

The Crown

The Floater moved fast over Downtown, past the roof top parties, and headed out towards the outdoor adventure arenas. Solomon looked at Fowler who seemed lost in his thoughts. He thought that Fowler looked stressed out and changed the music in the floater to lighten the mood. Fowler snapped out of his deep thoughts and looked over at Solomon as the classical music began to play. “What are you playing?” he asked.

“Moonlight Sonata, first movement,” smiled Solomon.

They passed the last of the building in Downtown and flew over the outdoor adventure arenas.

Fowler was surprised. “When did you get into classical music?” he inquired.

“When I took a five per cent stake in the new Opera theatre. I own some old fashioned bricks and mortar now. My financial advisor told me to diversify. He got jumpy when he heard the rumour about the N-Teks. Plus I use the Orchestra for some of my backing tracks.” Solomon pointed out the open window of the Floater. “I even own some of that theme park too. They’ve named a ride after me: Sol’s Big Adventure.”

Fowler looked out of the window at the theme park they were passing over. The classical piano tune continued to play and Fowler looked down at the people and aliens taking part in the action packed outdoor activities on offer. They passed over dirt bike rallies which churned up golden sand storms in their wake. Outdoor adventures had been one of the growth areas when Fowler had gone into the Tank. From what he could see there were more land based racing tracks, air based speeder tracks and obstacle courses than ever before. He looked forward out of the window and saw the lush green forests which had been placed around the different Citynet sectors to help define them geographically. Initially, they had been just empty spaces devoid of any identity. Fowler remembered the original planning meetings about the sparse Citynet map as the service took off and how they planned to fill it out. There had been a strong desire to make Citynet not just a set of densely packed Cyber cities. So they created a rain forest, a spectacular set of waterfalls for honeymooners and different life-style habitats for those looking for something out of the ordinary.

The surface of the glass-domed settler habitats reflected against the sunlight as they passed over them. These were soon replaced by the Way Back domains

where humans and aliens participated in social living experiments, recreating their past. Some of the dwellers rented out their experiences to voyeurs who just wanted to watch as they lived through the eyes of others, including seeing how aliens related to strangers and interacted with one another.

Between Downtown and the Financial Sector lay the lush rainforest. At its centre was Waterfall Mountain which contained giant water slides and boat rides. Clouds of water vapour lay like a mist over the tall carpet of matted vegetation made from leafy tree tops, over which some migrating birds flew lazily. The Floater banked left and then moved over the ancient Earth exhibits where the different periods of Earth history were re-created. Unsurprisingly, the Jurassic period was the most widely visited because of the dinosaurs. Every day, there were scheduled events and it was even possible to take a ride on the top of a diplodocus or watch a fight between a Tyrannosaurus Rex and a Triceratops which was a crowd favourite. A pterodactyl flew upwards and cruised alongside the Floater.

“Watch this,” Fowler said to Kay. He looked at the winged dinosaur and winked at it. The pterodactyl winked back at Fowler, then waved with its clawed fingers, and wheeled away. Kay laughed.

In the distance, Fowler saw the dim outline of the financial sector looming. It grew in detail until the outcrop of the tall central buildings could be made out. The buildings were all intertwined and criss-crossed with travel lanes and walkways that were almost impossible to fly though but still many vehicles managed to do it. The queues of traffic created dotted outlines around the lofty buildings. Some of the tops of the skyscrapers were sloped and artistically designed, specifically not to appear too blocky. At the heart of the financial sector lay Erstol’s stock exchange which was not yet visible and where the heaviest N-Tek infestation was concentrated.

The Moonlight Sonata ended and Fowler saw the first financial buildings advertising their high growth Off World investment portfolios. The Floater dropped in altitude and prepared to park. They decided to go on by foot into the Al-Sharat sector where they planned to do their initial investigations.

As soon as they had stepped out of the Limo it moved into a virtual underground car park whose entrance manifested itself as a flat wormhole in Citynet Space Time. Solomon joined Kay and Fowler. They walked up towards the Al Sharat sector which was at the heart of the original financial sector, adjoining the main Stock

Market building known by the traders as The Crown. Two Ixian trader passed Fowler in their traditional black and red striped suits chatting privately to one another. The aliens capable of flight zipped around one another in the fly lanes. Some were winged and buzzed loudly while others flew gently like gliding manta. There were also traders who floated like frozen statues above the walkways, some with mobile phones in their hands, stopped mid-sentence. They had been forced to drop out to take a break and not block the busy streets so they remained above the street in what was fondly known as Dropout Lane. Ten feet long Moneypedes zigged and zagged in and out of the empty spaces and Zeebes who appeared like nothing more than rolling fur balls scooted between their feet making high pitched beeping noises.

The Al-Sharat square was the place where the traders relaxed before dropping out of Citynet. Trendy bars and alien hang-outs were dotted around the central area where there was an exhibit dedicated to all the different life-forms which had joined in the various money making endeavours. The art exhibit was always changing. A human hand pushed up holding a ball of glowing electrical light which fizzled and crackled with electrical energy only to sink back into semi-solid display. The word Tesla appeared on the surface and then rippled away. What looked like a tree formed next and the Ixian hero Sepahinus appeared under it, tired and battle weary as he looked up at the stars before his legendary quest to reunite the warring Ixian clans. Life passed on around the busy square but Fowler stopped in the middle of it with Kay and Solomon.

“Where are the N-Teks?” asked Solomon. “I don’t see nothing.”

“Oh they’re here all right but they’re hiding out of view,” assured Kay.

“Well let’s keep it that way,” said Fowler. He looked to Kay. “Let’s setup a containment area about forty-feet square. I want transparent walls on the inside and a solid one on the exterior to block outside viewers from looking in.”

Kay nodded and her fingers danced over her console. A transparent wall that seemed to have the properties of liquid glass appeared around them. Outside in the Square, the walled square appeared with the words: Citynet Works Inc! on it. The traders walked around it and went about their business.

“Hold my calls Sol,” said Fowler. Solomon nodded.

“Kay I want you to apply a custom view filter to the wall that only we can see. Let’s start digging for N-Teks shall we?”

Kay smiled, glad to be finally be getting down to work.

“I want to see the extent of the problem first before we take any action. Bring me through each sub-layer one at a time.”

Citynet was essentially a physical simulation of reality broken into different layers some of which represented spherically based mass density responsible for mass and force while others represented well known fields such as Gravity and the Electromagnetic Field. Each field could be separated out in Citynet by the engineers who operated the system in case there were problems. Additionally, Citynet had added its own custom sub-layers all of which acted on mass density and the underlying quantum layer. The custom layers operated using Tensor calculus modelling the forces and the associated field interactions while the quantum layer operated using Probability theory.

The Gravity Field appeared first using a vector field notation and Fowler nodded indicating everything was Ok. Next they moved onto the Electromagnetic Field which was a collage of colours and planar waves rippling around the square. They switched to the maintenance layers which Citynet had added. They added real time information to the people and the Square itself, attributing them with properties such as their time online and origin servers as they moved. Next, they moved onto the layer which supported the capability to bend holes in Space Time, forming wormholes from one point to another.

“Next layer,” said Fowler, not having spotting anything unusual so far.

The final N-Tek layer appeared labelled with three symbols: A solid white square followed by a red solid circle followed by a green half-crescent moon. Fowler looked at Kay quizzically. “What do those symbols mean?” he asked.

“We don’t know,” said Kay.

The N-Tek view seemed almost foggy and there was movement but it was hard to make out the detail, like trying to watch swirling dust.

“Increase magnification by 10 to the power of 5 for any non-Citynet elements. Color code those elements red.”

Kay sucked in a deep breath and issued the command. Billions of swarming N-Teks became suddenly visible within the Square.

“We got company,” said Solomon.

Fowler looked at Kay. “I take it you’ve tried deleting and disabling the layer?”

Kay nodded. “Sure. It was the first thing we tried. The commands are accepted but the layer stays. Nothing we issue has any effect on it. We discovered it’s not

part of our command and control system. Walt tracked the layer down to the coupling and hardware assemblies in our server farms. The N-Teks have built their own custom interface between our hardware and the Neural assemblies. Everything is going through them. They own this sub-layer. When we try to physically clean up the infestation in the box, it goes down and its unrecoverable. We lost an entire farm trying different cleanup approaches. None of the approaches worked. They've bonded with the hardware on the atomic level. And as soon as we install new boxes they're infected within the week. All of our farms have been infected. We didn't know we had the problem until it was too late. They're also feeding off the power couplings and reproducing. It's only a matter of time before they take down the whole service." Kay sighed. "So what do you want to do?" she asked.

"Concentrations of the N-Teks are highest around the Stock Exchange, right?"

Kay nodded.

"I want talk to Chairman Jazar first and get his permission to try something. It might give us some breathing room. Sol, let him know we're coming."

"Done," replied Solomon.

They removed the barrier but kept the private view in place so that only they could see the N-Teks. They walked up the main tree lined avenue towards the Stock Exchange. Some of the N-Teks gathered around and formed a face in front of his face, mimicking him.

"What you looking at?" asked Solomon and the N-Tek face in front of his repeated his expressions.

"Don't worry," said Fowler. "They mimic initially when they start to learn. I think they find you interesting Sol."

"They're going to have to be smart to copy me," smiled Solomon.

"Fowler take a look at this," said Kay. She pointed at the Stock Exchange which was shaped like a Super Bowl with a Crown around it. It had been designed to match the shape of a falling droplet of water once it hit the surface of water. However, the shape resembled a Crown and was apt so it stuck. There was a maelstrom of N-Teks circling the giant building like a constant weather pattern that wouldn't budge. Other N-Teks were drifting towards the stock exchange. Some were attaching themselves to the vehicles and traders who were busy at work, coming and going.

“Filter off,” said Fowler and the Citynet view returned to the same one everyone else was seeing.

“So we’re going to see Mister Tickles,” said Solomon.

Kay looked at Solomon. “Who?”

“Have you ever met Chairman Jazar before?” asked Fowler.

Kay shook her head. “Walt insisted on meeting him in private when we were here the last time.”

“Ok some advice, whatever happens just don’t laugh ok?”

Kay looked annoyed. “Of course I won’t laugh; I have more alien friends than you Fowler. I am an extremely polite person and have excellent alien etiquette.”

Solomon looked at Fowler. “Fifty Stols says she laughs,” he said, trying to create a bet. Fowler just gave Solomon a look like he wasn’t helping.

Kay flushed feeling like she was being mocked as they walked towards the main entrance of The Crown.

As Fowler walked up towards the Stock Exchange, a name from his past popped into his head. The name was Trenton B. Ford; the teenager who had once used the hacker name Jellyfish. Trenton had been the first Citynet hacker to create havoc in Citynet. He had managed to shake Citynet’s original stock exchange building to pieces with a device of his making. Some had called it an act of Cyberterrorism others a design flaw of Citynet. No-one had been hurt but the image and prestige of Citynet had been at stake at the time and no expense had been spared to find the perpetrator. It had been Fowler and Solomon who had tracked Trenton to his family home on a quiet suburb of Erstol; the son of a travelling business executive. They’d taken the spotty-faced red haired teenager away in hand-cuffs, his excuse had been that it was his school science experiment and he hadn’t meant any harm.

Trenton had built a Tesla Earthquake machine online and attached it to the side of the original Stock Exchange. The strength of Citynet was that it was a powerful copy of reality and that had also been its weakness. Trenton had sent pulsed electrical signals through the building until the resonant frequency of the structure had been matched and it swayed like a bridge with a million feet marching in step on it and it collapsed. Billions of Stols had been lost and a security patch had been quickly put in place by Fowler’s team. Trenton had a quick trial and was sent packing home to Earth with his family where he was greeted in some quarters as some kind of a folk hero.

Afterwards, Franz hired some architects to re-imagine the square, blocky Stock Exchange building which had already been reconstructed within the hour. The competition had produced the design which became known as The Crown and some had thought it a fitting reaction to Trenton's reckless experiment.

The stock exchange elevator ascended smoothly, arriving at the Executive suites and the clear glass doors slid open. There was an alien leaving the waiting room ahead of them that looked like a giant Bullfrog, dressed in a trader's striped outfit. It called out Fowler's name repeatedly in a dull but insistent way. "Fowler. Fowler. Fowler."

Tom turned and looked over at the Bullfrog and a wide smile opened on his face recognizing his old stock broker friend.

"I'll be back in a second. Got to say hello," said Fowler. He walked over and began speaking frog and making strange facial expressions. He then made a series of what seemed like deep belching sounds which the Bullfrog reacted to. Fowler then reached out his hand and the Bullfrog slapped Fowler's hand with its long tongue and seemed to be smiling back; the side of its wide mouth curling up. The Bullfrog left the office, returning to the main trading floors below. Fowler came back quickly to them.

"I didn't know you could speak frog." Kay appeared impressed.

"All four dialects, including bullfrog," replied Fowler proudly.

"Another old friend?" asked Kay.

"That's Jeremiah," smiled Solomon.

"Yeah he used to be a good friend of mine," added Fowler, trying to fight off a smile as he looked at Kay.

The Bullfrog's real name was Shak-lok-runak and had been one of Fowler's investment advisors when he had been CTO. However, Kay looked unamused at their small joke.

"Kay, are you sure you want go in to see Chairman Jazar?" wondered Fowler. "You can wait out here if you'd prefer."

"No, I'm coming in and you're not going to stop me! I've a right to be there after all I've been through," insisted Kay.

Fowler raised his hands in mock submission. "Ok! You can't say I didn't offer."

Kay marched ahead of them in determined fashion.

"Oh, I'm going to enjoy this," smiled Solomon.

Jim-Jam-Jazar was a member of the powerful Citynet board which effectively ran Erstol. Each member of the board of Citynet was termed Chairman as each belonged to one or more powerful alien blocks on Erstol and typically controlled one or more of Erstol's essential services that other aliens depended on. The Ixians preferred the running of Erstol's Infrastructure and had done a very good job of it but the police force was an accommodation and made up from all the various alien inhabitants. Chairman Jazar was a Moneypede and they had effectively taken over the running of the Stock Exchange and Financial institutions because of their uncanny ability to spot the market trends and help make money for everyone else. More importantly, the Moneypedes were regarded as straight talkers and honest almost to a fault. There were only two human members on the Citynet board who were currently Sandra and Delcass and only two permitted from each other alien block. Franz had setup the board to be exclusive but representative. At present there were fifteen groups representing thirty votes and it would be growing again once New Erstol was operational. Fowler had been a member of the board along with Franz before his fortunes had changed and knew Chairman Jazar quite well.

The waiting room outside the Chairman's office was typically warm and dry, the lighting a little dim by human standards. The walls and flooring were made from what looked like a dry yellow sandstone and moisture free. An insect secretary buzzed around the office almost like a blur, gathering documents together as they entered. The secretary Zizo landed in its chair and observed the walkers with its bug eyes and switched on a translator.

"Walk and sit, there," said Zizo and they did so, sitting on the uncomfortable rocky seats. Small moneypedes scurried across the floor, some no longer than one foot long, emerging from under what seemed like cracks in the walls which were in fact their offices.

"Who are they?" whispered Kay to Fowler, looking down at the floor.

"They're Chairman Jazar's assistants, most of them are young relatives from back home so don't step on any of them. Last person I saw doing that was nearly thrown out a window." Fowler looked deadly serious and Kay nodded. "When we go inside you'll see a white line. There will be no chairs. Stand on the leftmost point of the line. I'll be on the rightmost point."

"And I'll be in the middle," said Solomon, "as usual."

Fowler looked at Kay. “Stand perfectly still when the Chairman comes to greet you and keep your hands by your sides. Try not to look at the Chairman directly but at each end. It’ll be better. You got it?”

Kay nodded. A breeze blew their way from the secretary, generated by its buzzing wings. “The chairman will see you now. Walkers, that way.”

Kay walked into the dimly lit office with Solomon and Fowler and took her place to the left of the line, keeping her hands by her side as Fowler had asked her to. Extractor fans kicked in, taking the sweltering heat out of the office. The automatic shading of the lights and windows lifted, revealing a long row of terminal stacked one after the other. Chairman Jazar was nowhere to be seen as the light in the room lifted so that it was comfortable for humans. The room was designed almost like a cave and the long Monepede skeletons were adorned on the curving ceiling in S-Shaped patterns. Suddenly, Kay felt her ears popping. There was a pressure differential being generated and realized it was Chairman Jazar communicating with them, using ultrasound. The Universal translator was activated in the room and Kay saw a small shape like an eye bobbing above each terminal one at a time. Each part of the Chairman Jazar’s connecting segments had an eye and each one took a look at its guests.

“Tom Folwer. How are you?” came the voice of Chairman Jazar. It was a vanilla Universal translator voice.

“I am well, thank you Chairman. I have some work colleagues with me. This is Kay Brunner and my agent Solomon.”

The Chairman responded. “Welcome. It has been many long work days since we last met. Let me come and greet you all.”

Solomon who was in the middle looked over at Kay and spoke in a quiet voice. “Here it comes.”

Kay raised here eyes nervously, keeping her hands by her side as the giant adult male Monepede moved from behind the row of consoles at remarkable speed. Jim-Jam-Jazar was over forty feet long with over fifty individual armor plated segments. Each segment contained a piece of the Monepedes brainstem which spanned the whole length of the alien. Unlike an Earth millipede, the Monepede’s brain spanned its length and also each segment contained several small eyes around a major one making the creature a giant mini-computer capable of doing complex calculations simultaneously. Each segment also contained at least one dozen outer legs which it used to move at speed.

It also had smaller daintier legs kept only for intimate communication that were normally retracted. They looked like drum sticks.

The giant length of the Chairman Jazar moved past Kay, greeting her. Dozens of tiny social legs and his larger mobile ones reached out to Kay, touching her body from head to toe. She wriggled as she felt almost like they were tickling her all over, touching her face and hair as well. She kept her mouth shut, trying to fight from letting out a shout of laughter, her face growing red. She managed to keep her composure. However, the worst was not over. Chairman Jazar swept around Fowler and proceeded to greet her from the back. Kay felt like she was being tickled all over her back and fought not to let out of shriek of laughter but could not hold one laugh in and then slammed her hand over her mouth trying to make it seemed like she had coughed. The Chairman swept around again and then resumed his position in front of them and settled, his body waving up and down which almost seemed to hypnotize Kay. She straightened her hair which was standing on end. Fowler remained impassive his hair also standing on end. Kay thought he looked quite ridiculous but Fowler acted as if nothing was wrong. Kay suddenly wondered if she had done something rude by tidying herself up. She looked at ends of Chairman Jazar which tended to remain static while the rest of his body bounced up and down in a wave like rhythm.

“Tell me what news have you of the N-Tek infestation?” said Chairman Jazar.

“My analysis has shown that the N-Teks are in fact conducting a systematic search Chairman,” said Fowler.

“Your evidence?” asked Chairman Jazar.

“I have done a time-series analysis of the movements of the N-Teks since they combined with our server farm technology. Each sector has been methodically Searched. Once the Search has concluded, they have moved to the next sector. It appears that the Financial Sector contains what they are Searching for; this very building in fact. They still appear to be searching. Concentrations of the N-Teks are growing here daily Chairman.” Fowler showed the time series analysis images and plotted the vector diagrams.

“And what are they Searching for?” wondered Chairman Jazar.

“This has yet to be fully determined Chairman. I would like to conduct an experiment, with your permission, to help determine exactly what they are seeking.”

“I am reluctant to grant this. Already questions have been asked by many of my colleagues as to the safety and security of this trading environment. I am responsible for many sensitive investments and off-world portfolios. Experiments are by their very nature contain an element of the unknown and may cast further questions. Insider trading is suspected by many on the floors as to being the true nature of the N-Tek infestation although my own investigations of trading patterns show this not to be the case and there have been no security breaches on the floor. Your former colleague Walt was instrumental with helping me on these investigations. He is a sad loss to us all.”

Fowler nodded. “We all miss him deeply chairman.”

Chairman Jazar pointed his long end-head sensor at the wall to their right. “Walt gave me a present when he last visited me which I am very fond of.” Chairman Jazar showed Fowler the Latin plaque on his wall which read. *Litera Scripta Manet*. “He translated it for me as: The written character remains.”

“Did he discover anything else we should be aware of?” asked Fowler.

“Not that I am aware of. He mentioned he was close to a break-through before his accident. Unfortunately, I received no further update. Please explain to me the nature of this experiment?” requested Chairman Jazar.

“I need to channel stock exchange data through a fixed point and observe the N-Tek behaviour to determine which data is of interest to them. I will at no point, attempt to view the data itself merely create a channel for it within Citynet Space Time.”

“If you attempt to view the data, I will be forced to have you sent back to the Tank immediately. You are aware of this,” replied the Chairman.

Fowler nodded in an understanding manner. “Of course Chairman.”

The Chairman formed the shape of a smile. “Then I agree to the experiment. Please keep me updated on your findings. The board looks forward to a successful resolution to this problem. Zizo will show you where you can perform the experiment.”

Fowler nodded and left the room with Kay and Solomon.

Solomon whispered to Fowler as he walked. “You do realize we need to look at the data to filter it.”

“Of course,” said Fowler. “But let’s be seen to do the right thing.” Kay walked alongside them and the two men grew quiet.

“Why didn’t you tell me the N-Teks were doing a search?” she asked. “It might have helped me with my analysis.”

“It didn’t occur to me Kay, my main concern was that Chairman Jazar would let us do the experiment.”

Kay flushed. “You need to tell me things like this.”

“Of course,” said Fowler but Kay felt like he was keeping her out of the loop and that he trusted Solomon more.

“And another thing,” said Kay.

“What?” sighed Fowler.

“Your hair it’s standing on end. Straighten yourself up.”

Solomon smiled as Fowler patted down his hair.

Zizo wasn’t happy either. The winged assistant walked ahead of Folwer and Kay, buzzing its wings occasionally in an irritated manner. Solomon hung back, working on a console.

“Show walkers way, hmh,” muttered Zizo, feeling the task was below its station. Zizo brought them to a travel shuttle that would take them to the apex of the dome over the main trading floor of the Crown. “Walkers sit there,” ordered Zizo and they did. As soon as the shuttle had reached the maintenance floor over the trading floor, Zizo dropped over the edge and flew back to its office.

“Ok,” said Fowler looking at the wall behind them. “We’re going to setup a three dimensional grid ten feet cubed, right here,” pointed Fowler. “Assign each block to a different server to handle the load. Kay can you switch on debug mode and give us a block view.” Kay nodded and it was done almost as quickly as he’d asked. Although there were physics based layers within Citynet, the three-dimensional world itself was physically constructed as a series of virtual square blocks in which the layers resided. The layers themselves spanned more than one. Each individual block was connected back to one of the machines in the companies’ giant server farms. Each machine could handle several thousand blocks simultaneously. The virtual building blocks were all stacked together to give the impression of a three-dimensional matrix through which the aliens and humans moved. One of the advantages of the Citynet design was that each stack of blocks or physical location could be replaced easily if there was glitching which was a sign that one or more boxes serving that location was experiencing difficulties.

On the wall in front of them, each block was identified with the machine maintaining the illusion of Citynet. Each block also acted as both a source and a sink of data, effectively sending and receiving information within its physical domain. Typically, each block was 1 foot cubed but they could be larger or smaller, depending on the needs.

“All right Sol, I want you to set up a vector field which tracks the N-Tek movements and sample every millisecond. I want you to do some differential analysis and let me know when they’re moving towards the grid.”

Sol nodded. “Working on it.”

Fowler switched his attention over. “Kay I want you to write a routine to redirect the traffic from the trading floor through the grid. We’ll need to analyze the packets once we figure out which traffic the N-Teks are interested in.”

Kay nodded. “I’ll also put in a control variable to limit the percentage of traffic otherwise the grid could go into meltdown.”

“Good thinking,” said Fowler. “Let me know when you’re done,” said Fowler. He walked over to the maintenance rails over-looking the trading floor and saw the brisk business that was going on. Billions of Stols were flowing through the market at any moment. They were going to redirect this traffic through the grid and hopefully figure out which traffic the N-Teks were interested in and possibly trap them by attracting them to a single point.

“We’re ready,” said Solomon.

Fowler turned around. “All right, let’s do this.”

Kay issued the command and then re-routed trading traffic began to flow through the grid. Kay had setup a graphic which indicated which sections of the trading floor traffic was being redirected.

“Anything?” asked Fowler.

Solomon shook his head. “Nothing.”

The amount of traffic being redirected continued to grow as the minutes passed. Kay watched the load on the machine increasing until she began to grow worried. “Grid is beginning to experience difficulties.”

“Ignore it,” said Fowler. “Keep the traffic coming.”

Solomon looked up. “Wait, we got movement. N-Teks are beginning to come this way.”

“Kay, trace where that traffic is coming from and focus on it.” She did so, logging the details, dropping off the traffic which had not caused the N-Teks to change

their direction. Fowler switched on the custom view and he saw the N-Teks moving their way.

“The grid is beginning to glitch,” said Kay. The area began to freeze and flicker as the server farm machines struggled under the load.

“Ease up the traffic,” said Fowler. Kay did so and the glitching disappeared but the N-Teks continued to swarm to the grid.

Solomon smiled. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves a honey pot.”

Kay analyzed the grid as the N-Teks flooded into it. “N-Tek densities are increasing. Fowler, there’s something strange going on. I’m getting some really weird readings in the other layers,” said Kay.

Fowler moved closer to the grid to take a closer look. The grid was beginning to glow with light even without their custom view turned on. A spherical N-Tek core was forming like that of a sun as more and more N-Teks continued to pour in. Arcs of light began to spread out of the sun-like core moving almost like tendrils.

“Readings are off the scale, the core is affecting the EM field,” said Kay. She got a small static electric shock from her clothes which made her jump slightly. “We’ve got to shut this down Fowler, I don’t know what’s going on here.”

“No, hold off for a minute,” replied Fowler. The core was beginning to make electrical crackling sounds. Fowler moved closer. He put his arm in front of his eyes to shield himself from the bright light.

Fowler turned to Solomon to say something to him, unaware that one of the tendrils of light had reached out towards him. Kay called out to Fowler to warn him but it was too late. The tendril of light wrapped itself around Fowler in an instant. He struggled as if in some pain. A halo of rainbow coloured light quickly formed around him. It was followed by a bright flash of light and then Fowler simply vanished in front of them.

Alarmed, Kay and Solomon quickly looked for Fowler on their consoles. Kay pulled up Fowler’s status. “He’s still online,” she said, sounding slightly relieved.

Solomon frowned as he checked too, looking for Fowler’s actual online location. “Yeah, but he’s not in Citynet.”

Kay shook her head. “That can’t be right.” She pulled up another view of Fowler lying on a chair, still jacked in. His eyes were closed and he was in no apparent distress. “So where is he?” she wondered.

Solomon frowned, looking at the glowing N-Tek core which had stabilized, thinking Fowler was somewhere inside it. “Looks like the N-Teks have him Kay.”

“How are we going to get him back?” She was beginning to panic, worrying Fowler would end up like Walt. “Should we pull the plug on the experiment?”

“No,” replied Solomon, realizing it might make things worse.

“So what do we do?” she asked.

Solomon wanted to say he didn’t know but knew that would only increase Kay’s sense of panic. Instead, he fell back on the advice Fowler had always given him whenever they had been in a difficult situation.

“First, we stay calm Kay.” He looked her in the eye. “Then we work the problem.”

The light which had suddenly engulfed Fowler cleared and he found himself outdoors and in darkness, standing on a rocky plain running up to the edge of a steep mountain slope. Above him was a starry night and he was alone. Fowler looked at the unfamiliar landscape, confused and disoriented. The massive mountain ahead of him was illuminated in the darkness by the silvery light of four moons. Fowler’s body had felt like it had been on fire when the glowing N-Teks within the core had touched him. All his implants had seemed like they were burning but the pain had eased quickly once the light had faded.

In the distance below the sloping plain, leading away from the mountain, there was a valley. Dim lights shimmered indicating some form of habitation but it was many miles away and too far to walk easily. Fowler did not recognize this place he had been suddenly transported to and immediately tried to summon Kay and Solomon, wondering if it was a habitat of some kind and a glitch had accidentally brought him there.

“Kay and Solomon are unavailable,” reported the monitor.

“What part of Citynet is this?” asked Fowler.

“This is not Citynet,” replied the monitor.

“So where the hell am I?” asked Fowler, feeling the cold wind cutting through his light clothes. He began to shiver.

“You are on the Ancient home world of Xuth.”

Fowler shook his head.

“That’s impossible. The ancients don’t have any dealing with us,” said Fowler. “Recheck.”

“This is Xuth,” confirmed the monitor.

Ahead of him in the distance, he saw a set of giant doors leading into the nearby mountain side. Light streamed out from between the heavy doors which were slightly ajar, revealing an entrance which had been carved out from the rocky core.

“Take me back to Citynet,” requested Fowler but the monitor did not respond. He stood in the cold wind, unsure what to do, his breath frosting up. He tried to drop out but that did not work either and he began to feel trapped. He wrapped his arms around his sides as he began to feel the cold bite, wondering if it was possible to freeze to death in this place. He decided not to find out. The light from the mountain offered the most readily available shelter. He walked towards it tentatively in the howling wind, wondering what lay within.