

For a moment, Erin thought she had gotten her wish.

She thought she was dead.

She felt her eyelids open...the signal had been sent from her brain and she thought she sensed the thin veils rising...but her world was still black. And then another horrific thought lanced through her mind. What if she actually *was* dead? What if the end had come and she had ended the misery that was a lonely life on Dagon, *but she was still aware?* Now, even worse than life on Dagon, she was confined to a world of endless, feelingless, movement-less eternity.

As she considered millennia in this condition, a familiar voice filled her ears.

“Erin? Are you conscious?” a synthetic but very comforting voice asked.

“Vex,” she sighed. “I am awake, but my eyes don’t work,” she said, slowly, and with great difficulty.

“I’m sorry about taking your visual sensing apparatus offline, but I was not certain about the trauma you suffered during the sandstorm and I was running some diagnostics.”

She heard Vex shuffling around for a moment, and then her sight came back. She was flat on her back, and suddenly a jet-black sky came into view above her, illuminated with innumerable glittering stars. Nearby, a campfire burned and its slow smoke rolled into the clearing above, drifting, dissipating, shifting from a dense gray cloud into the clear vastness of space.

Erin was about to respond to the comment when a memory flashed into her brain. The feeling of a hand upon her neck, grasping her, and then...nothing.

“Vex?” she asked.

“Mmm?”

“Mmm?” she asked, almost interrupting herself. “Never mind. I already know the answer to the question I was going to ask. That kind of response, one where someone says *Mmm?* is supposed to be very human, very lifelike, and very L7-ish, right?” she said.

Vex paused.

“Yes, you are correct. As you know, feedback is ver...”

“Yeah, yeah, Rusty, I know. Feedback is very helpful for your blah, blah, blah,” she said dismissively. “Feedback is great for me, too.”

Vex sat stone still. And then, understanding what information his tether sought, he explained.

“At that time, you had expressed a desire to...” Vex’s servos ramped up and his onboard circuitry scanned for the proper human word to finish his statement without causing undue stress. The idea hung in the air. “...no longer be a member of Dagon’s populace.”

Erin groaned slightly as she propped herself up on her elbows. A quick scan showed that she was lying on a small cot next to the fire. The face on her ‘Skin was the same one she’d had in place the last time they were at Glacier National Park. That projected face never turned aside from Vex’s as she slowly swung her legs down from the cot and faced the simulated human before her. She sat upright, elbows on knees, fingers interlaced as she waited for the second half of the reason why Vex had knocked her unconscious.

Vex sat as he always did - body rigid and perfectly upright, feet shoulder-width apart, hands palms-down on both knees. His cobalt blue eyes stared at Erin.

“While I am tethered to you and while it is my duty to protect and serve you based on the established laws of human and simulated human interaction, I have to make you aware that my advanced programming affords me the ability to break my tether with you if...”

Vex hesitated.

Erin waited.

The campfire crackled happily. The mountain stream ran clean and clear, reflecting the stars in its ever-shifting liquid ripples.

“...if, based on my observations, you do not seem mentally fit enough to advocate for your own well-being.”

Still, Erin said nothing.

“While I am indeed a tool to be used by humanity, I am also a valuable asset to the human community. Were I to be placed in an unnecessarily perilous situation that would lead to my destruction and the destruction of my human tether, I have been given the latitude to untether myself so that I can continue to exist even if my human does not. In that case, I would continue on my own until tethered to another human in need.”

Erin stared into the fire wavering before her. Vex could not read on her emotions. Her biometrics were all right down the middle: calm, normal. His programming forced the next question, the one that would determine his future with Erin from this point onward.

“It is in my programming and it is part of my protocol that I have to ask you this next question.”

Erin continued to stare into the fire.

“Is it in your plans to try to end your existence early again or are you going to attempt to continue to survive?”

“I...I...” she stuttered as she picked up a computer-generated pine bough, broke it, and tossed it onto the campfire. The disturbed flames twisted and twirled and a braid of sparks wrapped around itself as it withered up into the Montana sky. Erin looked right at Vex. “I’m sorry. I hadn’t realized I was so...” She stopped again as she struggled to pull her words together. “It won’t happen again. I promise.”

A quick biometric check showed that her heart rate was 62 bpm and her blood pressure was 122/78. She would have to have been a very practiced liar indeed if she were not telling the truth, Vex ascertained.

“I believe you,” he said. He did not feel the need to tell Erin *why* he believed her. Although he could not be certain, Vex felt that the phrase *some things are better left unsaid* from his Human Idiom Catalog seemed to fit this particular scenario. Confirming his theory would have been wonderful feedback, but sometimes feedback was not a goal worth pursuing. “Erin, although I am glad that you feel that you will not pursue your own termination again, I must warn you that, for whatever reason, if you put yourself into a perilous situation on purpose for the sake of ending your existence, I will not place myself between you and that goal.”

With a wave of her hand, Erin dismissed Glacier National Park and they were once again in the den of Unit D in H9400. She glanced around quickly, absently, and then queued up the smoky tendril animation, the one whose colors changed and melted slowly into one another over time across the walls of the den area.

“I know, Vex. And I am sorry I did that to you. I guess that I did it because it’s been such a long time since life has been normal and I...I...”

Now it was Vex’s turn to wait in silence.

“Ha ha,” Erin said joylessly. “I say ‘I’ a lot when I am trying to figure out what to say.”

Vex smiled.

“When I woke up just now...I was glad. That was the first thing I thought. I was glad. Even though living the life of a leftover is not fun and it’s certainly not easy, it’s better than the alternative.”

“The ‘alternative’ meaning death, correct?” Vex asked.

She smiled. “Yes, Rusty, I mean death.”

“Excellent,” Vex said as he projected a blue smile across his faceplate. “I am glad you made that choice because it makes dealing with our new challenges much more manageable.”

“I am glad, too,” Erin said before stopping abruptly. “Wait. What did you mean when you said ‘our new challenges’?”

Vex’s pause this time was so brief that Erin almost missed it.

“About our current situation, there is good news and bad news.”

Erin winced, groaned out loud, and put a hand to her forehead. “Oh, you gotta be kidding me,” she complained loudly. “You’re gonna do the whole ‘good news, bad news’ thing on me? Can’t we try this another time?”

Vex tilted his head. He even suddenly added two blue slashes to his faceplate projection, one above each eye, to function as eyebrows. He cocked the right one up into an arch while dropping the left one down. Erin sighed when she saw the inquisitive body language.

“First off, I kind of like the eyebrows. I think you should keep them.”

Vex nodded, smiling.

“Second, the ‘good news, bad news’ thing is something humans do to lessen the impact of facing something unpleasant when they speak with one another. I have been through this whole scenario a number of times in my life, Vex, and the ‘good news’ *never* outweighs the ‘bad news.’”

Following proper protocol, Vex asked, “Which do you want first? The good news or the bad news?”

“Vex!” Erin barked impatiently. “Just *tell* me what you need to *tell* me. It’s probably all bad news anyhow!”

Vex forged ahead. “The good news is that we survived a very serious sand storm.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured that one out, bud...”

“Before I give the bad news, I have to ask you a question.”

It was now Erin’s turn to cock an eyebrow.

“Yeah?” she asked. “Okay, go ahead and ask.”

“The information I have to tell you is similar in nature to the information I had about the Hendersons.”

Erin’s mind leapt forward but she tried to remain calm. “Okay. I understand. What’s your question?”

“Since you and I are tethered, we can customize our interactions more than I am supposed to with non-tethers.”

Vex actually shifted in his seat slightly, a gesture that Erin was fairly sure he’d picked up from watching humans in similar situations.

“When we met the Hendersons, I withheld concerning information to keep from worrying them unnecessarily.”

“Yes, yes, I remember,” Erin interrupted. “What’s that got to do with our situation?”

“First, my question is, do you want me to spare you from undo stress by not alerting you to problems if there are no solutions readily available to correct the situation?”

Erin didn't even pause before answering. Vex's words may still have been hanging in the air as she replied.

"No. Do not spare me. Even if we're in all kinds of trouble, I want to know about it. I don't want any more surprises."

Vex nodded. "I understand. I am not to avoid the truth with you, no matter how difficult it might be to hear what I have to say, correct?"

"Yes," Erin said with just a hint of hesitation slowing her response.

Vex placed his hand flat on the console in the middle of the room. A box of white light appeared around his hand. The simulated human spoke to the house in the silent language of robots and the wall in front of Erin, the one behind Vex, became a video screen. Erin watched as a video appeared. She saw herself standing in front of RB451, pounding on it and screaming as a wild wind surged through the audio track. Her words were almost impossible to hear, but the subtitles had been added automatically. Even in the midst of an impressive sandstorm like the one they'd just endured, the audio instruments were sensitive enough to parse human language from the background noise. She listened to the last things she said about being left behind, and then, because Vex was the viewpoint character and the movie was being told through his eyes, Erin watched as the force generator she had been pounding on failed. In the video, the bright flashes against the force field turned from a shimmering white to a dull yellow briefly before the energy wall disappeared completely.

As the force field fell, Erin watched as a hand attached to a long arm shot out from the screen, grabbed onto her neck, and then rendered her unconscious. Erin shot a dirty look at Vex.

"Remember, you just told me that you're glad to be alive." Before she could start an argument, Vex said, "Keep watching. Just a few more seconds."

The camera showed Vex rushing to Erin and catching her as she fell. Even though the door to the front of Unit D was only 80 meters away, the sandstorm that had been outside the hub was very much *inside* it now, weaker but still very potent, and it reduced visibility to zero meters. Through the audio recorder, what had been a staticky, rather indistinct howl earlier, now had an added clarity to it. Dust whispered, sand pebbles hissed, and sharp shards of rock flew like daggers *clunking* and *thumping* against the houses and hoverways. Several impacts happened *very* close to the recording equipment in Vex's 'Skin. Too close.

Erin groaned and put her hands to her head. She could just kick herself. How could she have been so careless? So stupid? For over a year and a half, she'd kept it all together, and now, in the span of just two days, she had let it all come undone.

"Our suits," she said quietly, looking down at her arms and legs. "How bad is it?"

Vex put a hand out in front of him, palm up. A small green hologram of Erin appeared in Vex's hand, a wireframe model thirty centimeters tall. The glowing projection rotated slowly.

"Okay," she sighed. "Show me."

Suddenly the figure was covered in small red pinpoints and slash marks.

"The three main areas of damage are *here*."

As the figure turned, three large slashes appeared on the figure and the rest of the red discoloration, the minor, mostly insignificant damage, disappeared.

"Right collarbone, left belt line, right thigh." The camera zoomed in to all three areas at once, making them prominent on the wallscreen. Numbers scrolled beneath each image indicating the length, width, and depth of each slash.

“Your suit is compromised,” Vex said. “Your personal biome is still intact, but as I am sure you understand, your suit is no longer self-sufficient. None of your liquid excretions will be repurposed with the same efficiency as they had been before. You will constantly be shedding water into the atmosphere.”

Erin stared ahead blankly thinking about every drop of sweat, every tear, every milliliter of saliva in her mouth evaporating in Dagon’s heat and wind.

“I’m such an idiot. What was I *thinking*?”

Erin placed her own palm out in front of her, but she couldn’t conjure up the same wireframe image that Vex had before him.

“Your ‘Skin needs to be repaired before you can use your diagnostics again.”

Erin let out a frustrated sigh.

Vex zoomed into the image of the damage to the collarbone area of Erin’s suit. The zigzagging wound in the ‘Skin was under a centimeter in length, but zoomed in, it looked like a horrific electronic chasm. The image rotated and panned as Vex manipulated it. The top layer of the ‘Skin was a series of interlocking hexagonal plastisteel tubules, incredibly strong and remarkably flexible. Beneath that protective layer of tubules was the piezo circuit fabric, the network of nanowires, capacitors, transistors, and inductors that powered a SecondSkin and provided all of its functioning.

The image on the screen showed a slice through the outer tubules and the circuit fabric alike. “While the damage looks significant at this scale, remember that each of the gashes is under a centimeter in length and is fewer than two millimeters in depth. As far as damage to a SecondSkin goes, you were fortunate.”

Erin groaned. “No, I wasn’t fortunate, Vex. I was an *idiot*. A stupid *child*.” She looked at the screen again, at the rent in her ‘Skin that should never have been there. “This suit I’m wrapped in is the only thing keeping me alive on this stupid planet and now I have destroyed it.”

Vex sat up slightly and his newly formed eyebrows raised slightly. “Do not worry. Your SecondSkin is not destroyed. It is just compromised.”

Vex manipulated the image once more and Erin watched as a solid blue coloring filled the damaged area. When the color completely filled the gap, it flashed briefly.

“Using the tools from your pack, I was able to use a filler to plug the damage. It’s a crude repair job and it does nothing to address your ‘Skin’s functionality, but the patches will protect you from temperature fluctuations, from the abrasive effects of moderate wind events, and from the corrosive effects of the hydrochloric rain storms.”

Erin looked down at her suit and found the small patched areas. She probed them with her index finger. The metal melted into the suit was hard and felt very different from the rest of the suit’s material.

“To do the repair job correctly, we’ll need to find a true repair and refurbishment facility,” Vex said.

A sudden thought flashed across Erin’s mind and her eyes widened.

“Oh, no. I’ve been so stupidly selfish that I haven’t even asked about you,” she said, her voice shaking. “Oh, no!” She couldn’t even coax her vocal chords to form the sentence stuck in her throat.

Vex smiled to put her at ease.

“Do not worry.” The image on the wallscreen vanished and the figure in Vex’s palm changed from Erin’s suit to his own. As the suit rotated, no red marks appeared at all.

“Surprisingly, my ‘Skin was not penetrated in the least. I do not know how to account for this anomaly. Based on the event we experienced together, my suit, too, should have been damaged, but it was not.”

Erin sagged visibly with relief. “I...I’m...so sorry, Vex. I should never have put you in that position. I could have ended everything for both of us.”

“You owe me no apologies. It’s my privilege to serve you.”

Erin grinned. “Does your programming *force* you to say that to make humans feel good?”

Vex grinned back. “I guess you will never know, will you?”

Erin laughed a little before the constant, nagging thought that had occupied her mind since the Exodus happened came back into her head and robbed her of any joy and relief she felt.

“So what now, Vex? What do we do next?”

“Now that your suit is in need of repair, I suggest that we move on, leave this hub and continue searching for slivers and a refurbishment center.”

“Move on?” she asked. “I’ve been using 9400 as a base of operations for a while. It’s kind of been like a second home to me. Do we *have* to move on right now?”

Vex stood up very smoothly and looked down at her. “Come with me. I think you’ll see what I mean when we go outside.”

Swallowing, Erin stood and followed Vex to what was left of the front door of Unit D.