

Fast Eddie

by

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(Comments appreciated)

Where do I begin... to write down my misadventure. I would have never picked up a pen and began had it not been for my host. He's the type of fellow who tells you what to do and his partners (soldiers) make sure you did just as your told. This hideout, this fortress has more weapons than I've seen in months. There is a guard at my door this minute, put there for my protection so I was told. Yeh right! He's got a mean looking revolver with a huge bore. That's bad enough but he points it directly at my chest and waves it around when he addresses me. I can't describe the look in his eyes. I truly believe he would love to do me in. He thinks I'm an enemy and a threat to my host. I am a guest of the leader of this organization.

I sit here and think of what has happened to bring me here. My mind wanders back to when I was an innocent eight year old kid. I worried more about what games to play than anything else. My mom brought us to the Mile High City after she and my dad started fighting. She thought it would be good to grow up near relatives. She never knew what was in store for us all. No one knew except the scientist and interfering generals who were developing project "UnderNet". The national/global computer network that was going to make our lives simpler by linking the regional infrastructure management computers. It made sense to have a system where electricity was diverted from one grid to another were it was needed more. Same with all the other resources of man.. fuel, water, food, and even surplus peoplepower in the form of the ten year old National Civilian Corp. If only the military hadn't been involved. They think everything has to be a part of the defense plans for our country. When the system went on-line, their supercomputers were blamed for the cold, heartless decision of the system. They were designed to keep on working through any natural or man-made disaster, including this Civil War of 2009. Most people think that the "UnderNet" planned and orchestrated the civil war. The first outbreaks were over resources. Fuel and water that was going to the big cities at the expense of the rural communities. 'The greatest good for the greatest amount of people' we were all told.

Now, after three years of civil war, life is very hard. This brings us up to a week ago. My story, in my opinion, is about a kid trying to stay alive in the streets of the Mile High City. Each day a struggle for food and a safe place to sleep at night. I lost my mom at the disaster relief center set up in the city park. She was killed for the contents of her small backpack. Most of it was family keepsakes like old pictures of my grandparents and of me as a buck-naked baby. I haven't seen a relative for months.

I was searching the rubble of the government buildings in the federal center on Alameda Blvd. when I found the doorway. It was buried under the exploded four-story building but I wiggled my way down to it. If I was ten pounds heavier, I would have never gotten in, but I did. The door was solid metal at least three inches thick but the explosion had split part of the door frame and I could squeeze through. I was giddy with the thought of what I might find. Nowadays, you traded for what you needed. I found a room that I was sure no others had looted. I wasn't worried about getting things out because all I would take was small items I could hide in my clothes. The street gangs would take anything larger they saw me carrying.

When I got my shoulders through the split in the door frame, I crawled through into the dusty floor. It was black as coal in the room and I hadn't

thought of bringing a light. That black is why the glowing red switch was so noticeable. After a minute my eyes adjusted to the dark and the dim glow of the switch lit up the area around it. I could see that it was a power control panel, a lot like the one we had at home for our old 786 computer.

I felt my way over to the light. That's when I noticed the sound. A very low hum you felt as much as heard. I was surprised that this room had electricity since the building above it didn't even exist. Some parts of the city still had electricity but it was getting to be less all the time. I reached for the switch and without knowing what I was getting myself into, turned it on. Just to the left, a small computer monitor screen began to glow blue. One small word appeared in the top left. It said "Ready". Growing up in the computer age made all of this very comforting. I hadn't seen a working computer in long time. I hadn't played a computer game in at least a year. I wondered if this computer had any games.

The glow of the screen helped to light the room. My eyes didn't need too much light. I looked around. In the center of the room were what seemed to be four padded columns with a seat going around each. The back wall was lined with electronic equipment and six large cases about as big as a washing machine. I recognized the columns. I had seen a special on super computers on TV. This room had four of them. The large electronic cases in the back were data storage. Huge hard drives. The wall I was at had a long counter. Above it was one shelf lined with notebooks, stacks of paper, and boxes of computer disks. I knew that these might be valuable and easy to carry. There were two other computer terminals like the one I had started. Except for the low hum and the active terminal, everything seem to be dead. I turned toward the terminal but I didn't see a keyboard. That seemed strange. I looked closer and saw that the keyboard was hidden underneath the counter on a sliding tray. I pulled it out and pushed the enter key.

A textured window appeared in the center of the screen. It had a dozen icons underneath the title. The title read "Regional UnderNet" in large letters. I didn't see anything that looked like a game icon. One of the icons said System Status with a picture of a small desktop computer. I used the mouseball on the keyboard to move the arrow to this icon and clicked it on. The screen cleared and began to scroll written text showing the status of different functions. Most showed that they were not available. When the screen stopped, it read "Ready" again. I hit the enter key and got the icons back. One other icon said "Vocal Interface". That sounded interesting and I clicked it on. I heard a loud "hum" from a small speaker on the shelf above me and it spoke to me.

The computer thought I was someone else. It said, "It's nice to talk to you again, it's been five hundred and thirty five days, eighteen hours, and thirty two minutes since our last visit." I cringed with fear. What had I started and would it cause trouble? I stood silent for a minute before I spoke. "Who do you think I am?", I stuttered. "How would you like me to address you?", it spoke. I had heard electronic speech before. At school, most of the CD Rom disks we used in computer lab had a lot of speech but this seemed different. It came clear and smooth from the speaker. "You can call me Vanessa, everyone else does. What do I call you?" I spoke toward the terminal thinking that the microphone must be hidden somewhere there. "Some called me "Fast Eddie" or sometimes just Eddie. You are welcome to address me however you wish. I will do my best to respond as you desire." I wasn't as worried now. It seemed that this computer would help me when I needed it and I could always turn off the red switch. One thing that all mankind learned in the last few years, you can't trust a computer too much. This one was a very advanced computer and a part of the enemy...the UnderNet. For all I knew, this could be monitored somewhere else. In some room, somewhere, the UnderNet could be aware that I just turned on the red switch. I wasn't afraid of someone showing up. I knew only someone of my small size could fit into the rubble and then find this basement room. I would hear anyone bigger trying to get in. They

could trap me but I have been trapped before, and always seem to get out.

I spoke out to the terminal. "What is your function, Eddie?" The speaker began to tell me about it's part in a highly classified project to monitor the activities in the western region of the UnderNet system for the National Security Administration. It was to record, analyze, and report activities of the UnderNet. The reports were to emphasize activities that seemed extraordinary and tracked anything that was related to the Department of Defense. I could see that the stories of the UnderNet were true. The government was watching parts of itself because they didn't trust each other. I was curious about the UnderNet system and why it went wrong. I spoke out loud one word, "Report!"

The padded columns behind me began to softly click and clatter. It sounded like our old home computer reading the hard drive. No other lights were visible in the room. I waited for a full minute and still no response from Fast Eddie. I walked over to the boxes of software and opened them up. Inside were standard Write Once Read Many (WORM) storage disks like we used in school. They all had fancy printed labels but they weren't store-bought software. Since most had dates on them as their title, I assumed that they were reports from that date. I put the boxes back and walked around the padded columns. In the low light of the glowing monitor, I could see that this room was very clean. Not much in the way of small items that I could salvage. The speaker began to talk again.

It began by saying a date about a year and a half ago. It listed off boring statistics of power consumption and allocation of resources. It was true that the cities were getting the lions share of resources. Everything was being diverted to the big cities. It even spoke of cutting off resources to the central part of Wyoming because of lack of justification. I remembered the TV news stories about ranchers attacking convoys of trucks travelling through Wyoming. I listened to the downfall of life as we knew it. Eddie talked about allocation of military forces to enforce the decisions made by the UnderNet. That included stationing full military detachments to protect the main frame computer centers, like the federal center here in Mile High. Then the report began describing the statistical probability of civil war. It was cold and unemotional about the numbers of citizens expected to be "lost". The report seldom made reference to what was happening in the eastern part of the country. Once in a while it would mention a directive or order that came from Washington that effected what was happening in this region. It made constant reference to dates. The report covered about six months when it described an administrative order that spoke of the 'greatest good for the greatest number of people' and cut off all resources to the rural parts of the west. The entire state of Nevada, except for military installations, was to be abandoned. Eastern Montana, northern Idaho, most of Utah, and eastern Colorado were all listed as "Minimal Need Areas" and were to be "de-emphasized". The body was cutting parts of itself off to save the rest. The report began describing in greater detail the events of civil disobedience. It specifically mentioned my present host. The man who was making headway organizing the rural west. It called this new army the "Sagebrush Rebels". My host had located the center of his organization just a few miles from the Mile High City. I listened closely to this part of the report since it fell so close to home for me. Everyone knew that it was the Rebels who had caused most of the destruction of the Mile High City. It was the final segment of this part of the report that stopped my heart. The computer said that my host would "continue to take instructions from this regional office of the UnderNet and assist in the completion of the goal of restructuring America".

So everything was a part of the plan. Even I might have been a key piece of the puzzle. After the report completed, I loaded up my pockets with items I could carry, turned off the glowing red switch, and wiggled back up to the sunlight. I went back to my main job of finding food, keeping out of danger, and surviving. It

was the computer disks that led the rebels to me. I had a hard time finding someone who wanted to trade for the disks since most people I knew didn't have much need for them. I must have talked to two dozen people about the disks. I finally got a black eye and a sore rib from a man who wanted to know where I got them from. He took the two disks I carried as samples and left me gasping for breath in an alley. Three days later I was captured by a roaming gang. I had heard they were looking for me but I had to come out of hiding to trade. They were waiting for me. I found out then that when push comes to shove, I didn't have a single friend on the streets. They all wanted to turn me in for the reward.

The gang took me to this building, a good hours travel outside of the city. I was thrown into a room that was probably an office in the old days but all of the furniture was gone. Only a few cardboard boxes that I could use to hide in and shiver while I waited. One good thing happened when the door opened. A small box of food and water was left. It was the best meal I had had in months. I was finally brought before my host. I was in no condition to argue with anything they said. I was terrified and thought for sure I was as good as dead.

My host sat at a wooden conference room table looking at some papers. Two aides, each clutching a notebook in their hands, stood behind him and quickly responded when he spoke. Finally one of the aides noticed me and my guards and spoke into the ear of my host. He stood up and came towards me. I couldn't read his face. It was stone cold but his eyes were alive. He ordered my guards to bring me to the end of the table and make me sit down. They immediately backed away as if they were afraid that they might be noticed along with me. My host sat down and looked at me for a moment. He then asked my name. I was so terrified that my voice sounded more like a squeak than a name. He paused and then quietly told me not to be afraid. He said that I might be of great help to him and "our" cause. "What cause?", I asked. "Your in the head office of the Sagebrush Rebellion and your my guest", he said. "I am the elected leader of the fight of the common man against the corrupt and bloated government". It sounded like a political speech when he said it. His voice even got louder like he was talking to an audience. "I had you brought here because we know of your find. We know that the computer disks you were trying to trade could have only come from one place. If I could get access to the place you found, then we might be able to salvage more data." He didn't know that the room I had found was still alive and active. He didn't know that Fast Eddie had told me all about my host. The head of the rebellion was a pawn of the UnderNet and following the plans that they developed for America. I was so confused my head hurt. I didn't know what to do. This man who sat next to me and asked me for my help was not someone I could ignore. Anyone could tell he got what he wanted, or else. If I told him of my discovery, and he got access to the active computer, who knows what that would mean. If I mentioned that I knew all about the UnderNet's involvement, it may mean my death. How could I expose the spy who lead the rebellion? I needed to know more about the situation.

"What is it worth to you to know where I found the disks?". I asked. He smiled at me and asked, "What do you need, my dear? I can provide you with almost anything you could ask for." I thought for a few seconds and responded. "I need things to make my life easier. I need supplies and weapons and transportation to a safer place. I'm tired of the Mile High City and the struggle to keep alive. There must be a safer place." My host slapped both hands down on the table and said "Done! You lead us to the computer room and I'll get you what you want. My men will take you to our compound in southern Utah. That's where I go when I need to relax and feel safe. You stay in the holding room and tomorrow morning you will go with my men and me to the city. You will hold up you side of the bargain. But be warned, I don't want to waste any time tomorrow, or you will answer to me." He waved his arm and my two guards immediately took me away. One of the guards handed my a notebook and a pen and told me to spend the rest of the day writing down anything I could remember about the computer room. That brings me to now. I have

sat here hiding in my cardboard boxes writing this story. Unfortunately I don't know how it will end. I have to re-examine the key points. The UnderNet was a major cause of the civil war- the civil war was killing everyone I know or have known- my host is an agent of the UnderNet- if someone could destroy the UnderNet, it might stop the war- I am a tiny little girl who normally couldn't do anything to make a difference- BUT, I have found myself in a unique position where I can make a difference by what I do. My mind spun around and I finally drifted off to sleep.

I was awoken by my host just after dawn. He burst into the room with his aides following him like leaves behind a dustdevil. He had a huge grin on his face and kept saying what a great day this was going to be. I thought to myself that when he finds out that the computer is still active, it should make his whole month great. We ate hard bread and cheese. All of the rebels seemed in high spirits and were very nice to me. I began to feel more relaxed and told them what types of tools we would need to get into the room. They didn't ask for my written story. I had hidden it underneath the largest cardboard box in my holding room. We loaded into five pickup trucks and began our journey back into town. I got to ride in the cab of one of the trucks.

I began to change my thinking about the rebels. They were treating me with respect and I actually had some social status with this group. Something I haven't had for a very long time. We drove on side roads around the outside of the city and came into the federal center from the southwest. We drove within a few city blocks of the crumbled building. No one bothered us, in fact, it seemed that most people ran and hid when they saw us coming. Maybe it was the two dozen armed men in the trucks. When we parked and began walking, my host chuckled and laughed with his soldiers. "I knew that the computer center had to be in a government building somewhere. The federal center is so big that I didn't know where to start." he told his men. I travelled in the center of the head group. My host ordered his men to follow my instructions as to where to go. We got to the rubble of the exploded building and I pointed to a spot where they should begin clearing a path.

With the soldiers working together, they had the cement moved very quickly and could see where the door was hidden. When we got the metal door cleared, there wasn't a handle on it of any kind. There wasn't any way to open the door. Men used their long metal prybars that worked so easily on the cement to pound and pry on the door but it didn't move an inch. My host became very anxious and would yell at the men to work harder. Finally they stopped and backed off. My host grabbed me by my shoulder and pushed me toward the broken door frame. "Get inside and see if you can open the door", he ordered. I crawled through this time with a flashlight lighting the way. I stood inside the room and looked around. Nothing had changed since I had been here before. Next to the door was a lever labeled "emergency release". I grabbed it with both hands and pushed upward with all my might. When it reached a point, the door clicked and opened slightly on it's own. Instantly, my host burst through nearly knocking me over. He stood with his hands on his hips and turned to look around the room. He kept saying "Oh My God!" over and over again.

Only three other men came into the room with my host. I spoke to the one standing next to me and pointed at the glowing red switch. With the additional light in the room, the switch wasn't as obvious as before. He pointed it out to my host who then got real excited. He turned to me and asked what I knew about the room. I briefly told him about turning on the switch last time and "talking to the computer". He stood and didn't say a word to me. He walked over and pushed the red switch. As before, the terminal screen turned blue and the word "Ready" appeared.

I told my host to pull out the keyboard and push enter, which he did. The textured window appeared with the icon list. By this time, all the other men were

crowded around me and my host looking at the terminal. I pointed to the icon that allowed the computer to speak and told everyone how I was able to listen and talk to the computer. I didn't say anything about the contents of our discussion. I decided to keep that part a secret for now. My host moved the pointer arrow to the "Vocal Interface" icon. The computer said, "It's nice to talk to you again Vanessa, it's been five days, six hours, and twenty minutes since our last visit." My host laughed out loud along with all of his men. I stood silent and tried to think as fast as I could. What to do??

My host quieted down his men with a wave of his hand and spoke, "Computer, I am here with Vanessa and I need your assistance." The computer replied, "I am here to serve you. How would you like me to address you?" My host puffed up his chest and put his hands on his hips. "I am Simon Green, leader of the Sagebrush Rebellion." The computer seemed to pause a moment. The soft clicks could be heard from the padded columns. I could tell something was going on but the others didn't seem to notice. Finally the computer spoke. "Simon Green, your presence here will allow me to finally complete our roles in the reorganization of America. The UnderNet thanks you and me for our excellent service as a part of the greater plan. You and I have done an excellent job of removing and reducing the unnecessary drain of valuable resources by the western cities. It is key to the success of the plan. We will be remembered as a key part of history. Your final orders and reward for your service will be issued to you in thirty seconds." I noticed one of the small icons flickering. It was a small digital clock counting backwards.

I turned and ran out the door as fast as I could. All the men bent down to look close as the clock showed ten, then nine, eight, seven... They all stood up straight and backed off. Everyone there had one horrible thought in their minds. I didn't hear the explosion that took out most of the soldiers and sealed the computer room forever. All I listened for was the beating of my still living heart.