

Two  
Citynet

Hessler gave Fowler his possessions back before leaving prison. Fowler had been in the Tank for three years. If he failed in Citynet, he would have another thirteen to serve. A new batch of prisoners filed by him in chains as he prepared to leave, flanked by guards on either side. Fowler was led on board the empty prison Floater and his shackles were unlocked. The craft took off, returning the way it had come, gliding past the automated weapons systems.

Fowler looked out of the window of the prison Floater as they emerged from the secure travel tube, leading into the giant commercial sector. In the distance, the lofty corporate sky-scrapers were as prevalent as ever. Memories flooded back into Fowler's mind of the life he once led. Erstol still retained its hustle and bustle. Freedom had once been a word in Fowler's vocabulary. Now it had a deeper meaning.

Within the cluster of teeming skyscrapers in the commercial sector, one stood tallest amongst all the others. It was Citynet Tower; the corporation which controlled the flow of information through Erstol. Citynet represented human power and prestige. Without Citynet, Erstol was almost like a ship without a captain. The other alien occupied sectors looked enviously at Citynet and were drab in comparison. The rays of Erstol's red sun pushed through the domed ceiling of the artificial world, illuminating the built up areas as far as the eye could see. The Floater drew closer to the giant skyscraper that was Citynet, entering the busy travel tube. They joined the queue of traffic leading to the building's corporate entrance. Fowler closed his eyes and took in some deep satisfying breaths of air, wondering if this was really happening. He opened his eyes and smiled with relief. No. This was not a Tank dream.

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"Hello Frank," said Fowler as he walked towards the security guard, manning the desk in Citynet's wide lobby.

The security guard looked up at Fowler taking in the heavily armed guards around him.

His sleepy eyes flashed open for a brief moment, unable to believe who he was seeing. "Hello... uh Mister Fowler. Sir."

“Is Sandra in?” asked Fowler.

Frank checked his computer terminal and saw that the CEO was expecting him.

“Yessir,” said Frank, handing out the security badges. “Go right on up. Take the elevator first on your left,” he pointed.

“I know the way. Some things you never forget,” smiled Fowler. “Give your family my best wishes,” said Fowler finally.

“I will,” said Frank, closing his open mouth, feeling like he had just seen a ghost.

Fowler walked down the wide corridor and disappeared into an elevator with his escort.

Frank immediately picked up the phone and dialed an internal number.

“You won’t guess who I just saw,” said Frank, straightening his hat.

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Sandra Verner looked at the hologram of her father’s strong face on the desk in front of her. She looked at him almost wishing she could seek his advice. Privately, she felt everything was falling apart. Even now, she could feel her father’s steely grip on her, almost reaching out to her from beyond the grave. She knew it was important to show no weakness but the pressure was building in her, threatening to tear apart her cool veneer.

She looked away from her father’s image and looked up at Delcass who was waiting with her in the corporate suite. They had agreed a pre-meet to formulate strategy on how to deal with Fowler but there had been a difference of opinions.

“We don’t need him. He’s past it,” said Delcass. “Just look at him. He’s a shambles like he always was.”

She watched Fowler on the security camera and monitored his progress to the top floor. Sandra looked at Fowler’s thin and frail body. He was badly shaven, shabby and seemed to have difficulty standing up straight. Being in the Tank for so long had taken its toll on him physically. He looked like a pale shadow of the proud man she had once known.

“It’s his mind we need. That’s all that matters,” she replied.

She zoomed in on his face, controlling the security camera in the elevator. Fowler looked up at the camera. She saw the look of defiance in his haggard face. His eyes spoke volumes. Fowler smiled coldly at the camera before stepping out of the elevator. Sandra looked

away; the determined look reminding her of her father's inner strength. She brought her hand through a light sensor and the Citynet business holograms fizzled from view.

Sandra looked up as the knock came on the door. "Enter," she announced.

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Fowler walked into Sandra's office. Nothing had changed, he noted. Not even the hologram of her dour father whose eyes moved and occasionally blinked for effect. Delcass sat on the wide leather suite with the panoramic glass view at the edge of the office. The two men looked at one another but said nothing. Fowler walked over to Sandra. It was as he had expected. Delcass was still looking over her shoulder.

"Hello Fowler," said Sandra. "How are you?"

Fowler looked back at Sandra and wondered if she could even begin to imagine what it could be like to spend three years in the Tank. *Of course not*, he thought to himself. All she's worried about is remaining in her ivory tower.

"Just fine Sandra," he replied without emotion. "What can I do for you?"

"We're looking for some consultancy. The warden filled you in I take it?"

Fowler nodded. "Just the preliminaries. So what's in it for me?"

"A pardon and a one way ticket off Erstol." Sandra sat forward waiting for his response.

"I also want my salary back-dated for the years I spent in the Tank," replied Fowler. "I also want a glowing reference signed personally by you. If required you will personally vouch for me in any future positions that I apply for," said Fowler.

"Done," agreed Sandra. "So long as the N-Teks are removed. Delcass will have the contract drawn up."

Delcass flexed his jaw irritably.

"Good. It's settled then." Sandra clasped her hands together. "Get to work. Delcass will bring you up to speed. We have a visitor's room set up for you with a change of clothes. You'll probably want to get cleaned up first," said Sandra and then waved him out of the office.

Delcass followed Fowler out of the office, speaking quietly to him. "No delivery and you're back in the Tank Fowler. I'll be watching you."

“Take me to my room,” said Fowler to the guards, ignoring Delcass.

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Fowler’s ragged reflection in the bathroom mirror said it all. Steam rose from the sink and slowly hid the truth of the Tank. He wiped the condensation away from the mirror and saw the man that he had become. He had clearly aged. The stress lines on his face told their own story. This was the price which Citynet had exacted from him. He looked at the tips of his fingers, checking out his N-Tek implants and examined the others dotted about rest of his body. He’d need all the implants to cope with what lay ahead of him.

Towelling down, he walked back into the company apartment and looked out at the other corporate buildings, all of which were smaller and less impressive. Citynet was the preying mantis of Erstol. It would not permit any young pretenders. Fowler looked at the external monitor and saw the guards waiting outside his door. *Only one step out of prison*, he thought. *A few more to go before I’m home free*, he realised. He flicked on the apartment console.

“Directory listing,” asked Fowler, drying his hair, looking to see if he could contact any old friends.

“Service unavailable,” replied the console. Sandra had him bottled up like her very own genie. But Fowler wanted out.

“List all available services,” requested Fowler, sipping some water.

“All services unavailable,” replied the Console.

He was locked out completely. He walked into the middle of the room and crouched down. Slowly, he began doing his Tai-Chi routine using it to harmonise his mind with his body, working on his stress levels. He closed his eyes and just concentrated on the movements. As he performed the intricate actions, he felt how weak his body had become and moved slower but with the same intent. Speed and strength were not the issue for now, he thought and kicked out one leg, which shook a little, then brought his right arm down in a curving movement. Accuracy is the issue.

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Having rested and exercised, Fowler was brought to Systems. On this floor, the real world of Erstol connected to the virtual world of Citynet. The door buzzed as Fowler walked up to it and it opened. Once, Fowler recalled, he had been in charge of this entire floor. The guards were finally left behind and Delcass waited on the other side, dressed in his neat corporate suit. Fowler had always felt himself to be Delcass' superior in every way but he had been outdone in the days before his arrest and then imprisonment. Delcass could have worked in any industry and the result would have always been the same: Delcass controlling people, manipulating them and forcing them to undermine his competition. Often when things went badly wrong, careers were sacrificed to save Delcass'. Politics for Delcass were his lifeblood. Work had been Fowler's. Delcass however had found a chink in Fowler's technical armour and that had caused his downfall. Fowler had been secretly performing illegal experiments with the N-Teks while doing his research work.

"Mezzler will show you what the problem is," said Delcass.

Fowler was surprised. "Mezzler?"

"He's in charge now," said Delcass.

"Mezzler's in charge!" he repeated with disbelief. "What about Mirsky and Jacobs?"

"It's been three years, Fowler. They've moved on," replied Delcass, hiding his quiet satisfaction. "Is there a problem?"

"No."

"Good." Delcass turned and left, checking his agenda.

Fowler watched Mezzler approaching, his obese body trundling under his weight; a man whose existence paid testament to the fat content in junk food. He'd been the joke of Systems during Fowler's tenure and now he was in charge. Fowler saw Mezzler's fake smile spread across his face and began to realise the shit Citynet was in.

"Jesus Christ Almighty, Lazarus has arisen! How the hell are you, Fowler?" said Mazzler.

"Well, considering," he replied. Technically Mezzler had always been a struggler. Fowler had always imagined that working was Mezzler's way of paying for his eating habits and nothing else. However, as a player in Delcass' team, he was a character assassin extraordinaire. Turn your back on Mezzler and expect a knife in your back. All with the tacit approval of Delcass.

“No hard feelings about what happened, huh?” asked Mezzler, seeking absolution for his part in sending Fowler to the Tank.

Fowler recalled Mezzler’s damning evidence of his secret work with the N-Teks. Mezzler had never seemed so precise. Dates, experiments, locations. Some people found spying too easy.

“Water under the bridge,” said Fowler, swallowing his words.

“Great, great,” he said vacantly. “You still got your friends with you?”

“Never leave home without them,” replied Fowler. “So what’s your problem?”

Mezzler looked confused. “Problem?”

Fowler lifted his eyebrows. “With the Citynet server.”

“Oh yeah, that,” said Mezzler. “Come on, I’ll show you. Quite a situation. Don’t know how we’re going to sort it out.”

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“I figure they must have come in through the air conditioning,” said Mezzler. “Hell of a mess.”

Fowler looked around the room. Mezzler’s words had been the biggest understatement he’d heard in his entire life. The N-Teks were everywhere, growing on the walls, ceiling and machines serving Citynet. They had even formed what looked like a termite mound near one central server.

“When did it begin?”

“About a month ago. Nothing too serious at first. Just a couple of pencil lines on the ceilings. Around power points and heat sinks. Standard stuff. Then they just went apeshit. Took only a week to get this bad.”

“Impressive,” said Fowler.

“That’s not what Delcass said,” smirked Mezzler. “And this is only the half of it. They made the Cyberspace jump. The server is compromised too.”

“Yeah I know,” said Fowler.

Mezzler was surprised. “How’d you know?”

Fowler looked at Mezzler. “The warden told me. Besides, it was in my research paper. I predicted it would happen. The old meeting the new.” Or more appropriately, the ancient meeting the new, thought Fowler.

“Oh.” Mezzler winced. “So how are you planning to fix it?”

“I don’t know yet. I didn’t get a chance to finish the paper. Remember?” He looked pointedly at Mezzler who looked away.

“Where do you want to start?” asked Mezzler.

“I’d like to take some samples for examination first. I’ll deal with the Citynet server later when we know what we’re dealing with.”

“You going to try to interface with them?”

Fowler nodded.

“That’s what Walt did and now he’s a vegetable.”

“Where is he?” asked Fowler.

“In MedLab. You won’t get anything out of him. He’s brain dead.”

“I’ll pay my respects then,” said Fowler and left Systems.

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Mezzler had managed to buy a doughnut on the way down to MedLab. Fowler wondered why the N-Teks would harm Walt. It was Walt who had turned a blind eye to Fowler’s work. At the trial, he had apparently caught a very bad flu and had been unable to make it into the witness box to testify against him. Fowler had appreciated Walt’s tacit help. Now he lay on a company bed in a room all to himself. A machine regulated his breathing.

“How long has he been like this?”

“Bout a week,” replied Mezzler, chewing his doughnut. “Funny, I thought it would be before him. He was always so damn health conscious.”

Fowler nodded. Walt had always said *garbage in, garbage out* while watching Mezzler eating his meals. Walt had been an unabashed health freak. Fifty laps of the company pool every morning followed by an aerobic workout. A vegan. Lean and mean to work with. Lightning fast response times. Even Fowler had been impressed with Walt. Fowler knew, if anyone could have solved the problem with the N-Teks, it would have been Walt.

“Did Walt try to interface with the N-Teks via his spinal tap?” asked Fowler, tilting Walt’s head sideways.

Mezzler nodded. “Yeah and he used your software to interface with them. When he jacked in and the software set up the comms, he popped just like a bulb. One guy claimed he could hear his brain frying.”

There was a hint of innuendo in Mezzler’s voice. Fowler looked over his shoulder and glanced at Mezzler. It was clear that Mezzler was going to be no help to him. Fowler knew Mezzler would hang him out to dry given half a chance.

Fowler turned his attention to Walt and ran his fingers down the back of his neck, looking for the Tap, using his index finger. He stopped suddenly.

“Are you sure?” whispered Fowler. He ran his finger along Walt’s skin again.

“You say something?” asked Mezzler.

Fowler suddenly stood up. His face had hardened like stone. It wasn’t just anger in Fowler’s eyes. It was rage.

“What?” asked Mezzler. “You find something?”

Fowler walked forward and knocked the doughnut out of the Mezzler’s hand.

“What the hell is going on?” shouted Fowler. “You take me out of the Tank to screw me over again, you son of a bitch!” Fowler grabbed Mezzler by the neck and forced him against the wall.

“Jesus, Fowler,” coughed Mezzler, spitting out bits of half-chewed doughnut. “Calm down! What the hell is going on?”

“One of my little friends, as you call them, told me something very interesting,” said Fowler, showing Mezzler his index finger. “In the tip of this finger, I have an N-Tek which specialises in poisons and toxins. Can tell me whatever I want just from a single touch.” He brought it slowly towards Mezzler’s forehead and rested it there. “You want to know what it found?”

Mezzler nodded, his mouth wide open with the half-chewed food.

“Drybozene residue.”

“What the hell is that?” gasped Mezzler.

“It’s a residue left over from a toxin which screws with your brain. It’s odourless. It’s tasteless. Spray it on some food. You’ll never know you’ve ingested it until you jack into the

net. Causes your synapses to burn out when you synch. You can't buy it some store. This is a highly specialised substance. Are you trying to set me up again, you son of a bitch!"

"You think I had something to do with it?" shouted Mezzler. "Hey, I just work here! I put my hours in and then I'm gone. Hell, I didn't even want his job!"

Fowler hated to admit it but Mezzler was right. Mezzler was too stupid to do something like this. He released his grip on Mezzler's neck. "Come on, we're going to talk to Sandra."

"Aw Jesus, Fowler, do we have to?" asked Mezzler, knowing the shit had hit the fan. "Can't we talk to Delcass first?" He was perspiring heavily.

"No!" shouted Fowler.

Mezzler followed after Fowler and saw his doughnut on the ground then stalled momentarily, looking at it.

"Just leave it!" shouted Fowler and pulled him into the elevator.