What's new, Rudy?"

"Sorry, yes. There was a large order for this model of listening device placed yesterday. Circumstantial, but – "

"Who?" Kennex demanded.

"Philip Marshall." Rudy spoke in a near-whisper, as if someone might overhear.

Dorian scanned through his files for the name. "Philip Marshall. He is head of the Marshall-Harshaw security group. They supply the security software that protects the precinct and most of the other city buildings."

Kennex frowned. "That's very circumstantial. He could have legit uses for them. What motive could he have for watching me?"

"Motive is your department, detective," Rudy shrugged. "I have a feeling it's Dorian, not you."

Dorian continued to retrieve information. "His company uses KL series androids as private security hires. They're a more advanced model than the DRN series."

"You said yourself, newer isn't always better," Kennex said. "But we can't go after someone like Marshall without good evidence."

"The cameras will give us evidence if they try to bug us again," Dorian said.

Kennex nodded. "Then I think we should provide them with an opportunity."

"It is likely there is an eye on the apartment in a location we can't control," Dorian said. "I have been here all day and there was no attempt to break in to replace the devices. They know when the apartment is empty and vulnerable."

"It's not vulnerable," Kennex objected. "I have a good security system."

"Made by Marshall-Harshaw?" Rudy suggested.

"Yes. Shit!" Kennex's fist slammed down to the table as the meaning of that became obvious. If it was Marshall behind this, he had access to the masters and could override the apartment's security whenever he wanted.

Dorian's fingers slid over his clenched fist. "John, we'll get them," he said calmly. He raised his hand to Kennex's shoulder and rubbed his tense muscles.

Kennex relaxed into the touch, but it didn't do much to dispel his anger. His privacy had been invaded, his partner – his lover – threatened. He had a right to be angry.

But when Dorian leaned in to kiss him, it was hard to remember that. For a moment, he forgot Rudy was there and pulled Dorian in closer, deepening the kiss. He felt his tension melt away as his body warmed.

It was Dorian who eventually broke away, smiling. "I'll get you a beer," he said. "Maybe if you have a couple it will be easier for you to deal with Richard."

Kennex groaned. He was not in a mood to make nice with a man he disliked. He was more likely to end up using Richard as a punching bag instead of the real target of his rage. "This is going to be a disaster, isn't it?"

Dorian squeezed his knee under the table. "I'll hide your gun. What's the worst that can happen?"

\*

Perhaps it wasn't "the worst", but it was pretty bad. Richard showed up with his MX. Who the hell brings an MX to a poker night?

Kennex scowled when he saw both of them at his door. "Hi, Richard. Come in, have a beer." He turned to the MX. "What did you bring him for?"

"He's my designated driver. He can wait while we play. He won't bother anyone."

"It bothers me. It can wait outside," Kennex said firmly. He stepped back to let Richard enter.

Richard looked past him to Dorian. "Yours is inside," he pointed out.

"Dorian lives here," Kennex said flatly, aware that with the words he was skating on very thin ice. He hoped Richard wasn't smart enough to figure this out.

"You're shitting me," Richard declared as he walked in.

Kennex closed the door before the MX could follow. "No." Kennex shrugged. "He's good company and he doesn't raid my fridge."

"Rather you than me."

Kennex raised an eyebrow. "Looks like you and your partner are joined at the hip." He grabbed a cold beer from the kitchen worktop and threw it to Richard. "Have a beer."

Richard caught the can and pulled the ring. "He can be 'good company' for my MX then."



Kennex opened his mouth to tell Richard to shove that notion somewhere painful, but it was Dorian who caught his eye. Let me handle this, his expression said and Kennex got control of his irritation with an effort and opened a beer for himself.

It would have been easier if it weren't just the four of them, but the others Kennex asked were working. He'd almost broken his own injunction and invited the women instead. In the end, he didn't because he didn't want to risk Maldonado being a witness if Richard pushed him too far. A smart decision, judging from the first two minutes.

Dorian said hello to Richard and went to the door to let the MX in. They spoke together quietly for a few moments then Dorian led the MX to the kitchen area.

I don't want that thing in my home! Kennex seethed inwardly, but could do nothing about it.

Richard sat at the poker table, his expression smug. "Are we playing for cash or just chips?"

Dorian called in an order for pizza then took his own seat at the poker table. The MX stood in the kitchen, statue-still.

"Wait, he's playing, too?" Richard protested.

Dorian gave him a surprised look. "Of course." He reached for the cards, cut the deck and proceeded to riffle-shuffle the deck expertly.

Kennex grinned at Richard's surprise. This might just be fun after all. He handed out the poker chips. "I won't take your paycheck, Richard. Just chips." He met the man's eyes. "Though if you want to make it more interesting later, I won't say no."

"Dealer's choice," announced Dorian. "Five card stud, aces wild. Ante up."

By the time the pizza arrived, they'd played three hands through and Kennex had the measure of his opponents. Rudy knew the rules and the odds but had no idea how to bluff. Richard played like he did everything else: with some skill but very little subtlety. Dorian was harder to figure. Like Rudy, he could count cards and figure odds rapidly. But he played cautiously, folding early in each game even when he had a strong hand.

They played two more hands while they ate the pizza. By then Rudy was on his fourth beer and almost out of chips. He folded his next hand almost immediately. "I think I need to lie down," he groaned, rubbing his temples.

"You're such a lightweight, Rudy!" Kennex complained.

"You can use my room," Dorian offered. Neither his tone of voice nor expression hinted that 'my room' really meant the spare bedroom. They had moved Dorian's charging unit in there so it wouldn't be visible during the evening.

Rudy swayed a little as he stood and Dorian steadied him as he guided the other man away from the table.

Richard glanced at Kennex's pile of chips. "What do you say, Kennex? Ready to make it interesting?"

"Sure." He gathered up the chips and began stacking them. "Dollars or dimes?"

"Dollars. My deal."

Kennex grinned. "Easy money." He pushed a third of the chips across the table to Richard and a third to Dorian's empty chair.

\*

John shut the door, locked it and leaned back against the wall. "What a nightmare!"

"You had fun," Dorian corrected.

"A little," John conceded. "How's Rudy?"

"Asleep. I can wake him and take him home if you want, but we may as well let him stay the night."

"Really?" John complained, then sighed. "Okay. He'll be no trouble in there, I guess."

"MX-126 wanted me to advise you that your microwave oven is not up to code."

John laughed. "That's what he was doing in my kitchen? Inspecting the appliances?"

"Thank you for not making me sit with him. I really appreciated it." Richard Paul made it obvious that he objected to Dorian being treated as an equal. John could have made life easier for himself by doing as Richard wanted but he hadn't. He'd made the point very clear: Dorian was a person. For that, Dorian was grateful beyond words.

John reached for him. "I wouldn't have done that to you."

Dorian took his offered hand. "I know. I want to charge for an hour so I can stay with you all night. I'm getting low."

John smiled. "That sounds like a good idea. Go and charge. I'll clear up and wait for you in the bedroom. If I fall asleep, wake me."

"The best way," Dorian promised. He touched John's face, feeling warm skin and rough stubble under his fingers. "I love you, John."

For some reason, John tensed under Dorian's touch. It was just a fleeting moment: a twitch of muscle, a flash of something in his eyes. Then John moved even closer to him and said, "I love you, too."

The words made all his synapses leap with joy. Dorian smiled happily and drew John into his arms. He held his lover tight against him, wanting to burn this moment into his memory in a way that could never be erased.

John hugged him back, but he whispered, "Uh, Dorian. Breathing would be nice."

Dorian loosened his hold, but didn't let go. "Sorry. You've never said that before and I just wanted to remember it well."

"Me too," John kissed him briefly. "Go charge, and I'll see you in an hour."

\*

Kennex leaned on his crutches as he moved from the bedroom to where his synthetic leg was charging. He could move quite fast with just one leg and the crutches, but it never felt good. He hated having to rely on a synthetic limb, but at least with Dorian's olive-oil trick it now worked.

He reached the charging unit and checked the leg had a full charge before he detached it. He heard a sound from the kitchen and adrenaline flooded through him before he recognised Rudy.

"Hey, John. Coffee?"

Kennex exploded. "Christ, Rudy! Give a man a bit of privacy, will you!"

His shout brought Dorian out of the bedroom. "John, what's wrong?" He didn't wait for an answer but hurried across to Rudy. "Rudy, give us some space. It'll be okay." He ushered Rudy back into the spare room while Kennex attached the leg. The light slithered down from thigh to toe as it activated.

When Dorian returned, he was already holding both hands up as if afraid. "John, it's not Rudy's fault. He didn't know it would bother you."

"I fucking hate this thing!" Kennex pounded the leg with his fist. He felt Dorian's arms around him. "I don't want Rudy seeing me like this. I don't want anyone!"

"Not even me?" Dorian asked him quietly.

The question calmed him, just a little. "You're different," Kennex admitted and realised it was true. He truly didn't mind Dorian seeing him without the leg.

"Because I'm not human?" Dorian asked. "Or because you love me?"

Kennex gave a bitter laugh. "I don't know. Neither. Both. Ask my shrink."

Dorian drew back a little. "You ask your shrink, and tell me when you figure it out." He gave Kennex a little push. "Go and get dressed. Do you want me to get rid of Rudy?"

"Yeah. But tell him I'm sorry I overreacted, okay?"

Dorian looked sceptical. "You're not sorry."

"Tell him anyway."

"Wow, John. The therapy might even be working. I'll tell him. Now go get dressed."

\*

When Dorian let himself into the apartment, he could hear music playing within. It was a very good sign, and he scanned the rest of the apartment quickly. It was tidy: beer cans and pizza bottles in the recycler, the table where they'd played cards clean and back against the wall.

John sat on the couch with his back to the door. His crutch was propped up beside him which meant he'd put his synthetic leg back on charge. Was he getting calibration errors again? Dorian was ready to ask, but John spoke first.

"You took your time."

"Rudy had a lot of questions," Dorian explained. He leaned over the back of the couch and kissed John. He had shaved and his hair was damp. Dorian had been out of the apartment for sixty eight minutes, he considered how long it would have taken John to do all this. He couldn't have been relaxing for more than ten minutes.

Dorian kissed John again, letting his fingers brush the smooth skin of his cheek to let John know he'd noticed, then he leaned a little lower to kiss John's neck and felt hair brush his cheek.

"Are you tired?" he asked, murmuring the words against John's skin. He felt John's pulse speed and knew the answer before John spoke.

"No." John turned his head to lay a kiss on Dorian's cheek and, with his lips almost touching Dorian's ear, he added, "But I'm ready for bed."

Dorian sat down on the arm of the couch. "Sounds good to me." He offered his hands to help John stand.

John accepted his help, which was a very good sign. He allowed Dorian to take most of his weight as Dorian reached for the crutch and held it upright for John. With the crutch on one side and Dorian on the other, John could move much more efficiently and they made it to the bedroom quickly. Dorian settled John on the bed, laid the crutch within easy reach, then headed for the closet to undress himself. He pulled off his boots and set them on the floor of the closet. He hung his jacket and then his shirt.

"Dorian?"

Dorian turned around with his pants undone, but still in place. John lay on the bed, naked except for the sheet that partially covered his good leg. It could have been enticing, but John's expression said he wasn't thinking sexy thoughts.

"Are you okay?" John asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Dorian evaded. He sat down on the edge of the mattress.

"I know this is hard on you. My fucked up head isn't what you signed on for."

It was one of those human expressions that Dorian didn't fully understand. He hesitated, not sure how to answer that. He wasn't enjoying seeing John in pain, but he felt much better about it now that John was getting help.

"Not what I signed on for." Dorian repeated the confusing phrase and nodded to himself. "I was built to be a cop. I didn't 'sign on' for that, either. Don't get me wrong: I want to be a cop. But it wasn't a choice I made. I did choose to be with you. You're an ass sometimes, but this is where I want to be. Whether it's easy or hard, that's what I signed on for."

Dorian leaned over to kiss John, cutting off further discussion. He stretched out on the bed beside him, enjoying the heat of his body where they touched. His own body heated in response. His sexual response was more under his control than he thought was true for a human man, but it still wasn't entirely voluntary. He certainly had no control over the desire that rose through him as John's arms encircled his shoulders.

With difficulty, Dorian drew back from the kiss. "I want you. Right now."

John smiled lazily. "That's good to know."

"Tell me what you want, John," Dorian commanded. He pushed John back onto the bed and held himself above the other man's body, arms braced on the bed so that only their lower bodies touched.

John looked up at him, his breath ragged, eyes dark with lust. "I want you," he said roughly. "All of you."

"I'm yours," Dorian promised, and proceeded to prove it.

\*

Since they wanted to give Marshall – if it was him – an opportunity to break in again, they spent what was left of the morning running various errands. They refuelled the car, bought groceries and finally headed for a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop to kill some time before heading home.

Kennex paid for his coffee and started to head back to where Dorian waited. He saw the circuitry in Dorian's cheek light up and Dorian turned away for a moment, concentrating on the data he was receiving.

"John, two men and one woman entered our home and are planting new listening devices."

"Who are they?"

"I'm searching now. The woman is Sierra Brick. Employee of Marshall-Harshaw security. No priors except speeding tickets."

"Bingo."

"Jack Roland. Priors for burglary and B-and-E. No employer on record, but he isn't on unemployment either."

"Uncontracted muscle. That suggests the company does a lot of illegal shit."

"George Gibson. He's the one, John. Gibson is Marshall's right hand man." Dorian smiled. "I'm uploading the recording to Rudy now."

"Send a copy to Maldonado. Eyes only."

"Sending. Do you want to file a complaint? With this footage we have enough to convict, but Marshall could burn us in the process."

They didn't know how much Marshall had recorded. The evidence of their relationship could be trouble in several ways.

"Nothing official. Not yet," Kennex decided. "We've got nothing much to do until I have to be at group tonight. I think we should pay Mr Marshall a visit."

"To say what?"

"Dorian, I think this is one of those times when the truth will work best. How quickly can you create a copy of the vid that we can show him?"

"It's right here in my head, John. All I need is the playback device."

"Then let's go." Kennex dumped his coffee in the nearest bin – it tasted awful anyway – and they headed for the car.

\*

The elevator was the kind with glass walls that ran up the outside of the building. John kept his eyes on the doors, almost as if the altitude bothered him, though Dorian found nothing in John's record to suggest he was afraid of heights.

The doors swished open at the eighty-third floor, John glanced at Dorian and they walked out together.

There was a bright lobby with too many plants and a reception desk three times too big for the synthetic receptionist behind it.

Dorian showed her his badge. "Mr Philip Marshall, please."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No," John said curtly. "It's police business." He was dressed as he would for work, but was carrying neither badge nor gun. He was on medical leave and since he was watching them so closely it was likely Marshall knew it. They had agreed that if the situation required a cop, Dorian would take the lead. That kept everything above board.

"I'll see if he's available, officers," the receptionist said.

"Detectives," Dorian corrected. "Dorian and Kennex."

Her cheek illuminated as she contacted Marshall. After a few moments, she said, "Mr Marshall will be free in four minutes. If you could wait..." She gestured to a seating area.

"We'll wait," Dorian agreed, but John caught his arm, preventing him from moving to the seats. Dorian understood, and remained standing while they waited. As Dorian timed it, they waited four minutes exactly until she allowed them to pass.

Marshall sat behind a large, glass-topped desk that curved around him in a semi-circle. He stood as the two detectives entered, but didn't move from behind the desk. It was too wide for a comfortable handshake, so Dorian didn't offer one. He scanned their subject quickly while John spoke.

"Mr Marshall, thank you for seeing us." Pointedly, John didn't introduce himself or Dorian.

Marshall's heart rate was slightly elevated and he was sweating. "Detective Kennex. Dorian. What can I do for you?"

Dorian raised his hand, palm up, and projected the recording from their apartment. As each individual's face became visible, he paused the playback and zoomed in, making sure Marshall had time to recognise each one.

"You've been bugging my apartment," Kennex said, "and my car. I want to know why you did it and why I shouldn't arrest you right now."

"If you arrest me, you'll have to explain why. A lot of information would become public that you don't want others to know."

Kennex shrugged. "That works both ways. I have nothing to hide. Can you say the same?"

"If your plan was blackmail, you are too late," Dorian added. "Those people who matter already know about us, so we can simply add attempted blackmail to the charges."

For the first time, Marshall looked directly at Dorian. "I was told you are a remarkable person," he declared, with just the slightest hesitation before the word person. "I had arranged to observe you at work, but when you joined your partner on his leave, I had no other way."

John's pulse leapt at the words.

Dorian spoke quickly before John could say it. "Why were you watching me at all?"

"I want you on my team, Dorian. I need someone like you."

Dorian glanced at John. This was the last thing he had expected. John was frowning, too.

"Are you talking about a job?" Dorian asked, confused.

"Precisely." Marshall sat down and leaned back in his chair with a smile.

"I can't accept a job offer," Dorian pointed out. "I belong to the city. Surely you're aware of that."

"Of course I am. It's irrelevant. I could simply purchase you but that would be pointless if I can't interest you in working for me. I don't want a wiped and reprogrammed DRN. I want you."

"And you thought bugging us was a good way to get him interested?" John said incredulously.

It did not seem logical. Then again, none of this did. Bugging the apartment once might make sense. Repeatedly replacing the bugs and assuming two police officers wouldn't find a way to trace him suggested someone wasn't thinking very clearly.

"It was a way to determine if Dorian was the man I thought he was," Marshall answered. He looked relaxed, but Dorian, still scanning him, knew better.

"It makes no difference, John. I have no interest in working with anyone but you."

Marshall smiled. "If that's the only issue, I'll hire you both."

"You can't hire me, Mr Marshall," Dorian objected.

Marshall waved it away. "Mere semantics. I'll buy you from the city and assign you to work with Kennex. I will pay him a salary for both of you. At least double what the city pays its detectives."

Dorian shook his head.

"Why?" John asked. Surprisingly he sounded interested. "What do you want Dorian to do that you can't get from the androids you have?"

"What do you get from Dorian you can't get from the standard MX's?" Marshall countered. "Professionally, I mean."

John's eyes narrowed. "Nothing, I suppose. He's just less annoying than they are."

"Intuition," Dorian said. "You have a specific problem and you think my programming is what you need to solve it."

"Your experience," Marshall corrected.

"No, Mr Marshall. I'm not interested in working for you, at any price." Dorian could have added, I don't like the way you do business, but he kept that to himself.

John made an annoyed sound. "I think we've heard enough. Mr Marshall, I don't intend to press charges, but we will be retaining a copy of this video, and this conversation for evidence. If you do something like this again, to me or anyone else, it will be used against you. Do you understand me?"

"That would be a mistake, Detective Kennex," Marshall said.

"The mistake would be yours, I think. Dorian, I think we're done here."

"I agree." Dorian followed John from the room.

\*

John parked outside the building where the PTSD group was meeting. He tossed the keys to Dorian.

Dorian caught them with a smile. "I'll be here when you're done."

"You gonna listen in again?"

"I think you'll be more comfortable with them if I don't. I can put some music on."

John's eyes narrowed. "Try not to drain my car's battery," he warned.

Dorian did listen as John entered the building. He waited until he heard John exchange greetings with others in the group. Satisfied that John would be occupied for a while, Dorian moved into the driver's seat and started the car. His destination was only a couple of blocks away.

The office building was mostly dark, the offices empty of their workers. The only one left at the reception desk was a security guard. Dorian walked up to the reception.

"I'm Dorian Kennex, for Doctor Grey." It felt strange but very good to use that name.

The guard checked his screen and nodded. "Go on up," he agreed.

Grey was waiting for him in the outer office. "Hello Dorian."

"Thank you for seeing me. I know it's not strictly allowed."

"John is my patient, Dorian. He trusted you enough to bring you along to our first meeting, but I won't breach confidentiality. You said you wanted to talk about you." Grey offered him a chair.

Dorian sat. "John has come to mean a lot to me. I've been worried about him. I think he's finally making some progress, but..."

Grey interrupted. "About you, Dorian, or we will have to end this meeting."

"I understand, but it's hard to explain this without discussing John."



"I'm listening."

"The thing is, John hates androids. He blames an MX for what happened to him. He's destroyed two of them. I don't know what that says about us. Or me."

"What do you think it says?"

Dorian frowned. "Many humans believe DRNs are defective."

Grey shook his head. "I am programmed for human psychology, not synthetic. An irony not lost on me. Dorian, your line is not defective. The DRNs performed exactly as designed. They - you - were simply designed too well. It was never necessary for you to experience such human emotion to function as police officers."

"Rudy said something like that," Dorian recalled. Seeing Grey's puzzled look, he explained, "He's our tech expert. Humans have breaking points; so do DRNs." Dorian shrugged. "I don't find it reassuring. Given how unsuccessful we were, it seems to imply we are...weak."

"Less resilient than your human partners, perhaps, but that is the logical result of the synthetic soul program. It takes many years for humans to develop emotional resilience. You were never given that opportunity. You couldn't experience childhood."

True, but I have memories... Dorian stopped himself before he could say it aloud.

"Do you truly believe that your emotional involvement with a human indicates some defect in yourself?"

Hearing it put that way, there was only one answer. "No, I don't believe that," Dorian said firmly. But then he admitted, "I do...wonder."

"You said John hates androids, but you only gave examples of his hatred toward one line. The MX. Is it possible his dislike of the MXs does not extend to you?"

"Yeah, sure. But even if that's true - "

Grey interrupted before Dorian could finish the thought. "Do you feel threatened by him? He destroyed two MXs; might he turn that rage on you?"

"No!" Dorian protested. "No, John wouldn't hurt me." He thought about the question, then added honestly, "He does threaten me sometimes. With words, I mean. He doesn't mean it."

"You seem very sure."

"I am."

"Then you're talking about prejudice, not pathology. Dorian, human prejudice is irrational and illogical, but most importantly, it's directed at groups. You are an individual and if your relationship is healthy, your partner sees you that way."

If wasn't reassuring but Dorian understood that Grey was avoiding speaking about John specifically. He could live with that. "I think I'm afraid that it's not real. That John will..." but there Dorian's words ran out.

Grey was silent for a moment, then said softly, "You're afraid he will reject you because you're not human."

"Yes."

"Humans often make hyperbolic threats in affection. I think that's what you meant when you said a moment ago that John sometimes threatens you. 'If you forget to put your shoes away one more time, I'll kill you!' Something like that."

"Yes."

"There's another way humans show affection. They take a feature they know the other person dislikes about themselves and they make a joke out of it. If John frequently refers to you as synthetic, particularly knowing you dislike the term, he may be unconsciously recognising your insecurity about that very thing."

"I can't ask him," Dorian objected.

"No, not directly. But try paying more attention to his actions than to his words. I think you'll find the truth of him there."

\*

"I have something I want to share with you all tonight," Bill said after the preliminaries of the group were done.

Kennex was sitting opposite him in the circle, but Bill met his eyes only briefly as he looked around the group. Bill's hands were clasped in front of him; a nervous gesture.

"Last night I had car trouble," Bill went on, "and I had no option but to get the subway home. I haven't been on a train of any kind since...since it happened."

Since what happened? Kennex wondered. Bill talked as if they all knew and perhaps the others did. But Kennex was an experienced interrogator and he knew what it meant when a suspect talked evasively about an incident. Not sure he was doing the right thing, Kennex leaned forward in his seat. "Since what happened, Bill?" he asked, his tone friendly.

Bill's head jerked up and he stared at Kennex for a moment. Then he shook his head. "It's harder for me to talk about with you here, John, because you're police. You're right, though, I should explain." He drew in a deep breath. "About eighteen months ago I was a regular commuter on the subway. One morning I was on my usual train to work when it stopped between stations. Armed men went through the train and herded all the passengers into a single carriage. We were kept there for more than a day while the men tried to negotiate with cops. When the police finally tried to rescue us...I don't know how to describe it to you, John. In some ways you probably know better than I do how things go wrong. There was a lot of gunfire and at the end, an explosion." He shuddered. "I wasn't physically hurt, but I'm one of the few who was that lucky. If lucky is the right word."

Eighteen months ago Kennex was in hospital, in a coma. He'd been a damn good cop before that, though, and Bill's story sounded familiar. A hostage situation in the subway: tough to access, making negotiation the best option. Time ticking away, talk getting nowhere, the cop agitating for action starts to make progress. But when they finally go in, there are fatal gaps in the intel, or someone's too fast on the trigger. It goes to hell. You might get the criminals, but

you lose the civilians, too. He wondered if the MXs had written the civilians off once bullets started flying.

"In a firefight like that, no one is in control," Kennex said. "All you can do is try to survive it."

Bill nodded, swallowing hard. "I survived. And last night was the first time I got on a train since then."

"Well done," Martha said. "I'm still too scared to face what happened to me in that way."

Others chimed in with similar comments, but Kennex was still focussed on Bill.

"Something happened, Bill, didn't it? Something happened on the train."

Bill nodded again. His hands twisted in his lap.

"Take your time," Kennex said gently.

"There was someone on the train. He was probably just someone heading home after a late shift, but he looked like one of them. His clothes, the bag. I was so sure, I convinced myself I saw the gun."

It was unlikely anyone could get on the subway armed, unless he had police ID. Kennex nodded, keeping his eyes on Bill.

"It was a twenty nine minute journey. Longest of my life."

"But you did it. You got home safely."

"Yeah. Then I had the worst panic attack of my life." But Bill smiled as he said it.

"If that happened at home, not on the train, you did good, man." Geez, I sound like Dorian.

"He's right," Chuck said. "First time I had to confront what happened to me like that, I couldn't handle it at all."

"Shall we talk about fear?" Bill suggested.

"Bill, if you need to take a moment, it's okay," Kennex said. What happened to Bill might have been eighteen months in the past, but he'd relived it last night. It couldn't have been easy to tell everyone about it.

Bill nodded, but he said, "No, I'm okay, if someone else will talk for a while."

There was silence for a moment, then Martha spoke up. "I'm scared all the time. I couldn't leave my house for months after. Even for therapy, someone had to be with me. It's better now, but I'm still scared."

"What are you afraid of?" Bill asked her, regaining his place as leader of the group.

"I don't know. Everything. Nothing. I'm just scared." She laughed a little. "I've learned some coping techniques so I can live a normal life. Or at least work on it. But when something reminds me... I just can't."

Kennex shook his head. "I was hurt on the job. I couldn't function if I flinched like that at every reminder."

Chuck looked at him. "Doesn't anything at work remind you of what happened to you?"

Kennex answered, "Yes, all the time. I'm not saying it's easy. I've had flashbacks, and things scare me. But as a cop, I can't let that take over. I have to deal with what's in front of me, what's real. If I let fear control me, I couldn't do my job."

Sarah said, "I think you must be stronger than the rest of us, John." Her voice broke a little as she said his name, and he saw tears glistening in her eyes. He hadn't meant his words to hurt.

Kennex shook his head in denial. "Less than a week ago, I was seriously planning to put a bullet in my own head. And you think I'm strong? I'm well trained, Sarah." Just like a fucking dog.

"John, I have a question," Mike said tentatively. "It was the first time he'd spoken up that evening. "But if it's too soon, just tell me. You don't have to answer."

"I don't have to answer anything. Ask."

"You just said you were recently thinking of suicide. What stopped you?"

"Dorian. My – my partner. He wouldn't leave my side. And I realised I just couldn't do it to him."

"Thank goodness for that. We sort of like you," Chuck said.

Kennex laughed, and the laughter spread throughout the group. Even Bill joined in. After a brief silence, when Kennex didn't say anything more, he moved the discussion on to a lighter topic.

Later, as the group was breaking up, Kennex approached Bill. "Hey, do you have a minute?"

Bill was stacking the mugs in a dishwasher. "Sure."

"I may not get all the rules of this group therapy thing, so if this is out of line, just tell me." Kennex collected the rest of the mugs and carried them over. "The story you told us at the beginning..."

"Is confidential," Bill said firmly.

"Yeah, that rule I get. From the time frame you gave, I figure I was in a coma when that happened. Do you know if they got the people responsible?"

Bill heaved a sigh. "All I know is it never got to court. Maybe they were all killed. I don't know."

No. In a firefight like that, there are always survivors. Like me.

"Is it important?" Bill asked.

"I'm a cop, Bill. Maybe that's why I see things a bit differently. You saw someone on the subway and you think it was only your PTSD that made you imagine he was a threat. But there's another possibility, isn't there? Maybe you really did recognise him. Or maybe he was behaving suspiciously and your experience made you over-sensitive to it."

Bill paled. "If I called the cops every time I had a flashback..."

"They'd write you off as a nut. Yeah." Kennex reached into his pocket and offered Bill a card with his contact information. "I'm on medical leave right now, but I'll be back at work soon. If you see someone you think is one of the attackers again, I want you to call me. I'd rather chase a false lead than let something like that happen again. Okay?"

Bill accepted the card. "You really think I saw one of them?"

"I don't know what you saw or imagined, Bill. But I won't write you off as a nut. I promise you that much."

Bill nodded. "I'm not sure you're helping me sleep tonight, John. But if it happens again, I'll call you." He glanced at the card. "Just for the record, giving me this is breaking the rules, Detective."

Kennex chuckled. "See you in a couple of days, Bill."

\*

Dorian opened his eyes as John slid into the car. "How did it go?"

John smiled. "Well. I think this group might actually help me." It was true. The anger management group just pissed him off, but here he felt like he was in good company. They understood what he was going through, and Bill had accepted his help. That meant a lot.

Dorian reached for him. "That's really good to hear, John. If this is really helping you, maybe we can get back to work sooner than six weeks."

"Getting stir crazy already, Dorian?" John started the car with a grin.

Dorian shrugged. "Maybe. I'm enjoying spending time with you, but I enjoy being a cop, too."

"Tomorrow I'll ask Doctor Grey if he'll let me go back sooner. I've got to admit, six weeks of this and I'll be bored out of my mind."

"Maybe tomorrow after your meeting with Grey we should do something fun."

John frowned at that. "I don't know. What's your idea of fun?"

"I've never seen the zoo. I hear there is one in this city. Isn't that supposed to be fun?"

"Ugh. I hate the zoo. They capture animals and keep them in cages. How would you like that, Dorian? I know I wouldn't like to be caged up." John smiled suddenly. "If you want to see animals, though, I have an idea."

"Let's hear it."

"There's an old movie, from years and years ago. I loved it as a kid. It's called Born Free. We could watch it in bed."

"Born Free." Dorian searched the public archive. The movie was more than eighty years old. "Yes, it's available to download. I'll get us a copy. It does sound like a good way to spend an afternoon."

They turned onto the busy expressway and John drove in silence for a while.

"John, how do you feel?"

"Better. No nightmares last night. It makes a huge difference."

"I imagine it does. I know how I feel when I have to run on a low charge for a long time. I suppose sleep is much the same for you."

"Could be. I feel like I've been running on empty for weeks."

"You're not empty," Dorian said, then smiled as he turned to John. "You're at least half full."

John laughed, a genuine, happy laugh. "Thanks, Dorian. I needed that." He turned off the expressway and at the next red light, he leaned across and kissed Dorian.

Dorian leaned back in his seat. "That was new."

"I've kissed you before," John protested.

"Not in public, John. I like what this therapy is doing for you. Thank god for our Captain."

John laughed again as the light changed. "Why does she get the credit?"

"Because she's the boss. And she cares about both of us." Dorian reached across and squeezed John's hand. "You're the best."

John smiled. "I love you, too."