

Upon hearing Vex's news of other beings in the area, Aaron followed the sim's lead and clicked his own rifle onto the mag lock on the side of his backpack. He pulled the blaster off his hip.

Consulting the global map in his memory, Vex called up Hub 2200 and looked at its arrangement. Like most of the smallest villages on the planet, this one consisted of thirty residential prefabs, all the same square footage, all the same floorplans, all the same architectural footprint. The small collection of municipal buildings in the center of the "town" acted as the operations center for the village.

"The reading I'm getting is coming from Unit L, directly south of us."

Instinctively, Aaron and Vex drifted toward Unit B and they flattened their backs against the wall. Unit L was in view to the south, 82 meters away from where they stood.

"We have two options," Aaron said. "We can go meet them or we can hide. Personally, I like the idea of hiding. Being shot at once per day is my limit. Kind of a rule I like to stick to."

As Vex scanned his sensors again and considered Aaron's proposals, one of the targets vanished, returned, vanished again, and then flickered in and out of existence.

"Sir, or Aaron, rather, I cannot get a solid read on all three marks. One seems to be fluttering. It may be a false image on my scanner."

Aaron paused. "What do you mean? Do you think that unit is running a stealth mod like mine?"

"No, I don't think so. Stealth mods work like yours does - it's either on or off." Vex paused to analyze the target data and there were still fluctuations. He couldn't be certain of the target's legitimacy. "This is the same problem I am having with my combat targeting. Without an update soon, I am concerned that more of my systems will have reduced accuracy."

"Well, two beings or three, I don't really want to run into any...hey, wait a second," Aaron said, interrupting himself. "Did you say you were having the same problem with your combat targeting?"

"That's right."

"The same targeting system that you used when you were firing warning shots at me?"

"Yes," Vex said simply.

"The same system you were using when you were firing warning shots *at my head*?"

Vex detected elevated heart rate and blood pressure levels. He sensed something was upsetting Aaron. The sim turned to look at his tether.

"Not *at* your head. *Near* your head. You were in very little danger, sir," Vex said, shifting into obsequious mode to placate his human. He quickly looked back toward where the sensor targets were.

"Very little danger?" Aaron gasped. Then he made a shocked snorting sound. "Oh, you had better believe we are going to be talking about this later, buster..." Aaron said.

"Just a suggestion, since I don't want to overstep my bounds, but shouldn't we address the more serious of the two situations we are currently facing?"

Aaron snorted again and mumbled, "Whatever." After a brief pause, Aaron seemed to be calmer when he said, "Let's head north. We can back out of this hub without ever crossing the path of whoever's over there."

"Too late," Vex said very quickly. "The targets are moving rapidly and they're about to come into view."

Vex's head whipped in a full 360 degree circle, his eyes scanning every nearby portal, his electronic brain calculating the distance to each doorway. Based on the velocity of the targets and Aaron's projected physical ability, Vex decided that they had to shelter in place.

"Behind me," he said through a closed audio channel between himself and Aaron. Vex's robotic arm reached back and pushed Aaron directly behind his frame which he was going to use as a shield, should the situation warrant such action.

"Easy!" Aaron blurted as he nearly tripped over his own feet. Vex went to one knee and extended both of his arms, each one ending in a metal fist clutching a Hammer Repeater pistol. Aaron crouched as well and used Vex's torso as a barrier. He placed his own gun arm over Vex's shoulder and rested his elbow on the sim's shouldplate for stability.

"Three marks tracking west to east, coming into view now..."

Down the empty street lined with empty prefabs, a small humanoid form raced into view. It had the awkward running gait of a child, the limbs clunky and unathletic, the arms and legs not quite in sync as it ran. A voice that could have come from the humanoid shrieked and then suddenly there was another humanoid behind the first one, much larger, twice its size, in fact, and it scooped up the screaming form it had been chasing.

Vex and Aaron both tweaked their volume receptors at the same time, neither aware of the other's actions.

"Kyla!" a deep voice said with authority. "How many times have I told you about this?"

The shrieking voice now turned into the unmistakable voice of a little girl. "I'm sorry, Daddy," the very unapologetic voice said.

It was then, while the man had the little girl hoisted over his shoulder, that he turned to see three pistols aimed at him. He quickly set the little girl down and pushed her behind his body. The other target Vex had tracked charged over to the man without even a glance at what its father was looking at and took up a spot with the other youngster, totally shielded by its father's frame.

"Don't shoot!" the man yelled, his hands up over his head, his palms empty. "We're unarmed!"

Vex spoke through the direct channel that only Aaron could hear. "What do you want to do?"

"I'm not sure," came the reply. "They seem harmless enough. Do you think they knew we were here? Do you think it could be an ambush?" Aaron asked, glancing around to see if he could detect anything amiss in the rest of the hub.

"I'm not getting any other readings," Vex replied. "There's an 83% chance that this person is telling the truth based on my area scans and on his highly-elevated vital signs."

"An 83% chance based on your malfunctioning innards. Great. Now I feel *really* confident about our chances."

"You need not worry. The bioscan system and targeting system are completely independent of one another."

"You're right. I feel a lot better. Thanks, Rusty."

"I am not rusting, sir. I just need a software update and a little work on my shell..."

"Skip it," Aaron said shortly. "You down there!" he said, opening his voice channel and cuing the same menacing voice he'd used when he met Vex. "Stay where you are! And don't put your hands down!"

“Let’s check them out to make sure they’re alone,” Aaron said to Vex using the closed channel once again. “I’m hesitant to walk away without knowing more about them. I don’t want them to come after us later.”

“I understand,” Vex replied. “Stay behind me as we approach.”

Vex transitioned smoothly to his full height and took measured strides toward the three humans before him. Aaron turned his head left and right as they neared the strangers. Vex hadn’t reported detecting any other signals, but that didn’t mean something else wasn’t nearby.

The man had chosen a traditional appearance for his SecondSkin, selecting faded blue jeans, a beige button-down shirt, and dark brown cowboy boots. The settings for his head were traditional as well. He forwent the need to camouflage himself and projected a rugged face, tanned, lined, and with just a bit of beard and mustache stubble. The hair mod he used was convincing. The tanish-golden mane he’d selected was long and the sensors in the mask responded well to outer stimuli, the strands of video hair buffeting in the wind that passed by.

“We mean no harm,” the man said warily. “We didn’t think anyone was in this hub. We were just looking for slivers. We’ll leave.” He stopped suddenly, his breath hitching as he swallowed audibly.

“Do not worry,” Vex said, trying to calm the man down as he clipped his blasters back to his belt. “You’re in no danger with us.” A clicking sound from behind told Vex that Aaron had holstered his weapon as well.

Slowly, Aaron came out from behind Vex just as the man’s two children peeked out from behind him, one on either side. The kids’ suits were similar to their fathers in that they projected classic clothing, the little girl with a white summery dress decorated with small pink flowers and boy projecting blue jeans and a red plaid flannel shirt. The faces on their masks must have been authentic. Their eyes matched their father’s.

“My name’s Keith Henderson. You already sort of met Kyla,” he said, nodding at his daughter who smiled shyly at the strangers. “This is my boy Kevyn.”

The boy, with his head cast slightly downward, looked up from under his brows as he slid back behind his father.

Aaron stepped forward and shook Keith’s hand. “Nice to meet you. You from around here?”

“No, we’re originally from the Orion cluster.”

“That’s over 800 kilometers. Did you walk all this way?” Vex asked.

Keith shook his head. “No, when this all started we had a hovercraft, but it didn’t last too long. After the Exodus, B-class slivers were in short supply. We found a few in some of the abandoned vehicles in and around our cluster, so we had a little energy stockpile, but it didn’t last long enough. We abandoned the car a while back. We had to scale down because we knew finding more slivers that size was going to get harder and harder. At some point it just made more sense to travel light.”

Aaron could hear the weariness in Keith’s voice. No mention was made of Kyla and Kevyn’s mother. He didn’t ask.

“We were looking for slivers, too,” Aaron said. “Did you have any luck?”

Keith smiled ruefully. “You beat us here, I think. We just started with unit L back there. It was picked clean.” He looked down at his kids and put his arms around them, smiling.

“We’re going to push on.”

Vex opened the direct voice channel to Aaron again. “Do you have any slivers? Either tech or nutrition?”

“Yeah, I found a few when I first got here but I...”

“How many?” Vex interrupted.

Aaron thought for a second before answering. “I don’t remember exactly. I’d just found the last two when you showed up. How come?”

“Give them to this family.”

“Now wait just a second. I need these, too,” Aaron protested. Keith seemed lost in thought and was unaware of the conversation happening right in front of him.

“Give them to this family,” Vex said again.

Aaron had a feeling that Vex was going to keep repeating that same sentence over and over until he gave in. Frustrated and grumbling, he swung his backpack around and plopped it on the reddish soil at his feet. He unzipped the main compartment of the pack and took out his sliver box. Pressing his right thumb on the sensor, the locked box detected his fingerprint through the suit and popped open.

The interior had rows of slots designed to hold D Class slivers, both tech and nutrition. Reluctantly, angry at Vex for being so bloody insistent, Aaron pulled the small rectangular chips from the box one at a time. The thin, lightweight metal slivers were several centimeters long, a few centimeters wide, and a quarter of a centimeter thick. Spent slivers were easy to spot. They weighed slightly less than their charged counterparts and their ends were punctured. Aaron groaned inwardly at what he was surrendering - three carb slivers, two protein slivers, a vitamin sliver, and two Class D tech slivers for charging SecondSkins and other small devices. It almost caused Aaron physical pain to hand the treasure over to Keith and his kids.

“Here. Take these.”

Keith's eyes went wide. “No, we couldn’t take those. We’ll be fine. I’m sure we’ll find more at the next hub.”

Aaron looked quickly back at Vex. “They really don’t want to take them, Vex. Maybe we should...”

Before Aaron could finish his thought, Vex snatched the slivers from his palm, took Keith’s hand in his own, and gave the stranger the invaluable supplies.

“You need these more than we do right now. Take them. They’ll help you.” Vex did a quick bioscan of the three humans. He reached into Keith’s still-open palm and plucked the carb sliver from the pile. “Give this one to Kevyn now. He could use the energy.”

Without even questioning the simulated human, Keith turned and leaned down to his son. “Turn around, buddy.”

Dutifully, Kevyn turned and gave his father access to the sliver sleeve at the base of his neck. Keith pressed his thumb to his son’s SecondSkin and a small compartment raised up from the energized suit fibers. A small slot opened at the top of the compartment. Once inserted, the suit sealed itself off around the sliver and the concentrated carbohydrates were electrified, expanded, and distributed into the vast system of tubules that ran throughout the SecondSkin. Millions of microneedles projected and plunged into Kevyn’s skin.

“Here come the itchies,” Kevyn’s dad said as he smiled at his son.

Even though he couldn’t feel it through his suit, Kevyn scratched along his arms. “It *is* itchy, Daddy!”

“That’s good, Kev. The itchies mean it’s working.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” Keith said as he turned back to Vex and Aaron. “We haven’t been very lucky in the last few hubs and these slivers will help us out a lot. I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s okay,” Aaron said. “Glad we could help.” He shot Vex a look that the sim wouldn’t be able to see, but the scowl made him feel a little better. “Where are you going next?”

Keith nodded back in the direction from which they’d come. “We’re going to keep heading south. We came from the north and it seems like those areas cleared out first and fast when the Exodus happened.”

Every time someone said the word *Exodus*, it was like death’s shadow passed overhead. The ominous silent moment held in the air a second longer before Aaron filled the void.

“We’re heading west. We wish you all good luck in the next village.”

“Same to you,” Keith said.

Vex and Aaron watched Keith, Kyla, and Kevyn as they headed south out of the hub, the children’s hands clutched in their father’s. As they got smaller and smaller, Vex spoke.

“There is something wrong with Kevyn. He’s running a fever. I don’t have the ability to do hospital-grade scans, but I can tell there is a problem. His temperature was 40 Celsius.”

“Then I am glad we gave them what we had,” Aaron said as he continued to watch. Vex’s head turned to face Aaron.

“There’s more. Kyla and Keith’s suits aren’t charging properly any more. Their piezofibers are damaged. The suits are no longer self-sustaining. Without a steady supply of Class D slivers to keep their SecondSkins charged, those two won’t live much longer.”

Aaron continued to watch quietly for a moment as the three strangers disappeared behind a ridge. He turned to look at Vex.

“Why didn’t you tell them?”

“It’s a part of my programming that has developed since I was elevated to level seven. The new protocol for dealing with situations like these is to not tell the humans that their situation is dire if nothing can be done to avert the crisis. Telling Keith what I knew would serve no purpose other than to worry him more.”

It seemed unfair to Aaron that Vex should hold on to such information, but it did not seem unwise. It seemed like the line between life and death was growing thinner all the time.

“Come on. It’s getting late. Let’s get out of here,” Aaron said, his voice heavy.

“Where are we going?”

“Home.”