

Four
Ursus

Mezzler had been ordered to accompany Fowler to Ursus. Fowler could tell that Mezzler was nervous. He had taken a bag full of various chocolate covered snacks which he ate as comfort foods. Mezzler explained that he had occasional sugar cravings, in particular when travelling, and Fowler nodded understandingly, accepting the excuse at face value. Mezzler said little but wrote mails back to Citynet, making sure Fowler would not see the content by switching screens whenever he came near. Fowler knew that Mezzler was dutifully reporting back to Delcass who had sent him to spy on him. For Fowler, it was as if nothing had changed.

Ursus appeared on the star-board view-port and grew steadily in size until its arid, lifeless surface could be seen from space. Fowler had been here before as a younger man when life had been more carefree. Little had been found. Now this dead planet offered him a path in which to follow Walt's last steps. He set the space craft on auto-pilot and it made its descent towards the vacated research station on Ursus which Walt had visited. He walked over to a nervous looking Mezzler.

"You been to Ursus before?" asked Fowler.

Mezzler shook his head. "I saw a documentary on it."

"Been in an environment suit before?"

"No but I'll be fine," replied Mezzler as the ship descended. "The planet's dead, right?"

Fowler nodded, looking at Mezzler's portly figure and wondered if they would have an environment suit big enough to fit him. The ship touched down on the arid surface of the giant planet. Here Erstol was nothing more than a small dot in the red sky. Fowler gave Mezzler the largest suit he could find in the corporate shuttle. Even then it was a struggle for Mezzler to get into it. He was clearly upset at having to go walking about on the surface of the planet but Delcass had given him explicit orders to keep a close eye on Fowler. The shuttle landed smoothly beside the research base on a clearly marked out landing area, guided in by the station's navigation computer.

Fowler began checking Mezzler's suit. "If you experience any problems at all, head back to the shuttle or the station, whichever is the nearest, understood? And lose the gum."

Mezzler nodded, spitting out his gum into the bin before putting on his helmet.

“Keep your visor down at all times. And stay close to me.”

“Where are we going?” asked Mezzler.

“I want to go down to the Basalt valley where Walt and Kay went. Then take some samples and check out what they were doing.” Fowler picked up his kit and walked over to the airlock, then stepped in along with Mezzler.

The atmosphere flooded out of the airlock and Mezzler grew slightly nervous. Fowler opened the outer airlock and stepped down the ladder onto the rocky terrain. Even with their visors down, the land was bright and vivid, reflecting the sunlight from the red giant.

“Watch your step,” said Fowler, helping Mezzler onto the ground in the heavy gravity.

As they walked, Fowler could hear Mezzler’s heavy breathing.

“Jesus,” complained Mezzler. “I feel so heavy.”

“You’ll get used to it. Just take small steps,” advised Fowler.

Ahead of them lay a large, vacated research station whose gray surface reflected the light. Situated around it were dozens of giant solar panels and a communication’s dish. They walked to the airlock and checked in, punching in their access code. The inner airlock door opened and they walked inside, the lights flickering on automatically showing them the station’s machinery and the vacated living quarters to the rear.

Fowler checked the station logs and saw Walt and Kay’s log entry. “They were here all right. Went down to the Basalt valley like Kay said.”

“What’s so special about the valley?” asked Mezzler.

“Couple of reasons. About sixty million years ago, there was life on Ursus before the sun changed to become a red giant. Studies revealed that the indigenous life forms, the Bezons, had developed some form of space travel from the artefacts we recovered on the surrounding planets. However, we found millions of fossilised alien corpses in the valley, dating back to around the time when the sun went red giant.”

“So they were left behind,” said Mezzler.

“No, that’s the strange part. It doesn’t look that way. We think it was more like a ceremony of some sort. The basalt valley was a gathering place. Maybe a revered religious site of some sort. They deliberately chose to stay.”

“Doesn’t sound very smart,” mocked Mezzler.

“Oh they were. We found some of their technology still operational on the neighbouring moons,” replied Fowler. “Then about 10 years ago, some geologists found N-Teks in the soil similar to those we’ve found on Erstol. That was when I joined the dig. We figured that maybe the N-Teks had something to do with the significance of the site. The N-Teks were everywhere, concentrated mainly in the valley. Some of the fossilised remains contained extremely high concentrations of N-Teks. Unfortunately, we ran out of funding. Some of the N-Teks we found were dated at a billion years old. I think the Bezons built their society around them in some way.”

“Are there any left?” asked Mezzler.

“No, they’re extinct now.”

“The N-Teks didn’t help them much, huh,” mocked Mezzler.

They walked into the transport bay and looked at the assortment of battered vehicles at their disposal. One was missing a wheel and the other looked like it had been scavenged for spare parts.

“Ok, we’ve got transport,” said Fowler, checking the battery power of the solitary dune buggy which was operational.

“You gotta be kidding me,” replied Mezzler.

Fowler smiled.

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They took the all-terrain dune buggy with the open top. Fowler drove, punching in their destination on the buggy’s console. The Land-Sat computer plotted their course on the buggy’s electronic map. Fowler preferred to drive rather than go on the auto-pilot, knowing the terrain well, relishing the freedom. Soon, they reached the edge of the sloping valley. Fowler stopped the buggy and stood up, pointing ahead of him in his environment suit. They spoke to one another over their suit comms link.

“This valley was formed about 600 million years ago when a giant asteroid hit the planet with the force of about 2 billion kilotons. We think that the asteroid might have contained the original N-Teks.”

“So how far back do the N-Teks go?” asked Mezzler.

“Before the start of life on this planet is our best guess. We also know that they evolve like any other living thing. The problem we’re having on Citynet is a

prime example. They're adapting to the new environment. As far as we know, the first N-Teks made their way onto Erstol about 20 years ago. Probably got carried in with the dust on the boots of the early explorers who planet hopped." Fowler looked down into the valley. "By the time we get to the dig our suits are going to be covered in them."

Mezzler began to wipe his suit instinctively, brushing off the dust.

"Don't worry, they're perfectly harmless."

Mezzler grasped the dash-board as the buggy made its gradual descent over the rocky terrain.

"This valley used to be covered in lush vegetation. There was a salt lake at its centre with marine life. The Bezons were partially aquatic. The dig is over there to the West, where the shoreline would have been," pointed Fowler.

"How much longer?" asked Mezzler.

"Nearly there," said Fowler.

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The dig was nothing like Fowler had remembered it. Vast tracts of land had been dug out beside the carefully preserved geological dig. There were giant mounds of rubble lying beside a newly constructed tunnel. Fowler swore and climbed out of the dune buggy, angry with the desecration of the site.

"Where are you going?" asked Mezzler.

"This way," pointed Fowler, walking towards the tunnel entrance.

"Can't we just stay here?"

"No. This is new. Looks like it was dug in a hurry." Fowler turned to Mezzler suspiciously. "You know anything about this?"

"No!" he replied quickly.

Fowler kept his insistent stare on Mezzler.

"Honestly!"

Fowler grimaced. "There's no record of this work on the station's logs. This has been done by someone hoping they wouldn't be discovered." Fowler looked at the amount of oxygen he had left and wondered if this was what Walt had found. Fowler walked towards the open entrance, keen not to waste any time, and entered the tunnel. Reluctantly, Mezzler followed.

"Fowler?" asked Mezzler peering into the darkness.

“Keep up!” replied Fowler impatiently.

Mezzler stepped forward tentatively. The darkness closed in on him.

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The lights on Fowler’s environment suit threw wide beams ahead of them penetrating the darkness. The temperature sensors registered that the outside temperature had dropped since entering the wide tunnel. They followed its downward path beneath the valley. Mezzler followed behind, unsure what lay ahead, ready to bolt out of the tunnel at the slightest hint of trouble.

“What’s that?” asked Mezzler, drawing to a halt, looking at something big lying in the shadows.

Fowler walked over to it. “It’s just a digger. Take it easy,” he said, climbing onto the giant machine. He shone his flashlight into the operator’s cabin, finding it empty.

“Take a look at this!” said Mezzler.

Fowler hopped off the digger and walked over to Mezzler. He watched as Mezzler wiped away the dirt from a side panel and revealed the block printed words:

IXUS RULUNQW - PEBAR SAEP ERSTOL

“Alien owned,” muttered Fowler. “Ixian. They still have representation on the Citynet board, don’t they?”

Mezzler nodded. “Last I heard Chairman Soth added another two percent to his Citynet stock holdings.”

“You sure Sandra knows nothing about this?”

Mezzler frowned. “Look Fowler. Delcass and Sandra tell me jack shit. I just...”

Fowler lift his hand. “I know. I know. You just work there.”

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They descended further into the winding cave. Fowler checked his oxygen. The tunnel widened unexpectedly out into a cavern. Fowler spotted a portable power generator ahead of him and switched it on. The entire cavern was illuminated with light and Fowler turned off his environment suit lights.

Fowler walked to the centre of the cavern where a specialized drilling rig had been assembled. He looked at the dark black crystalline rock which was being mined. He picked up a piece and saw the way it seemed to adsorb the light, then pocketed a piece.

“What is it?” asked Mezzler.

“I don’t know but I’m going to find out,” said Fowler.

The ground in the cavern began to shudder unexpectedly causing both men to lose their balance slightly.

“What the hell was that?” asked Mezzler, looking around.

Fowler turned around and looked at the entrance to the cavern. The dull noise which followed the shudder was rapidly turning into a thundering roar as it grew closer. Fowler realized there was a blast wave heading down the tunnel.

“Move!” shouted Fowler, diving onto the ground as the cabling in the cavern was knocked out of action. Darkness returned, heralding the on-coming chaos.

Mezzler moved too slowly. He was swept off his feet by the blast wave which lifted him into the air along with the other debris, carrying his fearful cry into Fowler’s ear piece. The cavern immediately filled with a fine dust, muddying the darkness. It rained dirt on Fowler’s environment suit.

Gradually, the noise from the explosion subsided and the air began to clear.

“Mezzler!” shouted Fowler into his comms-link. “Where are you? Turn on your lights! Mezzler?”

“I’m hurt,” came Mezzler’s weak voice over the comms-link. “Jesus Fowler, I’m hurt.”

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Fowler looked at his remaining oxygen supply and saw that he had reached the point where he would soon have to return. He stumbled around the cavern like a blind man using his suit lights to guide him. Mezzler continued to moan and groan, pleading for help. Finally, Fowler found Mezzler, slumped beside the cavern wall.

“Mezzler, I’m here now,” assured Fowler, touching his shoulder.

“I can’t see,” groaned Mezzler.

Mezzler's environment suit had taken a battering. His helmet was dented, and the visor was scarred. Fowler cleared the debris from Mezzler's visor, seeing his terrified face.

"I'll guide you. Can you walk?" asked Fowler.

"My ribs. I think some are broken."

Fowler helped Mezzler onto his feet. In the heavy gravity, Mezzler was like a dead weight, dragging his feet with each step. He limped badly on his left leg.

"Lift your feet," urged Fowler, not knowing how much father he could carry him. They moved out of the cavern. Ahead lay the digger. Fowler sat Mezzler down beside the machine. "Wait here. I'm going to check out what's ahead."

"Don't leave me!" pleaded Mezzler. "I'll tell you what I know. Just don't leave me."

Fowler looked at Mezzler. "Don't talk. Save your strength." He walked up the winding tunnel and came to a dead end. Fowler stopped in his tracks and swore, seeing that there was no way out.

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"What's wrong?" asked Mezzler.

"Tunnel's caved in," replied Fowler. "Some kind of explosive device. Someone clearly wants us dead. You said you'd tell me what you know. Now is as good a time as any."

"When we get out. Only when we get out," said Mezzler.

With great difficulty, Fowler helped Mezzler into the Digger's pressurised cabin.

Mezzler looked at the complex control panel. "How does it work?"

"I don't know. Start pressing buttons," said Fowler.

A holographic menu eventually popped up, showing the different life-forms capable of using the machine.

"Human, Erstol," replied Fowler and the cabin flooded with oxygen and was pressurised. The flat seats began to mould themselves around Fowler and Mezzler. Fowler took off his helmet. "OK, let's get to work."

Operating the vehicle was child's play once the human setting had been chosen. Fowler picked a spot in the valley wall, parallel to where the tunnel had collapsed and set the machine to work.

"Talk," said Fowler as the machine did its job.

"When we're back at the ship," replied Mezzler.

Fowler wondered whether he should try to beat it out Mezzler but thought better of it. Still, the thought was very tempting. The only thing he could be sure of was not to trust anyone who worked for Citynet. He felt the piece of crystal in his pocket and knew that it was crucial to what was going on. They'd tried to kill him for making it this far and probably killed Walt too. Fowler wondered what role Kay had played.

"How much suit air do you have?" asked Fowler.

"About an hour's worth," answered Mezzler.

Sunlight began to filter in through the tunnel as it broke through to the surface of Ursus. Fowler and Mezzler looked at the crater which had been left by the explosive device. Their all-terrain buggy lay smouldering on its side, now nothing more than a mangled mess.

Fowler grimaced and looked at Mezzler. "They've been thorough."

"How are we going to get back to the ship?" Mezzler was clearly panicking.

Fowler rubbed his brow inside the cabin. "You know if we can drive this thing?"

"Look!" Mezzler pointed at a silver ship hanging in the air to the east of their position, catching the sunlight.

"You see any markings on it?" asked Fowler, noting the way the hull reflected the light.

Mezzler shook his head. "Signal it!" he shouted.

"What makes you think it's friendly?" asked Fowler.

The ship disappeared before Fowler could respond, accelerating vertically and without any noise.

"Why didn't you signal it?" complained Mezzler.

"Shut up and help me drive this thing!" shouted Fowler, losing his patience with Mezzler.

"They could have helped us!" insisted Mezzler.

Fowler shook his head. "Why should we signal them? They want us dead not alive! Now, help me goddammit!!"

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Fowler's worst fears were realised. The digger's top speed was a couple of feet per minute. At this rate, it could take days to make it to the station. More serious than that, the machine refused to move up the increasingly steep slope of the valley no matter which route Fowler took. The digger's wheels turned but had no traction. They had come to a dead end.

"We're going nowhere fast," said Fowler. "I'm going to have to go on by foot. I'll take some of the digger's air with me."

"What about me?" asked Mezzler.

"You'll wait here. You're in no condition to go anywhere."

Mezzler's eyes opened wide with fear. "I'm coming too."

"Trust me. I'll come back and get you."

But Fowler could tell that Mezzler did not trust him. Mezzler trusted no-one. He fully expected Fowler to leave him behind. Fowler knew this because it is what Mezzler would have done. Fowler looked with scorn at Mezzler, knowing he was a victim of his own mentality.

"No, I'm coming," insisted Mezzler.

"How?" asked Fowler. "You can barely walk."

"I know some things," said Mezzler. "I'll tell you when we get to the station."

"Look!" shouted Fowler. "I don't give a shit what you know. You're staying here and that's all there is to it. Now suit up, I'm getting out."

Reluctantly, Mezzler nodded and both men suited up. Fowler then opened his door in the vehicle and climbed down the ladder.

Mezzler was determined not to be left behind and tried to climb down the ladder too.

Fowler looked up. "Get back into the cab. You're in no shape to follow me."

Mezzler shook his head. “No, I’m coming too.” But Mezzler’s injured leg gave out on him and he slipped from the ladder, landing back first on the ground with a sickening thud. A whistling noise spread over the comms link from Mezzler.

“Fowler, I’ve g...”

Mezzler’s voice was cut short. He began to kick violently on the ground, writhing about as a plume of escaping gas began shooting from the back of his helmet. Fowler lunged onto the ground, placing his hand vainly over the leak in Mezzler’s suit. He grimaced as the shooting gas disappeared and the external atmosphere of Ursus equalised within Mezzler’s suit. Fowler knew it was already too late and grasped Mezzler’s frigid hand. Mezzler’s tongue look unnatural as it pushed out of his mouth against the visor. His head had doubled in size and his eyes bulged from their sockets, taking in their final sights. Blood vessels popped squirting blood inside the suit. Mezzler’s junk-food dinner founted out of his mouth like a geezer.

Nausea swept Fowler and he looked away from the bloody spectacle. Sweat was pouring from his face within the environment suit.

“Oh Jesus,” gasped Fowler, fighting back the tears and shock engulfing him. He had never liked Mezzler but he didn’t deserve this fate. Mezzler’s hand dropped lifelessly to the ground. Fowler began to hyperventilate, fighting back the nausea. He began to feel dizzy and put on hand on the ground. He tried to focus on an object in the distance to give him some sense of perspective. The ancient dig began to resemble an eerie graveyard. He clenched the N-Tek infested dirt in his glove, seizing it, seeking another perspective but it didn’t work. His heart raced in his chest.

Maybe the saboteurs had achieved their objective, he realised, trying to catch his breath. Maybe he was already dead.