

Before Vex had a chance to answer Erin's question about their next steps, the atmospheric sensors in both his 'Skin and Erin's pinged.

"Dust storm imminent," the pleasant, passive voice stated. "Expect intermittent or interrupted communications during this event. All persons should remain indoors during this event to avoid harm in the event that there is a hub field generator interruption or malfunction. Travel is discouraged. If travel is absolutely necessary, please consult the latest transportation field generation status grids to ensure safe transport between destinations. The current dust event will have an approximate duration of 38 minutes. Seek shelter immediately."

"I'm sorry I could not provide more warning about this event," Vex said. "Without the aid of the planetary network, my onboard sensors alone do not have the range to detect the arrival of an event like this."

"Don't worry," Erin said as she got up off the couch. "We were already home and safe. It's not a big deal." She headed toward the front of the house, the side that faced the street they traveled when they arrived at H9400. "The sun is coming up. Let's see what this storm looks like from outside."

"I would strongly advise against that. I do not want to alarm you, but field generator malfunctions are becoming more commonplace."

Vex was behind Erin who was striding toward the first of two doors that led outside the house. She almost bounced as she walked.

"Yes, Rusty, I know that you have to protect your tether and all of that, but I also know that you have to go along with my wishes even when they contradict your directives." She stopped suddenly right before she arrived at the first door and spun to look up at Vex's face. "I've got that right, don't I?"

Vex paused. "Yes, you do have that correct. I can only give my advice. I cannot hold you against your will even when your poor choices could lead to pain, misery, or even your utter destruction."

Erin's eyes widened in surprise. "Geez, Vex, don't you think you're laying the guilt trip on a little thick?"

Vex paused for the briefest of moments which Erin was learning meant that the sim was processing conflicting information. If she had had someone to bet with, Erin was certain it was an L7 logic problem.

"I am not certain what you mean by a guilt trip," the sim stated. "The tactic I was implementing was passive aggression. Were you moved by my passive aggression enough to reconsider your plan to journey outside?"

Erin tried not to smile, but she couldn't help herself. For all of his intelligence and his amazing technology, Vex was similar to a robotic five-year-old.

"No, Vex, I am still planning on going outside." She crossed her arms as she stared into the sim's face.

He paused again. "Feedback is very helpful as I navigate my new L7 status. Can you please tell me, was my passive aggression well executed or were there other words I should have employed to have exerted maximum influence on you?"

"Oh, yes, it was very effective," Erin said, "but my mom had used that technique on me every day of my life since I was old enough to speak and listen. I think if you were tethered to someone else who did not have such a rich and robust background with passive aggression, you

would have been very influential.” Still staring at Vex as the silence of the moment dragged on, she said, “So, are you coming outside with me or what?”

She didn’t wait for an answer. Erin waved her hand before a panel that glowed green for a moment. The field generator door lost its bluish hue and dissolved when she passed through the portal. A quick sucking sound issued from the small hallway between the two doors as the door rematerialized and the airlock completed the vacuum sequence in just under two seconds. With the interior of the hub safe from the environment outside, the front door also dissolved at Erin’s hand wave.

Vex fell in quickly behind his human tether, passing through the airlock and then out the front door just behind Erin. Adjusting her SecondSkin’s face mask readout using nothing but her retinas, she quickly “clicked” on several menus and shut off all of the false-color sensor data in her head’s up display. The visor was set to TruView and Erin stared out at Dagon as it actually appeared when its land and sky were not being interpreted by a whole suite of SecondSkin computer software.

The horizon to the east was glowing brighter than it was in any other direction, but the Dagon sunrise was eclipsed by a towering, rolling cloud of red-brown dust. This was no small cloud - it was a mountain range of particles, sharp slivers of sheared rock and wind driven pellets that could do massive damage to anything they contacted. From a distance, it looked slow and harmless. But from a distance, many things on Dagon looked harmless. When conditions were just right, heat-excited wind currents sluiced between the mountain ranges and poured into rock canyons and valleys like an invading army, gathering speed and mass as more particles were enlisted for the assault. The top of this hot column of wind and stone rose to a height that topped out just beneath the tumultuous cloud bands that were the constant blanket enshrouding Dagon’s surface.

Erin walked quickly across the roadway toward the edge of H9400’s field generator boundary that faced the incoming storm. She reached her hands out in front of her and strode forward toward the invisible field. When the barrier sensed her presence at ten meters, it emitted a dim white light, a safety feature to let people know they were nearing the field. The field’s white light grew in intensity the nearer she got. She reached the electronic boundary and placed her hands against it. The field, which was as firm as the ground upon which she was standing, traced her hands in white light that shimmered slightly. She smiled as she dragged her hands left and right, her gloved fingers leaving trails in the field that faded after a moment.

“Ever experienced one of these storms up close, Vex?” Erin asked as her robotic companion took up a place just behind her right shoulder.

“No, I have not, and I would strongly advise you against doing it, too.”

The cloud billowed and ebbed as it loomed over H9400, blotting out the weak sunlight that was supposed to be a Dagon sunrise. Erin watched as the first dust particles impacted the field generator which, using a combination of heat and high-frequency sonic vibrations, vaporized the particles, creating the tiniest pinpoint flairs in the boundary that stood between this human hub and utter destruction. The first flairs lit up here and there, spreading all across the energy dome protecting the habitation. White sparkles glittered and danced. Erin smiled. She looked around, wide-eyed, at the spectacle before her. Quickly, the number and frequency of dust particles impacting the dome ramped up, and the occasional flairs became a web of dancing white light.

And then, the storm was fully upon them.

Amid the tiny flashes of dust particles, larger flashes appeared, rocks and wind-driven lances of sharpened stone. Looking across the entirety of H9400, the hub's field generator was easy to see since every part of the force field was engaged in fighting off the latest environmental assault from this rocky, windy, violent planet. The glowing, sparkling field crackled in the SecondSkins' auditory monitors and came across as a whooshing static, one that Vex and Erin had to shout over since their suits could not separate the voice and storm sounds and adjust their levels.

"Erin, I have to insist that we move indoors!" Vex's voice boomed into her headset. "This storm is particularly intense!" He pleaded, another technique his L7 status afforded him.

She spun on Vex, her face pinched and tense and angry. "I don't *want* to go inside, Vex! Do you hear me? I don't *want* to go inside!"

The storm continued to increase in ferocity. The energy dome was almost a constant blazing white light. Flashes of intense brightness flared, some so bright that they may have been particles the size of a human's fist. Even when it seemed like the intensity could not increase any more, the dome brightened, the number of flashes increased and intensified.

Vex was at a loss. His novice L7 status had not prepared him for a situation like this, for a scenario where he was tethered to a human that was resistant to all logic and reason. His human-relations routines and subroutines cycled in concert with his field generator status software and he suddenly detected an anomaly in the field generator. It was unclear what was causing the problem, but the cause did not matter. The result was going to be the same. There was a better than 17% chance that the field generator sub-unit only 120 meters to their northeast, unit RB451, was going to fail. If that link went down, then the entire dome protecting H9400 would come undone. Every dwelling, every human, and every sim would be at Dagon's mercy.

Vex weighed the various options coded into his programming in dealing with a situation like this, and he found that he had more than thirty possible avenues to address his tether's reluctance to seek shelter. His core processing computer worked and reworked scenario after scenario to try to determine the best approach to adopt under these conditions, but the models for probable outcomes were unclear and even the best possible result was no better than a 47% success rate.

Before his graduations through the various evolution levels, decision-making had been a fast, straightforward process. At L7, a sim's highest level of analytic functioning, the level that brought him as close to having human thought as a simulated human could be, he no longer had only three possible options in any given situation. He now had twenty options, or thirty. And when those dozens of options had to be weighed against even more options as circumstances changed and unfolded, Vex came to a conclusion. Being human was *really* hard.

Finally, he blurted out, "*Why* don't you want to go inside?!"

The question seemed to hit Erin like a hammer blow to her stomach. She folded in half as though some invisible force had crushed her just above her hips. Vex tried to be patient while grief gripped Erin and she once again sobbed uncontrollably.

Unit RB451 weakened again as the storm, somehow, increased in intensity. The probability of the faulty unit's failure rate climbed to 22.7%. The entire field above H9400 was a boiling mass of intense white light. It throbbed with intensity. And yet, Vex's tether was crumpled on the ground, her head touched to her knees, her hands clasped to the back of her neck as she rocked forward and back, forward and back.

Vex waited. He had another conundrum. Erin's situation was growing dire whether she knew it or not. There was almost a 25% chance that her life could end at any moment. While his L7 programming stated that he should not unnecessarily upset humans if he could avoid it, his protocols also allowed him to use mental stress to provoke a decision in a human that would force them to preserve themselves. As RB451 continued to weaken due to the storm's battering, Vex decided that he had to warn Erin to bring her out of her current helpless state.

Suddenly, she lifted her head while still sitting on her knees. Her mask was opaque but the grief was clear in her voice.

"I don't want to go inside because *I don't care if I die, Vex!*" she screamed. "They *left us!* They all *left us* and they didn't care what happened to us!"

Erin shrieked so loudly and inarticulately that, for a moment, all Vex could detect in his auditory receptors was the young girl's wailing. He sensed that this would not be a conversation that ended with a quick and satisfying conclusion for Erin. He had to goad her into action.

"I understand what you are saying and I am a good listener, but I have to tell you that the field generator unit right over there," he pointed to the faulty unit in question, "is failing quickly. There is a good chance that its demise will lead to a systemic shield collapse. We need to get inside *now.*"

Again, human reaction baffled Vex. Erin ran *toward* RB451, not away from it. While the storm seemed to be slackening in intensity, RB451 appeared to have been mortally wounded and it didn't seem like it would survive the battle. In an otherwise solid suit of electronic armor, there was one chink. And Erin ran toward it.

"I hope the shield *does* fail, Vex! I can't take this any more!" She ran to the broken sub-unit in the generator field and started pounding on the rectangular base with her balled up fists. Little jagged lines of arcing electricity played back and forth across the butterfly wings of the generator, but Erin either didn't see the malfunction taking place above her or she chose to ignore it. "I don't *want* to look for slivers! I don't *want* to search dead hubs to pick the flesh from their bones! *I want to stop thinking about why all of us on this bloody planet were not worth saving when the rockets all left!*"

At that moment, several things happened at once.

RB451 died. Its electronic signature went offline, as did its ability to put in place a force field that protected Hub 9400.

Vex clamped his hand on the back of Erin's neck and issued a concussive bolt from his 'Skin through Erin's suit, rendering her helpless.

Even before she had slumped to the ground, Vex caught her limp form and cradled her to his metallic chest as he sprinted toward their home, toward Unit D.

The dust storm, weakened but still formidable, poured into the broken shell of H9400's protective barrier, its shards spearing the landscape, its dust burying the hub alive in quick, sudden drifts.

And then Dagon grew quiet.