

Three  
Infestation

In Sandra's office, Fowler described what he had found to her. Mezzler shuffled uncomfortably, worried that he was being over-shadowed by Fowler.

"It's a very specialised substance. That's why we never detected it," added Mezzler, trying to participate.

Sandra looked annoyed at Mezzler that he had cut across Fowler. "Get out!" she said to him. He left the room, head hung low, leaving Fowler to deal with her.

The door closed after Mezzler and Sandra offered Fowler a seat. When she was sure Mezzler was out of ear shot she spoke up, relaxing a little. "I already know about the residue. We've had others check out what happened to Walt. Delcass informed me but we kept Mezzler out of the picture because he didn't have to know. Frankly, he's out of his depth."

Fowler was still angry. "So why didn't you tell me?"

Sandra met Fowler's angry stare. "Treat it as a test."

"I don't like being messed around, Sandra. We had a deal."

Sandra sat back into her seat. "Is that all you really want, Fowler? A one way ticket off Erstol and a glowing job reference? What about all those years spent in the Tank. Don't you want something back for them? I never had a problem with your N-Tek experiments but there was nothing I could do once the facts came out. Don't you feel the need to show Delcass you were right all along? He's the one who set you up three years ago. "

Fowler grimaced. "I don't need to prove a damn thing to Delcass."

Sandra looked at the picture of her father. "We all have something to prove Fowler," she said, looking more vulnerable than he had ever seen her. She seemed lost inside her own thoughts but then regained her composure.

Fowler began to feel the goal posts moving as Sandra was talking, knowing what an adept deal-maker she was. He knew she was worried that he might reveal to outsiders what was really going on in Citynet and undermine her perceived ability to control it. By personalising the problem she might be able to control Fowler and keep him on her side while utilising Delcass' skills as well.

"I expect you to keep your word. Delcass is your problem, not mine," said Fowler bitingly, knowing he had always been after her job.

Sandra smiled in response to the counter. "We both know my word is my bond. What I'm talking about is offering you an advisory seat on the board. We need someone with your skills. This is only the start for you Fowler. I want you back on my team; that's why I got you out! I needed the right reason for the board to sanction it. All you have to do is find out who is behind this. Get me some names! You know as well as I that the other alien co-operatives would love to see human control of Citynet end. This is one of the only successful human ventures in this sector. We have enemies in every alien camp who would like to sabotage us."

"Enemies don't necessarily have to be aliens," replied Fowler biting. He recalled the lonely days when no-one would answer his call and others who simply turned their backs on him. All his so-called friends had disappeared into their offices leaving whisper trails of his demise. "Before we proceed with all these grand plans, I need to know all you know," he added.

"You know as much as me now," she replied.

Fowler knew that Sandra was lying. "Okay then. I need unhindered access to all the on-line systems and freedom to move about as I like and talk to who I want. Lose the goons. Without that, you're not going to get the answers you're looking for."

"Granted," said Sandra. She paused thoughtfully. "You knew Walt, do you think he'd sell out?"

"When I knew him, no but people change." Fowler paused. "It all depends on how they're treated."

"Or how they perceive they're being treated," Sandra added as a retort. "Whatever you find out, I want you to tell me first. Just me."

Fowler was surprised. "What about Delcass?"

"You let me worry about Delcass." She gave him her personalised call card. "It's a direct line to my office. It's completely secure."

Fowler took the card and pocketed it. He turned and left the office. Outside Mezzler was walking the corridor nervously, his armpits soaked in sweat.

"What'd she say?" asked Mezzler.

Fowler enjoyed watching Mezzler sweat for a change.

"You don't want to know," replied Fowler and returned to Systems.

Mezzler wiped his sweaty forehead and began to get a sugar craving. "I'm not getting paid enough to take this crap," groaned Mezzler.

\*\*

In Systems, Fowler requested Walt's logs from the computer but none appeared on the holographic screen. He listed the change history and saw that all of the logs had been deleted the day after his accident.

"You have backups?" asked Fowler.

"No," replied Mezzler, accessing the admin services. "The backups were purged too. Whoever deleted them has been thorough."

"Can we see who deleted the logs?" asked Fowler.

"Sure," replied Mezzler but his face dropped when he saw that the changes had been made by Walt the day after his accident. "Looks like someone used his account."

Fowler nodded. "Okay, which Console made the changes?"

Mezzler made the request. "They were deleted in Walt's office."

Fowler looked up. "Search the personal locators database and find out who was in Walt's office at that time."

Mezzler sent the request.

"Just one employee," replied Mezzler as the name appeared on the screen.

"Okay, we've got our man," said Fowler, standing up.

"Not really," said Mezzler as the holographic picture appeared of a female employee. "That's Kay Brunner, Walt's assistant."

"Don't know her," replied Fowler.

"She's new. With us only a couple of months," answered Mezzler.

Fowler looked at her photo. "What's her brief?"

"She's a consultant. We kept her on to help Walt investigate the N-Teks. She specialises in your area," Mezzler wiped his brow.

"Okay, let's meet her."

\*\*

Kay was examining N-Tek samples with an electron microscope when Fowler and Mezzler walked into her office without knocking.

"Can I help you?" she asked, annoyed by the unexpected intrusion.

“This is Tom Fowler,” said Mezzler. “He’s come on-board to help out with the N-Tek problem.”

“I’d like a moment with Kay on my own,” said Fowler.

Mezzler grimaced and left the office, leaving the door ajar. Fowler walked over to the door and closed it over completely.

Fowler made direct eye contact with Kay. “I’d want to know why you deleted Walt’s personal logs.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking...”

Fowler cut across her and folded his arms. “Before you say anything, I know what really happened to Walt. I think you do too.”

Kay was taken aback by Fowler’s directness. “Who are you working for?”

“Sandra has given me permission to interview anyone I like. I need to know what Walt found out.”

“Delcass told me I was the only one assigned to the N-Tek problem,” said Kay defensively.

Fowler took a deep breath. “What was in the logs Kay?”

“I didn’t read them. They were personal,” she replied. “I cleaned out his account using his password. Delcass asked me to.”

Fowler sighed inwardly. There is was, that name again. Even now Delcass was working behind his back trying to undermine him from a distance.

Fowler sighed. “What else did Delcass say to you?”

“Nothing,” replied Kay evasively.

Even now, Fowler could see the distrust in Kay’s eyes. She had another piece of the jigsaw and wasn’t willing to give it up.

“I want to see your work schedules over the week before the accident.”

Kay gave them to him reluctantly and sat down, looking upset and annoyed. Fowler took them up and paged through the worksheet. “What brought you to Ursus?”

“We wanted to take some samples from a new dig.”

Fowler looked at the location. “In the Basalt Valley?” He shook his head. “That’s a preserved site. No-one’s allowed dig down there.”

Kay looked surprised as if it meant something to her. “Oh, you’ve been there before?”

Fowler nodded. "I did some studies of the ruins for my PhD. I was looking for a link with the N-Teks on Erstol but I ran out of funds. So, what did you find Kay?"

Kay shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing."

Fowler shook his head. His voice was getting harsher. "What were you looking for?"

She looked away evasively. "Walt never said."

Fowler knew she knew she wasn't going to tell him anything more. "Thanks, you've been a big help," said Fowler, throwing the schedule on the table and left the office. As he opened the door, Mezzler was leaning into it, trying to listen to their conversation.

Fowler walked past Mezzler, feeling his blood pressure rising again.

"Where to now?" asked Mezzler.

"I'm going to see Delcass," said Fowler. "You coming along?"

Mezzler swallowed hard. "No, I've a couple of things to do first. See you later." He reached for his pager as he walked away and pressed a button.

\*\*

The door to Delcass' office was wide open. "Come on in," said Delcass, "I've been expecting you."

Fowler walked into Delcass' office and looked around it. Nothing had changed in the three years since he had been in the tank. Everything was cold and efficient in the vice president's spacious office.

"I need some transport. I'm going to Ursus," said Fowler.

"Why?" asked Delcass. "You're not thinking of trying to run out on us already are you?"

Fowler had expected a comment like that from Delcass and paid no heed to it. "No, I keep my word," smiled Fowler, recalling Delcass' speech to him three years before that the company would do all it could to protect him when his N-Tek experiments were uncovered. It had all been a pack of lies. The memories lay heavily on Fowler's mind. "I want to follow up on some work Walt did."

Delcass smiled wryly. No-one talked to him the way. Only Fowler did and it still irked him. He pursed his lips a little. "You haven't changed a bit, Fowler." There was a clear coldness in Delcass' voice.

"Thanks," replied Fowler emptily and walked around the office, looking at the technical journals which Delcass had in place to impress all those who entered his office. The books had clearly never been read. Delcass displayed a hologram of the top floor of Erstol where craft were coming and going and looked up some details.

Fowler looked into the trash can by the book shelf and saw a wolf's Mask in it. "Been to a fancy dress lately?" asked Fowler.

"My son's birthday. You know how the kids like to dress up," replied Delcass. "Take the company Shuttle. It's all yours. Enjoy your wild goose chase." Fowler looked away and left the office. As the door closed, he heard Delcass' sardonic voice. "Don't forget Fowler. The clock is ticking. You're not out of the Tank yet."

Fowler resisted the urge to slam the door.