

Six

They took Kay's ship back to the dig. She guided the ship low and fast over the dead planet, dipping down into the valley. What had taken Fowler almost an hour by foot took no more than a minute or so by the ship. Fowler checked the external sensors and found there was no sign of another ship, lurking in the distance. They were forced to land on the protected site, crushing all the signs warning against landing there. They suited up. Dust devils swirled in the distance as a storm was approaching. Fowler felt his strength returning but had to continually drink fluids to keep his temperature down. Together they picked up Mezzler's remains and brought the corpse onto Kay's ship. Once on board, Kay went back outside again and took some video footage of the dig, gathering evidence of what had happened recently.

On board the ship, Fowler stood over Mezzler's corpse. Mezzler's suit was dusty, the glass plate on the visor coated with blackened blood. Fowler took a blanket and spread it over Mezzler's corpse. Fowler looked out of the ship at Kay and admired the calm organized way she had handled the situation. He took a seat, feeling his energy levels slowly returning as he drank more fluids.

She returned, meeting Fowler's stare. "You were very lucky, you know. If that storm had hit you might not have made it back."

"You make your own luck," replied Fowler. "I would have figured something out."

"If you say so," replied Kay, unconvinced. "We'll leave your ship behind and have it picked up. You're in no condition to pilot one."

"I couldn't agree with you more." Fowler sat back as the ship lifted off, making its way back to Erstol. "Again, thanks for your help."

"Anytime," replied Kay. "So do you think the Ixians are behind what happened here?"

"I don't know. The Ixian markings on the digger don't necessarily mean that it was them. Any alien can buy Ixian machines on Erstol and ship them here," said Fowler. "It's non military so there's no embargo." The ship took off, climbing above the orange landscape. "So what brought you to Erstol?" wondered Fowler.

"I wanted to find out something," she replied.

"What?" asked Fowler.

“If it was true what everyone was saying,” she paused. “That Erstol was a new beginning for us all. That it proved we could live together in peace with other life-forms. I lost my brother in the war with the Ixians. For a long time, I felt a lot of hate and anger. In the end, I realized it was eating me up. I needed to make a change. So I came to Erstol.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” replied Fowler, growing quiet. “Was he involved in the fighting?”

Kay shook her head. “He was on a medical convoy to the colonies during the war. His ship was destroyed by an Ixian cruiser. They claimed it was a legitimate target.” Kay snapped out of her painful memories. “So what about you. What brought you here?”

“Research on Ursus until the funds dried up. Then Citynet offered me a job. After that, I worked my way up to CTO.”

Kay nodded. “You got any family?”

“I’m a single child. My parents split up when I was ten and I lived with my step-father until I was old enough to go to college. We never got on. I haven’t looked back since.”

Kay had always sensed the Fowler was a loner and thought it explained a lot about the way he behaved. “So what was your major in college?”

Fowler sat back. “Archeology and science. There’s a lot of demand for archeologists researching dead civilisations to see if there are any technologies that can be re-used back home. What about you?”

“Oh,” smiled Kay. “I’m just a programmer who likes the company of N-Teks.”

“So what do you think then?” asked Fowler.

“About what?”

“Do you think Erstol can work? Can we all be one big happy family?” he wondered.

“I used to think so before I came to Ursus.” She looked back at Mezzler’s corpse. “Now I’m not so sure.”

As they broke out of orbit, Fowler set himself the task of filing a report, detailing what had happened to him and Mezzler. He kept it deliberately short, still feeling nauseous as he wrote, then sent it directly to Sanda. Fowler disconnected from the Citynet server before Sandra could contact him directly. He was in no mood to talk to

her, feeling drained. He finished off his drink and lay down on a make-shift bunk, trying to avoid looking at the large black body bag in the air lock. He took the crystal he had found on Erstol and examined it closely. It was shaped like a diamond but its surface was black and unyielding. Yet, if he held it to the light, he noted that it refracted light, spreading out its colours, as if there was order within the crystal on the molecular level. Fowler wondered if it was something which was worth killing for and pocketed it, knowing that there would be time to examine it in detail later. He slept lightly, aware of the strange dream he had experienced on Ursus. As a student, he had slept soundly on the base, eking out a mundane existence. The revealing dream was new to him and shocking by its clarity. Fowler reckoned he was hallucinating and took some pain killers to ease the swelling in his implants and joints.

The words, *Help Us*, resonated in his mind almost like a whisper and he did his best to ignore it, watching as Erstol began to grow closer on the scanners. He poured another water from the dispenser and downed it in one.

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The wide defensive field array, covering the domed world of Erstol was unmistakable. In the distance beyond it, construction was proceeding on the new ringworld which was Erstol's replacement. Erstol's current settlement of a billion alien souls no longer had enough space. There would be room for a hundred billion on the ring and it could be expanded.

"How long before the Ring is complete?" asked Fowler.

"There are always delays. Current estimate is two years from now before it's fully habitable. The Ixians are complaining they're not getting their fair share of the work or living space."

Fowler nodded. Construction had already begun on it before he had gone into the Tank.

"Is Citynet still underwriting it?"

Kay nodded. "Sandra is still the majority shareholder."

They passed through the tight security cordon around Erstol and passed through the dome's surface. The artificial light illuminated the giant settlement and they flew towards Citynet tower. Kay guided the ship into the company hangar located beside the Citynet Tower. Two security guards arrived and they took Mezzler's body away, both men heaving under the weight of the corpse.

Kay saw how washed out Fowler's looked. "You need some medical attention? I can call a doctor," she suggested.

Fowler shook his head. "No, I've some people I need to see first."

Kay frowned. "But Fowler, you can't just leave..."

"See you later, Kay. Tell Delcass I've sent Sandra a full report if he asks."

Kay threw her arms in the air, thrown by how cold he was after all her help. "Well thanks a lot!" she replied.

"Don't mention it," he replied.

"Fowler!" exclaimed Kay but Fowler walked out of the hangar and onto the streets of Erstol, not looking back. He took in the once familiar sight of people and aliens going about their business and hailed a passing Floater. Quickly, he hopped into it. The Floater ascended above the high rise buildings and stopped there, waiting for its destination. Fowler looked out of the window, glancing down at Kay who was standing in the hangar doorway, light flooding out into the dim alley. She looked tense and confused, arms folded. Fowler knew he had cut her short, feeling slightly guilty, but was determined not to become a victim like Mezzler. He winced as the N-Teks sent a spike of pain up his neck, knowing what he must do. They were still acting up and he didn't have time to answer lots of questions about Mezzler's untimely death; especially to the likes of Delcass. His temperature was down but he felt like he was suffering from some sort of bug, sapping him of his strength. Worst of all, many of his implants were no longer responding.

"Location?" asked the Floater.

Fowler specified his destination, absent-mindedly to the computer. "BJs Cyberspace Consultancy opposite the museum of natural history." It was the closest thing he had to home now, he realized. He flashed his company card at the console. "Charge it."

"Thank you," replied the Floater. It arced upwards gracefully and slotted with mathematical precision into the crowded travel tubes. The travel tube lights flashed past Fowler's eyes as Citynet Tower faded into the distance behind him, like a bad memory.

The Floater exited the high speed travel tube and arced down towards Erstol. Fowler sat back into the comfortable seat, looking above him at the ringworld above the dome. It resembled a saintly halo above Erstol. He changed his focus and looked down. Different sectors of Erstol which he had known well were taking shape.

It was time to see some old friends.

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Fowler walked past the elegant Museum of Natural History. Outside it was a statue of Franz Verner, the founder of Erstol. He had been loved by human and alien alike because he had spent all his money on public works, showing no favour to one side or the other. The Museum was one of his great legacies, showing the origin of the various alien species, fostering understanding amongst them. Fowler crossed the road. His feelings were a mixture of nostalgia and hope as he stood outside BJs. The cyberspace consultancy had an ordinary shop front with circular windows on the upper levels, mirroring Ixian architecture more than human. Behind the ordinary double doors in front of him, Fowler recalled spending many of his happiest times. Even as CTO of Citynet, Fowler had spent most of his lunch breaks here with Jerry and Bunny, filling them in on the office politics of Citynet. He pressed the buzzer on the door.

During his trial, Jerry and Bunny had returned to Earth and could not be contacted. At the height of Fowler's N-Tek research work, Jerry had even let him work in the office all night. Jerry had helped Fowler solve many of his technical problems stabilising the implants and patching them into his immune system so they would not be attacked by his white blood cells. Now, Fowler needed the expertise that BJs had to offer. The N-Teks were acting up in a way which he had never experienced before. Fowler looked into the shop front and saw the thin figure of Bunny approaching, his ponytail as long as ever. Bunny was a joint partner in BJs and the man on the floor who kept everything running smoothly. He pulled open the door, shaking his head with disbelief and greeted his old friend. "Fowler duuude!"

Bunny's greeting left Fowler speechless and he just smiled. Excitedly, he started bouncing up and down in his trademark fashion and then settled.

"You look like shit, are you on the run?" asked Bunny, eyes darting left and right.

Fowler shook his head. "I'm here on business," replied Fowler, smiling easily. "Citynet pulled me out of the Tank to help out with the N-Tek infestation."

"So your nano-dudes finally broke you out," smiled Bunny, pulling the door wide open. "Well come on in you felon!"

"Where's Jerry?" asked Fowler.

“Where else, in the pit,” replied Bunny.

“C’mon,” said Bunny, who skated across the shop floor on his anti-gravity heelee runners.

Jerry was the real brains behind BJ’s successful business venture as a cyberspace consultancy. With hundreds of thousands of corporate users on the Net, they paid lucratively for BJ’s expertise in tracking technology trends and more importantly, cracking down on Corporate cybertheft.

Fowler walked to the back of the shop. He was about to climb the antiquated spiral staircase when Bunny blocked his way.

“Not going to happen Fowler,” said Bunny firmly.

“Come on out of my way, I need to see Jerry.” But Bunny pushed back on Fowler.

“We have unfinished business dude.” Bunny looked serious. “You think I’d just let you up there without settling it?”

Fowler looked confused. He could have easily pushed Bunny out of the way but held back. “What business?”

“Dude, don’t pretend you don’t remember.”

Fowler drew a blank. “Help me out here Bunny.”

“The decider dude. The series!” Bunny looked earnestly at Fowler.

Fowler sighed. “Look Bunny, I haven’t got time for this.”

“Oh, so you forfeit then. The series is mine! Loser!” Bunny smiled raising his arms. “Winner! The series is mine!”

Fowler stood back. “Hey now, wait a minute. I didn’t say I forfeit.”

“You turned down a direct challenge dude. I win. Those are the rules.”

“Look,” said Fowler. “I’m not well. I’ve just got back from Ursus. I’ve just spent three years in the Tank...”

Bunny shook his head. “Well I just got a new tooth dude.” He showed it to Fowler. “I’ve been on pain meds for the last week but I still wouldn’t wuss out of a direct challenge.”

“I haven’t played in three years!” protested Fowler.

“Neither have I dude!” Bunny was having none of Fowler’s excuses.

“Why not? You could play Jerry anytime.”

Bunny sighed. “He won’t play me. He says I’m a cheat.”

Fowler smiled. “Well you are.”

“Dude, that hurts me deeply, right here in my heart.”

Fowler smiled. “Your heart is on the other side.”

But Bunny’s head dropped disappointedly. “You know something Fowler. We had something special. We had the series man. I’ve been waiting three years for the decider. Thinking about nothing else man. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?” Bunny gave Fowler his sad look, like something special had been lost. His head dropped and he moved out of the way. “All right then dude, just go on up. It’s over.”

Fowler looked at Bunny sad demeanour and couldn’t help himself. “Ok, just one game.”

Bunny’s mood instantly changed. “Dude! You’re back!”

Bunny brought Fowler to the back of the shop and pulled the dusty sheet off their old fussball table. He took a small ball from a box on the shelf and gave it to Fowler, like it was a precious religious object. Fowler inspected it and then rolled it into the middle of the table and they began to play. For Fowler, it was as if he’d never been in the Tank. Bunny did his trick of trying to push the table a little but Fowler put his foot against the leg.

“Stop cheating,” smiled Fowler, knowing what was coming next.

“I’m not cheating dude. The floor is slippery that’s all. Bunny knocked the ball into the back of Fowler’s net and Bunny put his fist in the air. Fowler couldn’t keep up with the speed of the game and lost 10-0. He shook his head, knowing what was coming next. A holographic image of Fowler’s face superimposed inside a duck’s face appeared above the table and his image began to quack like a duck. Bunny made a quacking sound too, enjoying his victory over Fowler. “Bunny wins the Erstol World Fussball series! The crowd roars!” A simulated crowd began to roar. He skated around the room on his wheelies and ended up back at the table.

He looked Fowler in the eye. “You want a chance to get even?”

Fowler smiled and nodded, fighting his way back as his reflexes improved. They played a couple more games until they were even again. Fowler laughed and joked with Bunny who was up to his old tricks. He suddenly realized it had been years since he had laughed so much. He felt his co-ordination returning a little even with the NTEK problem he was suffering.

“Come on, we’d better go up to Jerry,” said Fowler finally.

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Fowler climbed the antique spiral staircase. He smiled as he opened the circular hobbit styled door and walked into the pit. The giant room had been modelled after a hobbit dwelling with curving wooden eaves and a circular window at the other end of it, letting in the dim alley light. The room was also littered with every imaginable technology device.

Jerry leaned out from behind a row of holographic monitors, having watched Fowler come into the shop. "I heard you were out but I didn't believe it." Jerry got out of his seat and gave Fowler a hug. "My God, Tom, you look like hell."

"I know," replied Fowler. "My implants are acting up."

Jerry frowned, getting down to business immediately. "Which ones?"

"All of them. They've gone crazy on me. I just got back from Ursus."

"Ursus?" replied Jerry. "What the hell were you doing down there?"

Fowler sighed. "It's a long story."

Jerry looked concerned. "Okay, let's take a look at you. We can catch up later." Jerry gestured to Bunny who immediately brought a chair over to Fowler. Using a syringe, Jerry drew some blood from Fowler's fingertip and placed the drops in a sampler by his desk.

"It's going to take a while. Sit," urged Jerry.

Fowler slouched in a seat and poured himself a glass of water, swallowing it quickly. "You heard what happened to Walt?" asked Fowler.

"It was all over the newsnets. Some called it Fowler's Revenge." Jerry raised his eyebrows, looking for a reply.

Fowler remained unmoved. "I had nothing to do with it. I found drybozine residue on Walt's skin."

Jerry nodded. "Sounds like a professional job." He glanced over at Bunny who said nothing. Jerry checked the analysis of Fowler's blood. "Looks like you're up to your neck in it as usual. You should have joined us when you had a chance."

"You know, I should have done a lot of things and I still can but I'm not out of the Tank yet," said Fowler. "The Citynet servers have been compromised by the N-Teks. If I don't sort it out, then I'm back in again." Fowler looked on as the analysis of the blood sample containing the N-Teks continued.

Jerry shook his head. "To hell with Sandra and her cronies! What did those leeches ever do for you?" asked Jerry. "They sold you out. Bunny and I can get you

off Erstol and back to Earth, no questions asked. We have some friends who can re-ID you, no problem. Why not let her and those rats sink.”

Fowler shook his head. “And be on the run for the rest of my life, worrying about some bounty hunter around every corner? No thanks.”

Jerry nodded grudgingly. “So what was the Tank like? Is it as bad as they say?”

Fowler nodded, looking at the floor. “Like a nightmare that just won’t go away.”

N-Tek code began appearing on a holographic monitor.

“You know a contractor called Kay Brunner?” asked Fowler, looking up.

Jerry smiled. “Yeah. I gave her a job last year. Very cool operator. Came in on contract but she left.”

“Why?”

Jerry analysed the emerging N-Tek code. “You know what Bunny can be like. He wasn’t looking at her face when he was talking to her.”

Fowler raised his eyebrows. The final N-Tek code was extracted from Fowler’s blood sample. Jerry punched a button on the console, collating the results.

“Cross referencing with your original implant code we implanted four years ago.”

There were changes everywhere. Fowler looked on with disbelief at the large portions of new code which were highlighted.

“Well what do you know,” said Jerry. “They’re evolving as you predicted.”

Fowler frowned. “Evolving or mutating?”

“Code looks clean. They’ve just patched in some new functionality. They’re repopulating your implants at the moment. It looks like your immune system is being reprogrammed to recognise them. That’s why you’ve still got your fever. From what I see, it looks like a clean job. Tidy little guys aren’t they.”

Fowler shook his head. “I don’t get it. Where did they get all the new N-Tek code from? They need contact with other strains for this amount of cross fertilisation.”

Jerry shrugged his shoulders. “You been working with some new N-Teks strains lately?”

Fowler shook his head.

“You absolutely sure?” asked Jerry.

Fowler lay back and thought about the day's events. The mineral sample came quickly to mind. He reached into his pocket and drew out the crystal which he had recovered from Ursus; realising the truth.

"Of course!" he realized. "It must be pure N-Tek." He'd been handling the crystal all day.

Jerry smiled, looking at Fowler. "Looks like they've found themselves a nice new home."

Fowler sighed inwardly.

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As Jerry had predicted, the N-Teks slowly acclimatised to Fowler's body chemistry. His body temperature dropped and he slowly began to feel his strength return along with a strong appetite. Jerry and Bunny took Fowler out for something to eat. Fowler looked through the menu, remembering the old favourites.

Bunny was wearing what Fowler thought was possibly the loudest t-shirt he'd ever seen. It was a bright collage of colours. They ranged from swirling yellow to orange to a wild red, all moving into towards a center point.

"Come on Fowler. Do the trick with the fork!" urged Bunny.

The waitress stood awkwardly by the table in the restaurant as Bunny tried to impress her with Fowler's skill. Fowler, like Jerry, ignored Bunny, looking at the menu as they sat together.

Fowler rubbed his hand against his face. His implants hadn't fully settled down. "Another time."

But Bunny persisted as the attractive waitress looked on. "He's able to make the fork lift off the table without touching it. He's got these N-Teks implants in his finger tips which can create a magnetic field." The waitress smiled politely as Bunny went on in his overbearing way, privately thinking he was completely insane. "Come on dude, show her!"

"I'd like to order now," interrupted Jerry, changing everyone's focus. The waitress smiled again, plainly relieved.

Fowler ordered his meal. "What do you want to drink?" asked the waitress.

"Just mineral water," replied Fowler.

“Still on the wagon,” said Jerry.

“I like to keep my N-Teks sober,” smiled Fowler, “in case my cutlery starts flying around the restaurant.” He looked around the busy restaurant and envied the way everyone seemed so happy and carefree. He wanted his freedom back. Even now, not all of his N-Teks were behaving correctly. He was also privately worried by what new code the N-Teks contained, worrying maybe that they might try to alter his DNA. However, Jerry’s analysis of the N-Tek code change had shown them to be benevolent. The N-Teks were not like a virus which might mindlessly kill its host or transform it into something alien. They were not parasitic either, rather co-operative and helpful like other normal cells in a body. Fowler felt the need to get in touch with the N-Teks and find out what was going on. In order to do that he would have to go jack into Cyberspace again. He sighed to himself, unfolding his napkin, not relishing the thought. It reminded him too much of being in the Tank.

The drinks arrived. Fowler had a flashback and suddenly realized that this was the last place he’d eaten out at before he’d gone into the Tank. “I’d like to propose a toast,” said Fowler. He lifted his drink. “To good friends.”

Bunny lifted his glass of milk and Jerry raised his beer.

“Dude I could have scored with the waitress if you’d helped me out.” He raised his eyebrows as if to give Fowler a hint about what it meant to be a good friend.

“All right,” smiled Fowler. “I’ll do the N-Tek trick the next time. I promise.”

Bunny nodded reassured. “I’m even wearing my luck t-shirt dude!”

“So what’s new these days?” asked Fowler.

“You dude,” joked Bunny.

Fowler smiled and looked at Jerry. “Is Chairman Soth still on the Citynet board?”

Jerry nodded. “You bet. He’s buying up every available percentage of Citynet stock.”

“Why?” asked Fowler. “He must know about the N-Tek problem, right?”

Jerry nodded. “Sure but the stock is cheaper and, as we all know, Chairman Soth has that kind of money to spare. Rumour has it he’s being bank-rolled by the Ixian military industrial complex. Plus almost everyone knows about the N-Tek problem. News broke last week when Walt had the accident. Sandra tried to reassure everyone, saying business as usual. Some weren’t convinced though. A few investors got

the jitters and sold their stock. Stock price dropped twenty percent in one day along. That was when I heard they were bringing you out of the Tank. Looks pretty much like Sandra's job is on the line, leaving you know who next in line."

"Delcass," sighed Fowler, dreading the prospect.

Jerry nodded. "You'd better face up to the fact that he doesn't want you to succeed Tom. If you fix the problem, Sandra saves her position and Delcass stays where he is, still taking orders from her."

Fowler nodded, not liking the implications in either case. "Did they ask you to look into the problem?"

Jerry nodded. "Sure but we were too busy."

Fowler was surprised. "Really?"

Bunny sat forward. "We've had enough bad experiences with them already."

"What sort of experiences?" wondered Fowler.

Jerry frowned, looking around him. "This is not a good place. Eat up Tom the food in here is good. Alien ears are much better than human ones."

Bunny leaned forward unable to hide his curiosity. "You were under for a few days at a time in the Tank?"

Fowler nodded as he ate.

"They put you underwater, right?"

Fowler nodded.

"How'd they feed you?"

"Food tube," replied Fowler.

"What about y'know when you had to go?" asked Bunny.

Fowler sighed and looked around him in the restaurant. He leaned over to Bunny and whispered in his ear, explaining where the waste tube went each time he was placed in the Tank. He used a drinking straw to illustrate, pushing it upwards.

Bunny jerked back, his eyes wide open. "Dude! Nooo!!" said Bunny. Everyone in the restaurant turned around and looked at Bunny.

Jerry leaned in to Bunny. "Remember when you asked me to tell you when you were acting that way?"

Bunny nodded, eyes darting left to right.

"Now's the time," said Jerry quietly.

"Sometimes, I get a little too excited," explained Bunny to Fowler.

Fowler sat back and Jerry put his hand on Bunny's shoulder. "Man needs his privacy," said Jerry.

Still Bunny couldn't help himself. "Dude," whispered Bunny, looking sympathetically at Fowler.

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Bunny had closed up BJs when Fowler joined Jerry in the pit. Jerry sat back in his favourite chair and put his feet up on the desk and told Fowler the about the break-in which had occurred at Citynet.

"Normally, we're never too busy to take work from Citynet. Pay is too good. Sandra asked us to do a job for her last month. We had to sign all sorts of non-disclosure agreements before taking it on. Of course, the pay was incredible."

Fowler sat back in his seat, listening intently. "What happened?"

"Citynet security was being breached. There were a couple of high level break-ins. Sensitive information was being gradually stolen by a group of professionals who Citynet hadn't been able to trace. We dealt directly with Delcass who then reported to Sandra. Our brief was simple. Find out who they were and give the details to Delcass. Sounded simple enough. Just a straight-forward case of Cybertheft. When we asked what information had been stolen, Delcass wouldn't tell us. He said we didn't need to know. Anyway, we set up a trap for the thieves. They were using an android to give them a pure digital feed into Citynet and get by most of Citynet's security. He acted as their gatekeeper to do the tunnelling but we managed to lure them out from under his cover. There were four others. We managed to spike two but the rest of them got away. We were able to trace them to their access site. That was it then. We thought it was over. They found the two we had spiked dead in an abandoned warehouse. Delcass hadn't told us that the spike we were using was lethal. I was pretty angry about it but there was nothing I could do. They showed us some fine print in the contracts we'd signed and said they had the right to over-ride the protocols. We figured out the team's methods of access and wrote a security routine to prevent it from happening in the future. We got paid and moved onto the next job." Jerry sat back in his seat as he remembered. "After that it got a little spooky. We both noticed that we were being followed wherever we went. We hired our own private eye to follow those who were following us and we found out that they were being paid by Citynet. When I found that out, I called in

personally on Sandra and I told her that if anything happened to me or Bunny I would make sure that everyone in this entire sector would know that Citynet security had been breached. She claimed to know nothing about it but after that the goons disappeared. We tried to find out what happened to the thieves but we let it go when things settled down.”

“Which private eye did you hire?” asked Fowler.

“Chutt-Ho. An alien who lives downtown. Came highly recommended. Why?” asked Jerry.

“The break-in happened shortly after the N-Tek problem started?” inquired Fowler.

Jerry nodded.

“Then maybe the break-in might have something to do with what’s going on now,” pondered Fowler. “I think I could do with some outside help.”