

The Vagrant, Chapter 2 Scene 1

By Conner Roy

It had been four days since leaving Moore's village when the bandits attacked, and three minutes since the initial gunshot. Stephen was caught like a deer in the headlights; his heart pounded, his eyes widened like an insect's, and his legs turned soft like ballistic gel.

Stephen looked around. He imagined the desert sand like a blank canvas, bloodstains and bodies thrown on like the art of the late 20th century, an experiment to find beauty in ugliness and meaning in the arbitrary. Or perhaps the sand was a lunch tray, the five corpses were food for the vultures, and the wrecked terrain-rover, still aflame, was sustenance for scrapyard bandits and opportunists. These thoughts disgusted him, but they were necessary to stop the panic and guilt (a fine way to get yourself killed in the midlands between civilizations).

Travis had disposed of the threat with the punctuality and precision only an android would be capable of. He stood patiently, awaiting his next command. His eyes darted from body to body on the desert floor, his assault rifle in a ready position.

Stephen could muster only a single word to say to his companion. "Safe?" The question was silent, spoken through an exhale in between sharp, nervous breaths.

It took a second for Travis' audio detection to recognize the breath as speech. "The threats have been neutralized, but I will keep surveillance on the bodies until they have been confirmed absolutely." He spoke emotionlessly, as if his words were in a vacuum.

Stephen nodded in response, and shut his eyes to cleanse his mind. He played it all again in his head: the sound of the terrain-rover, the shouts of the bandits as the gunfire began, his instinctual dive for cover that never existed, the gunfire, the explosion, the shouts, the silence, and he flushed it to the recesses of his mind. There would be plenty of time to contemplate later. He opened his eyes.

"How many people- er, *threats*, were on the rover." he asked

"Seven," Travis replied.

"I only count five bodies. Where are the other two?"

"They were trapped under the terrain-rover when it toppled. Deaths confirmed beyond doubt."

Stephen looked under the rover, and attempted to push his emotions down as he swallowed a small chunk of his own vomit. Through the panic, the contemplation, the desensitization, he had managed until now to suppress the most grotesque sensation: the *smell*, that terrible odor of burning flesh trapped under the rover, which sent him into a fit of strained coughs and gags as he reached for the filtration mask in his back pocket. He let out an immense sigh of relief after fastening his mask.

He took a closer look at the rover, a rusted metal patchwork of forgotten times. It was easy to deduce the means of their downfall. They were either crushed, or lit aflame by the resulting fire. Stephen winced, and swallowed the idea of asking Travis how, exactly, they were killed. There would be time to contemplate later.

From the silence came another gunshot, and a cry of pain.

Stephen leapt in the air and arched his back like a cat. He whipped his head around while grabbing his pistol, and saw Travis' assault rifle pointed to a body holding a fresh new wound.

"What the fuck just happened, Travis?" Stephen asked.

"The threat was reaching for its gun, so I neutralized it with a non-fatal shot to the hand."

Stephen winced. "I'm gonna request a change in language protocol. Do not refer to human threats as 'it'".

"Understood. They are still alive, if you would like to interrogate them."

Stephen grimaced under his filtration mask. Travis would never truly understand, but he listened anyway. It was a tightrope too thin and a dilemma too complex for a being of ones and zeroes. Lean too far towards compassion and he would become too weak to survive, but lean too far to detachment, and the dehumanization would turn him into what he sought to destroy.

He walked to the bandit and gently turned him over to his back. He wore a filthy long-sleeve cotton shirt, long pants, and a bandana covered the top of his head. Typical desert wear for wasteland travelers. The shirt was stained with blood, and a blackened ring surrounded a bullethole just below the chest. A rare miss from Travis, who likely noticed the lack of armor and aimed for the more reliable target of the chest. It was meant to pierce the heart, or at least cripple the lungs. His sunken face was stained with blood, which dripped down his chin and matted his beard and dyed his black beard a dark red.

He made eye contact with Stephen. His eyes were the color of the wasteland sand at night. Every tool of detachment failed at the sight of those eyes, which reflected years of suffering and stories of pain that no man had ever cared to hear.

"I'm sorry," said Stephen. It was all he could say.

To his surprise, the dying man laughed. A dry, bloody, strained laugh, but a joyous one.

"The only words I wouldn't expect to hear." More blood spilled from his mouth as he spoke. "I really thought we had a chance. Should've known we didn't from the stories."

Stephen's heart sank to his ribcage. "Stories?"

"The hell are you surprised for?" He coughed, and wiped the blood from his mouth with his uninjured left hand. "You think you can make such a big mess in a company town and not expect word to travel?"

Stephen clenched his fists. *Goddamnit*, he thought to himself, *I should've known I'd make too much noise back there*. He pushed his anger aside. "Why did you attack?"

"We were hopin' to sell off that bot of yours, "

"I should've guessed you all were scrappers." Stephen sighed as he felt an ounce of regret left his body. Travis, his obedience and sense of duty, his skill, and his infinite potential for destruction, have to be kept out of undeserving hands. "Do you know what you could have done to this world, letting a weapon like that fall back into corporate hands?"

"I sure as hell do now," the scrapper said with a strained smile.

Stephen knew he was dodging the question, but he pushed no further. He deserved at least a little piece of mind in his last moments. "I'm sure you know this already, but you're...obviously not going to make it. Any last wishes?"

The scrapper shook his head. "Just shoot me. I got nothin' to stay here for."

Stephen stood up, took five steps back, and pointed his pistol towards the scrapper. He placed his finger on the trigger, but he did not fire.

Come on, Stephen, do it.

He felt sweat roll down his forehead.

This is mercy, Stephen. Mercy.

His hands began to tremble.

You can't show weakness now, Stephen. You won't make it out alive like this.

He took his finger off the trigger, and both of his arms went limp at his side. Travis pointed his rifle to the man.

“Go ahead, Travis. Make it quick for him.”