Aaron and Vex walked in silence, taking one of the hovercar roads north out of Hub 2200.  Vex sensed Aaron's pensive mood through the volume and tone of his voice and elected to stay silent as they walked.  From what his former family had taught him, most humans needed silence to process troubling events.

Aaron took long, quick strides, but Vex's ocular scanning, which stretched all the way to the horizon in all directions, did not turn up anything of interest, so, with the current lack of input from his human tether, it was difficult to determine Aaron's plan.

The human abruptly turned right, stepped over the hovercraft road curb, and continued walking, east now, at a brisk pace.  Aaron turned his right wrist and stared down at it as he walked.

"Vex, I am not getting any kind of reading as far as weather goes, but I can feel the wind picking up.  Are you getting anything?"

The sim checked the heads-up display in its eye cams.

"Currently the wind is blowing steadily at 24 kph, gusting to 35.  Our region may experience a wind-related event in the next one to two hours based on current wind patterns and surface temperature.  Forecast reliability is currently at 53%."  Vex paused for only a second.  "And to anticipate your next question based on your previous concerns, no, my weather GPS unit is in no way tied to my targeting computer.  The uncertainty in the forecast comes from the number of factors involved in the wind, temperature, and surface topography of this particular region."

Aaron stopped and turned 180 degrees on his heels.

"Vex.  Did you just make a joke?"

"Yes, sir, I believe I did.  Just one more benefit of my level seven freedom."

The face on Aaron's visor broke into a wide smile.

"There's hope for you yet, Rusty," Aaron said as he turned back around and started walking again.

Scanning the area around them, Vex noticed the light tan particles of sand tumbling along the surface of the reddish-brown rocks that stretched out in every direction from east to west, north to south.  With each gust, beige waves of particles only slightly larger than dust skittered along the ground, looking like tendrils of thin smoke.  The surface of Dagon undulated with rolling hills of volcanic rock that had bubbled up when the planet was still young and then had frozen for eternity when the lava cooled.  No matter what their makeup, though, every stone on the planet was at the mercy of Dagon's scouring winds.  Surer than a laser lathe, Dagon's hot breath stripped the surface off anything it touched.

Both near and far, angular outcroppings of red rock jutted upwards, jagged and sharp, like stone knives through the planet's thin skin.  Some towered high above the landscape, their pointed peaks sticking sharp fingernails into the bellies of the clouds racing clouds above.

The clouds.  Vex scanned the sky with his ocular sensors rather than his suite of weather imagery tools, opening and closing the shutter several times to capture images for further study later.  Seeming deceptively slow when viewed from ground level, the colorful bands of sulfur and phosphorus, helium and hydrogen, ammonia and oxygen traveled in high-speed channels that screamed by at 600 kilometers per hour.  Deep brown, pearly white, blues so light and faded that they were barely detectable...the sky was a liquid tapestry always in motion, always changing, never the same.

Sensing a terrain change in his foot sensors, Vex's head snapped back to Aaron.  The human and the sim had come to a ridge that rose and fell rather sharply.  Aaron traversed the hill

purposefully and Vex followed his tether's lead.  Sitting on the back side of a stone ridge was a hovercraft.

The vehicle looked like a tool one would use for construction.  With a matte silver finish so the car didn't turn the nearby white star's rays into a lethal light weapon, its surface was devoid of even the smallest gaps or cracks, making it look for all intent and purpose like an inert block of metal.  But once the car detected Aaron's 'Skin, it hummed to life.  Jets beneath the vehicle whirred to life, emitting a deep *whump* to pop the vehicle off the ground and then settling into a rolling purr.

The hovercraft sat perfectly still half a meter off Dagon's rocky surface.  The cunningly jointed doors revealed themselves and lifted like bird wings to allow the riders to duck under them and enter.

"I'll drive," Aaron said, unclipping his rifle and pistol and sliding the pack off his back.  He dumped the items in the cargo area behind the seats as he grabbed a handle on the door over his head, plopped into the black bucket seat, and placed his hands in his lap to let the craft know he was safely inside.  Vex followed suit in the passenger seat.

"This is Skyline's latest model of the Harpy, is it not?"

"You know your cars, Vex.  Yes, indeed, this is the Harpy Excelsior," Aaron said with pride.  "I got *really* lucky while hunting at Hub1988.  This baby was sitting in an open autoport.  The people from that house left and never returned.  They were part of the Exodus."

Vex heard the catch in Aaron's voice.

"I think this vehicle suits you.  It was meant to be yours."

Aaron let out a barking laugh.  "If it was meant to be mine, I think it's a shame it took an Exodus for it to fall into my hands."  Aaron was quiet for a moment.  "But thanks for trying to change the subject."

"My pleasure.  You were not supposed to detect the shift, though.  I need to work on my subtlety."

"Don't worry," Aaron said, looking at his passenger, a warm smile on his face.  "You're doing great."

The doors dropped quickly and then stopped a centimeter before closing completely.  The rectangular black screen that spanned the entire dashboard of the vehicle came to life in the form of a soft glow emitting from the bottom of the screen like a lime-green sunrise across a black horizon.   In the center of the screen, much brighter green words appeared, zipping toward the riders from that black horizon and stopping in the foreground.

<div align="center">

Welcome to Harpy.
We drive the future.

</div>

"Mind the gaps," the hovercraft announced in a pleasant female voice.  "No interference detected.  Sealing doors now."  The car's voice was accompanied by a wavy green oscilloscope graphic on the dashboard.

As the gaps between the doors and the frame vanished, a small, solid *clunk* vibrated the seats and a quick *hiss* told the passengers that the vehicle was ready.

"Drive home," Aaron said.

"At once," the car responded.  "Would you prefer to drive or would you rather I took the wheel?"

"You drive this time."

"Affirmative."  The steering wheel in front of Aaron retracted into the dashboard and vanished.  Aaron's seat slid back and reclined to his specifications.  The car inched forward on a pocket of air, rounded the outcropping behind which it had been hidden, and approached the roadway's curb.  Detecting the nearby obstacle as the roadway, the vehicle's hoverports huffed out a gust of air and hopped the curb, landing on the roadway with a couple of soft bumping movements.

"Heading home, sir," the car said. "Estimated travel time is one hour and fourteen minutes. Sit back and relax." Aaron heard the irises on the accelerator engines open up as he felt the jolt of the car darting forward. In moments, the Harpy was shooting along the roadway with dust plumes swirling up from the roadbed behind it.

Now underway and with the stress and tension of the last hour and a half gone, Aaron suddenly realized that he was exhausted. His eyelids were sandbags and he couldn't keep them open. He yawned and stretched his arms and legs.

"Vex, I am beat. Do you mind if I get a little sleep on the way home?"

"Not at all. If you don't mind, I am going to do a partial reset to see if I can get some of my systems that are below optimal levels up to a more satisfactory level."

"Then it's settled. Nap time it is," Aaron said, his words blurred and slurred through another yawn. In a moment, he was asleep, Vex was in a low-power wait state, and the Harpy Excelsior was headed north, taking its two passengers home.

* * * * *

A series of three tones from the Harpy's notification system sliced Aaron's dream in half and jolted Vex from the final stages of his system's reset.

"Destination approaching in five minutes, sir," the voice said in a placid tone. "Would you like me to activate the house's 'welcome home' routine?"

Trying to wipe the cobwebs away, Aaron shook his head. "No, Car, thank you. We'd like to come in dark tonight."

A pause between the user and the interface. Long and short all at once.

"Since this is the fifteenth consecutive time that you have requested to arrive to a dark home setting, would you like this to be the default setting, sir?"

Vex looked to Aaron. Aaron's head never turned - the face in the driver's seat sat still, stoic, facing the onrushing roadway.

"Yes, please. Make darkness the default home setting."

A tiny *hishing* sound, almost imperceptible, leaked through the Harpy's invisible joints, a sound derived from the car's hoverports and mingled with the quick, sandy swirl of Dagon's dust and sediment being drawn into the vehicle's intake valves. The passengers rode in silence as their destination approached.

Although the sun was setting for the second time that day, there was still enough light to see the hub getting larger in the windshield. The blue-white star making its way quickly toward a distant red mountain range threw a very muted white light across the landscape. Squat, squarish, prefabbed houses protruded from the ground like rows of misaligned teeth jutting from dusty red gums.

Around the perimeter of the town stood tall steel towers, each one topped with large square solar panels that looked like mechanical butterflies in mid-flight. The undersides of the wings were a series of tubes and wires that stored and amplified the captured energy to form the hub's invisible force field, a transparent dome that incinerated any projectiles hurled from space and that acted as a dam to divert Dagon's wild winds around the habitations. Smaller versions of those same towers flanked every hoverway and every rail passage.

"Now arriving home," the Harpy announced as the hovercraft decelerated aggressively but not uncomfortably. "Approaching final destination, Ursa Major Cluster, Hub 9400, Unit D."

The vehicle's windshield showed a faint glowing dome over H9400's buildings superimposed against Dagon's landscape, the indicator that the force generator was doing its job. The Harpy passed through the barrier effortlessly as its disrupter field opened a hole in the force generator's field. Like a drop of water into a puddle, the vehicle and passengers slipped inside H9400's protective bubble.

Vex's scanners detected nothing moving in the hub but their own vehicle as it slid on its cushion of air. The hovercraft's headlight bar emitted a plane of high-intensity light that lit the prefabs momentarily and threw long, elastic shadows across the hoverway and between the buildings and even

against some stone pillars and ridges beyond the town's borders, making the stones look like the legs of huge rock beasts stalking the evening landscape.

The light finally illuminated a "D" on one house. From an area directly next to the prefab, a panel raised up from the ground spilling the accumulation of dust and grit that had settled upon it in the time that Aaron had been gone. The portal revealed a downward sloping car passage.

"Parking sequence engaged," the car announced.

Slowing to a stop just in front of the portal, the Harpy turned 180 degrees and then it backed into the portal. Lights along the carport's floor and ceiling glowed to life as hard dark fell outside across this part of Dagon's surface. The carport ramp closed and mechanical gears clunked into place to lock the door.

With a hiss, the Harpy's doors released, the wings folded up, and Aaron and Vex left the vehicle and headed inside Unit D.

Aaron walked through the unit passing from one small but comfortable room to the next, each room coming to life with a soft glow near the ceiling, one room in rose red, one in sky blue, and another in muted white.

"Let's go to the study. It's the biggest room in the house."

Vex measured the room with his eyes and found it to be thirty meters on each side with a three-meter-tall ceiling. A square table-like piece of furniture sat directly in the center of the room. Two L-shaped couches sat around the table.

"Sit," Aaron commanded, pointing to one of the couches. Vex did as he was told. He sank a little into the soft cushions. His back was perfectly straight. His hands were on his knees. He stared at Aaron, waiting.

Aaron approached the couch, spun on one foot, and fell backwards onto the cushions, sighing loudly as he stretched his arms out over his head as far as he could. He yawned and then he looked over at Vex and started laughing.

"At ease, Rusty. We're off duty now."

Vex tilted his head slightly, a gesture he'd picked up from humans once level seven had been unlocked.

"It means you should relax and make yourself comfortable, like I am."

The simulated human looked at his tether's posture and then at his own to analyze the two positions.

"Since I don't feel comfort, consider this my most comfortable position."

"Suit yourself, Vex." Aaron sat up and reached a hand toward the square table. A drawer slid out when it detected Aaron's SecondSkin. The open drawer revealed a series of slots, most of which were occupied by slivers. Vex watched Aaron pull out two slivers, a standard protein sliver and a standard carbohydrate sliver, both infused with appetite suppressants. Uttering a subvocalized command, Aaron opened the sliver port in his forearm, inserted the two nutrition supplements side by side, and watched the suit swallow them. A moment later the port opened on its own, and the two spent casings slid partially out. Aaron plucked them from his suit and placed them in a different section of the drawer where other spent slivers resided.

After that, a silence settled on the room. Aaron looked across the table at Vex's face. The sim's SecondSkin face was a combination of many different races. The robot's skin appeared to be off-white with just a hint of pale, pale blue. His nose was slender and was set between two almond-shaped eyes, eyes that had no pupils or irises. Although the eyes were a monochrome cobalt blue, they still looked somehow warm, somehow intelligent.

"Is that what your face really looks like? Beneath the skin?"

The sim nodded. "Yes, this is my actual face."

Aaron paused and tilted his head slightly. "Do you ever change the face on your 'Skin? I mean, do you ever see a need to look different than you actually look?"

Vex considered the question for a moment.  "No, I have never seen a need to alter my appearance."  He paused.  "Should I consider changing my appearance?  Do you find my face displeasing in some way?"

Aaron smiled, but it wasn't a humorous smile, Vex could tell.  This was one of the expressions that humans displayed from time to time that he had a difficult time interpreting.  "No, Vex, you have a very nice face.  I am sure all of the other sims would love to have your face."

"All of the other sims *do* have my face.  At least the ones that came from the Protosystems labs do."

Aaron laughed a genuinely humorous laugh, and Vex felt like he was on more stable ground again, but Aaron's biometrics were in flux.  Heart rate was up.  Pulse was climbing.  Blood pressure spiked.  He wasn't sure what to do next, so he waited.

"I h-haven't been honest with you, Vex," Aaron stumbled.  He gesticulated as though the hand and arm movements in front of him might somehow drag the words out.  "It's just been so long since I have seen anyone and it's been so long since I've seen my family that I...I…"

Vex could hear and sense Aaron's crying, but his 'Skin's face disappeared and went opaque, just like when they first met in the street pointing rifles at one another.  After several long moments where the human tried to end its crying, the faceplate changed again, but what appeared was not what Vex expected.

The face across from him belonged to a teenage girl.

She had reddish-brown hair that fell in waves over her shoulders.  The color was not dissimilar from much of the rock and dust on Dagon.  Her expressive round eyes were dark brown, dark enough that it was difficult to tell where the iris stopped and pupil began.  Vex had the idea that her real eyes were probably more bloodshot than the ones she projected now, but he had an idea of why she didn't want him to see her real eyes.

"My real name is *Erin*, not *Aaron*."  Vex heard the quavering in her voice and he thought she might start crying again, but she pushed on.  "Let me start at the beginning…"