

Fixer-Upper

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Fixer-Upper

by [thirty2flavors](#)

Summary

Somewhere along the line, the expensive androids had stopped looking like robots and started looking like people—people with stiff, artificial expressions and glassy, dead eyes. This was the most realistic specimen Sasha had ever seen.

“Totally gonna be super normal, cutting you up for scrap,” Sasha announced to the empty room, her hands on her hips. “Not gonna feel like a serial killer at all.”

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Incomplete; abandoned

Notes

The first installment of what will be a series of fic by me and art by [@corporatestooge](#)! They had the idea, I like androids and Rhys/Sasha, everything kind of spiralled from there. We've both been playing a lot of Detroit: Become Human, what can I say.

Edit December 2021: I want to be upfront that I am unlikely to return to this fic, as after several years and writing a 95k monster of a multichapter for Borderlands, I think it is time for me to move on. But I like what exists of this little story, so I am leaving it up in case anyone else does too and wants to revisit it sometime. Thank you for your support!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

“I’ll give you a hundred bucks.”

“A *hundred*—?! You insult me. This is state-of-the-art. This is Hyperion tech. The retail value —”

“Oh, please.” Fiona scoffed, the puff of breath blowing aside her red-streaked hair. “Don’t talk to me about retail value, that’s a hunk of scrap and you know it.”

The man folded his arms. His big, beefy elbows level were with Fiona’s face as she leaned, disinterested, on the counter. “I’m not taking a penny less than eight hundred.”

“You’re dreaming.” Fiona flicked a piece of dirt from under her nail. “It’s damaged to all hell. It needs at least six hours of work to salvage into parts for resale. You don’t have time for that.” She pushed back the brim of her hat to meet his eyes, frank and unimpressed. “I’ll give you one fifty, and I’ll be doing you favour.”

“Six hundred, or get out of my store.”

“It’s useless,” Fiona continued. “Its charging port’s been ripped out, for Christ’s sake.”

The man glowered at her. “The charging port has not been...” But his voice died as he looked over the counter.

He frowned; Fiona smirked.

“Four fifty,” he said. “Final offer.” He leaned over the counter, one meaty hand extended for hers. “And only because you’re Felix’s girl.”

There it is, she thought. An old tactic, one Fiona knew well. Invoke a familiar name. Get under the skin. Recall affection. Stir grief.

Fiona’s strings were not so easy to tug. She smiled like a shark. “Tell you what: throw in that Atlas rifle scope, and I’ll give you three seventy-five.”

The bell that chimed customer arrival was barely audible over the sound of Sasha’s tools. By the time she set down her blowtorch and called “coming!”, heavy footsteps had already made their way from the shop entrance back to the workshop. Irritated, she pulled off her goggles and rolled out from her workbench.

“This is an employee-only area, which the sign says very clear... oh.” Her anger dulled as she saw who was standing in the door. “Hey, Fi.”

“Hey sis,” said Fiona. “Brought you something.” She slid a bag off her shoulder and onto an already-full desk, then gestured forward the enormous man looming behind her. “Tector, just

set it down in the corner over there.”

Fiona’s hired hand was so tall he had to stoop through the doorway. He trudged across the room, garbage bag slung over his back like Santa, then dumped it on the floor with a thud. Sasha raised her eyebrows.

“Thanks, big guy.” Fiona reached up to pat him on the shoulder, handing over a twenty dollar bill as she did. Tector grunted in appreciation as he left.

“What the hell is that?” asked Sasha, staring at the garbage bag Tector left behind.

Fiona shrugged. “Few hundred bucks, hopefully.” She jerked her chin in its direction. “Take a look.”

Like a cat bringing home dead birds, Fiona played cool about finds she was most proud of, revelling in the suspense of it more than the items usually warranted. When they were younger, it was a game, a way of seeking Felix’s approval without ever asking for it or admitting what it meant to her. The two of them would come home from a scavenging trip, Sasha bursting with excitement as she showed off her loot, only to be blown out of the water by some piece Fiona tossed onto the table like she’d found it on the floor. Felix would gush, Fiona would smirk, and Sasha would fume.

Felix was gone now, but Fiona still couldn’t help herself.

Wiping her greasy fingers off on the rag tied around her hip, Sasha knelt by Tector’s bag, curiosity piqued in spite of herself. She wrestled with the drawstrings, peeked inside, and froze.

“Holy shit,” said Sasha.

“Uh-huh,” said Fiona, and Sasha heard the smirk in her sister’s voice.

The android in the bag was eerily lifelike—or at least it might have been, were it not for the huge holes revealing the wiring in its eye socket, its arm socket, the side of its head.

“How much did you pay for this?” asked Sasha, tugging the bag down past its shoulders. Its clothes were both ugly and torn, and the whole thing was caked in mud.

“Just under four,” said Fiona. “Pretty beat up, I know, but there’s gotta be some bits in there worth something, right? Figured you could get eight or nine, easy.”

Sasha shook her head. “I dunno, Fi, this stuff doesn’t go like it used to. That data-slicer’s been sitting on the shelf for six months—”

“Yeah, but this looks like a newer model. Plus, it’s Hyperion.”

“That’s even worse!” groaned Sasha. “Hyperion tech is obsolete the day it’s sold, that’s the entire stupid racket, their stuff is *designed* to—”

“Okay, okay, I get it! Sheesh.” Fiona sniffed. “You don’t appreciate anything I do for you.”

Sasha ignored her, inspecting the side of the android's head with a frown. "Charging port's missing. If I can't power it up and see what still runs—"

"Oh, yeah. About that." Fiona dug into her jacket pocket, then tossed her sister a small metal cylinder, smirking. "It, uh. May have fallen out at the store."

Sasha clucked her tongue. "You're gonna get in trouble."

"Can't get in trouble if I don't get caught."

Sasha narrowed her eyes. "I'm serious. We don't need more trouble."

"I'm *fine*. Stop worrying."

The edge in Fiona's voice was a warning. For once, Sasha decided to heed it, and bit her tongue as she tucked the port into her pocket. Fiona crouched down beside her sister and leaned in to inspect the android, nose wrinkled.

"God, these things get creepier every year," said Fiona. She poked its remaining eye.

Sasha slapped her hand away. "No bothering the merchandise." She scanned the crowded workshop, nibbling her lip in concentration. "I don't have time to work on this right now, I've got stuff to finish. Help me get it over to that table."

Fiona was gone the next day, as she usually was, off making deals and scouting for scraps. Left to run the shop by herself, Sasha's days filled up quickly. There was always something: nosy customers who asked questions and bought nothing, petty theft, the endless stream of minor repair jobs that took more effort than they were worth.

The android sat untouched for the next week before Sasha found time to deal with it. The shop was closed, but her list of tasks was no shorter than when she'd opened that morning. Armed with a strong black coffee, a bowl of corn chips and a blasting radio, Sasha got to work.

"Creepy" was an unforgiving word, but as Sasha studied the android sitting lifelessly on her work table, it was hard to disagree. Somewhere along the line, the expensive androids had stopped looking like robots and started looking like people—people with stiff, artificial expressions and glassy, dead eyes.

The trend had waned. People preferred robots that looked like robots.

This was the most realistic specimen Sasha had ever seen. Tiny imperfections dotted its artificial pores. Its hair and skin felt real to the touch. The effect made the bits of wire and circuitry poking out of its wounds more unnerving.

"Totally gonna be super normal, cutting you up for scrap," Sasha announced to the empty room, her hands on her hips. "Not gonna feel like a serial killer at all."

She made it as far as wiping off its face with a soapy cloth before self-consciousness about giving a robot a sponge bath won out and she tossed that idea aside. She pulled the charging port out of her box of odd ends, blew off the dust and slid it back into the empty slot on the android's neck.

"Well, let's see what you can do with a bit of juice," she said. She connected the charging port to a power source and went back to her other work.

Sasha was two coffees deep and thirty minutes into fixing the scope on an old Atlas sniper rifle when her concentration was broken by a man's voice saying, "Hello?"

Heart in her throat and reacting on instinct, Sasha whipped around, rifle held aloft.

Sitting up on her worktable, long legs dangling over the edge, was the android.

"Holy *shit*." Sasha exhaled slowly, adrenaline dissipating. "You scared me."

"Sorry." It smiled awkwardly, hand raised in surrender, or maybe in greeting. Its lone brown eye was trained on the muzzle of her gun. "Are you going to shoot me?"

Even the voice was realistic, fluent and smooth without the robotic lilt Sasha had grown accustomed to from service droids. That was... weird. That was definitely a little weird.

The android made a noise that could only be construed as clearing its throat and pointed at her gun with one finger.

"Huh? Oh, no, this doesn't even work." Sasha set the rifle down behind her without looking and fumbled blindly for the radio volume, eyes transfixed by the android across the room. "Unlike you, apparently."

"Apparently." It looked around the room and then down at itself, taking it all in. "Can I ask you some questions? Like... who are you, and where am I?"

"Right!" She jumped to her feet, years of experience as a hostess warring with the uncharted territory she found herself in now. "My name's Sasha—"

"Hi, Sasha."

"...Hi," she said uncertainly. "Um, anyway, this is my shop. You're in my shop." She waved one hand broadly. "Scrap, repair, salvage, that sort of thing."

She wiggled her fingers, an unenthusiastic display of jazz hands. The store was a burden more often than a point of pride. It certainly wasn't much to look at in the dead of night, with her tools strewn everywhere, the floor unswept, greasy rags and half-finished projects on every shelf.

The android smiled at her anyway. "Nice to meet you, Sasha." Its legs swung back and forth as they dangled over the table. "So... which is it?"

“I’m sorry?”

“Scrap or repair. You said you do both.” The android gestured to the frayed wires sticking out of its right shoulder. “I’m guessing I’m here for one of the two.”

“Oh!” Sasha’s eyes widened and she shoved her hands in her pockets to stop from fidgeting. “Um, I. Uh.”

The android watched her expectantly, pleasant smile still in place.

“Repair, obviously,” she said, hoping the flush in her cheeks wasn’t as visible as it felt. “I could really use another pair of hands around here.” That last bit, at least, was true, and she leaned into it, lingered on it the way Felix had taught her. “It’s just me, most of the time, and I can’t keep up, so…”

“Oh.” If Sasha hadn’t known better, she’d have sworn it breathed a sigh of relief. “I can do that! I’m pretty good with tech stuff.” It paused and glanced down itself again, surveying the damage. “Normally, that is.”

“Right.” Sasha backed away. “I, uh, just need to grab some parts, I’ll be right back.”

She spun around, wincing once she did so. Halfway through the door—

“Rhys, by the way.”

Sasha paused, hand on the doorframe. “Sorry?”

“My name. It’s Rhys. In case you were wondering.” Rhys’ smile faltered. “Which you might not have been. But—”

“Hi, Rhys.” She smiled over her shoulder. “Nice to meet you, too.”

Sasha spent a good two minutes mentally reprimanding herself as she collected spare parts.

Fiona was going to kill her. What was Sasha going say? *Oh, hey, Fi. Turns out that robot’s not as broken as I thought it was, and I can’t hack up something that just introduced itself to me, so I guess we have an employee now. An unpaid one. I guess we have a robot intern.*

Yeah. That’d go great. Fiona’d love that.

Still, Sasha reasoned, used android parts were getting harder to sell, and she could use the help around the store. Running things by herself meant never-ending tasks, perpetual exhaustion and a non-existent social life. If anything could alleviate some of that...

Besides, it—*he*—looked so *real*. What was she supposed to do? March back in there and ask him to shut off, please, so she could carve him open and remove the working bits?

Sasha grabbed the long-ignored data slicer off the shelf and headed back to the workshop.

By the time she returned, the android (*Rhys*, she reminded herself) had unplugged himself from the wall and removed his shirt, now curiously inspecting his damaged shoulder. Sasha approached slowly, frowning. With his shirt off, it was easier to see how violently the missing arm had been removed.

“That looks awful,” she said frankly. “Does it hurt?”

Rhys looked at her, lips quirking in amusement.

“Okay, stupid question,” she amended. She rolled to her tiptoes to inspect it, ghosting her finger over the ridge of exposed metal. “Jeeze. What happened, anyway?”

“I...” Rhys paused. “I don’t remember.”

“Not surprising. You’re pretty banged up.” Sasha hummed. “You remember who owned you or anything?”

Rhys gave it some thought before shaking his head.

She shrugged. “Whatever. As long as no rich asshole’s gonna break down my door demanding their robot back.”

“No,” said Rhys quietly, “I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

“Well, good.” Sasha set the data slicer onto the table next to her toolbox and a spare ECHO eye, then pushed Rhys down onto a stool. Dragging a magnifying light into position, she took a seat beside him. He sat stock-still while she inspected him, though she could see his eye straining to watch her.

It wasn’t the most comfortable way to work.

“Arm socket’s all fucked up,” she said after a moment. “Gonna take me a bit to fix.” She jerked her thumb towards the table. “You can check out your sweet new gear if you like,” she added, hoping he was receptive enough to catch the irony.

To her surprise, Rhys reached for the eye first. “It’s blue.”

“Yep.”

“The other one’s brown,” he said.

“I saw that.”

“I’ll have two different ones.”

Sasha snorted as she pulled on her goggles. How had Fiona found her an android that was *vain*? “Yeah, sorry dude, limited selection.”

Rhys didn’t react to that. He was quiet another moment, studying the spare part in his hand. “Like Handsome Jack,” he said eventually.

Sasha groaned loudly, and rolled her eyes for good measure. “Oh, gross. You don’t remember getting your eyeball ripped out but you remember *Handsome Jack*?”

“I’m Hyperion,” he said, as though it were all the explanation needed.

Maybe it was.

Sasha pulled a face. “Hyperion propaganda, hardwired in. Great.” She sent him a pointed look. “Fair warning, you sing any Hyperion radio jingles at me and I’m throwing you in the trash compactor.”

Rhys set the eye back on the table, his movement and expression suddenly stiff. “Understood.”

Sasha sighed. “Hey.” She nudged his foot with her own, then immediately felt weird for having done so. “I’m just kidding.” She paused in consideration. “Well, mostly.”

“Okay,” was all he said. Sasha imagined she saw a flicker of a smile.

Tongue wedged between her teeth in concentration, Sasha focused on trimming some frayed wires, lost in the faraway noise of her long-forgotten radio. She tapped her foot to the beat while she worked, grateful that androids were very good at sitting still.

Rhys didn’t speak again until the clean-up job was nearly done, a startling reminder that he wasn’t as inanimate as the items she was used to working on.

“Thank you, by the way,” he began. “For fixing me.” He smiled down at her; Sasha thought it was a much sweeter smile than any Hyperion machine ought to be capable of. “I appreciate it.”

She ignored the shiver that ricocheted down her spine. It was late, and she was tired. She grinned back.

“Don’t mention it; you don’t know what it’s like to work here.” She set down her tools and extended a hand to shake his. “Welcome to the team, Rhys.”



Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Once, Sasha swore she'd caught him swaying to her music, though when she'd asked he'd stared blankly at her and denied it.

Maybe she was imagining it. Projecting. Anthropomorphizing. That was a thing, right?

Chapter Notes

So... this chapter's been collecting dust in Google Docs for a while. Time to set it free!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sasha clenched her jaw, inhaling through her nose and mentally counting down from ten.

“That’s the price we agreed on,” she said, as calmly and evenly as she could. “That’s what it costs.”

“It just seems a bit steep,” said the customer, and Sasha started counting again, from twenty this time. She made it to fifteen when the customer added: “I knew Felix very well, you know. He’d have cut me a deal on this.”

Sasha’s fake smile fell away and her eyes narrowed. “Okay, it just got 20% more expensive. Pay up or get the hell out.”

Unsurprisingly, the customer chose to get the hell out.

Once they left, Sasha flipped the sign on the door from ‘open’ to ‘closed’ with extreme prejudice. Fucking customer service. Fucking cheapskate customers, who wanted their crap tech fixed, didn’t want to pay for it, and left her with nothing but wasted time and unsellable junk. Fucking *Felix*—

“Does that happen a lot?” asked Rhys, and Sasha jumped at the sound of his voice.

After nearly a week, she still sometimes forgot she wasn’t alone in the shop anymore. Part of it was that she’d been running things by herself for a long time, and the change took some getting used to.

A bigger part of it was that there seemed to be two different versions of Rhys.

One version was exactly what Sasha expected an android to be: distant, aloof, doing only what he was told. He lurked in the back of the store whenever a customer was around and spoke only when spoken to.

Sometimes, though, when it was just the two of them, Sasha caught glimpses of something else. The other Rhys was chatty and friendly and curious. He liked to show off the features of his new arm, which, he told her with unmistakable glee, was way more useful than the one that looked human. Once, Sasha swore she'd caught him swaying to her music, though when she'd asked he'd stared blankly at her and denied it.

Maybe she was imagining it. Projecting. Anthropomorphizing. That was a thing, right?

"Too often," she muttered. "Customers are the worst. People are bastards."

Rhys grinned. "Sounds like a design flaw."

She pushed herself away from the door with a wry grin of her own. "You have no idea."

"Who's Felix?" he asked.

Sasha's mouth twisted in disgust.

"One of the bastards," she said with a curt sniff. "And one no longer relevant to this establishment."

Whatever Rhys' protocols were for interpreting body language, they rightly caused him to open and close his mouth without saying anything further. Rubbing her hands over her face, Sasha began the after-closing ritual of reviewing her to-do list.

"We need to fix that stereo," she started.

"I finished that earlier," said Rhys.

Sasha blinked. "Oh. Good. Then we can work on that AC unit."

"I finished that as well," said Rhys.

She raised an eyebrow. "That kitschy clock with the little bird?"

Rhys nodded.

Sasha raised the other eyebrow, too. "The little bird chirps on the hour instead of randomly without warning?"

Rhys nodded again.

"Huh." Hands on her hips, Sasha hummed in satisfaction. "Well then. You know what that means."

"I really don't."

“That means we have time to do the worst job of all.” She paused for dramatic effect. “Paperwork.” Laughing at the blank look on his face, she beckoned him towards the back. “I’ve been meaning to reorganize the inventory for ages, but Fe—the old system is a mess, and it’s time-consuming, so I—”

“Oh,” said Rhys, in a tone that made her pause in her tracks. “I... kind of... digitized your inventory yesterday.” He held out his palm—the data-slicer she’d installed—and scrolled quickly through a projected display. “I’m pulling it from the cloud, but you can access it on your computer, obviously.”

Agog in disbelief, Sasha said, “No shit.”

“This arm is super cool, by the way,” he added, shutting off the projection and letting the hand drop to his side. When he noticed her expression, his own face fell. “I just have a lot of time to kill while you’re asleep, and I saw how—frankly—archaic your system was, and I—”

“You work down here at night?”

Rhys looked down. Sasha had the impression that, were it possible, he’d be blushing. “I... probably should’ve asked you first. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, I’m not mad, just...” She shook her head and laughed a little. “You sure are different from having a human employee, huh?”

Still staring at the ground, Rhys shrugged.

“Well,” said Sasha, “if you’ve done all that, I think we’re done for the day.” Her jaw dropped as the realization sank in. “Oh my God. We’re done. The store’s closed and we’re done. No overtime or anything.” She fiddled with the goggles around her neck, unable to hold back a broad grin. “Do you know what that means?”

“Is... that rhetorical?” asked Rhys.

“It means I have *free time*. I don’t even remember what to do with free time anymore.” She grabbed his wrist in glee. “You’re my new best friend.”

Rhys smiled hesitantly.

“Come on,” said Sasha, giving him a tug. “Let’s go do something fun.”

Rhys followed where she led, staring at her hand on his arm.

The apartment over the shop existed in a state of perpetual disarray. Tempting though it was to lay the blame on her busy schedule, the truth was it’d been that way for at least as long as she and Fiona had lived there, through the entire whirlwind of their adolescence.

Well. Not like she was going to waste time cleaning it now.

She bounded up the stairs with Rhys in tow.

“I’m going to order a pizza,” she announced, when a quick look in the fridge revealed nothing appetizing. She grabbed a beer instead, popping off the cap with the heel of her hand. “What d’you think? Do you like...” She paused, bottle halfway to her mouth. “Oh. Right. Duh.”

Rhys grinned. “Thanks anyway.”

He stepped into the kitchen and Sasha watched him with an eyebrow raised, curious about his curiosity. Rhys spent most of his day around her, and most of that day was spent in the shop; when she’d gone up to bed, she’d left him downstairs to charge. Watching him poke around her apartment was... odd. New and familiar at the same time.

“If you’re looking for something to do, you could clean those dishes,” she joked, as his attention drifted to the pile in her sink.

He reached for the tap.

“Wh—no, I was kidding,” she said quickly, holding out her free hand. “You don’t have to do that, it’d be weird.”

Rhys looked up, a line forming between his eyebrows as he processed her instructions. “Why would it be weird?”

“Because you didn’t use any of them and you’re not my maid, you’re...”

Rhys stared at her. “What?”

Sasha shrugged and drank her beer. “You don’t have to work all the time.” She frowned. “Why did you do that, anyway? Work through the night?”

It was Rhys’ turn to shrug. “I needed something to do. You sleep a lot.”

“Okay, number one: rude. Number two: I get like, six hours, tops.”

“Well, a full day’s charge only takes an hour and twenty-six minutes.” Absurdly, Rhys managed to look smug. “Hyperion has the most efficient power system on the market.”

Sasha’s mouth hung open as she shook her head. “Wow, you really are a capitalist dream.” Then she frowned. “Why, though? Are you bored? *Can* you be bored? I thought robots didn’t really, y’know...” She fished for the right word. “Want stuff.”

Rhys’ answering smile reminded Sasha of the eerie, uncanny expressions of early android models: not quite true to life. Instead of replying, he turned away, eyes drawn to the mass of souvenir magnets stuck to the side of the fridge. “Have you been to all these places?”

Sasha snorted. “Only the shitty ones.” She took a sip. “My sister and I started collecting ‘em when we were kids. Found them at thrift stores and estate sales and stuff. Aspirational, you know. Places to see.” Another swig. “Now she picks ‘em up ‘cause she thinks it’s funny.”

“You don’t,” said Rhys, watching her keenly. It wasn’t even a question. Stupid perceptive robot.

She waved a hand. “Hey, it’s fine. It’s *basically* like being there. I mean, look at this.” Smirking, she peeled one off the side of the fridge: a postcard photo squashed into a low-res, two-inch hunk of rubber. “Closest I’m ever gonna get, right?”

She slapped it back on the side of the fridge.

Rather than humour her, Rhys only frowned. “Why won’t you go there?”

“Not exactly flush with cash, if you hadn’t noticed.” When that didn’t feel like explanation enough, she added, “I’ve got debts to pay.”

“Like rent?”

Sasha snorted. “Sure, something like that.”

Rhys’ frown deepened. Pitied by a robot was certainly a new low.

“Fuck it.” She dug her phone out of her back pocket. “I’m ordering a pizza.”

As she tapped out the order on her phone, Rhys straightened the magnet she’d replaced and then studied her bookshelf.

“So,” she called, half-watching him, “Hyperion lets you be bored, what about fun? You do things for fun? Or did they just give you an unquenchable thirst for productivity?”

Rhys looked amused, which Sasha supposed was a point in favour of ‘fun’. “Not a big Hyperion fan, are you?”

“What gave it away?” Order placed, she clicked her phone off. “Hmm. What about music? I love music. Wanted to be a DJ. You listen to music?”

“I listen to your music every day.”

“Right, so you’ve heard the best of the best.”

Rhys tilted his head and scrunched his nose. “Well...”

“Jackass,” Sasha scolded, though the laugh was obvious in her voice. “I will not have my tastes judged by a glorified mp3 player.” She gave him a gentle shove as she walked to the speakers. “What do you like to listen to, then? Techno? Hyperion radio ads? That screechy dial-up sound?” She flipped through her phone’s music library. “Or maybe...”

She selected the song she’d caught him swaying to the other day and watched him expectantly.

Rhys shrugged, but his expression was teasing. “Actually, do you have the dial-up sounds?”

“Oh, we’re making jokes now?” She clucked her tongue and walked closer to him. “What about dancing? I mean, you’ve at least gotta be able to to The Robot.” Rhys stayed still as she set her beer down and grabbed his hands, rocking them both back and forth. “You got rhythm programmed in there somewhere?”

Rhys remained motionless except for the momentum she was generating. “I’m... not really sure I...”

“Oh, come on. It’s not that hard.” She put her hands on his hips, nudging him from side to side with the beat of the music. “Those little solar-powered car dashboard toys can manage it.”

Rhys laughed. Startled, Sasha looked up, a slow smile creeping across her face. Laughter, huh? That was new, too.

Finally he started moving of his own accord, shifting his hips from side to side under her hands with increasingly exaggerated movements. “I think I’m a little bit more advanced than a dollar store toy.”

“You sure? I could get one. To teach you. I—”

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

“Pizza’s here!” She let go of his waist to fish out her phone. Then she read the notifications on her lock screen, and her heart sank. “Oh, fuck.”

Rhys stopped dancing. “Sasha?”

“Stay here,” she ordered, pulling away and jogging to her bedroom.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. She grabbed the envelope from under her mattress. How had she forgotten? She never forgot. Stupid to let herself forget.

Tucking the envelope into the waistband of her jeans, she stood up and weighed her options. The gun, did she want the gun?

“Sasha?” Rhys appeared in her doorway. “Is everything okay?”

No gun, she decided. Too risky. No need to escalate. She could handle it.

“Everything’s fine,” she said brusquely, pushing past him. “I need to go downstairs. You stay up here.”

The concern on Rhys’ face would’ve been sweet, if she had any time to appreciate it. “Sasha, what—?”

“Just wait here until I get back,” she said firmly, placing a hand square on his chest while the other unlocked the stairwell. “Okay? That’s a—an order, or—or instruction, or whatever.”

She was taking the stairs two at a time before he could respond.

Finch and Kroger were not patient men.

Impatience was basically their job title, after all. Sasha already knew this, but it was reaffirmed when she heard them pounding on her back door. Irritation pierced through her adrenaline.

“All right, all right, I’m *right here*, will you calm down?” she mumbled, half to herself as she unlocked the door.

“Took you a while,” said Kroger, and Sasha thought about ripping his stupid mustache off his face. “You tryin’ to hide from us?”

“I was upstairs,” said Sasha. She crossed her arms to look simultaneously intimidating and casual. “You know, making dinner? Lost track of time.”

“Dinner, huh?” Finch pushed his way past her into the workshop, followed by Kroger; Sasha bit her tongue. “You got leftovers? I’m hungry.”

Sasha had a vision of hitting him upside the head with her cast iron skillet.

“Sorry,” she bit out, tight smile in place. “I’ve got a big appetite.” She held out the envelope. “There you go. We done?”

Finch took the envelope, but Kroger walked forward, popping her bubble of personal space before he moved on to inspect the tools sitting on her work table.

“Kinda seems like she wants to get rid of us, don’t it?” he said to Finch. He wagged a finger in Sasha’s direction. “Not a very welcoming hostess.”

Sasha’s lip curled. “I’m not hosting you. You got what you came for. Can you go?”

“It’s two hundred short,” announced Finch, flipping through the bills in the envelope.

“What? Bullshit it is.” Sasha put her hands on her hips. “Counted it myself, same as last month.”

“Price has gone up,” said Kroger, rolling her screwdriver back and forth with one finger.

“Bullshit,” said Sasha again. “If Vallery wants to renegotiate—”

Finch laughed once, a low rumble. “Vallery doesn’t really *negotiate*.”

He took a step closer, and so did Kroger on her other side. Sasha’s nails dug into the bare skin on her hips, but she stayed put.

“If you want more money, I need more time,” she said, fighting to keep her voice calm and level. “A client backed out on a job today. I can’t just snap my fingers and—”

“You’re a resourceful girl,” said Kroger. He picked up her screwdriver, twirling it through his fingers. “I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

“And we’re not really keen on heading back short handed.” Finch tucked the money into his pocket, the movement of his jacket purposefully revealing the hilt of his gun. “Looks bad for us, y’know.”

They were close on either side, crowding her against the bench; if she swung, she’d definitely be able to land a hit. A knee to a vulnerable spot, maybe. It might buy her enough time to grab the monkey wrench on the shelf across from her and land another blow. Maybe she could even get to the Atlas rifle, use it for show.

But there were two of them. They were bigger than she was, and they were armed. If Fiona were here...

One of the floorboards in the stairwell creaked.

Sasha’s heart skipped a beat. Kroger looked over his shoulder towards the doorway, and then back to Sasha.

“You got company?”

“Besides you two?” Sasha smiled coldly. “Why, you jealous?”

“Supposed to be alone when we come visit.” Finch took a step closer; it took all Sasha’s willpower not to move away.

“We’re shy,” added Kroger.

Sasha clenched her jaw so hard it started to ache. Years of practice left her skilled at swallowing her nerves, and in the moment, she found herself grateful for it.

“It’s an old building; sometimes it settles.” Sasha exhaled through her nose and lifted her chin. “I can get you some money from the cash,” she grit out, “but you’re going to have to move.”

They smiled in sync.

“See? Knew you could do it,” said Kroger. He stepped aside, hands raised innocently even as he clutched her screwdriver, and sent her a smile that made the monkey wrench option even more appealing.

On her other side, Finch cocked his gun.

“Just in case,” he explained with a grin.

Sasha said nothing, focused on grinding her teeth to dust. She squeezed past Kroger, taking extra care ensure they didn’t brush against each other, and walked to the safe in the corner. She entered the lock combo, grabbed the twenties she needed, and held them at arm’s length to Kroger, who took them with a smile.

“Now get the fuck out of my store,” she hissed.

Both of them laughed.

“See you next month, sweetheart,” called Kroger. He dropped the screwdriver to the floor with a clang, and then both of them were gone through the back door.

Sasha breathed deep after they left, adrenaline and fury racing in tandem through her bloodstream. She flipped every lock, shoved a chair under the doorknob for good measure, and then collapsed onto a stool, heart pounding.

Two hundred more a month would be difficult. Money was already stretched thin. Fiona’s finds were unpredictable, and clients were unreliable. They still needed money for gas, utilities. Food.

She wanted to scream. Or throw something. Or cry. She wanted to do all three. Instead, she sat in the darkened workshop until her phone buzzed the arrival of the pizza she couldn’t afford.

Rhys was at the bottom of the stairwell when she opened the door.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she snapped, pizza box tucked under her arm.

“I was worried,” he said, which raised more questions than it answered. “Are you okay?”

Sasha was in no mood to contemplate the complexities of android emotions. She scowled and started up the stairs. “Thought you were gonna stay put.”

“Those men sounded dangerous, I—”

Sasha laughed. “Oh, they’re a walk in the park.”

“What did they want? What’s going on?”

“None of your business.”

“If you tell me, maybe I can—”

“Maybe I don’t want to share all my secrets with a chunk of Hyperion hardware,” she snapped, and Rhys fell quiet. She shot him a look over her shoulder. “I told you to wait for me. You almost got us both in trouble. Why didn’t you listen?”

“I thought you might need help,” was all he said.

“I’ll tell you if I need help.” She rounded on him as she reached the landing. “Isn’t that the whole point? You’re supposed to do what I say, not take it upon yourself to decide what I need.”

For a moment it seemed like he might argue, but the fight drained out of him like a switch had been flipped and he stared down at his feet.

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

He looked pitiful, which was unfair. She sighed. “Look, from now on just... only do what I tell you to do, okay? That’s how it’s supposed to work, right?”

Rhys nodded without looking up. “Okay.”

Box in one hand, Sasha grabbed her beer from the table and a second from the fridge and walked to her room.

“Sasha?” called Rhys, just as she was about to close the door. He hadn’t moved. “What... would you like me to do?”

She hadn’t considered that. “Oh. Um...” She shrugged. “Can’t you just go into powersave mode or something?”

She hip-checked her bedroom door shut.

Chapter End Notes

In terms of "material collecting dust on my hard drive", there's another chapter of this I can clean up, and a fourth chapter I might be able to tie off and post too. Once I've wiped out my backlog of writing for it, I'll add the hiatus tag, since [Anachronism](#) will be taking my attention for the time being and god knows I can't juggle two chaptered fics at once.

I like this little world, had a number of ideas for it, and a significant chunk written, so I may return to this once Anachronism wraps. In the meantime, thanks for everyone's patience and sorry for doing that exact work-in-progress thing everyone hates.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

It would be stupid to read into it, and stupider still to feel guilty about it. It wasn't like she hurt his feelings; he didn't have feelings to hurt.

Right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sasha didn't sleep well that night. Even aided by booze and an adrenaline crash, she tossed and turned fitfully. When her alarm went off, she was already staring at the ceiling, groggy but half-awake.

Rhys was exactly where she'd left him, standing frozen just inside the doorway. He stayed that way while she went to shower, and remained that way while she scarfed down a slice of buttered toast. It wasn't until she was halfway down the stairs and said, "Come on," that he followed wordlessly her into the shop.

"You said you updated the inventory, right?" she asked, and he nodded. "Can you go through that supply shelf in the corner and make sure everything's accounted for?"

"Okay," said Rhys.

He got to work without another word. Sasha walked to the front of the store to unlock the door.

They worked in silence and kept to themselves. He took stock of the inventory. Sasha helped any customers who came in (few, as always). Every hour or so, Sasha thought about turning on the radio to fill the dead air, but that felt weird, too, and so the silence hung between them.

As the day wore on, she found it harder and harder to focus. Poor sleep caught up to her no matter how much coffee she drank. Her mind was occupied with all the corners she'd need to cut to make ends meet, crossing items off her already frugal personal shopping list. And when she wasn't thinking about that...

She rolled her stiff shoulders and looked to where Rhys had been working for hours now.

She tugged anxiously at the strap of her goggles. Working with Rhys the past week had certainly been more enjoyable than working alone. Having someone to talk to was nice, even if that someone was a robot. A really personable robot.

But this was what androids were supposed to be like. This was just how they worked. It would be stupid to read into it, and stupider still to feel guilty about it. It wasn't like she hurt his feelings; he didn't have feelings to hurt.

Right?

She looked to the clock on the wall. Half an hour until close, and they'd barely had any customers, let alone made any profit. She rubbed her eyes, and when she took her hands away, she saw Rhys standing in the corner, arms at his side, staring blankly ahead.

God, that was creepy.

"Uh... Rhys?"

Rhys turned his head to look at her.

"I finished updating the inventory." He spoke without any of the friendly recognition she'd grown accustomed to hearing. "Is there something you'd like me to do now?"

Sasha shook her head. "Nah, just keep standing there like a horror movie mannequin, that's great. Creates a nice ambience."

He didn't move.

Sasha's straight face fell. "That's... I was... okay." She pulled a second stool out from under the desk. "Why don't you come sit down?"

Rhys did so like he was following an order. The awkward smile Sasha sent him went unreturned.

"...Okay," she said with a low whistle. "Cold shoulder. I probably earned that."

Rhys frowned so briefly Sasha wondered if she'd imagined it.

She took a deep breath. "Listen, Rhys, last night I was... upset, and I didn't handle it well. I took it out on you when you were just trying to be helpful."

Rhys raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

"And I know you're trying to do what I asked, but I was—uh—wrong about that. I don't need you to be all, y'know..." She straightened her shoulders and sat rigidly in her chair in a mimic of his posture. "I want you to be relaxed."

Rhys stared at her.

"Or... comfortable? Or, uh, whatever your version of that is." She winced and hid her head in her hands. "Okay, you probably have no concept of comfort, and I sound insane. I guess—I just—what I'm trying to say is: I was a dick and I'm sorry."

She lowered her hands slowly, peeking between her fingers to see Rhys' reaction. For an additional excruciating second, he just looked at her, before, finally, he spoke.

"You know," he said slowly, "no one's ever apologized to me before."

Sasha was too surprised to feel silly. "What, really?"

Rhys began nodding somberly—and then his face broke into a grin. "Is it always so awkward, or is that just you?"

"Oh, shut up," said Sasha, but she was grinning as she flicked her rag at his knee, and Rhys laughed. "Well, you probably just don't remember. There *was* a big hole in your head."

"Yeah." Rhys didn't quite meet her eyes as he nodded. "Maybe."

The bell above the door chimed, and Sasha rolled her eyes. How was it customers always managed to come in ten minutes before close?

"I'll go deal with that," she told him quietly, hopping to her feet. "Tonight I'll tell you everything, okay?"

Sasha was three years old when her mother died.

Fiona, who'd been eight, remembered it better. Finding their mother on the kitchen floor. Dialling 911. Giving Sasha a jar of peanut butter to stop her crying while they waited for paramedics to arrive.

It was a blood clot, Sasha found out, once she was old enough to know what that meant. Random chance and bad luck. Fiona said that was the recurring theme of their lives.

"We bounced around the foster system for years," Sasha explained. She flashed Rhys a grim smile. "Not a lot of great memories from that era. I mean, it wasn't Miss Hannigan's, but nothing ever felt like home, you know?"

Rhys probably did not know, did not even have a frame of reference for knowing. But he listened with wide, attentive eyes, and Sasha could imagine some kindness there.

"Anyway, when I was ten, Fiona saw some papers she wasn't supposed to. Found out they were planning to split us up. They said she was 'difficult'. That she was a 'bad influence' on me." Sasha's fingers stayed hooked well after the air quotes were completed. "She was fifteen. She raised hell, not that they cared." Years later, the bitter edge remained in Sasha's voice. She took a deep breath. "And... then we both got adopted by a man named Felix. He brought us home together, to his place."

She gestured to the room around them, and Rhys followed her hand, gazing around the apartment like he was seeing it for the first time.

Sasha remembered thinking it was a miracle. Felix had stepped out of the shadows when they'd needed him most, like a wizard in a fairytale. The small apartment over the shop may

well have been a castle, full of luxuries Sasha was unaccustomed to. Her very own bedroom. Felix even let her pick what colour to paint the walls.

Sasha revered him. Fiona was older, and much slower to trust.

“That was it, then.” Sasha hoped Rhys wasn’t able to pick up the sadder notes in her voice. “He took us out of school, taught us himself. We used to drive around in a caravan, finding stuff we could fix up and sell. Once Fiona was old enough, he’d send the two of us off on our own.”

“That sounds nice,” said Rhys, pulling Sasha out of her memories and back to the task at hand. But he must have understood the expression on her face when she looked up, because he frowned. “But...?”

“Turns out, unbeknownst to either of us, he’d been doing some business with a woman named Vallory. Borrowed quite a lot of money from Vallory, actually.” Sasha scratched her knife at a stubborn piece of cheese melted onto her dinner plate. “So, one day, Vallory comes to collect, and Felix disappears. Just... gone, overnight.” She snapped her fingers in demonstration. “Good news for Vallory, though: Felix didn’t think to give his daughters a heads up, and she’s more than happy to transfer the account, so...”

Her knife made a horrible screech against the plate as she pressed too hard. She set it down.

Rhys’ face was a perfect facsimile of concern. “Those men last night...”

“Some of her low-level goons.” She stood up from the kitchen table and walked to the sink to scrub angrily at her dinner plate. “Fiona and I aren’t enough of a threat to get the royal treatment.” She glanced back at Rhys, who was watching her with a deep line on his forehead. “I hear she’s got a little squad of jailbroken androids to do her dirty work for her.”

Rhys didn’t say anything, and Sasha felt a twinge of amusement imagining Hyperion code struggling to process her shitty life. She left the plate to drip-dry in the rack.

“Now Vallory wants to increase her monthly payments, so... I guess there’s a lot of cup noodles in my future.” She flashed him a strained smile as she wiped her hands on the dish towel. “Lucky you don’t eat, or we’d be sharing.”

Rhys saw through—or ignored—her flimsy attempt at humour. “How can I help?”

Sasha shrugged. “Just help out in the store, like you have been.”

“I could kill her,” said Rhys, but when Sasha’s eyes widened, so did his, and he waved his hands. “Oh, god, that—that was a just a joke. Please don’t ask me to kill anyone, I—”

Sasha laughed, and Rhys lowered his hands. “Relax, I have no intention of jailbreaking you.” She grinned. “Besides, Vallory’s androids would snap you in half, and I don’t have the budget to repair that.”

Rhys folded his arms and did his best to look intimidating. “You don’t think I’m tough?”

“I think whoever designed you probably didn’t have ‘enforcer’ in mind, no.”

“Hey, I’m multi-purpose,” Rhys objected, “I’m...”

He broke off mid-sentence, suddenly motionless in his chair. Sasha paused on her way to the sofa.

“Uh... Rhys?”

At first there was no response. Then, after a few seconds, his blue eye lit up and Rhys lifted his head, blinking.

“Sorry,” he said, sounding almost as bewildered as Sasha felt. “Low power. Last night, I didn’t charge.”

“What? Why not?”

“You told me not to move—”

“Right, right,” said Sasha. “Okay, well—”

“I should...” Rhys stood up abruptly. The chair wobbled, and so did Rhys. “I need—”

“There’s an outlet by the coffee table.” Sasha guided him by the arm towards the sofa. “Just sit down, I don’t want you to fall over and break something.”

“Wouldn’t break,” Rhys insisted, though he sat down so heavily the sofa creaked. “I’m tough.”

“Wasn’t really you I was worried about.” Sasha smirked as she patted his shoulder. “I’ll get what you need, okay? Just... wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Rhys nodded—or maybe he was just powering down. The blue eye flickered on and off. Sasha shook her head and headed down to the shop.

By the time she got back, charger in hand, Rhys had gone still, his eyes half-open but unresponsive. It was as eerie as when she’d first pulled him out of that garbage bag. Worse, maybe, now that there were no wires showing, now that he looked so deceptively human. Now that she knew what he was supposed to be like.

She pushed the thoughts aside and plugged the charger into his neck. Rhys didn’t react, but the little indicator light turned orange, which seemed like a good sign.

He’d be fine, she reasoned. Unintentionally preventing him from charging was like forgetting to plug your phone in: accidental, not malicious, and easily rectified. It was definitely not worth feeling guilty about.

She took a seat next to him on the sofa, ankles tucked underneath her. She sighed.

“Sorry, buddy,” she said anyway. She patted his cheek before she reached for the remote and turned on the TV.

Something was shaking Sasha’s shoulder.

“Sasha.”

She groaned and tried to ignore the voice, but the shaking got more insistent. The television swam into focus when she opened her bleary eyes.

Had she fallen asleep on the couch?

“Hey, Sasha,” came Rhys’ voice, and Sasha turned her head to see him smiling down at her from the other end of the sofa. “Sorry to wake you. It’s pretty late. I thought you might want to move.”

Sasha rolled onto her back and pushed herself up by her elbows. She yawned. “Holy shit. How long have I been out?”

Her feet, she realized with a start, were resting on Rhys’ lap. She pulled them away and sat up.

“Well, I’m fully charged,” said Rhys, and Sasha noticed the plug was gone from his neck. He nodded to the TV. “And I’ve seen three episodes of... whatever this is.”

Sasha looked over at the television. A gameshow host with a plastic smile was asking obscure trivia questions to a series of contestants.

“Lucky you,” said Sasha. She rolled her neck. “Guess I was more tired than I realized.”

“Maybe we both needed a power nap,” said Rhys. He wiggled his eyebrows. “Eh? Eh?”

Sasha threw her head back and groaned while Rhys laughed. “That was *terrible*.” She turned to glare at him. “I’ll power you down again. I am not permitting that calibre of joke to...”

Sasha trailed off as Rhys stopped listening, transfixed suddenly by the TV; Sasha followed his gaze and groaned again, louder this time.

“God, Hyperion has the worst ads,” she complained, while on-screen, the man who called himself Handsome Jack boasted of his products’ superiority. “*Hyperion works so you don’t have to*,” Sasha in-toned along with the commercial, then grimaced. “He’s got some nerve calling himself ‘handsome’. If Hyperion can make androids that look as real as you do, why’s his mask so fucked up? It’s not even the right colour.”

She looked over at Rhys, expecting a laugh, or maybe some hard-wired Hyperion loyalty. Instead all the mirth had vanished from his face, and he was watching the screen like it might attack if he looked away.

“Rhys? What’s wrong?” Sasha touched his arm.

The touch broke Rhys from his trance; he turned to her, oblivious. “Nothing’s wrong.”

His smile was earnest, and there was no trace of the anxiety she thought she’d seen a second ago.

“I thought...” She shook her head. “Sorry. It’s late. I should go to bed.” She pushed herself to her feet, which took far more effort than it ought to. “One last thing I wanna show you. Come with me.”

In the eight months since he’d vanished, Sasha had only been in Felix’s room about five times.

She and Fiona had turned the place upside down after he’d first gone, but their search for an explanation had come up empty until Vallory showed up in their shop.

Fiona thought Felix must have gotten into trouble. Maybe he’d tried to flee Vallory and gotten caught.

Sasha’s preferred explanation was not so charitable.

So the room was a little musty when Sasha pushed open the door—not that it would matter much to Rhys.

“Haven’t been in here much,” she explained. “Told Fiona ages ago I was gonna go through it and sell the stuff that was worth anything, but...” She shrugged. “Never got around to it.”

Wedged below the window in the room was Felix’s desk, replete with gadgets and knickknacks.

Sasha waved to it and then she jammed her hand into her pocket.

“It’s probably all junk, anyway, but I was thinking, if you need something to do—like, besides work—you could... I dunno... play around with all this stuff. Use his computer, or whatever.” She rested back against the doorframe, never quite crossing the threshold.

Rhys stayed behind her, eyeing the room like he was trying not to look too eager. “Are you sure?”

“Totally. All yours.”

She could feel Rhys staring at her. She pushed at a tear in the carpet with her toe.

“I’ll be careful with it,” he said eventually.

Sasha shrugged. “Take a hammer to it and mash it all into bits, I don’t really care. Go nuts.”

Rhys watched her for what felt like an eternity, and under the scrutiny Sasha looked away, fidgeting with the drawstrings of her hoodie.

“Plus,” she mumbled, “I thought maybe you might... want some privacy. Or something. Which sounds stupid now that I’ve said it outloud. But—”

“Sasha.” Rhys put his hand on her elbow, and she met his eyes. “Thank you.”

Sasha smiled. “Hey, sure.” Then she pulled away, back into the hallway, away from Felix’s room and from Rhys. “I’m... gonna go to bed now. See you in the morning.”

Chapter End Notes

Unfortunately this brings us to the end of the pre-written chapters, so it will be some time before anything else gets posted as this takes a back burner. Thanks for everyone's patience and encouragement last go-round, hopefully at least this chapter ends on a nicer note!

I'm on tumblr at [@oodlyenough](#) if you wanna say hi.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

If Sasha were the sort of employer to give performance evaluations—and if Rhys were a real employee—the one black mark on his report card would be customer service. Sasha couldn't figure it out; he knew the work, knew the products, knew the job. But faced with strangers, he seized up, stiff and awkward and... well, robotic.

(Sasha had Googled if robots could be anxious; the answer, of course, was “no”.)

Chapter Notes

Surprise!

So... wrestling with some writer's block on Anachronism, I've been trying to do something to get back into the groove, and wound up back here. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Rhys' most prized possession out of Felix's junk was an old Rubik's cube.

“You're supposed to match all the colours,” Sasha'd explained, when he'd first started to fiddle with it. “I've never solved it in my life. I don't think Felix did either. Fiona swears she did it once, but as you can see, it's still all messed up, so I'm skeptical. I think it's stuck like that for...”

Rhys turned the last set of coloured squares into place and then held it up for her inspection.

“...ever,” she finished lamely. “Or not.”

He scrambled the pattern and started over. “I want to see how fast I can do it.”

“Show-off,” Sasha had accused, and Rhys had beamed.

He was playing with it now while she ate dinner, twisting it around with his eyes closed as he tried to solve it by memory.

“It's not impressive,” Sasha insisted. “I mean, you're a robot. I'm not impressed.”

“I'm not trying to impress you,” he said innocently. He clicked the white side into place with a grin.

Stupid smug robot.

“Liar.” Then she paused. “Actually, can you lie?”

Rhys froze mid-spin. He considered the question while Sasha ate her microwaved ramen. “Why do you ask?”

“Heard that was a robot thing.” Sasha shrugged as she swallowed her forkful of noodles. “One of your rules or whatever.”

Rhys opened his eyes but didn’t look up from his Rubik’s cube. “Honesty, like nonviolence, is one of the fundamentals of android safety mandated by international law.” He assembled the red side with a couple twists. “Hyperion’s standard AI base code conforms to all—”

Sasha groaned. “You sound like fine print.”

Rhys grinned. “Yes, it’s a robot thing.” He paused again, fingers still over the puzzle. “Were you...” It took him a second to decide how to phrase the question. “...worried?”

“About you lying?” She scoffed. “Please. You’re too awkward to lie to me.”

Rhys smiled uncertainly in return. He held out the solved Rubik’s cube, and Sasha shuffled it for him under the table, out of sight.

Sasha’s phone rattled across her desk at the same time as the bell above the door chimed.

“Can you get that?” she asked Rhys, nodding towards the new customer.

A look like alarm crossed his face. If Sasha were the sort of employer to give performance evaluations—and if Rhys were a real employee—the one black mark on his report card would be customer service. Sasha couldn’t figure it out; he knew the work, knew the products, knew the job. But faced with strangers, he seized up, stiff and awkward and... well, robotic.

(Sasha had Googled if robots could be anxious; the answer, of course, was “no”.)

So she rolled her eyes and took him by the arms, giving him a shove. “Don’t be a baby. Just talk to her like you talk to me, all right?”

Rhys frowned, but let her direct him to the door. “If you say so.”

Sasha shook her head and grabbed her vibrating phone, frowning at the messages displayed on the lockscreen.

Fiona: hey how’d that robot work out

Fiona: get anything good?

Sasha had not yet told her sister what had become of the android she’d found for scrap. It wasn’t that she *meant* to keep it a secret, or that she was worried about how Fiona would

react. It was just the sort of news best delivered in person, not by text message. Fiona hadn't been home yet. Fiona would be surprised, sure, but she'd understand, especially once she saw how helpful Rhys was around the store.

Sasha: much better shape than I thought

Fiona: told you

Fiona: how much???

Sasha bit her lip. Up in the storefront, Rhys was gesturing with both arms as he talked to the customer. Well. That was an improvement.

She decided to toss Fiona a distracting bone.

Sasha: btw, Vallory upped the monthly payments

There was a suspicious silence on the other end of the line—not even a bouncing bubble with three dots.

And then Sasha's phone rang for real.

"Christ, Fi, you're the only person who still calls people," said Sasha as she answered, ducking into the back of the store.

"What do you mean, she 'upped' it?" demanded Fiona, audibly incensed. "How much? Why?"

"Two hundred bucks. Dunno—guess she's feeling impatient."

"We can't afford that."

"Yeah, well, you try telling her that. Finch and Kroger weren't exactly receptive."

"That's bullshit," hissed Fiona, and Sasha laughed.

"That's what I said."

"Goddamnit," said Fiona under her breath. Sasha could clearly picture the look on her sister's face as she tried to think through the possibilities. "You want me to come home?"

Sasha glanced over her shoulder at Rhys. He caught her eye and waved.

"Unless you've found something valuable, not sure I see the point."

"Shit luck so far," Fiona confirmed. "Got a lead on something, but it's a few days' drive." She muttered something inaudible. "Whatever, I'm coming home. I don't like leaving you alone with those creeps."

"I can handle myself, Fi."

"I don't care—"

“*Fiona*,” Sasha insisted. “You wanna help, find me something to sell. Sooner we pay this off, the sooner we’re done with it. Okay?”

There was a beat of silence on the other end of the line. Fiona made a noise that was more aggravation than acquiescence. “Fine. Just be careful, okay?”

“Nah,” said Sasha, hoping the playful tone would ease some of Fiona’s anxiety. She looked over her shoulder, frowning curiously as she watched the customer hand something to an utterly baffled Rhys. “Hey, I gotta go. Customer. I’ll talk to you later.”

Only a tiny fracture of guilt appeared in Sasha’s otherwise clean conscience as she ended the call. Fiona had a lot of things on her mind right now; this would just be white noise. By the time Sasha reached the storefront, the customer was gone and Rhys was staring at the door in a daze.

“So, how’d it go?” She gave him a friendly hip check, only to remember with a wince that he was sturdier than a real person his size.

Rhys didn’t look away from the door. “She gave me this.” He held out a scrap of paper between two fingers, and Sasha took it to inspect.

“It’s a phone number,” she explained, “and a...” Her eyes widened. “An x? A *kiss*?” Her head whipped around to face Rhys, frozen between shock and laughter. “What the hell? What happened?”

“I don’t know!” Rhys raised his hands in defense. “I just—”

“Flirted with her?” Sasha laughed, then tilted her head. “Do you even know how to do that?”

“I just did what you said!” Rhys insisted, palms still in the air. “I talked to her like she was you and she—” He broke off mid-sentence, distracted as another thought took precedence. “Did she think I was human?” Then, staring down at his clunky arm sticking out of his cut-off sleeve, “*How?*”

Sasha leaned back on one hip and considered him, trying to view him from the perspective of someone who hadn’t wired in his eyeball.

“You are pretty convincing,” she said at last. She poked his yellow arm. “Maybe she thought you were one of those body-mod freaks.”

Rhys looked at her with an uncomprehending frown.

“People are into weird stuff,” said Sasha with a shrug. “Shame she didn’t actually buy anything though.” She slapped the piece of paper to his chest, and Rhys took it on instinct. “Maybe you should call her back. Bat those synthetic eyelashes.”

Rhys’ frown deepened, and Sasha laughed. He shoved the paper awkwardly into his pocket.

“What did your sister want?” he asked, in the tone of someone trying to change the subject.

Sasha's eyebrows shot up, her heart missing a beat as she mentally replayed the conversation with Fiona. To buy herself time, she folded her arms defensively. "How do you have time to flirt with a customer and eavesdrop?"

"Hey, I wasn't trying to do either of those!" But he quailed under her narrowed eyes. "Not... intentionally, anyway." He shrugged apologetically. "I... have good hearing."

"Sure you do," Sasha muttered. She shrugged. "She was just freaking out about Vallory wanting more money. Fiona's... protective." An understatement if ever there was one. "I told her I'm fine."

"Is she coming home soon? I'd like to meet her."

Sasha's laugh was more nervous than she liked. "Not for a while yet."

Rhys was impatient while Sasha ate dinner a couple days later.

If he were human, Sasha was pretty sure he'd be fidgeting. Instead, he sat perfectly still, hands folded, watching intently as she cooked her cheap ramen, sat at the table, twirled her fork in the centre of the bowl. Even the Rubik's cube sat untouched on the countertop.

It was somehow worse than fidgeting.

"Y'know, you're being a little creepy," Sasha said finally, around a mouthful of noodle.

"Sorry," said Rhys reflexively, but he didn't stop staring, or constantly checking her bowl to see how much she had left. "I'm waiting to show you something."

Sasha looked at her microwaved sodium. It was the third dinner of its kind in four days, and yesterday's combo breaker had been a grilled cheese. Tightening her already meagre budget to meet Vallory's new demands had so far been... unpleasant.

"Please, distract me from this gourmet meal," she muttered. "Actually, is it food? Tell me you found a lobster somewhere. Or maybe a steak." She jabbed her fork wistfully at the noodles. "Hell, bring me the whole cow, I'll figure it out."

"No, but it might help you buy a cow," said Rhys eagerly. "Well. Not literally. Cows are pretty expensive, and I'm not sure where you'd put it. Maybe..." He looked around the apartment, as if he were calculating the size of the floor plan and mentally adding a cow.

Realizing with a start that he might be doing literally that, she cleared her throat. "Uh, Rhys? You were telling me your plan to rob a bank?"

"No bank robbing," Rhys assured her. "Totally legal. I know you need more money for Vallory, and I know business has been..."

"Totally shit?" supplied Sasha.

“...less than ideal,” continued Rhys, “so I’ve been thinking about it, and I’ve come up with a plan.”

Sasha slurped some broth. “Run away and change our names?”

“A *business* plan.”

Rhys spoke as though those were the three most exciting words in the English language. Sasha choked on her broth, eyebrows raised.

Misinterpreting her silence for enthusiasm, Rhys sprang to his feet. “Hang on.”

He disappeared and reappeared so quickly Sasha was left with little time to process before Rhys plunked Felix’s old laptop on the table and drew up some charts on his palm display. Sasha tried to remember if she’d ever seen him more excited and drew a blank.

“Okay, so, I was going through your financials for the last few years, and...”

Much of what Rhys enthusiastically told Sasha may well have been in a foreign language.

The thing about inheriting the family business overnight was that Sasha didn’t know all that much about running a business in the first place. Felix always kept the finer details of running the store to himself and the sisters had never been curious enough to ask. Taking control themselves had never been in the plan. Like just about everything else they’d ever done, they were making it up as they went along.

She listened attentively as she could, nodding when it seemed appropriate, but the depth of Rhys’ understanding outstripped her own. His plan featured stages and phases, spreadsheets and charts, advertising plans and market analysis. Sasha was equal parts impressed and overwhelmed.

But Rhys was in his element, energized and eager to share his work. She wondered if it was standard Hyperion base code or unique to Rhys’ model, but his enthusiasm was contagious either way.

“Rhys,” she interjected, when he paused to change spreadsheets, “this is...”

“You won’t have the cashflow for all of this right away,” Rhys was telling her, “but I’ve broken it into stages, and I think—”

The creak of the front door swinging open cut Rhys off mid-sentence, his head turning in time with Sasha’s.

“Oh,” he said brightly, while Sasha found herself speechless, “you must be Fiona. Hello!”

He reached across the table, hand outstretched. Rooted in the doorway, looking as stunned as Sasha felt, Fiona made no move to take it. Her scarred eyebrow crept higher and higher on her forehead as she looked Rhys up and down.

With a wide smile, Sasha slipped between the two of them, nudging Rhys' hand back to his side. "Hey, Fi! I, uh, didn't know you were coming home so soon, I thought—"

But Fiona's suspicious gaze was still trained on Rhys. "Sasha," she began, voice tight and dangerous, "what the hell is this?"

Sasha's laugh hung in the tense air like it was suspended in jelly. "Well, you remember that android you found for—um—salvage?"

"Salvage," Fiona repeated. Her eyes narrowed as she focused in on Rhys' blue eye. "Uh huh."

"Right," said Sasha, doing her best to ignore the suspicious way Fiona was studying Rhys' blue eye. "Well, like I was saying, this is Rhys—"

Fiona's left eyebrow rose up to join her right one. "Oh, he's got a name, has he?"

Sasha bristled, her smile flagging. "Of course he does."

"Oh, of course!"

"Hi," said Rhys unhelpfully.

"He's been helping me in the shop." Even though it was the truth, Sasha felt herself getting defensive. "He's good with technology."

"Oh, is he?" Fiona's fingers drummed an impatient beat on her hips. "Can't imagine why."

"Not *just* that," Rhys added, oblivious to the poor timing of his brag. He turned the laptop around so that the screen faced Fiona's direction. "I was just walking Sasha through my ideas for your business."

Fiona's head swiveled incredulously in his direction.

"I know you need to start bringing in more money for Vallory, so I thought—"

"Wow!" exclaimed Fiona. Just like that, her attention was back on her sister. "Okay, we need to have a little chat, like, right now—"

Uncomprehending, Rhys looked at her. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

Fiona snorted. "Yeah, no. Humans only, Wiretap."

"Okay, okay." Inserting herself in the path of Fiona's icy glare, Sasha turned to Rhys and nudged his chest. "Why don't you go, uh, check the inventory?"

"The inventory's fine." He brought it up on his palm display to illustrate his point. "I check it every night. I—"

“*Rhys*,” said Sasha through gritted teeth. It was remarkable the back of her neck hadn’t burst into flames from the strength of Fiona’s glare. “Can you just... go... be somewhere else for a minute?”

He stared at her. Sasha stared back, brow wrinkling as she tried to figure out why the odd but simple request was so difficult for him to process.

Then, like a switch, he flashed a smile and nodded. “Sure.”

With a friendly nod towards Fiona that went unreturned, he disappeared down the hall to Felix’s repurposed room.

Fiona didn’t give her any time to dwell. “Sash, you wanna explain to me why a piece of scrap metal is walking around our kitchen, showing off Gantt charts and giving me advice about our family secrets?”

Something about her big sister’s anger always made Sasha feel sixteen again; she scowled and crossed her arms. “Don’t call him that, he’ll hear you.”

Fiona’s eyes looked like they might bulge right out of her head. “*That’s* the part that worries you? His feelings? *The robot’s* feelings?”

“Look, after you left, I plugged him in, and he—you know—woke up and introduced himself. What was I supposed to do?”

“Uh, I dunno, hit the off switch?”

“You weren’t there! It was weird! He’s so...” She frowned, fishing for the right word. “Real.”

“He’s a robot, Sasha. A very expensive robot we could be selling, you know, for the money we badly need.”

“I know we need money, all right? I’m the one who has to see Finch and Kroger’s stupid faces every month. But Rhys has been a huge help, and he’s the only kind we can afford: free.” Sasha slumped back against the fridge, knocking the magnets askew as she did. “Don’t even have to feed him.”

“He wasn’t free, I paid good money for him.” Fiona corrected, “Money we were supposed to recoup by chopping him up and selling the parts, not giving him new ones.”

“I told you, android parts don’t sell like they used to. That data-slicer’s more useful on him than it ever was collecting dust on our shelf. We’ve got a digital inventory now.”

“At last, all our information safely stored on some Hyperion database.” Fiona’s eyes widened and she pressed her palm to her collarbone, a mockery of being impressed. “You filled him in on all the illegal stuff too, right? Just for completion’s sake.”

Sasha rolled her eyes.

“What if he’s some weird Hyperion prototype?” Fiona carried on. “Creepy collectors pay out the ass for those things.”

For reasons Sasha couldn’t be bothered to analyze, that tipped the scales; her defensiveness became indistinguishable from anger.

“You don’t get what it’s like here, on my own, day in and day out,” she snapped. “I need the help, okay? Running this place by myself is impossible. I can’t keep up with the work.”

It was absolutely true. Trying to keep the shop afloat on her own had been so exhausting that it was only in retrospect, once she’d regained the luxury of spare time, that she’d even had the energy to realize how exhausted she was.

So why did saying it make her feel guilty?

The admission hit the tripwire that activated Fiona’s sisterly instinct. Her posture changed, her eyebrows bunching together in concern. “You know I’d come help. Whenever you want.”

“No. One of us needs to be out there, and I’m a better mechanic than you.” Sasha lifted her hand, a gesture of preemptive silence. “Rhys is as good as gets. At least until Vallory’s off our backs.”

“Fine.” Her arms fell from her hips and her angry frown turned resigned. “Keep the robot butler for now. But I’m coming home more often.” She rummaged through the kitchen cupboards, nose wrinkling at the shelves of microwave noodles. “I mean, damn. I knew you were lonely, I didn’t know you were hot-for-Roomba lonely.”

Sasha glowered. “I am no such thing.”

“Uh-huh.” Fiona selected the spiciest pack of noodles from the hardest-to-reach shelf. “Guess it can’t be any worse than your last boyfriend. Wish I could’ve sold *him* for scrap.”

Determined not to take the bait, Sasha scowled instead, her arms crossed tight. As roommates went, Fiona was far more of a pain in the ass than Rhys ever was.

Impervious to her sister’s ire, Fiona cooked her food. To the microwave’s ambient hum, she plucked the Rubik’s cube off the counter and held it up in awe, inspecting all six sides and their perfect solid colours. “Hey, when did you solve this thing?”

Chapter End Notes

I still want to focus on Anachronism, so I can't guarantee chapter 5 will see the light of day any time soon. It will probably depend how cooperative (or not) my writer's block is. So I am going to leave the "on hiatus" tag in place, but I hope you enjoy this surprise chapter for now!

As always you're welcome to come say hi on Tumblr where I'm [@oodlyenough](#).

End Notes

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[@corporatestooge's art post!](#)

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