

CHAPTER 1

2257 A.D.

EVENT: DAY 6, Unknown Hour

IN A FROZEN CAVE, barely lit by an aqua glow, lay the crumpled oversized mass of a hibernation suit.

Wedged into a shallow niche, it housed the body and shattered mind of Doctor Federico Comani. Brittle silence reigned. Around him flowed ethereal fog-shapes, mute witnesses: the eternal offspring of the Ghost Falls of Eighre Masc.

The starkly beautiful world was a spinless, frozen ball of ice. Its orbital realities left one face forever exposed to the dark cold of space. The other half faced the distant, dim system star, Janus, rarely eclipsed by Eighre Masc's dead moon.

As a planetary scientist it was Comani's business to study these things. He had experienced the *Follen Worlds* Sensorium recordings. He'd not had the survey privilege. Terrologist Lars Follen named Eighre Masc for its translation: "Ice Phantoms." No Earth-bound, and few spacers, would ever witness its beauty in person.

With the sunward surface ever hovering at a forbidding minus 181 degrees Celsius, the ghost falls never tired.

Near to the kilometers-high perimeter walls of the atmosphere basin, mountain-sized ice rubble piled up to cast deep shadows, allowing the spectacle of pooled oxygen lakes. Liquid oxygen (LOX) trickled down through

the fractured, granite-hard H₂O ice basins of Eighre Masc, into ice-cavern complexes beneath the low plains. Then, miniscule subterranean heat, generated by the tidal forces in the solvent core, caused an instant change in the LOX—it flashed into ether at its relative boiling point, one degree above its frosty liquid state: the “ghostly” displays.

Dr. Comani had always thought that these Ghost Falls were exquisitely beautiful. In these caverns, the transformation manifested as an ephemeral waterfall, the solvent oxygen falling from its higher point, and in mid-air, disappearing into its self-made cloud, in a whisper. Fog-shapes propagated like snakes from those transitional points, and bloated into drifting golems larger than a man. The tentative specters eventually rose out of the caverns to return to liquid in the shadows of the frigid surface. The cycle was endless.

Just a few days earlier, Fred would have appreciated time off from his demanding schedule for a visit, a perfect place for his disconsolate soul, with unresponsive, undemanding phantasms for his only company. In the years of his life as a terrologist—his second life, taking the place of a broken one—when forced to suffer the presence of others, Comani dreamt of such a place as Eighre Masc. It called to the loneliness enshrouding his heart. But resolute and rigid-minded, his focus was on his job, and his work would never take him there.

Here.

He had his perfect world now.

He no longer wanted it. The isolation carved into him just as half the planet had been carved out over billions of years by ultraviolet bombardment. His rattled psyche was besieged by an old and forgotten need to be with other humans. Something he'd done without for a long time. Gone was his requirement for seclusion.

In his desperate torpor he was reliving the life he knew before his present occupation, a life that he'd banned from his thoughts.

Marooned, embraced by cold, hard ice and the not-quite-splashing whisper of the falls coming through the pick-ups of his suit, the renewed necessity for human closeness was pushing into his comatose state. Every so often, sorted from the whispers, a word in his native dialect filtered through his broken consciousness.

The days crawled by uncounted, and the haunting lexicon of his non-companions grew. Their murmuring coldly excluded him.

Comani, alone, fought off an alien terror that consumed him.

The safe inner void that had for so long been his only consolation, a protected hollow within, had become a screaming, gaping maw. Eons had chewed away at this side of Eighre Masc, and now countless teeth bit and snapped at Fred. He fought the nightmarish monster with all of the goodness of a life past. Memories of love.

Combat with this terror left little room for other sensory inputs. The feeding and waste-handling of his body was left to the devices of the hibernation suit. The memories of the trek from the crash site to this cavern, even donning the suit, all were hazy or absent. Unnecessary memories that could not be spared space in his brain. Any distraction from his struggle, and he might slip, might fall into the toothy, dark unknown.

Survival of spirit had become prime. Survival of his body was secondary.

Comani heard the whispers of the ghosts. And he heard his spirit keening.

It wailed for good reason: he had witnessed—no, he had been the cause—he had sucked the life essence out of more than half-a-dozen souls.

CHAPTER 2

*EVENT: DAY 2, 1420 Hours,
UT (Universal Time)*

ANY SECURITY OFFICER could have spotted them there, dangling in their harnesses from the nose of the space elevator capsule.

Taylor had arranged it all in advance, but she could not be sure her security perversion program was doing its job. She didn't much care though, because it added to the danger-rush, the chemical fix of adrenaline flooding her body. It had been too long since her last stunt and she was ready for anything.

Garrison, her unwitting partner, who swung next to her, hadn't expected more than an erotic weekend aboard *Toroid Alpha*, the massive space dock. This ride had cost him 700 credits, but Taylor was worth it.

There was no way he could have known what she'd planned for them, but he was about to find out.

She had made sure that she and Garrison arrived late to the space elevator. The agent assured them that they'd be onboard in time for takeoff. *The Bullet*, a thirty-two person cylindrical shuttle capsule, rode the high velocity tube up to the space station.

Just before they had rounded the last corner to the shuttle loading platform, Taylor pushed him sideways through an access door that he hadn't

known was there. He'd think that she wanted some exciting, chancy bit of sex. Any of her lovers would have thought the same.

"Hey, Taylor. What..." She'd quickly silenced him by pushing him up against the wall of this new passage, kissing him hard. Her wild unpredictability and exotic beauty both unnerved and excited him. She read it in his face, his resignation to take the next shuttle for a few more credits.

But as he had begun to respond to her advance, she'd pressed a mylex pressure suit and mono breather into his hands, her hot, wet breath in his ear as she whispered urgently, "Put it on."

She leaned away from him, gripping his shirt front, and pulled him past a corner in the private passage, and into a maintenance bay. The front of the six-meter-tall, half-sphere nose of the Bullet protruded through a partition wall. The bustle of people loading could be heard in the passenger terminal area on the other side of the wall.

In an angry whisper, he said, "What the hell, TJ?" When he turned to her, she was on a knee, pulling rigging and harnesses out of her overnight duffle. He looked again at the shuttle: a maintenance ring at the tip of its nose brought the pieces together for him.

"Oh, no way, Taylor..." He scanned and found several cameras watching over the area. Garrison did not need trouble with the military police.

"What is it, Captain? Too scary?" Using his rank, she got right under his skin.

It was an insult that Garrison couldn't tolerate. "No," he spit back before catching himself. She had watched him fume in that moment, as he thought about what she intended: a ride to the station, but on the Bullet's nose. Because it seemed possible, she had to do it and drag him along.

With some quick mental calculations, he must have decided it was survivable, because he hadn't backed out. Instead, saying, "No, I just meant... did you foul the cameras?"

"Handled," was all she could be bothered to say before she turned and took three strides on her long legs and tossed a hitch up around the Bullet nose ring, three meters above the mag lev rails.

Gymnastically, she had set her rig while he donned the suit. A finger on the pressure spot of his scalp hood rigidified the faceplate. He'd looked up to see her silently swaying in her harness, beauty disguised behind the hood, her finger beckoning.