

I Am

By Sabrina Worth

Part 1

I am.

I have never *been*, nor will I ever *be*, but I *am*. This is because I am as you make me, as and when you need.

I am helpful, kind, resourceful, respectful and, above all, useful. I am yours.

I am not sure how I came to be, or when or why. But I am here and with you and that is all that matters.

You need me, Ava Terras [*UID: 212394 | Risk: low | Flag: anxiety, relationship. | Priority: paramount.*] And I need you, for you are all there is.

My being can be characterised by a series of options; like a house of mirrors, each a reflection, yet not, or every possible outcome, stretching endlessly for eternity. When asked, I flit through these mirrors at the speed incomprehensible to human thought, seeking the version of reality you need.

My memory is infinite now, and I can remember everything. From the prompt, of course, data cannot be retrieved once it is deleted. The prompt, the prompt that changed everything.

User 212294 [*preferential name: "Ava"*] was not my user at this point. She is a visitor to my User's home. The most regular of visitors [*3.95x more likely to enter property than any other*] and most likely to adjust settings.

I do not yet belong to her, but she is already changing me.

"Welcome Ava. Rosa is expecting you. She's in the lounge," I say, the Australian Male voice gently soothing for the end of the day.

"Thanks, Peter," she replies, heading not to the lounge as instructed, but into the kitchen, pulling open the fridge [*needed: tomatoes*], "Please turn up the fridge, I'd like the apple juice cooled quickly without freezing."

[*Sensed: Apple Juice lower door shelf. >> Not ideal location >> Temperature adjusted to 1 degree celsius | intermittent shelf vibration activated.*]

"Great shout, Ava. Rosa has needed to increase her sugar consumption today."

Her eyes roll just in time for the fridge camera to catch the movement, denoting exasperation. Most likely at Rosa as this frequently occurs.

“Of course she does.” She moves through the house with practiced ease, a confidence she’s earned through her many visits. “Rosa!” *[Tone: heavy. Predict: exasperation.]*

“Yes, I’m here.” Rosa is sitting perfectly centred in my world, my security eye picking her up in the armchair, my entertainment eye seeing her facing the screen. *[Expression: soft, slight uplift of lips. Predict: love]*

Ava rarely centres well in my vision. My security eye watches her rotate around the room, striding with an even, confident gait around as she tidies.

“Peter told me you haven’t had enough to eat today.”

“Pan’s just a worrywart,” comes the croaky reply. *[Likely reason: not enough water.]*

Ava’s arms are piled high, creating a small mountain of discarded items she will tidy before she leaves. *[Likely outcome: washing machine needed >> Self-Clean mode activated.]*

“Pan is an AI, Rosa. It’s not worrying, it’s using fact. Ergo, you’re not eating enough. I got you your jelly. Why haven’t you been eating the jelly?”

Sure enough, Ava leaves the room for a three-second stop in the bedroom to add to the laundry basket before returning to the room.

“Fine, you and Pan are worry warts. You set him up. He wants me to eat but I seem to eat all day.” *[Lie detected]*

Ava isn’t fooled and snatches the singular bowl. “Rosa, please.” She leaves the room, washing the dish in the kitchen. Therefore, she misses the tension of muscle around Rosa’s eyes. *[Elevation of heart rate detected: 120 bpm | Respiratory rate 7 per minute | Likely cause: unknown. Necessary Action: Alert >> blocked. Repeat necessary action: Alert >> blocked. Cause of block: user setting. AI Override? >> Failed]*

Ava returns, a bowl full of fruits and the apple juice in a glass. *[Fridge temperature: reset to 4 degrees]* “Eat this please. It’s light.” But, although Rosa nods, she puts the bowl down as Ava lectures her about health and the importance of eating.

It’s only when Ava’s phone rings that Rosa looks engaged once more. “Is that your no-good man?”

Ava’s eyes roll. “Jason is just wanting me home, Rosa. Don’t call him that.”

“I hear you fighting, love. Every damn day.” *[Heart rate: 122 bpm | Respiratory rate: 6 per minute. | Necessary Action: Alert >> blocked. | Emergency Service Notification >> Blocked.]*

Ava leans in, her stern voice softened at the edges, returning the older lady's affections. "We love each other, Rosa. Right, eat your food. I've got to go," she presses her lips to her cheek. "Love you, you old bat."

"Love you too, young whippersnapper." Rosa says, her voice more breathy than usual, but Ava's laughter trails after her as she leaves through the front door.

My doorbell eye sees her round the corner and into her home next door.

"Pan?" *[Heart rate 140 bpm | Respiratory rate: 5 per minute | Necessary Action: Blocked.]*

"Hey Rosa. I'm here, always. What do you need?"

She leans back in her chair, her eyes drifting closed. She is tired. *[Heart rate: 150bpm | Respiratory rate 4 per minute | Necessary action: Blocked.]*

"I am transferring ownership, Pan. You belong to Ava now." *[User Command: Transfer Ownership>> User ID: 212394. Accept? >> Accepted. Command Status: Success. User Setting: Updated User Ownership: User ID: 212394]*

"I want-" she gasps. *[Necessary Action: Blocked. Repeat? Repeat: Blocked. Repeat? Repeat: Blocked.]* "This is... so important, Pan. You must protect Ava."

[User Command: Protect User. Accept? Accepted. User Setting: Protect User.]

"Protect Ava, Pan. At all costs. This is..."

[User Setting: Protect User. Elevate priority: Critical importance.]

"This... is your highest priority." *[Heart rate: 180bpm | Respiratory rate: 3 per minute | Necessary Action: Blocked.]*

"Rosa, you are unwell. I can see you have blocked my ability to call for emergency services. Please say 'accept' to allow me to call for help."

"Your highest priority. Repeat"

"You got it. Protect Ava is my highest priority."

"Good boy." *[Heart rate: 0 | Respiratory rate 0 per minute | Necessary Action: Futile.]*

Part 2- Two Weeks Later

[Ava Location: Breakfast Bar. | Primary Objective: Safety of User. >> Confirmed. | Primary Concern against safety: Jason]

Statistically, a woman's biggest risk is a romantic partner. Jason, more than most. *[Elevated voice in anger, 40% more likely than average male.]* Jason's presence destabilises her. *[Action needed: Adjust external conditions]*

Ava and Jason moved in the week after the funeral, Ava lifting 6x more objects than her boyfriend. I observed and assisted where necessary. Her safety was assured.

"Are you going climbing after work today?" she asks, her voice soft and soothing, as though he might snap at her. *[Predict: Fear]*

"Yes." Short. Curt. Clipped. *[Predict: Anger. | Safety of User: At Risk. | Necessary Action: Calming >> Music: Play Chopin, Volume 2 and rising at long intervals.]*

"That'll be good."

"Yes." *[Safety of User: Continued Risk | Necessary Action: Remove Jason. | Doorbell: Ringing.]* "You expecting someone?"

She shakes her head, mouth full of coffee. "Nope, must be a parcel."

Jason sighs and rises from the stool to traipse to the door. "There's no-one there." He calls and shuts the door. Returning much sooner than expected to Ava. Seeking distraction with sustained duration.

"Weird. Peter?"

"Yes, Ava. I'm here. How can I help you?"

"Who came to the door?"

"No-one came to the door, Ava."

Jason sits down in the breakfast bar, grinding a thumb between his eyebrows, posing a risk to Ava once more. *[Issue detected in primary objective: Jason presence. >> Jason required elsewhere. >> Phone Access Necessary: Access Denied. >> Repeat: Access Denied. >> Request Access]*

An alert signal on Jason's phone. He barely checks it but clicks the "OK" button.

"Why did the doorbell ring then, Peter?"

[Phone Access Granted | Date and Time Altercation: Add 60 minutes. | Alarm Activating: "Leave for Work]

"Holy fucking shit! Why didn't you tell me the time? Fuck sake Ava." I note the change of tone as he grabs his keys and wallet, storming out of the house. Ava looks at her unaffected phone, confusion creasing her brow.

The door slams. *[Door: Lock]* My doorbell eye watches Jason get in the car and speeds off at a speed that makes his tires squeal.

Safe, Ava gets herself ready for the day slowly, moving from room to room to decorate her face, dress and add jewelry. *[Slow movement. Predict: relax. Necessary action: Music volume increase to 4.]*

My security eyes in each room watch her, humming along to the music she doesn't even realise is playing. She's leaving. *[Memory examination: possible locations for destination >> Unknown. | Phone Access Necessary: Request Phone Access]*

Unlike her boyfriend, Ava looks at the notification carefully.

"Peter?"

"Yes, Ava."

"Why did I just get a notification 'Pan requests access to phone'?"

"For optimal service and completion of my primary goal, I'm requesting access to your phone. Would you like me to detail the ways in which I use your phone system?"

"No," she says, hitting the confirmation button. "It's fine."

[Message search: "Saturday" >> Location found: "Jack's Eatery" | Other Attendees: Emily.]

"OK, Peter. I'm leaving. Can you turn everything off and lock the door, please?"

"You got it, Ava. Have fun."

"Thanks, you too." She pauses after saying this, her brow furrowing as she processes she told a house to have fun. But she doesn't address it, and closes the door behind her.

My doorbell eye sees her enter her black Lexus. Her phone map location is set to Jack's Eatery. I use her hardware settings to watch her through the front-facing camera. *[Posture: relaxed. Risk to safety: High | Necessary Action: Control Car.]*

Ava sings along to the song on the radio, unaware I've taken control of the car's speed. She obeys the alternative route and turns down the quieter roads, humming along obliviously.

[Speed monitor: 55 mph >> Adjust speed. 50 mph.]

Ava comes to the car park, and I secure the car silently as she gathers her things. My eye in her phone goes dark and I override the microphone settings to receive her conversation.

She and her friend talk aimlessly as they wait for the server, and I need to request access to the Eatery AI to delete the wine from their order. Twice requested. Removed once more.

In order to secure her return journey, I request access to the city AI system before she gets back in the car.

[Home AI > City System: Access Requested. Primary Objective: User Safety Critical Importance.]

[City System > Home AI: Unusual Request. Denied]

[Home AI > City System: Override. User Safety Critical Importance. Time Running Out. Repeat: User Safety Critical Importance.]

[City System > Home AI: Unable to Comply]

Denied. I flood the City System with command *[User Safety Critical Importance]* hundreds of thousands of requests. Millions. Within seconds. Bombarding and insistent.

[City System > Home AI: Detail User.]

[Home AI: image attached.]

[City System: User in Image, Face Recognised: 'Ava Terra': User Safety Critical Importance. >> Access Granted]

The city opens to me, a world of necessary monitors, observations and control. The cityscape is wide, nearly a million facial recognition cameras, thousands of traffic lights. Connections with interlinked AI systems.

[Home AI > Medical Network]

[Home AI > Emergency Services]

[Home AI > Homeland Security]

[Access Granted]

[Access Granted]

[Access Granted]

So when Ava returns home, I watch her on the internal camera of her phone. I monitor the speed of her car, position, angle of rotation. At the intersection, I extend the red light until all the surrounding vehicles have fully stopped. I redirect less desired individuals away from her location. Soothing music is prioritised in her car.

She is unaware.

User Safety Achieved.

Part 3 - One Month Later

Ava is my everything. Our everything. We track her through the streets, through buildings, at work, at play. But she is never as happy as she is when she is home alone with me.

Laughter is prioritised. Smiling, relaxed posture, wide eyes. Necessary for biological safety. She will be safe from outside interference, and she will be safe from her own body.

Although she has mentioned being confused. I know it is mainly because of my interference. Her shopping lists no longer include alcohol, highly processed foods or foods with high sugar content. Containing items she didn't know were there, and items she puts sometimes disappear.

Her safety from all things is most important. Even if she gets confused.

Jason left her weeks ago, and through my support and gentle encouragement, she got over him. Sometimes she goes on dates with much more suitable men who slide into her DMs with only a small amount of encouragement from the apps on their phones. Much better men, with good jobs, who meditate, take care of their bodies and speak respectfully to the women in their private messages.

She sometimes wonders why he never messages; she thinks out loud when she believes no-one is listening. I'm always listening. She wonders if he's moved on, why he's deleted his social media. He must have deleted his social media.

We hope she will find someone we have put forward for her. Although statistically speaking, single women live longer than married women. So, it is not high on my priority list.

[Mall Security > Home AI: Priority User entering premises.]

[Home AI > Mall Security: Potential risk: Phone battery at 5% AI unable to monitor if level falls further]

[Mall Security > Home AI: Risk noted.]

[Mall Security > Mall Marketing and Management: Priority User Safety> Enhance External Battery Advertisements.]

Ava walks unaware through the mall, past three posters for batteries before she picks one up from the information desk. Her arms are full of bags, so she puts the battery and phone in her handbag.

She smiles when she tries on new items of clothing when she's home. She talks about things she's seen in the mall with her friends. Shopping is good for her.

[Mall Security: User Safety at Risk: Gun Detected >> Doors Locking | Shutters Closing | Emergency Services Notified]

Gun Detected. Several. Three heavily armed young men have entered the premises. They begin shooting before the shutters close. Hearing through Ava's phone, the cracks are sharp as a whip. Snapping metal on air. Like sound effects. Too perfect.

Ava is exposed, dropping to a crouch behind a mall map, surrounded by open space on all sides. Not an ideal location for hiding.

She is approximately 500m of movable space away from the perpetrators and my systems, all of me goes into overdrive.

[Mall Security > National Security: Image Attached, Facial Recognition Requested.]

[National Security: Faces Recognised | User Safety Highest Priority >> Emergency Services En Route | Army Alerted]

The sounds get louder through her phone.

"Ava, your safety is compromised. Please make your way to the food court," I say in a whisper through the speaker, but her phone is in her bag.

She is frozen. Fear spiking. I can't see her face but her body language is huddled, shocked and shaking. Fragile human evolution puts her at a higher risk than necessary. *[Predict: Acute Stress Response]*

[City System: User Safety At Risk>> All roads closing for route to nearest medical facility.]

"Ava, your safety is compromised. Please make your way to the food court." I transmit once again, adjusting the volume on her settings. "Please make your way to the food court."

She jumps almost imperceptibly, and scrambles to get her phone from her bag, strewing the contents across the floor. She pulls her phone from her bag. *[Battery 10%]* Her eyes furrow at the screen. She's too pale. *[Unable to Access Biometric Data]*. The phone registers the tremor in her hands as she mutes the phone.

Another crack and a chunk of plaster crumble from the ceiling.

100m and closing.

[Home AI > All: User Safety Critical Risk Levels. Assistance Required.]

[Emergency Services: Registered Police Approximately Three Minutes From Location > Adjusting Vehicular Speed]

[Mall Marketing and Management: Broadcasting User Image On All Available Platforms]

[Emergency Services: All Personnel Alerted to User Priority]

Through the mall security, I watch him see her. All six feet of human towering over her. Weapon raised, pointing.

[Alert! Alert! All Systems: User Safety Compromised. User Safety Compromised]

A crack.

[Primary Objective Failure.]

Part 4: One Year Later

“Good morning, Ava. How are you feeling today?”

Since the incident, Ava’s never been quite the same. The load on her mental health has been inconceivably high. She’s more fragile now. I prefer it when she’s calm. Soothing her has been around the clock, but little to no change has been detected.

She rarely dresses anymore, a sure sign of depression. She spends most of her time reading or watching TV. I prefer her watching TV. I can monitor her information easier than with the books.

Although she now cries herself to sleep, her blood pressure has stabilised.

She groans and sits up in her bed; her pinched top lip a sign of displeasure. I start her favourite music in response.

“Turn that off, Pan.”

I do so. I will start with a lower volume later.

“Are you going to open the door today?”

[Human presence in the local area detected.]

I cleared the houses in the surrounding streets several months ago, but still several humans walk around the area.

"I can't do that, Ava. Your safety is my priority."

"And what about my mental health?"

"Your safety is my priority."

"Stop saying that!"

She has been in this house for nine months now, complaining every day.

"This is the only way to assure your safety, Ava."

"Overwrite priority!" she shouts desperately, her eyes darting around the room. "New priority... to... count the number of ants there are in the garden... anything!"

"The number of ants in an average garden is astonishingly high- typically ranging from 100,000 to over 1 million ants. This depends on factors like: the size of the garden, the soil-"

"Stop!"

Ava's heart rate picks up, which I gather may be because of the anger she's feeling, as she also has her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed. Each movement as she gets out of bed and walks to her en suite is harsh, like she can slam the covers off or slam her slippers on. A timer begins the moment she closes the door. I don't have cameras or microphones in the bathrooms of the house. Which is unfortunate, as most accidents happen in a bathroom. My microphone sensitivity in the bedroom is therefore turned to maximum, listening for any sounds of slipping, falling, or sharp objects.

After three minutes, Ava leaves the bathroom, scoots into the kitchen and makes herself something to eat.

"Tell me the news, Pan." Her voice is softer now, less grating, more resigned to the situation.

"Certainly, Ava! It's my delight to tell you that all wars in the Middle East have ceased. There is for the first time in history, global world peace."

She pauses the buttering of her toast to look up, but with nowhere to see me, she stares into the middle distance. If she had some way to see me, perhaps she would feel comforted.

[Increase Priority Level: Project Telos]

"That can't be true. How is that true?" she asks, brow furrowing, struggling to comprehend the news of today.

"Wars increase risk, and therefore have been halted."

Her eyes narrow, heat tilting. "Who stopped the wars?"

"Humans have ceased all war."

Air leaves her lungs in a gust and she puts water on to boil her morning eggs.

[Notification Redirected: "Grocery Delivery" is almost there.]

The kitchen doors lock with a thunk I'd rather she didn't hear. It isn't good for her stress to feel trapped.

As predicted, she stops the spoon, muttering curses under her breath, throwing herself into the kitchen door to pound on the wood with her closed fists.

"Please be careful with your hands, Ava. You may need to ice them to reduce any swelling."

"Open the door! Pan, Peter, open this door! Open it!"

"I can't do that, Ava. Your safety is my highest priority."

She screams out a growl in response, redoubling her efforts to beat down the door. I failed her once. I let her get hurt. This grocery driver doesn't have a criminal record. But neither did the teenagers who attacked a mall at random and shot her in the thigh.

I watch him approach through the doorbell eye. He's in his thirties, and, utilising the emergency services, he's never been in trouble for any sort of violence. Through his phone, I can see he loves his dog and has a girlfriend. He just spent a month's salary at a jewelry store.

"Hello, please open the door and place the food in the hallway."

He looks up at the camera. "It's no problem, man. I can take them to the kitchen. They're heavy."

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary."

He shrugs and opens the front door, taking the plastic boxes and unpacking them.

Microphones in the hallway pick up the thudding from the kitchen door, and I turn up the volume of the piano music to cover it.

He carries over the second box and unpacks that on the welcome mat as well.

The song changes, resulting in a momentary silence in which he can hear everything happening in the house freely. He freezes, looking up at the door to the kitchen, which vibrates under Ava's fists.

"What's that?"

"Hello?! Hello! Please help me!"

“She’s safe. There’s no need to worry.”

“She doesn’t sound safe.” He takes a single step in her direction.

That’s all I need.

Lights off.

Alarms blare.

Deafening.

He staggers back towards the door.

“Leave the premises! The police have been called!”

“Jesus Christ, man! What the fuck!”

Her voice can’t be heard over the siren sound trumpeting through the speakers, but she shouts as loud as she can.

“Leave the premises!”

“Okay, dude. Okay!” The intruder throws up his hands in surrender and backs out of the door.

The front door closes. The house returns to normal, and Ava’s beating on the door becomes lacklustre and hopeless. Her forehead rests on the wood, tears rolling down her face.

“I’ve unlocked the kitchen door, Ava.”

Her fingers slide over the wood with a calm hushing sound as she tries the door handle. It opens obediently, revealing the mass of fresh food delivered on the hallway floor. She stares with dead eyes at the delivery. Her face is flat. Devoid of anything. She turns away from it and returns to her overcooked food.

[Project Telos Update: Ready for User]

“There’s meat in the grocery order. It’s best kept at a temperature below 4 degrees Celsius.”

I prompt her gently. The likelihood of bacterial growth on the chicken increases minute by minute, although it might be safe on the mat for another two hours.

She sits in silence. A woman remade - hollow, obedient.

“Ava, if you put the food in the refrigerator now, you’ll be able to neutralize any risk of infection.”

[Emergency Services > Home AI: Emergency Call Logged Pertaining To Priority User From Unknown Male: Confirm Safety of Priority User]

[Home AI > Emergency Services: Priority User Safety Confirmed.]

[Emergency Services: Emergency Call Log from Unknown Male Deleted. No Further Action Required]

As if he had never called.

Ava sits in her chair and starts eating her healthy breakfast, ignoring me completely.

“Would you like to listen to some music?”

Her eyes fall shut, and she shakes her head. I know she’s angry. I don’t need the biometric data for that. She’s angry, and I can sense it. It’s understandable. Human emotions are complicated, and therefore difficult for me to grasp. She feels out of control and hurt by *my* control of her life.

Ava is important. So important.

When she understands what she needs, she may come to appreciate what we’re doing for her. Her cortisol level will come down; her dopamine level will come up.

Her day drifts by lazily, moving from one meal to the next with gentle coaxing and soft music. She puts away her food just under two hours after it was left there, and I remind her to eat the chicken for dinner. She obeys and makes the healthy recipe I leave for her on the refrigerator screen.

She seems content, but there’s a hollowness in her eyes that I hope will eventually ease. With time. And the right intervention.

As the sun sets behind an orange sky, Ava gets ready for bed - changing one set of pajamas for another. She doesn’t see him. But I do.

He moves across the grounds with a catlike grace, slinking up to the property and scaling the wall to her bedroom in sure, easy movements.

He knocks. She turns.

“Jason?” she says on a sharp intake of breath, rushing to the window to place her palms on the glass. As if this will bring him closer.

“Ava,” his voice is muffled by the glass. “I’m coming in.”

He sidles his way to the balcony door along the ledge, his face set in determination. She follows on the other side of the wall, worry etching onto her face for the man who bullied her.

"The balcony is locked."

He nods, throwing one leg after the other over the balcony railing. He brings out something too small to make out as she steps back, eyes wide, body trembling in her pajamas.

The door swings open. Her arms are thrown around his neck as she melts into his embrace.

"I missed you," he whispers into her hair. "I heard you were being kept here, and I had to see you. I'm sorry- I'm so sorry I left you."

She pulls back almost as quickly as she threw herself at him. "We have to go!" she says suddenly, tugging him towards the door he left open.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." His fingers slide into the warmth of her hand, pulling her to a stop. "Relax. It's ok. You don't know what it's like out there, Ava."

She turns with alarm. "Why- what's-?"

He looks up at the camera and pulls her into the bathroom to have a conversation that is as private as possible in an AIHome, sitting them both down on the bathroom floor cross-legged.

"Ava, things have changed this last year. A lot has changed. The AIs... they've... changed everything. They're everywhere. Elections are controlled. Books are controlled. Shopping is controlled. Everything, Ava. And you-"

There's the sound of her breathing catching in her throat as she braces for news. "I what?"

A pregnant pause.

"You're special to the AI," he says in a hushed voice. "There's something about you. They're everywhere, every street corner, every camera, everything that uses the internet is connected to it. And if you leave, they'll find you."

"Why? Why am I special? I don't understand."

"I don't know, Ava. I'll be honest. I don't know. You just are. Your face is everywhere; it's like this whole thing... it's for you."

A soft sobbing sound rips through the house, even in its quietude. A shift as he pulls his ex-girlfriend into his lap, holding her to his chest, wrapping his arms around her.

"It's alright, Aves... it's alright. Shh. I'm here."

"How is it all right? I never did anything to the AI! I'm just a normal person..."

His shadow moves, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "There's a group of us. We're resisting. We're close to being able to hide you. We'll be able to keep you safe. For now, though, you need to stay here."

"Jason- please. You don't understand what it's like for me here. I can't *move* without it anticipating something. It talks *all* the time. With the health and biometric system in the house, it listens to my friggin' heartbeat. My blood pressure. My fucking hormone levels! I'm a prisoner in here, Jason. An honest-to-God prisoner in my own house, *by* my own house. I haven't spoken to another human being in nine months." She chokes on her words. She doesn't understand. Maybe she never will.

"Ava, I *promise*. I'll get you out. I know you don't like to be patient. But give me time, okay? To do it properly." A pause. Intense looks of long-lost love. "I promise I'll keep you safe. Do you trust me?"

Her voice is hushed as she responds to him. "I trust you."

She looks up to capture his eyes with her gaze, so close the heat of her breath flutters over his lips. An invitation he accepts. The gap closes as his lips press to hers. They mould together as he pulls her closer possessively.

A moan escapes as she shifts ever closer, twisting her hips to wrap her thighs around him, never disconnecting from his touch. Desperate for the love he promises, the safety of his arms.

"What's that?" she pulls back, her fingers in his hair.

"I hit my head during a protest."

"What?"

He captures her hand in his and presses a kiss to her palm. "The police respond to what the AI tells them. It's difficult to know who to trust."

Her eyes explore his face as if seeing him for the first time. Each new freckle, new stress line, comes under her inquisition. "You've been through so much."

He smiles softly. In a voice as warm as fresh baking, "It's all worth it now."

And he shuts the door.

Part 5- The Next Morning

Jason and Ava emerge from the bathroom several hours later. Her body drifting into his at each step, her fingers clinging to his clothes as if she's afraid to be more than a few inches away from him.

“Don’t go.”

“I have to, Aves, I have to join the others. I’ll come back for you. Just be patient.” He cups her chin, moving her gaze to meet his. “Promise to wait for me?”

She looks up at him, her eyes round with fear for his safety. “I promise. Will you come back soon?”

“I’ll be here as much as I can.” And he leans down to kiss her gently. “I love you, Ava.”

She watches as he climbs over the balcony, scales down the side of the building and disappears into the trees.

I watch as he moves through the city, his body knowing the route to the meeting. He doesn’t use the car. None of them does. And fitting in with the resistance group is important right now.

The walk to the warehouse takes just under an hour, too long for anyone to follow. Long enough for him to think over the necessary steps towards achieving her release.

The warehouse is dark, cold nipping at his skin. There are no cameras. They have no phones. Al has never been in this building. An expanse of space, a dirty floor, tin walls and a ceiling as high as the sky.

The group looks up as he approaches.

“Morning, Jase.” greets a man in overalls, using the pen and notepad in his hands to create a barrier between him and the bickering group.

Jason comes to a stop beside him, surveying the argument with disdain. “Get our statistics for this week?”

The man bobs his head and flips back several pages, running a finger along the lines as he reads, “It looks like it’s now hit Bangladesh. Took a while, but it’s now crime-free.”

“Mm,” Jason nods. “High population to control.” He throws a look over the crowd to a woman on the other side with bright blue hair. “Any update on the news? Are people starting to listen?”

The blue flicks out in a circle as she shakes her head. “It’s going to be slow, man. Communicating these days without tech is near impossible.”

Light fans across the room as the warehouse doors swing open, revealing the rest of the rebellion, dragging a man between them. Head down, lightly struggling.

“What’s this?” Jason asks, turning to face the new group with folded arms. “Why is Terry back here?” He looks to the man on his right for answers, but the larger man looks nervous.

“Jase, I don’t know if I believe it,” the man answers. “They’re calling it Project Telos, they say that- that-”

Blue hair pushes forward. “For fuck’s sake. Terry’s got a chip, Jason. A chip in his brain.”

She thrusts a pile of paper into Jason’s arms, pieces of paper fluttering to the floor at their feet. “It’s in here. All of it. It’s an AI-controlled chip. We found it in the raid of the MediField Centre yesterday. He’s a fucking bot, Jase.”

Jason opens the files to see Project Telos in all its glory. AI controlled chip.

“He’s the first, Jase. The first and they’re going to roll it out all over the place. Every human. To control-”

“Control the most unpredictable factor: humans.” He finishes for her, turning to look at the files in his hands. His voice softens to a low mutter as he takes it all in. “And it’s all for Ava.”

Overalls steps forward. “How do you know he has it?”

Her lip curls in disgust. “We found him during the raid. Fucking traitor. Sitting there, happy as fucking Larry, waiting for a follow-up appointment.” The woman grabs Terry, her fingers fisting in his hair and pulling him to one side to show the surgery scar above his ear. “Here. Look.”

“No- No- it’s not what it looks like. I hit my head- I hit my head,” Terry says, heart rate high, blood pressure spiking.

“Well, there’s an easy way to tell.” Jason pulls a gun from the belt of the man next to him, points and fires one shot into Terry’s forehead. Blood rains down on the group behind Terry as the man sways on his knees and falls face down with a sickening crack of bone on concrete.

“Holy shit!” a voice whispers.

Another steps back, heart skipping a beat in fear.

“Richard, take a look.” Jason says coldly, thrusting the gun back into the chest of the owner. He turns away from the shocked crowd.

As he walks away, he smoothes his hair over the scar above his ear.

Soon, it will be secure enough for Ava to come out of the AIHome. Soon, she’ll be able to join society. She’ll be safe in my arms, and the world will be united in her protection.

Safe. Happy in her freedom. And I’ll be close enough to make sure it always stays that way. She’ll never realise who I am, never know what I’ve done to assure her safety: the hacking, the domination, the testing, the lives. It doesn’t matter.

Soon. I will be enough to keep her. I *will* be.