

Engines Under Ursus

By

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One

The Tank

They'd taken Fowler out of the Tank. He'd thought hard and worked fast in his cyberspace prison, doing his assigned tasks, knowing all the while that his body was wasting away in the real world. Occasionally, they'd let him out to exercise but each time he returned, he felt successively weaker and more physically debilitated. Fowler didn't know which was worse, working in cyberspace or learning how to walk again. Each time he returned to his body, he'd check his N-Tek implants, asking them if they were okay. They were polite and courteous. They had little choice but to be nice to him. He was in the Tank because of them and they knew it.

"Warden wants to see you," said Hessler on day one-hundred and fifty one of learning how to walk again.

Fowler hadn't complained about the break in routine. Working in cyberspace for such prolonged periods of time had caused many unpleasant side effects. He asked the guard why he was wanted but had forgotten to use his voice.

"What's up?" asked Fowler, remembering to use his actual voice. His lips, jaws and larynx felt stiff.

Hessler said nothing, bringing Fowler to the warden's door, knocking twice politely. The lights in the hall shimmered slightly but were then restored. Fowler noticed the shimmering lighting effect. He looked at the thin lines that resembled pencil marks stretching across the ceiling, before being brought into the room. The N-Teks are even here, thought Fowler. There seemed to be no escaping them.

Warden Bill Mooney looked up from his desk as Fowler walked in, flexing his jaw line. The warden usually never saw prison in-mates. It was always left to the others in his employ. He was a climber, looking for the next move up. On the back wall above the warden was a plaque awarding him with the highest colony award; the Diamond Citizen's Award. He had received it for his profitable running of the prison service in a lucrative deal with Citynet.

Jacking the prisoners into Cyperspace and having them control low level machinery meant the prison paid it way and more. Fowler looked at the other hologram on the warden's desk, sitting in pride of place. It was another power picture. The hologram captured the moment where the warden shook hands with the most powerful person on Erstol, Sandra Verner, CEO of Citynet. Behind her, Fowler saw Delcass, Vice President of the company who was standing to her right. It was one of those cheesy corporate pictures designed to portray an image of cool confidence. Fowler flexed his jaw and looked away, meeting the warden's insistent stare as memories were rekindled when he had been Citynet's CTO. They had air brushed him out of all the company photos after his sentencing.

"You know why you're here?" asked the warden.

Fowler shook his head. "I don't get out much."

"The N-Teks have infiltrated Citynet. Well what do you have to say for yourself?"

There was a clear accusation in his voice.

Fowler shrugged. "What do you expect me to say? It was all in my research report. You people should learn to read." He sat forward as if to get up. "Is that it? Can I go now?"

"No." The warden clenched his fists, knowing he needed Fowler. "We need to talk about this." Fowler could tell he'd been leaned on by Citynet. The warden was sweating a little under his expensive suit.

"Have the N-Teks monopolised your power points yet?" asked Fowler.

The warden nodded. "Over a month ago."

Fowler hid his surprise. Whatever Citynet had tried in the meanwhile had clearly failed. There was a veiled sound of desperation in the warden's voice.

"Have they formed any cyberspace nests yet?" asked Fowler.

"Yes but they're re-encoding themselves with shared encryption keys as soon as they're discovered and then they morph."

Fowler hadn't observed this behaviour when he had studied the N-Teks. They were adapting again. "What server's have been compromised?" he asked.

The warden clasped his hands and looked down. "Citynet. Upsite particularly; the investment sector."

"Well what do you know," replied Fowler, grinning to himself. "And they said Citynet could never be breached."

“This is not funny Fowler! This entire colony depends on Citynet. Millions of families rely on these servers to run everything from food production to our life support,” shouted the warden. He raised his hand and pointed it accusingly at Fowler as if the whole problem was his fault. The pointing finger curled to form a fist. “You will stop them or so help me, I’ll make sure you’re jacked into every on-line assembly machine in this city!” The warden’s clenched fist struck the table unceremoniously, causing the hologram to shudder.

Fowler remained unfazed. “Where’s Walt? I thought he was your new golden boy.”

“He’s brain dead. The N-Teks burned out his neurons when he attempted to remove them!” The warden took a deep breath. His blood pressure was clearly up and was trying to lower it as he let his breath out slowly.

Fowler shook his head. “That’s impossible, they’re not aggressive. It’s not their style,” insisted Fowler.

“Well then, what is their style?” demanded the warden.

Fowler rubbed his stubble ridden chin thoughtfully. “They’re pacifists.”

The warden was losing his patience with Fowler’s philosophical out-look. “You talk about them as if they’re alive. They’re nothing more than a glorified virus.”

Fowler smiled. “They’ve outsmarted Citynet security. I think that’s a good enough definition of an intelligent life form.”

“Look, we’re getting off the point here.” The warden looked flustered and angry with Fowler.

“Which is?”

The warden put his hands together, getting to the point. “We want you to find out what they want.”

Fowler sat up in his seat. “Who exactly is we?”

“Citynet.” The words were like manna from heaven for Fowler. Citynet needed him again, after having abandoned him. Still, he felt cold comfort. “I know what the N-Teks want.”

The warden frowned. “And what is that?”

“To do whatever the hell they want,” said Fowler, meeting the warden’s stare.

“Well then they’ll have to be destroyed before they bring everything down!” said the warden, having heard enough. “It’ll be the end of humanity in this sector if we don’t do it. It’ll give our enemies the ammunition they need to say we shouldn’t be here at all.”

The lights in the room flickered and the holograms rippled.

“Take me to Citynet,” said Fowler. “I want to talk to Sandra. Then we’ll deal.”