

## Seven

Jerry had given Fowler permission to charge Chutt-Ho's bill to his account. Fowler was grateful to have such good friends still on the outside. In the Tank, life had become over-simplified and the routine had been mind-numbingly predictable. Friends had become a thing of the past and the solitude had taught him to appreciate them. Now that he was out, Fowler knew he could not cover all the possible angles himself and figured that Sandra and Delcass were withholding information from him. Fowler realised if he could get Chutt-Ho on board, he could possibly get closer to all that had happened to Citynet during the month preceding his release.

Fowler followed the locator arrows on Chutt-Ho's business card, gradually becoming more nervous as he moved out of the human controlled sector of Erstol and into the Ixian controlled sector. "Dammit," muttered Fowler. He walked across the unofficial dividing line between the two communities and noted the Ixian graffiti scrawled across the approaching building **Ixus Rulunq!** Slowly, Fowler walked through the majority occupied Ixian sector of the city, beginning to feel lonely and vulnerable. Fowler knew humans would never be welcome in this sector. Too much had happened in the war. He tried to ignore the two Ixians walking towards him, but could not help noticing their grey eyes followed him menacingly. One hissed a curse at Fowler as they passed but the other Ixian urged restraint and they walked by. The Ixian made a final threatening clicking sound in his throat.

Fowler sighed with relief when he saw that he had to turn left off the main road and went out of sight. The back streets were quiet, almost eerily so. Finally, he turned down an alley and saw the low key entrance to the office of Chutt-Ho. A neon light buzzed over the door with an inward pointing arrow. Fowler stopped in his tracks under the sign and a business hologram popped up. "Chutto-Ho Private Investigator. Your concerns are our business." Outside the office lay an antique Floater which reminded Fowler of an Earth Oldsmobile. Fowler stepped into the doorway and took a deep breath, staying within the shadows. He looked behind him before he stepped inside, checking that he was not being followed. He sighed, seeing that all was clear.

The stairway was very steep and he climbed each step laboriously, finally pushing open the frosted glass door, feeling the cool temperature within the room, contrasting with his clammy looking complexion.

“Can I help you?” asked an alien with bowl shaped eyes, peering up from behind a green filing cabinet.

Fowler looked curiously at the alien wearing a shark suit, then cleared his throat. “I’m here to speak to Chutt-Ho.”

The alien’s fish-shaped oval eyes opened wide with interest. “What do you wish to talk to him about?”

Fowler thought the alien had the face of a Catfish. “It’s of a sensitive nature. I’d rather tell him myself. Jerry from BJs gave me his card.” Fowler looked away distractedly, to the main office door. “I don’t have much time.”

Chutt-Ho stepped out from behind the filing cabinet, his spats coming into full view. His spiky fins acted as arms within the suit but they had no fingers. Instead of fingers, Chutt Ho used clusters of tendrils which hung from the front of his body to form two notional feet for the shoes. A multitude of other tendrils moved under his open mouth which he used to pickup and examine other items. He used them to take the hat from the top of the filing cabinet. He straightened the edge of the hat with his tendrils, then slipped it on, pulling it down slightly at the front. “I am Chutt-Ho, at your service.”

Fowler raised his eyebrows, looking at the strangely dressed alien. “You’re...ehm” Fowler was suddenly lost for words and wondered if it sensible to trust this alien with his freedom but recalled Jerry’s glowing reports of the small private detective. He swallowed his words and tried to smile. “Chutt-Ho - hello.”

“Please come into my office and take a seat. You look quite warm. Would you like a cool glass of water perhaps?”

Fowler nodded thankfully, taking a seat. “That would be perfect, thanks.”

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Fowler relaxed and explained to Chutt-Ho in detail what had happened to him since he had been released from the Tank, including Walt and Mezzler’s untimely deaths. Chutt-Ho listened patiently, sipping some green fluid from porous sponges which lay in a dish made from what looked like a giant sea shell. When Fowler mentioned Chairman Soth’s name in relation to being the suspected owner of the digger on Ursus, Chutt-Ho stopped drinking and seemed to pay more attention.

“Are you certain the digger was Ixian?”

Fowler nodded.

“Chairman Soth is a very powerful individual on Erstol. He is also well respected within this area. Many Ixians call him the hero of the war. Many would accuse a human, such as yourself, of trying to discredit him because of your history. Species are naturally distrustful of each other and with good reason, mister Fowler. Being a minority species on Erstol, I should keep out of Ixian-Human affairs. My work is of a purely investigatory nature, not political.”

Fowler frowned, worrying that Chutt-Ho was refusing to take the job. “I’m just looking for information. I’ll pay very well.”

Chutt-Ho sat forward. “Money is of no use when one has been recycled, mister Fowler.”

Fowler put his hands together. “Look, I’m not saying the Ixians are behind this at all. All I want you to do is to continue your investigation into those individuals who broke into Citynet.”

Chutt-Ho shrugged. “Some time has passed. The trail is long since cold.”

Fowler smiled. “I’m sure you could warm it up again.”

Chutt-Ho blinked rapidly and sipped some more of his drink. “And then?”

“All I want you to do is see if there is some connection between the Cybertheft and what’s happening now.”

Chutt-Ho gurgled, his eyes rolling in his large head. An inner eye lid blinked. “That is all you want me to do?” His tendrils bristled.

Fowler nodded, not able to tell whether Chutt-Ho had been sarcastic.

“So, you’ll take the job?” wondered Fowler.

“This is not an ordinary case Mister Fowler. You have just stepped into my office. I realize you know Jerry and I know him too. He is an honourable human. However, I do not know you. Please tell me something about yourself. I wish to acquaint myself with you.”

Fowler shrugged. “What do you want to know?”

“Do you have any family?”

Fowler shook his head, looking away. “No. Anything else?”

Chutt-Ho gurgled. “Mister Fowler. As you are aware I am a private detective. I have been trained in the art of lying. Each species has tell tale signals when they lie which may not be visible to their own species. Please, do not lie to me if you wish to avail of my services. I place truth and honesty in the first. Prompt payment in the second. Once again Mister Fowler, do you have any family?”

Chutt-Ho placed his fish eyes on Fowler.

Fowler swallowed hard. "Yeah, I have a wife but we're separated. I have a son, who's four now. He lives with his mother. I don't know where they are at the moment, since I just got out of the Tank. I think they still live on Erstol."

Chutt-Ho seemed happy with the response.

"And your biological parents?"

Fowler grimaced hard. "I was brought up by my mother. She divorced my father." Fowler dropped his stare and looked at the ground.

"Why did she divorce your father?" inquired Chutt-Ho.

Fowler began to feel his temper rising, angry at the intrusion.

"They didn't get on. Human couples that don't get go their separate ways. It happens all the time..."

Chutt-Ho interrupted. "Mister Fowler. You have one more chance if you would like me to take this job. I have many clients."

Fowler wanted to walk out of the office and tell Chutt-Ho to go to hell but he wondered if anyone else would be willing to take such a risky job. He looked at Chutt-Ho and decided to tell him the truth.

"My father was a gambler and a drunk." Fowler sucked in a deep breath, finding the words hard to say. "He gambled away our family home when I was six and my mother left him. We moved from town to town until my mother met her new partner. I never really got on with my step-father. After that I threw myself into my studies and got a scholarship and went to college. Now I'm here on Erstol in this sorry mess."

Chutt Ho sucked more fluid from the sponge.

"Did you love your father Mister Fowler?" asked Chutt-Ho.

Fowler looked uneasy at the directness of the question, and felt a wave of emotion sweep over him. "Did I love him?" Chutt-Ho gurgled, waiting for the reply. Fowler felt a lump forming in his throat. "Sure I did. I missed him when he left. For a long while I thought it was something I'd done. I was just a kid. When I was older my mother explained what had happened about the gambling. After that, I guess I never forgave him for what he did to her."

Chutt-Ho rocked from side to side. "So do you think you are like him then?"

Fowler clenched his fists. "He was a gambler and drunk. I became CTO of Citynet. There's no comparison."

Chutt-Ho wet his lips. "But you gambled away everything that you had on your NTeks, didn't you? You lost your job and the respect of your family. Doesn't that make you the same as your father?"

Fowler was stuck for words, knowing there was some truth in Chutt-Ho's words. It was worse than meeting the Tank shrink. To hell with this, thought Fowler. He's no right to ask me anymore questions. "Look, I'm done here with your questions! Do you want this work or not?"

Chutt-Ho drank some more from the sponges. "The sun surely rises."

Fowler looked confused. "Is that a yes or a no?"

"I shall attempt to warm up the path."

Fowler sighed with relief, realising it was an acceptance.

Chutt-Ho sat down at his desk. "Now to the matter of my fees."

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As Fowler had suspected, Chutt-Ho was expensive to hire but Fowler was hopeful that he would turn up some information helpful to him. Fowler thought it too coincidental that the break-in had happened shortly after the N-Tek problem had escalated, wondering if in some way it was tied into Walt's death.

It was dark when Fowler left Chutt-Ho's office. As ever, the corporate lights in the city dominated. The recycled air never changed temperature. The rain which fell from the controlled weather patterns was a joke, more of a light drizzle which could be timed almost to the minute. People worked around the clock in the city; the overhead traffic still heavy. The city was more like a living organism in space, feeding off the information being passed through it. Not only did knowledge provide power to a privileged few, it also created employment. Now that was all under threat with the N-Teks invading Citynet's channels of communication.

Distrustful of the Ixians, Fowler had summoned a Floater to meet him outside Chutt-Ho's office. Warily, he sat into it. He felt tired and drained, wanting time away from Citynet and all its ills. Being physically active for such a long period of time had caused unexpected aches and pains as he was forced to use muscles which had been slowly wasting away over time in the Tank. He stretched out his arms, straightening his back, feeling the muscles crunch into place.

"Destination?" inquired the Floater.

“Hang on,” said Fowler, reaching into his pocket. He opened his wallet and looked at a picture of his estranged wife, wondering whether he should visit her. She had never visited him during his time in the Tank and he figured in those dark days that she had given up on him.

Confused, Fowler took the picture of his estranged wife and threw it on the floor of the Floater wanting to slam his foot on it but could not bring himself to do it. The picture landed face down on the floor but he knew it would never be so easy to forget that part of his life. He carried memories of Jane with him as palpably as his N-Tek implants. He shook his head, knowing he could not bring himself to see his wife when she had so visibly rejected him, yet he wanted to. His marriage was over and that was all there was to it. However, a part of him secretly wondered how she would react if he just turned up on her doorstep, then realised it was probably just a pipe dream.

“Please state your destination,” repeated the Floater, sounding less pleasant.

Fowler looked out of the Floater’s window at the giant corporate buildings, seeing the distant spire of the Citynet Tower.

“Take me to Citynet,” said Fowler, feeling quiet despair. He reached down and picked up the photograph, replacing it in his wallet, realising it was a part of his life he was not yet willing to relinquish. Too much had already slipped away.

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Kay was in the labs when Fowler arrived back. He poured himself a coffee, trying to keep himself alert. Kay was still sore by the way he had treated her and just glanced up at him then went back to her work examining samples of the N-Teks in Systems, trying to crack their code. Fowler sat down in a seat and rubbed his eyes.

“I thought you’d run out on us,” said Kay, looking into her microscope.

Fowler ignored her comment. “Have you made any progress with the N-Teks?”

Kay sat up and turned around, determined not to let Fowler off the hook. “Where were you?”

Fowler shrugged his shoulders. “Around.”

Kay shook her head and stood up. “I helped you Fowler! I think it’s only fair that you help me too.”

Fowler frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I took the heat for you today. Delcass grilled me, asking me what you'd found out."

Fowler grimaced. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him the truth."

Fowler looked at Kay coldly. "Which version of the truth is that?"

Kay's cheeks flushed red with anger, tired of his patronising tones. "Who the hell do you think you are talking to me like that? I've had a lousy day all because of you! You want know the truth?"

Fowler sipped his coffee. "Go on. Be my guest. Educate me."

"You're a self-cantered egotistical fool. The truth is I couldn't care less whether you go back to the Tank or not. You think you're smarter than everyone else. If you were so smart in the first place, you wouldn't have ended up in the Tank, would you!"

Fowler lay back against the wall, unconcerned. "Tell me something I don't know. Tell me why you went out to Ursus on your own? Did Delcass send you to spy on me?"

"No."

Fowler looked on. "Then why Kay?"

"Because I was Walt's friend and I want to know what happened to him. I checked out your software. It couldn't have done what happened to him. Nobody in here tells me anything! Including you - and you only just got here!"

Fowler met Kay's sad, confused eyes and he knew he had been rough on her. "All right, I'll level with you, Walt was murdered. I found traces of dybozene residue on his skin which is a by-product of a chemical that caused his death. Delcass and Sandra already know this. I just want you to know he was my friend too."

Kay looked shell shocked by the revelation and slowly sat down.

"Jesus," muttered Kay.

The intercom in the labs buzzed and Fowler answered it. Sandra's tense face appeared on the other side. "Where the hell were you?"

Fowler straightened up. "Making some enquiries about the residue."

Sandra relaxed slightly but still seemed tense. "I read your report on Ursus. Meet me in my office in ten minutes."

Sandra clicked off.

Fowler raised his eyes and swallowed the coffee quickly.

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Sandra was standing in her office when Fowler came in. Fowler knew Sandra never normally stood in her office when she had visitors. She preferred to sit behind her large desk to emphasise her authority. For a brief moment, Fowler thought Sandra looked vulnerable but realised that he had made a mistake in assessing her mental state. She was more like a cornered animal, ready to strike out at anyone who came near. Fowler took the crystal he had retrieved from Ursus and dropped it onto her officious table top. It slid gently, coming to a stop by the hologram of her father's head.

"That's what Mezzler died for?" Sandra seemed unimpressed.

"I think it was more a case of death by panic. He thought I was going to leave him behind." Fowler paused. "He lost his head."

"And you didn't." Sandra grimaced.

"I always keep my promises. He was used to people not keeping theirs."

Sandra looked unimpressed by Fowler's moral stance. "In order to keep your promises, you have to deliver on them. I can't keep Delcass quiet forever. He says you've done nothing about the N-Tek problem since you were released - and he's right! He's even saying you were responsible for Mezzler's death. He's lobbying the board to get you sent back to the Tank. Then we can get someone else in who knows what they're doing."

Fowler understood Sandra's tactic and retaliated. "So it's true what everyone's saying then."

Sandra perked up. "What's that?"

"Delcass is giving the orders now. I thought you were in charge. Times really do change."

Sandra's face hardened. "I will always run this company Fowler and don't you forget it!"

"Truth is Sandra, you're out of touch, sitting up here in your ivory tower. All you see is the big picture. Margins, stock values and managing the board members. You haven't got a clue what's really going on, on the ground, have you?"

Sandra walked over to her desk and looked at Fowler. "There's a line between us, Fowler. Just remember, you can step over it."

Fowler finally lost his temper with Sandra. “Just remember, all you’ve left is Delcass. And let’s be honest, he wants your job so he’ll be glad to see me fail which means *you* fail.”

Sandra sat down in her seat. “This is getting us nowhere.”

“Maybe not for you.”

“Is this your idea of delivering on your promise!” said Sandra. “Maybe I should just send you back to the Tank. Maybe Delcass was right, you are all washed up.”

Fowler walked over to Sandra’s desk and picked up the crystal, then showed it to her. “Do you know what this is?”

Sandra said nothing, her eyes betraying her ignorance.

“It’s not a crystal, it’s pure N-Tek. What we’re up against is a billion years of N-Tek evolution. They want to survive just like you. They’re not going to just go away because you want them to, Sandra. They need to be understood and that’s going to take time. You can’t burn them or poison them. They’re even resistant to nuclear attack for Christ’s sake! These things can live on barren worlds for millions of years.”

Sandra looked with contempt at the N-Tek fragment, focusing on the more pertinent facts. “You said in your report that you found Ixian mining equipment.”

Fowler nodded and pocketed the fragment. “How’s your relationship with Chairman Soth lately?”

“You worry about the N-Teks and I’ll worry about Chairman Soth. I want you to find out if there are any links between that fragment and the problem we’re having in Systems. Now get out.”

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Fowler slept uneasily that night in his room. He dreamt he was back on Ursus again, sitting by the shoreline, ringed with fiery torches. The Bezon ritual continued as some of the aliens swam through the waters, riding on the backs of creatures that looked to Fowler like sea monsters. They carried nets on either side as they corralled what seemed like fish to Fowler.

“They are not monsters,” said Yalthak, reading Fowler’s thoughts. “These are the creatures which share this world with us as you do with the N-Teks. We strive to live in harmony with all living things, including you.”

Confused, Fowler looked at Yalthak. "What the hell is this? Your world is dead. Are you trying to take over my mind, Yalthak? If you're not then let me rest goddammit. I've had a lousy day and I've a tonne of work to do tomorrow."

"Do not be angry with me Fowler. We will let you rest, we mean you no harm. We are part of the N-Tek colony which is within you now. Our path has been chosen but yours has not yet been. We were promised that you would come but first we would like to understand you. It is our way."

"Okay," sighed Fowler. "Here I am but make it short."

"Tell us about freedom, Fowler," said Yalthak.

Fowler sighed. "Could you be more specific?"

"Our people travelled the stars," began Yalthak, "but found none that have matched the beauty of Ursus. We realized this world is our home; our beginning and our end. This would be our final resting place. Now we hope it will become our place of freedom. It is written so. We have waited a long time for one like you to arrive." They joined a queue of Bezons and Fowler stood in line with Yalthak. He eventually stood beside a barrel of dark liquid with Yalthak.

"Now what?" asked Fowler.

Yalthak turned to Fowler. "Please do not move."

Yalthak put one of his many limbs into the liquid and began to vibrate it, covering Fowler from head to toe in the liquid.

"Better," said Yalthak.

"I'm glad you think so," said Fowler, wiping the liquid out of his eyes and spitting some from his lips. As the liquid began to dry, Fowler began to feel his skin tingle and he felt a little light-headed.

"Now collect these," guided Yalthak. "As many as you can hold."

Fowler stood in front of a large pile of what looked like wrapped bricks of dried seaweed. Fowler raised his eyes.

"OK," replied Fowler, light-headed. "Now what?"

"It's time to make your offering," said Yalthak. They walked to a giant mound of seaweed blocks. "Now throw as high as you can, to get to the top of the mound."

"Ok," said Fowler. He felt like laughing in a slightly drunk way. He threw the first one right over the top of the mound and it hit another Bezon on the head.

“Oops, sorry,” said Fowler. Yalthak helped Fowler put the remaining seaweed bricks on the mound. All around the beach front other mounds were being built up in the same fashion by other groups of Bezons.

“Please sit,” said Yalthak. “Now we lie back and give thanks.”

“Okey dokey,” said Fowler. He felt himself falling back and ended up looking at the two crested moons above Ursus. His eyes swam a little in the beautiful configuration that the moons had formed.

“We have been celebrating this festival for thousands of years. This will be our last one. I would like you to share this memory with us now Fowler. You are our Spiritus Mundi.”

Fowler looked sideways at Yalthak. “You’re reading my mind, aren’t you?” said Fowler.

“Yes, your are the Spirit of this World,” admitted Yalthak. “Our species merged with the N-Teks before our world died and now those N-Teks have merged with you. You are our Second Coming Fowler. The N-Teks told us you would come. They were the First. May I ask you a question?”

“Shoot,” said Fowler.

“Have you stopped caring about your own kind?”

Fowler thought it about it for a moment. “I honestly don’t know. I haven’t given it much thought,” replied Fowler.

Drum sounds rolled around the beach-front. Fowler sat up and watched as the torches were brought to the many seaweed bonfires and each was lit. The seaweed caught fire rapidly and burned with a greenish-red hue which Fowler had never seen before. Smoke wafted around the group of Bezons who sat fifty deep, around their bonfire. Once again the smoke was intoxicating and seemed to make Fowler feel high. He stared into the flames and let the heat warm his face, sobering up a little.

As the flames died down to form embers, the group stood up to dance and Fowler joined them. Instruments were brought into the inner circle and they started to play strange rhythms to which the group danced in unison to. Fowler did his best to join in, jutting his chin and head forward to the tribal music, finding it strangely entertaining. Then Yalthak stood forward and sang his song which was accompanied by other instruments. He started it by letting out a deep roar from the back of his long neck and everyone danced to the tribal song that followed.

As soon as it has started, it was over and they broke up, joining the other Bezon groups for the feasting. Fowler looked around but could not see Yalthak anymore. He dwelled on Yalthak's words, wondering what their significance was. Was it important if he cared about others of his kind? What significance had that to Yalthak? He dipped his feet into the cool water, pondering the question.

The water was cold but refreshing. Hell of an illusion, he thought to himself and looked upwards at the two moons again but saw something move past them in the sky. The object was some kind of bird, circling in a decreasing gyre and it was slowing coming down to where he was.

What the hell is that? wondered Fowler. He looked around him but all the Bezon's had gone to feast inland. All there was left were embers from the fires. He began to feel a little nervous as the winged creature began to descend and take shape. It was no bird but some kind of a beast.

The giant wings of the beast with the head of a human and the body of a lion landed on the beach front in front of him. The sea began to turn a blood dimmed red. As it walked, the sand turned to glass. Fowler realized the N-Teks were tapping into his memories. The scene was very familiar to him but he wondered why they had picked this one? The beast was a bronze color and the face of the human seemed to morph from one face to another. Fowler drew back from the giant creature but tripped and fell backwards. The beast jumped forward until its face almost met that of Fowler.

"What do you want?" asked Fowler.

The first face appeared and it was Delcass. He looked at Fowler with contempt and spoke. "You're not out of the Tank yet."

The face then morphed again and it was the face of Chairman Soth. "The war with the humans will never be over my people until they submit!" The Chairman raised his hand and was greet by Ixian roars.

Why these people? wondered Fowler.

A face Fowler had almost forgotten appeared on the face of the beast. It was Franz Verner, Sandra's deceased father. "Tom, I just got your response. I would like you to reconsider our offer. I know Citynet is small company but I think you'd be making a mistake not to accept. Let me tell you my vision for the company. I believe the war was a mistake and I think we can show both humanity and Ixians alike that it is possible to live and work together profitably in a peaceful manner. I think many people confuse power with greatness when true power is really about having a positive vision for the

future and making it real. On Estol we can all become great if Citynet does. We can show all of the species what gracious beings we are, not just Ixians. Citynet can become a beacon of hope in this sector. Tom, this is more than a job where you clock in and clock out. I understand your reluctance but please reconsider. It is an experiment where I think we can show everyone, even our own, the path forward. The position is still open. Please call me.” Fowler recalled how the message had swayed him to take the position as a technical director with Citynet in their Cyberspace division. There was something about Franz that had made him special and Citynet in the process.

Fowler realized the N-Teks were digging deeper into his memories but Tom shouted out. “Get out of my head. You’ve no right!”

Another face appeared in front of him, to a set of memories he had tried to repress over the years. It was the face of a woman, he had all but forgotten.

Rayna appeared in front of him. They were inside a dome and he was sitting down, catching his breath. He could taste the blood in his mouth. “You are ready Tom, you’ve passed.” She smiled. “Now you can be my shield.” She offered him her hand for the first time. Fowler remembered the moment and turned away finding it painful. His mind was flooded with his past, during the war, and he realized this it was like looking at another version of himself. He realized he had changed and then recalled Yalthak’s words, asking if he no longer cared about his own kind. However, there was something deeper to this place, with the beach and the beast. He knew what he was really being asked. Did he have the same passionate intensity as those who were now bent on destruction and power? Did he care enough about the positive outcome for everyone, not just humanity, as he once had as a younger man? He looked back into Rayna’s face and remembered how idealistic he had been.

“I’m sorry,” was all Fowler could say to Rayna.

The beast swiped out at Fowler, catching him on the arm, tearing his flesh and the dream was over.

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Fowler sat up in his bed in the dim light of the Citynet skyscraper, his breath coming in short, heavy pants. Again, the dream had been unusually vivid. He focused on the company room, trying to calm himself, wiping the sweat from his face. He climbed out of the bed and walked into the bathroom, pouring himself a glass of water to clear his thirst. He rubbed his arm, where the imaginary creature had harmed him.

Fowler felt a sharp pain in his arm and examined the spot. On closer examination, he saw a growing red mark emerging on his arm.

Curiously, Fowler looked at his arm in the mirror. The red dots were forming letters. He looked closely at the two words forming on his skin and shook his head with disbelief, almost hearing Yalthak's voice as he read them.

HELP US