

Five  
The Dig

Fowler set out of the valley on foot, trying to make as much progress as he could under the heavy gravity. Without the all-terrain buggy, the short bends on the gravel road seemed to stretch on forever. Worst of all, he was breathing heavily and using up more oxygen than he would have liked. He looked at his gauge and kept on moving, trying to keep a steady pace. As he took each heavy step, he realised this was where Citynet's need to keep its hold on power had led him; to another place worse than the Tank, a hostile, dead world where he might fall like Mezzler. Fowler tried not to allow failure to dominate his mind. Thoughts of Delcass made him strengthen his stride. His need to succeed made him move on.

Fowler had lied when he had told Sandra that he had nothing to prove. He had everything to prove. He wanted Delcass to suffer the way he had, to experience the early torment he had experienced in the Tank. Fowler snapped out of his delirious thoughts, knowing that the hate would only consume him. Politics had beaten Fowler, plain and simple. Delcass had out-manoeuvred him politically. The knife had been in his back and he hadn't even realised it. That had been the hardest lesson. But the N-Teks had changed all that. They were beyond Delcass' control. Privately, Fowler wondered if the N-Teks were beyond his own control too.

Fowler reached the crest of the sloping valley and he looked into the distance. He saw the grey station dome with the satellite dish. He headed towards it; one heavy footstep trailing after the other; his slouched formed silhouetted by a blood stained horizon. *He's not going to win*, thought Fowler thinking of Delcass. He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to move on. His suit issued a warning that his air was running low and he thinned the air mix so that could make the distance. His lungs began to heave slightly and he began to perspire. As he walked he began to feel his muscles cramping up, the pain growing with each step. Fowler set his sights on the dome, determined to make it there.

He sucked in each lungful of air almost trying to hold it and then released it slowly. Gradually, he made out the airlock to the deserted station. His ship was still there untouched by the saboteurs.

A red light began to flash on his suit's head up display. He was almost out of oxygen. He felt like he was walking in slow motion. He reached out his arm which was shaking and cramping up as he neared the door.

The code, what was the code? he thought frantically. His face and lips were turning blue. He was finding it hard to remember. He punched in some numbers and wasn't sure if they were correct. The airlock door clicked open. Fowler staggered inside.

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The airlock hissed as it equalled pressure with the vacated research station. Fowler took off his helmet and fell onto the floor, letting the helmet roll across the floor like a lopsided bowling ball. Sweat dripped from his face and he lay on all fours, panting heavily, like an exhausted animal. His lips had a bluish tinge. His body had been slowly starved of oxygen and he sucked in deep breaths of air, feeding his being. He ripped off the environment suit and stumbled towards the water dispenser, regaining his strength, dousing his face with the cool liquid. He took the crystal out of his environment suit pocket and looked at it closely, wondering if it had been worth Mezzler's life. His sweat-stained hand wet the crystal's surface and it seemed to change colour slightly in the dim light. He put it down and drank some more water from his cupped hands.

Mezzler was dead and Sandra would have to know. Delcass would try to turn it to his advantage. Maybe try and work it so that he would be sent back to the Tank. Fowler threw off his sweat-soaked clothes. He walked naked through the station towards the accommodation section he had once known so well; his wet footsteps leaving a trail. He stepped into the shower in the accommodation section and washed away the unpleasant thoughts.

"To hell with them," muttered Fowler.

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Fowler dried off feeling exhausted. He could barely keep his eyes open. The cubicles which he had once thought of as home were all empty. He pushed open a door. Inside there was a bed with a mattress. There were two sheets and a blanket neatly stacked at the end of it. Quickly, Fowler lay down on the bed and threw one of the

sheets over him. He threw an arm over his eyes, blocking out the light. Sleep took his exhausted body. The bunk was comfortable, the room was cool. His other arm lay over the side of the bunk as he slept, the tips of his fingers growing red and inflamed, dancing as if to a silent tune. Gradually, Fowler slipped into a deep dream-filled sleep.

In his dream, Fowler found himself part of a procession which was taking place on Ursus, making its way to the base of the salt lake. It was an earlier time. Ursus' Basalt valley was green and lush with vegetation. The lake at the bottom of the valley was calm and tranquil. Fowler walked with the other Bezons in a torch-lit procession. One of the creatures walked alongside Fowler, saying nothing, acting as his protector. The eyes of his escort were dark, its skin black as night. The head protruded backward to a smoothed out point. Its shape was partly humanoid, yet its movement was insect-like in nature. It had what looked like fins on its back. Fowler took a deep breath and inhaled the warm, humid air, marvelling at the vividness of the dream. He reached out to a tree and pulled off some of the leaves, smelling their pungent aroma.

The Bezon spoke telepathically to Fowler. "We call this tree an Acos, what you would call an evergreen," informed the alien.

"Who are you?" asked Fowler.

"I am Yalthak, your guardian. I am here to help you in whatever way I can on Ursus. I was very worried that you would not make it back to the research base. We have been waiting a long time for your arrival."

"I must be hallucinating," muttered Fowler.

"No, you are not," replied Yalthak. "In time, all will become clearer."

Together the Bezons took their places by the shoreline and sat, each knowing their place. Some of the other assembling Bezons emerged from the water. Yalthak guided Fowler to his place and he sat down. The torches surrounded the calm lake with a ring of fire. "What do you know of freedom, Fowler?" asked Yalthak. "Our world is dying."

"I don't understand. Your world is already dead."

Yalthak continued undeterred. "Soon, our sun will expand and we will be no more. Tell us about freedom, Fowler."

“Fowler?” Kay tried to wake Fowler. He looked ragged beneath the quilt; the colour drained from his cheeks. He was sweating feverishly. Fowler eyes darted open suddenly as if he had just been transported from another time and place. His blood shot eyes focused on Kay’s concerned face.

“Kay - How did you get here?” asked Fowler.

Kay looked puzzled. “The same way you did. On a company ship.”

Fowler sat up, taking her by the arm. “Show me your ship.”

She saw his naked form under the sheets. “Here, put this on first,” motioned Kay, giving him one of the station’s orange jump-suits.

Fowler dragged his bare feet slowly as he came out of the accommodation room, looking like a dishevelled orphan. The orange sleeves on the large jump-suit were rolled up. His sweaty hair was sticking out in all directions.

“Are you all right?” wondered Kay. “You look terrible.”

“Don’t worry about me. Just show me your ship!” insisted Fowler unsteadily.

“All right! All right.” Kay brought Fowler to a plate glass window where Fowler looked at the Citynet ship.

Fowler expended his breath against the window. “It’s not silver.”

“No,” replied Kay, wondering about the significance of the color.

Fowler felt dizzy and thirsty. “Not silver,” he muttered. Fowler lay against the wall and slid down it. He sat down on the ground, wrapping his arms about himself, shivering. “Mezzler’s dead.”

Kay was shocked. “Dead! How?”

Fowler tried to stand up but could not. “A ship.” He grew light headed and rested against the wall. “A silver ship without any markings sabotaged us while we were in the dig. It tried to bury us alive. Did you see one on your way here?”

Kay shook her head. “No, where’s Mezzler’s body?”

“He’s still out there.” Fowler felt the ground blurring in and out of focus. He shook his head insistently. His eyes were watering uncontrollably. “Don’t want to go back to the Tank, Kay. Wasn’t my fault. Wasn’t...”

The ground seemed to rush towards him as he passed out.

Fowler felt a cold swab on his forehead when he came to. Kay was sitting nearby his bunk. She seemed relieved that he had regained consciousness.

Fowler felt better but was still sore and stiff. "How long was I out?"

"A couple of hours. You were delirious. Jesus, I thought you were going to die. What are those marks on you body?" asked Kay.

Fowler looked at the N-Tek implants in his body. Normally they were the same colour as his skin and hidden from view. However, the specialised cells were now red and inflamed. Fowler felt how sensitive and sore the tips of his fingers were. His mouth and neck joints felt sore too. Wherever there were implants, Fowler felt pain and discomfort.

"Something's wrong with my implants. I have to get back to Erstol," said Fowler.

"You have N-Tek implants?"

Fowler nodded.

"I thought they were illegal."

"They are. I was in the Tank because of them. I just got out." Fowler looked at Kay knowingly and she quietened. "Where is the specimen I found?"

"What specimen?" asked Kay.

"We found a crystal. About so big." Fowler clenched his fist. "It has something to do with all this."

"I didn't find anything." Kay was insistent but Fowler got out of his bunk and searched through his damp clothes. He found the crystal by the water fountain and saw the way it seemed to change colour in his hand, catching the light, then pocketed it.

"Where did you get it?" asked Kay.

"In a new tunnel by the dig. Did you go down there with Walt?"

Kay shook her head. "Walt went down on his own. He insisted I stay here."

Fowler paused thoughtfully. "I'll need the use of the labs electron microscope to examine it."

Kay nodded. "You'll have to clear it with Delcass first."

Fowler lost his temper and snapped at her. "Godammit Kay! I think this is why Walt was killed. Now Mezzler. Are you with me or not?"

She paused, looking at Fowler, seeing the look of determination on his face. "Of course I am."

“Well then, cut the procedure bullshit and give me access to the labs.” Kay looked unsure but Fowler stood his ground. “It’s all or nothing if you want to find the truth.”

“Okay, okay,” said Kay disarmingly, worried about Fowler’s mental state.

“Can you tell me something?” she asked.

“What?” asked Fowler, calming down.

“Why did you do it?”

Fowler grimaced. “Do what?”

“Inject the N-Teks into you. It’s a life sentence. Everyone knows that. You had everything. I just don’t get it. Why did you throw it all away?”

Fowler suddenly felt very emotional. His cantankerous veneer crumbled. “I’ve been asked myself the same question for the last three years in the Tank. I guess I thought I was smarter than everyone. When it came down to it, I wasn’t. I did a lot of things back then I’m not proud of.” Fowler held back, not wanting to elaborate any further. He looked up at Kay. “Look, I’m really sorry for the way I talked to you in Systems. It’s just I don’t know who to trust anymore.” He began to feel faint again.

Key instinctively came to Fowler’s aid. “It’s Okay. I understand. Just rest. Let’s get you back home.”

Fowler looked up, like he hadn’t heard that term in a very long time.

“Where’s that,” he asked, meeting her eyes, feeling like there was a connection. She was close to him. He could smell her perfume.

Kay blushed a little, feeling like an invisible line had been crossed. She regained her composure. “Erstol. Come on, let’s get you on your feet.”