

It's a Very Distinctive SecUnit

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It's a Very Distinctive SecUnit

by [the_original_n_chan](#)

Summary

In which the universe's best thief and smartest hacker meet an unusually short, angry SecUnit.

Notes

Silence89 is the person who turned me on to *The Murderbot Diaries*, so you can blame her for this. :D

“Ain’t you a little short for a SecUnit?” Alec asked. He was proud that his voice remained level. Especially since said SecUnit currently had him jammed up against the wall, one armored hand gripping his throat.

“Not if I cut you off at the knees,” the Unit growled.

Did SecUnits sass back? Or was that not so much sass as a grim promise? Alec gulped nervously, grateful that he was still in fact able to do so, considering the Unit could crush his larynx and esophagus together into one undifferentiated mass with just a casual squeeze.

“Now, now—let’s just all stay calm, act reasonable,” he tried.

“Oh sure, I’m reasonable,” said the implacable engine of violence and death. Alec stared at his own dim reflection in the armor’s face plate and tried not to replay the climax of *RogueBotCop IV* in his head. “Like for instance, you got a *reason* to be back here?”

He *might* actually have a chance to talk his way out of this. Jesus bless.

Now how the hell did you talk down a construct?

“So you know about the DoctorHu project, of course.” He put all the confidence he could muster into his voice, boldly projecting the assumption that *everybody* knew about the project, absolutely they did, and if you didn’t then something was wrong with you. He still had his metaphorical fingers in the security feed—he didn’t dare try anything yet for fear of revealing his presence, but he could feel the flicker of connection when the SecUnit tapped it.

“There ai—there *isn’t* any DoctorHu project.” The SecUnit applied a little upward pressure, until Alec was standing on his toes. He grabbed onto the Unit’s wrist with both hands so he didn’t lose his balance and choke himself out.

“Oh, oh, they didn’t send you that module? Shoot, no wonder you don’t got my clearances. These bond companies, amirite?” The new elevation had the Unit’s forearm gun port pointed up under his chin; the angle was perfect to blast a hole right up through his brain. Alec eyed it with trepidation. “Look,” he wheezed, his throat starting to close up as much from anxiety as from the actual physical compression, “just let me—I’m just gonna check the feed, see what the problem is here, okay, see if I can get that update for you—”

“You think I’m gonna let you download something into me?” the Unit snapped. “How stupid do you think I am?”

“You’re—you’re *very* smart!” Alec blurted. “Smartest killing machine I ever did see.”

“And I see you up there in the ceiling,” it added sharply. “If you fire that thing at me, I’m gonna pop his head right off.”

“You talk funny for a SecUnit,” Parker’s voice floated down to them, all echoey from the girders she was lurking among.

“How many SecUnits have you actually talked to?” it challenged her.

“Usually they talk *at* me. You know,” her voice dropped into a lower, grating register, “‘Leave this zone immediately.’ ‘Stop, or I’ll shoot.’ Stuff like that.”

With Parker there to divide the Unit’s attention, the odds had started looking a little better. “Look, no download, okay, fine,” Alec said. “We can just go over there to that display, and I’ll put in my codes and bring up the records. You can review them visually, all right?”

The SecUnit considered for what felt like a subjective eternity, then pulled him away from the wall and tossed him in the general direction of the display, sending him stumbling, nearly falling flat on his face. Rubbing at his throat, Alec reminded himself that he wasn’t in any less danger just because the Unit had released him. With its superior speed and strength, it could cross the entire length of a room and punch right through his chest before he could do more than blink.

“Throw the weapon away, then come down here,” the SecUnit instructed Parker, and Alec winced at the clattering thump as the gun hit the floor and bounced. He was proud of his work on that; he really hoped it wasn’t broken. As he moved toward the display, he glanced over at where Parker was plummeting headfirst out of the overhead superstructure, her arms spread in exultation. The nearly invisible threads of her filament harness caught her just a couple of meters above the floor—she hung there upside down for a second, swaying gently, then flipped herself over with controlled grace and released the cords, letting them zip back into the harness as she dropped the last distance, landing lightly on the balls of her feet. There was no way to tell with the helmet on, but Alec had the impression that the SecUnit was staring at her like she was crazy.

Parker was certainly...something. She wasn’t actually augmented, at least as far as he knew, but her speed and dexterity were almost unreal. It was quite possible she was a mutant. Or some kind of experiment. He’d never asked, figuring that if she ever wanted to share the details of her past, she would. She was fierce, brilliant, multitalented, and unpredictable, as well as emotionally awkward, poorly socialized, and generally several steps to the right of neurotypical. As far as he was concerned, it was all a part of her charm. Although he did sometimes wish that she was less inclined to express her dislike by stabbing.

Keep distracting it, he told her through their private channel. She came skipping up to them, giving every appearance of being blithely unconcerned. (It could be that she actually was.) Bouncing to a stop with a swish of blond ponytail, she inspected the SecUnit up and down, then leaned in alarmingly close and poked at it.

“Stop that,” it grumbled with remarkably human-sounding annoyance. But it didn’t retaliate, even when she poked it again. Surprising forbearance, for a supposedly heartless murder machine. Huh.

Of course, Alec knew better than to think that it was even briefly oblivious to him. Bots and constructs had enough processing power to track multiple sources of input simultaneously.

But it wasn't entirely focused on what he was doing, which gave him the least little edge. Especially since what he was about to do was nothing that it would ever expect. At least, he hoped so.

Because humans, even augmented humans, weren't capable of parallel processing—they could only handle one thing at a time in the feed. But he'd done a lot of work on his augments, and he'd managed to create a hack that was a rough approximation of what the bots could do. His splitter could load up to two sequences at a time and launch them into the feed on signal, which in collaboration with his actual brain meant that he could effectively do three things at once. And an extensive collection of templates and variables let him generate those processes virtually on the fly. By the time he'd reached the display, he was ready.

"Okay," he said, unnecessarily cracking his knuckles. As the SecUnit came up behind him, managing to loom ominously despite the fact that even in its armored boots it was barely taller than Parker, he triggered one of his sequences to access the system, using the ID code he'd cloned earlier from a passing security tech's implant. Simultaneously he glanced over the fake project that his other split had been compiling from one of his templates and approved it. (It didn't have to be seamless or even good; it just had to look like something that could conceivably be a real project file. He'd actually based this particular one on something from an episode of one of his favorite old-time serials. It wasn't like SecUnits watched media anyway.)

As Split2 stealthily loaded the file into the system and Split1 retrieved it, he told Parker, *When I hit it, we gotta be ready to move. I don't know how long this will hold it.*

Parker blipped an animated 3-D schematic at him, with a helpful label reading *Hardison running for the door* to help him pick that part out from all the time-distance calculations and probability vectors she was mapping. (She'd always assumed that everyone could communicate over the feed with complex images; it had been a shock to her when Alec had not-so-gently disabused her of the notion.)

(He might have been panicking slightly at the time. Trying to correct the trajectory of a failing shuttle was not the time for a communications breakdown.)

"See, DoctorHu project, Jack Harkness in charge—that's me. Now, you want to see more, I'm gonna need *your* clearances. So—"

HARDISON! Red for *extreme danger* flashed through the feed, and suddenly everything was moving very quickly. He jerked back from the display—the Unit had just turned away from him, its stun baton lowering (it had been going to take him down from behind? Aw, *shit*), Parker was sliding across the floor toward the gun (that woman was going to get herself shot to death), and he frantically told his splitter *go go go!*—

—and *ping* went Split1, spoofing the security system as it tapped against the SecUnit's defensive wall, and incidentally masking Split2 as the latter darted in to scoop up the echo of the Unit's ID. Split2 wrapped that ID around a packet of *I AM A VERY NAUGHTY SECUNIT* and pitched it through the back door that Alec had just opened into the system.

Aaaand....

Nothing happened.

Well, the SecUnit turned its head toward him, so *something* had happened. But Alec had been expecting at least some twitching or vibrating or even falling to the floor when the governor module went off.

What governor module? was the system's response when he queried it, and, *There's no SecUnit here.*

Alec's eyes widened. This SecUnit was a *con*.

"You have a *fake* governor module. A fake! Or did you just turn it off somehow?" Alec's delighted laugh faltered as the Unit pointed the baton at him menacingly. It dawned on him then that an uncontrolled SecUnit might actually have a much darker purpose and be even *more* likely to murder them. It hadn't bludgeoned him yet, though, let alone popped out its energy weapons and blasted him and Parker into oblivion. The fact gave him a glimmer of hope.

"Step away from him!" Parker was kneeling on the floor, the gun aimed unwaveringly at the Unit. "This gun *can* take you down." There was a fair chance that it could—the small projectile it fired would generate a miniature EMP field on impact. The Unit's organic parts wouldn't be affected, but the loss of its electronics would have to be a handicap, and might even be enough to paralyze it. There was still an awful lot of risk, though—maybe it was EM-shielded, maybe Parker would miss, maybe it would blast her before she could even get the shot off. And was that risk even necessary?

"Hey now, you know, things don't have to be like this," Alec tried carefully. "How about we call a truce? Solidarity among thieves, right?"

"I ain't a thief." The Unit had given up its pretense at speaking CorpStandard. It sounded vaguely offended, but as far as Alec was concerned a rogue SecUnit had no room to be judgmental.

"What are you, then?" Parker demanded.

It hesitated, then answered, somewhat surprisingly, "I'm a retrieval specialist."

Parker hmphed, but Alec was curious. "Yeah? What are you retrieving?"

"Why should I tell you anything?" it retorted, and Alec strongly suspected that behind the featureless helmet it was glaring at him. He held up his hands placatingly.

"Look, I think we can assume that none of us here are friends of ValyuMor," he said. "Maybe we have a common cause. Even if it's just to fuck these assholes over."

And it seemed that he had indeed assumed right, because after a slightly longer hesitation, the SecUnit collapsed the baton and stowed it away. "One of their subsidiaries does this thing where they pressure poor people to basically sell their kids into indentured service. They say it's just for a few years, the kids will learn skills, be eligible for careers and all that, but they

use debts and punishments to keep extending the time. Those kids never get out. Contract labor is shitty enough, but adults, they can make their own decisions. With kids...it just ain't right." One armored hand had closed into a fist; the Unit released it deliberately. "A friend of mine, he was working with a youth protection group, and he got into trouble with the corp. He's out of it now, but he asked me for help, and...I guess it's become my fight now."

That was a lot of words, and a lot of emotions. (And also, SecUnits were apparently capable of having friends, which was something of a revelation.) Alec found himself relaxing, much of the tension seeping out of him. Across the room, Parker had lowered the gun and was staring intently at the Unit. Kids at risk was a sensitive spot for her, too.

"Funny thing, that, 'cause we're also helping out a friend," Alec said. "Actually, a bunch of friends. You ever heard of the Black Book?" When the SecUnit didn't reply, Alec went on, "It ain't actually a book—it's the detailed, long-term plan of a major corporate alliance to choke off a group of freehold systems, trying to get them to fail so the corps can take over their resources, mine the people for data and market to them, you know, that whole thing that corps do. Our guy used to be a corp agent, but they screwed him over, and when he left, he managed to sneak out a copy of the Book. So what we're doing now is picking that whole alliance apart, messing up their plans and their communications, making it seem like it's all collapsing from the inside. Turning them all against each other, so the free systems have a chance to fight back."

"We're providing leverage," Parker said. She'd come closer and was studying the SecUnit intently.

"That's right." Alec grinned. "So what do you say, man—you wanna help us wreck not just this corp, but a whoooooole lot of them?"

The SecUnit apparently didn't have to think about that very long. "Okay," it said decisively. "I'm in."

"Aw, yeah!" Alec raised his hand for a high five, held it there for a couple of seconds, and then lowered it awkwardly when the SecUnit didn't return the gesture.

"So, do you have a face?" Parker asked. Alec was half expecting some snappy comment, so he was mildly surprised when the face plate went transparent and the helmet folded itself down. He and Parker both stared until the SecUnit's brows drew together in a dangerous-looking scowl.

"*What?*"

"I like your face," Parker decided, and Alec laughed.

"Yeah, me too, but I gotta say, man, there's no way that hair is standard."

"It helps me to pass." They both looked at the SecUnit, Parker tilting her head quizzically, and it added, with what sounded like some reluctance, "To pass as human."

“Mm. Sometimes passing is hard even when you *are* a human,” Parker said. Nodding sagely, she reached out and patted the SecUnit’s shoulder. “If you ever need any help figuring things out, just ask.”

Watching Parker attempt to school the SecUnit in how to blend in among normal humans would be vastly entertaining, and also kind of like watching a transit tube wreck at rush hour, but that was an experience for another day, preferably one not being spent in the bowels of a planetary development facility. “So, what’re your thoughts on the best way to access the survey department’s comm hub?” Alec asked the SecUnit.

Parker bounced a little. “Ooh, maybe it could—”

“*He*.” When they both glanced at the SecUnit, it lifted its head, jaw set and chin jutting in stubborn, glowering defiance. And at the sight Alec’s heart twinged, a feeling like the very first time Parker had let him see past her walls, offering him a view of what she thought of as brokenness, and what he saw as just another part of a beautiful person.

“He,” Alec acknowledged gently, smiling, and his heart softened still further at the SecUnit’s obvious surprise. “You got a name that you want us to use, bro?”

The SecUnit’s expression eased—not a smile, at least not yet, but there was a new light in those intense blue eyes.

“You can call me Eliot,” he said.

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