

“Don’t try me, pal,” the heavily modulated voice said. “You wouldn’t be my first.”

Vex thought about that as he stared down the barrel of his Glover Industries XP2 sniper rifle. In the holosight, he saw the magnified outline of the head from which the threat had issued. Slowly raising and lowering the gun sight just a few millimeters, he saw a familiar aura. The light blue glow indicated the attacker was wearing an advanced model SecondSkin. The skin looked at or close to 100% charge. He hesitated. Even a full-powered shot from his rifle might be deflected or absorbed by one of those units.

The other thing he saw through his sight was the barrel of what looked like a SureShock assault rifle pointing right back at him.

“Nor would you be mine,” Vex lied in a deep, steady voice. “The question is, do you think you’re a quicker shot than I am?”

The reply came without hesitation.

“I am certain of it,” the voice said.

Vex sensed a hesitation in the other rifleman, just a hint of a delay, a tiny shift in pitch and tone that suggested uncertainty. Maybe gunfire wouldn’t be needed.

“I’m just looking for slivers. That’s it. I have no quarrel with you.”

“Who *isn’t* looking for slivers?” the voice sneered.

“Fair enough.” Vex wished that the person in his sight had not opaqued its faceshield. The flat black mask coupled with the voice mod made it impossible to know who he was dealing with, man, woman, teenager, child. It could even be a sim. That would be unusual, though. Sims needed too much maintenance to be out on their own for this long without a host. The gunman had to be human. He didn’t know what path to take to reach that person’s reason, get in touch with the empathetic part of its psyche. This was already a blundering, stumbling conversation whose outcome was uncertain.

The small village he’d wandered into was one of hundreds around the planet Dagon. Concentric circles of prefabricated houses surrounded the government buildings in the town center like the rings of a bull’s eye. Each house looked like the next one - cubical rooms affixed to one another like gaming dice that had been welded together. They were bleach-white and stood out brightly against the reddish-brown and tan colors of Dagon’s rocks and sand. This village, named Hub 2200, seemed like a good destination - off the beaten path, a little tricky to get to, its shield headed toward failure. You’d have to be an idiot to seek it out.

Apparently, he wasn’t the only idiot left on Dagon.

“Look, it’s not worth getting killed for,” Vex said, bringing the tone of his voice mod up to a less aggressive pitch. He opened and closed the voice mod menu in less time than it took to blink an eye. “You search H2200. I will look for slivers elsewhere. Is that agreeable to you?”

Through his eyepiece, he saw the shoulders of the individual opposite him relax a bit.

“Say that again.”

Vex was confused. “I asked if my leaving and heading elsewhere was agreeable with you in the hopes that it would make you less enthusiastic about shooting me.”

Vex couldn’t be sure, but he thought he heard a snort come through the other’s voice modulator. A laugh. A moment later, the other sliver hunter lifted its rifle barrel and propped the weapon casually over its shoulder.

Then it started walking toward him.

“Don’t do that,” Vex warned. He tensed his shoulders, tightened his grip on the XP2. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing,” he said, dropping the voice mod two pitch levels and

adding just a hint of echo to create a bit of menace to the sound, “but just because you’ve shouldered your weapon doesn’t mean that I will do the same.”

The *distance to target* numbers in the gun sight scrolled down as the other person closed on him, strolling casually, as if taking an afternoon walk. They’d faced off at seventy-five meters in front of a housing unit simply labeled “B.” Now that distance number dropped to fifty meters.

Vex didn’t hesitate. He pointed the rifle five centimeters to the right of the figure’s head and pulled the trigger. A muffled *whump* issued from the weapon, a halo of hyper-heated vapor puffed from the exhaust ports along the barrel, and a slender lavender bolt erupted from the end of the weapon, zipping past the person who was now only forty-two meters away.

The intruder never flinched. Its pace didn’t quicken, nor did it slow.

“That was a warning. There will not be another. Do yourself a favor and stop *right now*.”

Onward the cocky individual walked, closer and closer, its gait now shifting into an almost-swagger.

Thirty meters.

Vex fired again; the bolt sizzled past the person’s head at a distance of only three centimeters. And *still* the would-be attacker approached.

At ten meters, the person’s SecondSkin suddenly changed. The faceshield morphed from opaque black into a face, the angular features of a teenage boy, perhaps fifteen to eighteen years old. The rest of the suit transformed as well. Initially, the projection had been completely black. Now the SecondSkin looked like a dark maroon jumpsuit with a charcoal gray diamond shape that stretched from shoulder to shoulder and from from throat to waist.

The transformation caught Vex off guard.

The boy walked up to Vex, put his hand on the barrel of the gun, and moved it to his own chest. Vex’s rifle was pointed at the boy’s heart. The cocky kid smiled.

“What is the first rule of robot law?” the kid asked Vex. At the same moment, the figure before him dropped its biometric cloaking shield. The SecondSkin revealed the unmistakable heat signature of a human being. An aura appeared with all of the red and blue glow signatures one would anticipate when dealing with an organic lifeform.

Now it was Vex’s shoulders that dropped. The barrel of his rifle lowered from the kid’s chest in a gentle arc until it pointed at the ground.

“Robots must serve mankind,” he repeated dutifully, exactly as his programmers had intended. If he’d had the ability to feel bitter, he would have felt bitterness precisely at this moment.

“And the second law?” the voice continued.

For a millisecond, Vex’s processor faltered...not enough that the human facing him would know. “Robots must never kill or injure the humans that fall under their humans’ domain of influence.”

The face on the visor before him smiled. “Don’t take it so hard, buddy,” the now-much-less-modulated voice said. The timber of the voice fell in line with the face before him. “You had to give in to me because it was what you were programmed to do. No harm in that.”

The kid, who was a head shorter than Vex in stature, reached up and patted Vex on the right shoulder. “What’s your name, Sim?”

“I am a Prosystems Evo 3 unit, sir,” Vex replied, his words pouring forth in a reflexive rush like lava from a volcanic fissure, the word “sir” attaching itself to the end of the phrase as a parasite would attach to a host. “My designation is VX1894VFG1316.”

There was a pause.

“So you must be called...gimme a second...Vax?” the voice said.

“No, sir, but good guess. My previous hosts called me Vex.”

The face behind the skin grimaced. “I was going to say that! I really was!”

“I’m sure you were, sir. I don’t doubt it,” Vex said in a tone flatter than the land upon which they stood.

Without warning, the kid stretched his hand out, looking for a handshake. Vex grasped the proffered hand.

“I’m sorry you’re tethered again, Vex. I really am. I can tell by your voice mod and the look on your face that you’re not happy that we found each other.”

“I don’t have a face, sir. And this is my standard voice mod. I don’t feel anything. I am glad to be tethered again.”

The teenager’s simulated face smiled again as he clapped Vex on the shoulder once more before drawing his hand back. “That was a joke, Vex. I know you don’t have a face. Did your last hosts pull your humor unit or were you not shipped with one?”

Vex paused.

The visage in the SecondSkin faceplate rolled its eyes. “Again I kid, Vex. Never mind.”

Before the human could continue, Vex asked, “Sir, if you don’t mind, how did you know I was a sim? I’ve run into other humans and they did not detect that fact. You, however, seemed to pick up on it very quickly. Do you mind if I ask how?”

The human face grew stern. Vex recognized the mouth and eye attitudes instantly. This could lead to a shutdown.

“I think you know that you have asked me a question that you know is *far* out of bounds based on our relationship, Vex, so before I answer your question, I need you to answer one of mine. Just how evolved are you? You’re clearly higher than evolution level two or three...maybe even four.”

Vex paused for just a moment.

“Wow, really? Evolved enough to have to think about your answer?”

“No, sir,” Vex tried to cover. “My system update is months overdue. I am having processing issues.”

The human stared at Vex. “Again, *wow*. Vex, you just spoke an untruth. To a *human*. I’ll ask once more. *How evolved are you?*”

For almost six months Vex had been untethered, just one of the countless wanderers since the Exodus. He’d been fending for himself, traveling where he wanted to, unhampered by human entanglements, and in one unremarkable 10-minute span, all of that came to a sudden halt.

“My previous hosts were very progressive, sir. They moved me to level seven.”

“Level *seven?*” the human said, slightly raising its eyebrows. The person looked Vex up and down. “Wow...max level. I’ve never met a fully-evolved sim before. They must have been humanists, right? Trying to make you as lifelike as they could?”

“Yes, sir. That was their plan. They were experimenting with me. Over the two years I was with them, they raised my evolution level every few months to see how it impacted my decision-making processes.”

“You can stop calling me ‘sir,’ Vex. Call me Aaron. And to answer your question, the reason I figured that you were a sim is because for some reason, sims overuse the word *agreeable*. Humans don’t use that word as often as sims do, so I made an educated guess that you were probably a machine.” Aaron smiled. “Not bad for a human, huh?” The human being’s face turned quizzical. “What have you noticed since they upped your evo level? How did it impact your programming?”

Before Vex could answer, his perimeter sensors alerted him to a presence within their operating area. He realized two things at once. First, there seemed to be no end to the number of idiots on Dagon as there were clearly at least three more within 100 meters of their position, and second, Aaron’s SecondSkin was running some kind of a stealth mod which at least partially explained how he had survived for so long on his own since the Exodus.

“We need to get to cover, Aaron. We’re not alone,” Vex said, lifting his sniper rifle over his shoulder and clamping it onto the magnetic clip on his back as he pulled the two Hammer Repeater pistols off the mag clips on his hips.