

Eight

Kay found Fowler slumped over a console in the labs; asleep from sheer exhaustion. She shook him and he sat up. Fowler rubbed his exhausted looking face, looking confused for a moment as if not knowing where he was.

“Didn’t you get to bed last night?” asked Kay.

Fowler shook his head. “Not really. Too much work to do.”

Kay shook her head. “You’re not going to be able to function if you’re exhausted.”

“I have to find out what the N-Teks want.”

Kay frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I found an N-Tek cluster on Ursus and they mated with my implants; that’s why I felt so lousy. Now they’re trying to communicate with me. They won’t let me goddamn sleep.”

Kay looked unconvinced. “Are you sure?”

Fowler nodded and showed her his arm with the words **Help Us** on it, looking as if it had been recently burnt onto his skin.

“Jesus,” muttered Kay. She frowned worriedly and touched Fowler’s forehead. “Do you still have a fever?”

“No, my immune system is treating the new N-Teks as native now. We’re just one big happy N-Tek family. Sometimes I feel like a goddamn N-Tek test tube.”

“What about your original implants?”

Fowler looked at Kay, wiping the sleep out of his eyes. “They’re working fine but I can’t communicate with them anymore using my cyberspace software. The older N-Teks are dominant and have replaced the N-Teks’ language. There’s new code in place which I haven’t been able to crack.”

“But I thought you cracked the N-Tek language.”

“The N-Teks I had inside me were synthesised within my laboratory three years ago. They were bred from N-Teks I extracted from samples found here on Erstol. I refined them and made them as simple as I could. The N-Teks on Ursus are much older and far more sophisticated. They contain a richer instruction set which I haven’t been able to decipher. It could take forever to figure it all out.”

Kay stepped into action. “Okay, show me the code.”

Fowler shook his head. "Don't waste your time. I've been trying all night and I can't solve it." He looked away distractedly, rubbing his chin.

"Come on Fowler, show me the new Ursus code that's been patched into your synthesised N-Teks."

Fowler nodded and displayed the new N-Tek code. Kay then compared it with the N-Teks which were proliferating Systems.

Fowler sighed. "They're not the same. That was the first check I made."

"That's fine. I expected as much," replied Kay calmly. "All right, let's see what the differences are between the ones in Systems and the ones you found on Ursus."

Kay used the electron microscope to examine the molecular structure of the different N-Tek samples, moving through them one by one. "Okay, let's assume that the N-Teks on Ursus are the oldest source." Fowler nodded, accepting the premise. The differences were highlighted holographically. Kay examined them closely and further broke them down into their constituents part. Kay nodded, smiling a little, isolating the code sequences.

"What?" asked Fowler.

"I recognise some of these code sequences. Look, there and there," she pointed. "They're recent; alien made."

"Are you sure?"

Kay nodded. "No doubt about it."

Fowler sat up. "I don't recognise them."

"N-Tek research has moved on since you were in the Tank, Fowler. Looks like the N-Teks here in Systems are derived from the N-Teks you found on Ursus. Best guess is that they have been spliced with this new alien code."

Fowler sat up, his eyes alive with the possibilities. "You know what that means?"

Kay smiled, nodding. "Someone has already altered the N-Tek code on Ursus. To do that they'll need to have cracked most of the code. We find them and we find out who tried to bury you on Ursus."

Fowler sat up, rubbing his tired eyes. "So where did you see this code before?"

"Only one person I know has the knowledge and resources to do this sort of work. I attended a seminar hosted by him last year. His name is Professor Asha Miku.

He's Ixian. Works downtown in their Ministry of Science. He demonstrated samples of this proposed N-Tek code at a conference I attended last year."

Fowler stood up. "Okay, let's go." He stopped and looked at her. "Thanks again."

Kay smiled, saying nothing.

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Again, Fowler travelled into Ixian territory but this time with Kay. However, she seemed calm and relaxed which surprised him.

"You come down here much?" asked Fowler.

"Occasionally," replied Kay. "I have some friends who live here."

Fowler shook his head. "You have friends who are Ixian?"

"Yes. Do you have a problem with that?" asked Kay.

Fowler snorted. "No problem at all. It's just I usually feel lucky to get out alive most of the time."

Kay smiled. "You should smile more. Maybe they'd like you."

Fowler frowned.

"Smile," urged Kay.

Fowler frowned harder as the floater touched down outside the Ixian building. They got out and Fowler straightened his hair, still feeling ragged. Together, they stood outside an ancient looking building which looked like it had been built in the first phase of Erstol's construction. It looked dark and unyielding like many of the Ixian buildings on Erstol. It had groups of black and yellow tiles which marked official Ixian buildings.

"So where are we?" asked Fowler.

"Outside the Ixian ministry of science." Kay took out a business card from her wallet. She placed it in the card reader and waited as it dialled through to the professor's office. Eventually, the professor's face appeared on the other side of the monitor. "Yes?" he inquired.

"Hello Professor, I'm Kay Brunner. I attended your talk last year about N-Tek panspermia."

"Ah yes, Kay, what can I do for you?"

“I was wondering if you have some time to talk to me and my colleague on some new N-Tek findings we’ve recently made.”

The professor perked up. “What sort of findings?”

“We’d rather talk to you in person. It won’t take long.”

The professor frowned a little but his curiosity got the better of him. “All right then, come on up. I’m on the fifth floor, just follow my card.” He buzzed them in.

The interior of the building was cold and impersonal with circular inscriptions painted on the walls. Kay and Fowler took the elevator.

“You’ve done research into N-Tek panspermia?” Fowler was impressed but tried not to show it.

“Sure, I did some research on it in the early days. I did my major in biogenetic programming and nanocomputers. Professor Asha is primarily a biogenetic expert. Recently, he moved onto N-Teks to see if he could synthesise them to automate gene therapy. Could benefit a lot of people not just Ixians.”

“Once gene therapy is all he wants to do.”

“What do you mean?”

The elevator doors opened. “Later,” replied Fowler.

They walked up to the room and knocked politely. Professor Asha opened the door and bid the two humans welcome. They received curious stares from the other Ixians in the office hall.

“Welcome Kay. It’s good to see you again.”

“And you too professor.” Kay smiled. “This is my associate Tom Fowler.”

The professor smiled knowingly. “I am familiar with your work, Mr. Fowler. I read your research paper with interest.”

Fowler smiled wryly. “That makes a change.”

“Now, what have you got for me?” he asked.

Fowler took the N-Teks crystal from his pocket and handed it to the professor. “Do you recognise this?”

The professor’s Ixian eyes blinked rapidly with excitement. “Aah! Of course! This is an N-Tek cluster. Where did you get this from?”

“In a mine shaft on Ursus,” replied Fowler.

“Ursus. Excellent!” The professor sat up excitedly.

Kay sat forward. “You’ve worked with this material before?”

The Professor nodded. “Of course.”

“Where did you get your samples from?” asked Fowler suspiciously, wondering if he was behind their sabotage.

“I was given a sample by an anonymous benefactor who asked me to examine it. I began from there.”

Fowler frowned sceptically. “And how long ago was that?”

“About two years ago. I have been searching everywhere for its source. This is a great breakthrough! I did not know it was from Ursus. Thank you very much.”

Kay looked at Fowler, exchanging glances.

Still, Fowler wanted answers. “So you’ve cracked the N-Tek code within it?”

“I am not at liberty to discuss that.”

Fowler stood up angrily and took the fragment back. “Look professor, we came here in good faith. The least you can do is help us out now that we have helped you. Quid quo pro.”

“Mister Fowler, you must realise that I am servant of the Ixian government. There are channels and protocols which must be followed before I can discuss my work with anyone.”

Kay nodded. “We understand that professor but we have reason to believe that these N-Teks have been altered and are posing a threat to the continued safe operation of Citynet which is in everyone’s interest both human and Ixian.”

The professor looked unnerved. “Altered in what way?”

“New code has been spliced into them; code which resembles some of your research work to date.”

“That is impossible.” The professor looked shaken. “I think you should go now.”

Fowler grimaced. “I’m not going until you tell me what’s going on!”

The professor gave Fowler his card. “Call to my home tonight after sun-down. It will be easier to talk there. Now please, leave.”

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They walked away from the building slowly in the drizzling rain. “An anonymous benefactor. What sort of fools does he take us for?” Fowler shook his head.

Kay shrugged. “He might be telling the truth.”

“You’d trust an Ixian.”

Kay took a deep breath. “There you go again, Fowler.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re going back into your own little paranoid world again. Why shouldn’t we trust the professor? I chaired the same committees together with him. I know him. He is an honourable person.”

“You are so naive.” Fowler shook his head.

Kay looked exasperated by Fowler. “And you are so paranoid! Not everyone is your enemy Fowler. There’s good and bad everywhere. Some of the Ixians are good too.”

“He works for the Ixian government! Doesn’t that tell you anything?”

“Yes, he needs a lot of money to do his work. You should learn to trust people, Fowler. Not everyone is out to get you.”

Fowler stopped in the light drizzle. “I used to think like you once, Kay. I trusted people and I ended up in the Tank. I learned the hard way.”

Kay smarted. “You’re like a dog that’s been kicked too hard. You growl at anyone who comes near you, offering help.” Kay’s face showed her frustration. “This is a completely different situation. Can’t you see that?”

“Is it?” Fowler was unconvinced. “I was nearly buried alive on Ursus. I take that very personally.”

“Look just trust me for a change.”

Fowler said nothing and walked on, frowning.