

Although Vex technically couldn't feel the sensation of surprise, he determined that the quick rerouting that he had to do to assimilate this new information into his existing schema would have been felt as *surprise* to a human. All of his existing files on the subject of "Aaron" had been quickly gathered and placed into subfiles that fell under the new main heading of "Erin." He prepped his sensors for quite an influx of new data under that designation.

Across from him, Erin reached toward the table unit, her palm down, fingers pointed up slightly. A holographic tablet, transparent green and with glowing edges, appeared beneath her hand. Erin pressed virtual buttons and made swiping gestures, but Vex could not see what she was doing. She looked up just as the whole room dissolved into darkness. A moment later, the entire area was transformed into a rich virtual environment. On all sides and in such impressive detail that Vex had to use his sensors to confirm that he had not really been transported to a distant world, the room turned into a scene that must have come from the vast collection of Earth media loaded into the brain of each house.

Erin and Vex now sat in awkward, lightweight chairs made of a crude silvery metal. Between the criss-crossed frame posts were strung seats and backrests made from plastic fibers. The chairs sat upon a bed of rubble of some kind of earthen stone...granite seemed a likely candidate. Flowing behind him and winding gracefully back and forth was a brook of clear water. The stone riverbed made the water's surface ripple and whisper. Where the center console had been in the house a moment ago there was now a small fire dancing up from a pile of logs. Thin white smoke drifted up into the windless air. A log in the fire *popped*, the whole stack of burning wood shifted, and a twisting column of sparks swirled upwards, the embers flaring orange and then winking out of existence as they cooled. Tall evergreen trees lined the river's edge, their pointed heads holding up the sky. Beyond the evergreens off in the distance, Vex saw a rocky mountain range rising and falling. The sky, a darkening shade of blue, was a patchwork of tattered gray clouds whose undersides glowed with a rich orange and dark magenta glow. A yellow sun was moments from disappearing behind a black rock peak.

Erin looked around, her face melting into an easy smile. In this simulation, her SecondSkin was gone, replaced with traditional Earth clothing - faded blue jeans, brown hiking boots, an off-white shirt beneath a red-checkered, long-sleeved flannel shirt. She looked up at the sky and took a deep breath. Vex's sensors picked up on the room's odorphonics: pine, water, wood smoke. As Erin exhaled loudly and breathed in a second deep lungful of the scents, all of her biometrics dropped to nearly-normal levels. She spoke as she continued to look up at the clouds passing overhead.

"This is a place called Glacier National Park. I came across it one day while looking for a new Earth environment to try out. It was located in a place called the United States of America in the state of Montana." As Erin looked at the little stream and the pine trees, a strange chirping sound started. To Vex, the chirping had the same urgency that some of his sensors did when they alerted him to a system error. He must have looked confused because Erin held her hand out toward Vex and in her palm appeared a wireframe model of an insectoid creature. The tiny beast rotated and Vex noticed the long, oddly-shaped legs toward its back end.

"They're called crickets," Erin said, smiling.

Vex looked at the model in her hand and then listened to the sounds coming from all around them.

"Are they malfunctioning?"

Erin laughed hard as she closed her hand and the image disappeared. “No, silly. That’s the sound they make. I guess it’s how they talk to each other.”

Vex considered that. “It must be a difficult language to understand. I have no files on that species.”

“I don’t even think scientists on Earth know what those sounds mean.”

They both stared at the fire. The flames crackled. The clouds drifted. The stream flowed.

“It’s easier to travel as a male rather than a female,” Erin said suddenly, looking at Vex. “Early on I tried to be myself, but I learned quickly that there are a lot of not-very-nice people on this planet.” She looked back into the fire. “I decided it was better to pretend to be a boy instead of a girl to discourage any other idiots from bothering me.”

“I understand. I have heard of incidents like the one you are talking about.”

She leaned over, picked up a virtual stone, and threw it into the small river with a plop.

“I’m sorry I cried. I try not to do that too often.”

“Why do you feel that you need to apologize for crying?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess that when humans cry around other humans, it makes them uncomfortable. It can be kind of an emotional burden on them.”

“I am not human, though. You don’t need to worry about burdening me. I am here to serve you.” Vex paused. “I think you will find that I am a good listener.”

Even though the Erin sitting with him was a projection, the virtual human before him behaved in exactly the way the real human did, too. Vex saw a single tear trickling down her cheek.

“I think that’s why I apologized. I can already tell that you *are* a good listener.”

Vex paused for a moment. “I have to admit something to you, Erin.”

She looked at him and nodded, her face earnest.

“I am not sure what ‘being a good listener’ is. Since my promotion to level seven, I have access to new protocols, but some of them are very nuanced and I don’t understand which situations call for which actions. I could tell that the pattern of our conversation called for that phrase, but I don’t understand why. Although I just claimed to be good at listening, I don’t think my auditory receptors are more acute than any other sim’s...or any other humans, for that matter.”

Erin laughed. “You know, Vex, even though this whole situation sucks, I’m really glad that we ran into each other. I already enjoy having you around.”

Vex smiled. “I enjoy your company, too, Erin. Since my family vanished, I have come to realize the importance of humans in my life.” A thousand memories etched into Vex’s circuits flashed by in a quarter of a second. He thought about the critical moments in his development when his evolution level was stepped up and his humans had helped him develop into a more human-like sim. “I had only been L7 for twenty-five days before...” He paused.

Erin smiled sadly. “You can say it.”

“...the Exodus. After each elevation event, Dr. Sandy provided context for many of my new protocols to help me understand when to use them.”

“Dr. Sandy?”

“Dr. Sandra Ferrence. She was the matriarch of my previous family and a professor of artificial intelligence and humanistics at Dagon Univeristy’s eastern campus.”

“So she was the one who coached you through those transitions?”

“Yes. Without her help, many of my new abilities would have been of no use to me.”

“Well, I think I can help you with some of that stuff,” Erin said. “So, being a good listener...” Erin paused. “Humans are pretty self-centered. I don’t think we mean to be, but we’re more worried about what is happening with ourselves than we are with what’s happening to others around us. I think it’s kind of an evolutionary thing...like we need to be more concerned about ourselves as a survival instinct.”

Vex nodded his head, his cobalt blue eyes intense as he listened.

“When someone calls you a good listener, it’s a compliment. It means that you are willing and able to stop thinking about yourself and you can be more concerned about someone else for a while.” Erin paused. “Does that make any sense?”

Vex nodded again. “It does. The additional context helps a great deal. Now I can state with confidence that I am indeed a good listener since I am genuinely more concerned about your well-being than I am about mine. It is literally part of my programming. You can confide in me about anything you would like to and it will cause me no mental anguish at all...since I am not programmed to feel mental anguish.”

Erin smiled. “I am glad I can help with your development. And I am indeed going to confide in you when I need to.” Erin picked up a thin branch that had been sitting beside her chair. She held it in the fire until its tip was alight. She pulled the stick from the flames and in the air before her face, she used the fiery stick to write her name in a fancy script, drawing a little star in place of the dot above the ‘i’ in her name. “Tell me more about your previous family, Vex.”

“Dr. Sandy was married to Dr. Timothy Ferrence, or Dr. Tim. He also worked at Dagon University. His focus was robotic engineering. He actually developed several of my components.”

Erin raised an eyebrow. “Really? That’s pretty amazing.”

“Yes. For humans, the Ferrences were very intelligent.”

“For humans?” Erin smiled.

“What I mean by that is that sims have a lot of knowledge built into our electronic brains, and when the global network is functioning, we have access to almost every fact that humans have ever gathered. But human intelligence is different. What is unique about human thought is that humans can take facts and combine them in ways that lead to new knowledge. So far, sims can’t do that, so it was interesting to watch the Ferrences when they worked together to innovate. They displayed impressive intelligence...for humans.”

Vex looked around and noticed that although the clouds continued to move and shift and their colors flared and faded, the sun never moved.

“I love sunsets,” Erin said in response to the question the sim never asked. “In my world, the sun never really sets.” She winked at Vex. “Did the Ferrences have any children?”

“Yes,” Vex nodded, “a 13-year-old girl named Victoria. Although she was young, I think she may have been more intelligent than both of her parents. She displayed talent equal to theirs when learning information from both of her parents’ disciplines. Victoria helped to shape my L7 protocols, too.”

Erin’s face was emotionless as she listened to Vex talk. She looked down into her lap. “I try not to think about my family,” she said slowly. When she looked up, her eyes were shining, wet, but she wasn’t actually crying. “It’s hard to explain, but when humans think about things

that mean a lot to them, things that they care about but that they have lost, the memories can cause physical pain.”

“Physical pain? Like an injury?”

“Yes, sort of like an injury. I don’t know how to explain it. Humans get weird feelings inside that come from thoughts. We can feel a heaviness in our chests. We can get headaches. We can get stomach aches.” Erin looked at Vex and smiled but he could detect sadness in the smile. “We try to avoid memories that cause us pain. Sometimes it’s better to pretend those feelings don’t exist rather than having to face them.”

“It must be difficult to be human,” Vex said. “I don’t want you to feel physical pain from your memories, Erin, but I would like to remind you that we have established that I am a good listener.”

Erin took a tortured moment then spoke. “My father Emmett and my mother Patty both worked for the maintenance branch of the Department of Technology. That is how they met.” She thought about her father, a short, stout man with an impish grin that rarely left his face. Through his ‘Skin she could see that he had thick fingers, strong fingers even when they weren’t aided by the SecondSkin’s strength enhancers. But those powerful fingers were incredibly agile, too. When she sat next to him and watched him fix a generator field, she was always impressed with the deftness of his movements, with the precision with which he wielded a circuit etcher or a microwelder. What she loved most was to watch him when he was creating something new or solving a complex problem. He’d hold a field induction unit or contemplate a hovercraft repulsor iris before him and not only turn it over in his hands, but she could see him turning it over in his mind, too, thinking about the possibilities.

“My mother was in the scheduling department and she was in charge of passing the maintenance orders on to the various teams. Since my father was the lead maintenance manager in his sector, he spoke to my mom a lot. That’s how they got to know each other.”

Vex nodded and smiled. As Erin spoke, she made a few gestures with her hands and Glacier National Park dissolved. Once again they sat in the study of Unit D of H9400. The walls glowed. The first color was a deep green, much like the evergreen needles in the park they had just departed. The colors twisted and swirled with a slow fluidity like tendrils of smoke trapped in glass. Green gave way to red which yielded to violet which succumbed to burnt yellow.

“When my father decided that he wanted to ask my mother out, he unplugged the sensors in her hovercar’s dashboard.” Erin smiled. “He had to time it just right so that he was still at her office when she needed his help. Emmett Demarco just *happened* to be in the carport when Patty’s hovercar wouldn’t start. He came to the rescue.” Erin paused. Her eyes were looking at the console on the central unit between them but she seemed to be looking into the past.

“Do you have any siblings?”

Erin’s back stiffened at Vex’s question. Her eyes locked on the sim’s face. In the days before the Exodus, that was a question no one asked. After a moment, Erin realized there was nothing to fear. No government was in place to hear her answer. No surveillance machines recorded her response.

“I do. A brother and a sister.”

“*Three* children?” Vex inquired, his voice climbing a tone register.

“As far as Polaris knew, they thought there was only one child - me.”

Vex leaned his head to the side slightly. “How did your family get around the single-child limitation?”

“The same way every other family did. By ordering extra ‘Skins.’ Erin remembered her parents being concerned about ordering extra SecondSkins, but it was easy enough to do. Requesting new ‘Skins to accommodate a child’s growth or to have as a backup in case a suit was damaged was not terribly uncommon. Erin had known of other families that had done the same thing. Hers was not the only family that had circumvented the one-child rule, but they were definitely in the minority. She didn’t know how many families had done the same thing across Dagon, but she imagined that there were probably many families like hers.

Erin pulled up the virtual control panel in the center of the console again. She tapped a few keys and an image appeared - a group of five people.

“Mom, Dad, and me you can probably figure out,” she said. “That’s Benny on the left and Sonia on the right.”

Benny was taller than Sonia, but not by much - ten centimeters at most. Both of Erin’s siblings shared similarities with their parents’ ‘Skin faces - same round eyes, same slightly crooked smiles. Vex made a copy of the image.

“Benny was eleven, Sonia nine. But that was how long ago?”

“One year, six months, fifteen days, and just over nine hours ago,” Vex said after consulting his Exodus clock.

“A year and a half,” Erin said slowly, dreamily. “A year and a half.” She stared at her family for a second longer before dissolving the image.

Vex watched Erin’s face harden. Her jaw beneath her SecondSkin flexed and bulged. She swallowed hard.

“But that time is over and done now. They can’t help us, can they?” she said abruptly. Erin changed the room again. The color-shifting walls dissolved into a muted white. “We only have one question to worry about, Vex, and that question is, what do we do now?”