

PLANET X91

DESCENDING INTO ID

CHAPTER ONE

“RAVINA WELCOME back. You died; twice.”

Ravina sent the unshaven man with the blue eyes hovering over her a blank stare.

‘Surely, he was joking,’ she decided inwardly. Swiping her mouse colored hair away from her hazel eyes she looked around at her surrounds.

“Does what you’re looking at seem familiar?” questioned the man.

“Yes, of course,” she growled. “I’m lying on a narrow bed in shuttle craft number seven.”

“What planet are we on?”

“Declan, I might have died, be advised my memory is still intact.”

“What planet are we on?”

“Planet X91,” she croaked. “What happened?”

“Do you remember we landed the shuttle in the exact center of the South Pole to build the weather station four days ago? The wind was freezing. You wandered off a short distance to investigate what looked like a hole in the ice.”

“Yes, I remember,” said Ravina. The angry tone in her voice was starting to abate.

She struggled to sit upright. Pushing her back against the wall of the makeshift hospital section of the shuttle she switched her gaze between the three faces staring at her.

“I’m fine,” she stammered.

“I don’t recommend you stand for a while. Take it easy.”

“Declan, I’m going to stand, so back away,” Ravina demanded.

The woman’s quick mood swings were nothing new. To be accepted on the journey to the stars she hid her anger to perfection. Even though everyone knew at times she was impossible to be around she seemed to be a great organizer. She got the job done no matter what.

Ravina swung her legs over the side of the bed, placing both her feet on the metal floor. The moment she tried to stand Ravina hurriedly groped for the side of the narrow bed. Declan stepped forward to stop her from crumpling into a heap. He placed her gently back onto the bed.

“I can’t seem to stand!” she gasped between breaths. “What’s wrong with me?”

“We’re not sure,” replied Declan.

“Have you completed a full body scan?”

“Yes,” replied Declan.

“So what did the scan reveal?”

“Nothing is wrong.”

“I recommend sitting might be a good thing for at least a while longer,” hinted a young woman.

Her short dark hair didn’t reach the collar of her Military Uniform. To Ravina, her grin looked genuine. The woman’s dark eyes relayed she felt deeply concerned over the incident.

“Ravina, do you remember me?” asked the woman. She stood straight and dusted her uniform.

“Yes, I remember you, Zoe,” Ravina ticked off. “You were the one who flew the shuttle to this location.”

“What other facts do you remember about the incident?”

“Everything,” she groaned. “You helped me to rig the winch and connect two lengths of metal cable together so I could descend into the round hole in the ice. I can still feel the cold wind blowing down the tunnel.”

“I feel guilty over you nearly dying; permanently,” moaned Zoe. She reached out and pulled the blanket that was at the foot of the bed up to Ravina’s waist.

“Don’t be. I’ll be fine soon.”

A lively lad, a tad older than eighteen, stepped up to the bed. He looked as though he’d swallowed a canary.

“How’s the patient feeling?”

"Blake, the patient, is giving us a hard time," reported Zoe.

"That's nothing unusual. I've heard you say you remember everything. Do you want to continue or start over?"

"What do you mean continue?"

"You've been talking in your sleep. I've recorded your mumblings."

"What have I been saying?"

"We have no idea. Eyes in the ice don't make sense."

Blake shoved the microphone under Ravina's nose. He grinned at her fuming expression.

"I want to finish recording the words of the first person to have died and be resurrected on planet X91."

"I thought we're on Earth." Ravina smirked at seeing every one of her companions glaring at her. "I'm only kidding."

"Forget the wisecracks. Just record the remainder of the story," insisted Blake.

"Where are the others?" questioned Ravina.

"Outside," reported Blake. "They want to lash the equipment down before the snow storm hits. Now start squealing about what happened when you descended the mysterious hole."

"If it's all the same to you I think we should wait till the council members arrive. I want to tell them in person what I saw and not some microphone. Besides telling my side of events twice is one too many times. Believe me, when I tell you I don't want to ever go through something like that ever again."

On that note, Blake stopped the recording and glared at Ravina.

"Judging by the expression on your face I know it's time for me to go call the Piper."

Seeing Ravina flopping prone on the bed Blake stored the tape recorder back in a draw and walked towards the shuttle's nose section. Sitting in the pilot's seat, he leaned forward, his fingers hovered above the communication's button.

"Why the hesitation?" asked Zoe. She invited herself to sit in the copilot's seat. Before focusing on Blake, she glanced out the window at the approaching storm. Already the wind had whipped up the newly fallen snow and was blowing it across the ice plateau.

"I'm not sure what to report," Blake replied.

Zoe was the copilot on this particular shuttle mission. Blake had decided it was high time to force her into such an important role. Seven minutes of actually flying time other than a simulator would be priceless to her. Flicking the overhead buttons to bring the AON drive on line then being able to fly the shuttle till they reached the ice caps was a moment she'd treasure for the remainder of her life. She almost jumped out of her skin when Blake said she could land the shuttle.

Zoe didn't even appear nervous at the idea. She made a text book landing. She even brought the shuttle's nose around, so it pointed into the wind. When she stepped away from the craft, she wore a proud look. Staring up into the blue sky she felt a tingling sensation at the thought of one day being allowed to pilot the shuttle into space.

"Tell whoever answers the call to get here, pronto," urged Zoe.

Blake pushed the communication open button, bringing the radio to life. He sat deeper into the chair.

"Weather station camp three to the Piper spaceship how do you read me, over?"

Waiting for a reply, Blake continued talking to Zoe. He wasn't like most other blokes in the colony who were fast at talking to the young ladies. He was in a classification titled the strugglers. He didn't label himself as shy he just never knew what to say.

Silence marred the airways.

"Did you use the hyperlink? The conventional method mightn't be fast enough to get through the storm."

Looking somewhat red in the face Blake shook his head. He tapped up the computer's main menu, scrolled down to the hyperlink channel and opened the link.

Josh Quinn reached out and pushed the communication button on the Piper's console.

"Piper to weather station camp three is there a problem?"

"You might say that," replied Blake. "Who am I talking to?"

"Josh Quinn. If you're after anyone else, they have stepped out of the Piper to soak up some sun."

"I understand," said Blake.

He told a watered version of events then went on to describe the approaching storm.

"Inform Ravina it was a good call to order no one else will go anywhere near the hole in the ice. We're on our way."

“The storm is less than a minute out from our location and will last another fifty-nine minutes,” advised Blake, studying the storm pattern on the computer.

“We’ll land in sixty-two minutes,” said Josh. “Piper out. Henry, sound the ship’s sirens, the council must vote on an important idea.”

Three short, sharp blasts instantly made the colonists on edge. Everyone stopped what they were doing. The first thing they did was to stare at the sky looking for a tell-tale sign something or a spaceship might be approaching the planet. When they saw the council members running towards the Piper, they switched their attention to the runners.

The council members sprinted onto the Piper’s bridge. They found Josh sitting at a round table Clay had finished constructing a few days earlier. The yet unpainted table looked sturdy in design. Seats from one of the shuttles surrounded the table.

“I hereby bring this urgent meeting into being,” announced Josh.

Florian sat next to him giggling at hearing his serious voice.

Nara displayed a smirk long before she sat opposite Clay.

“Nice table,” mentioned Reltso.

“I’m glad someone has noticed the official table,” groaned Clay.

“Why did you make a round table?” quizzed Reltso.

“Reason being not one person on the council will think he’s more important than the others. Hence, there isn’t a seat at the head of the table.”

“Sounds good to me,” chirped Florian.

They were all seated when Sergey burst onto the bridge and sat at the last vacant seat. He flashed a grin at noticing everyone staring at him.

“I thought the colony voted you off the council,” probed Nara.

“I’m here as Kelsey’s proxy while he’s on a reconnaissance trip, to the second moon,” advised Sergey. “The mining group wanted him to fly the first shuttle filled with iron ore to the other side of planet X91. They want him to detect a suitable site for our first and second furnace. In a few months, we’ll be able to start the construction of the first metal framed building.”

“Good news,” said Reltso. “On behalf of the council members, it’s good to have you sitting at the table, even if it’s only for a short time.”

“What’s up?” questioned Clay sitting deep in the chair.

“I have just received a call from weather station camp three. There’s been an incident at the South Pole,” Josh started. “I’ve been told Ravina died, twice. The quick-thinking doctor onboard the shuttle successfully brought her back from the brink of death.”

“Will she be okay?” questioned Nara.

“Yes, provided she rests for a few days.”

“What caused her to die?” questioned Florian.

“While she descended an ice tunnel she claims she saw a face in the ice wall. By the time the other members of the group could get her back to the surface, she was dead.”

“We have to go check out the tunnel,” said Reltso.

“I’d have to agree,” echoed Josh.

“But?” questioned Nara.

“I’m thinking at least one of us mightn’t be too thrilled at descending into another tunnel especially after the last time.”

“It’s been a week since we eliminated all the giant spiders in the catacombs,” jeered Clay.

“Seven days hasn’t been long enough to end my nightmares,” complained Florian. “Every night I dream about being chased by a spider the size of the shuttle.”

“I’m certain there are no more spiders,” argued Josh. “Ravina did say she saw a face.”

“If I may make a suggestion,” whispered a man over Josh’s shoulder.

The council members watched Lomeny hobbling towards the table. Each step he completed looked painful.

Josh stood and helped the man to sit at the table. A few seconds ticked off before Lomeny could catch his breath.

“I know this table represents the council members who were voted to be on the council,” started Lomeny. “I also understand I probably shouldn’t be here as yet even though I’ve been elected to be on the council.”

“I believe every council member who can be here, has the right to vote on any idea we come up with,” said Josh.

“Thank you,” croaked Lomeny.

“How are you feeling?” questioned Florian.

“I’m improving. Almost dying in the hidden catacombs and being helpless to stop the spiders from drinking my blood has taken a lot out of me.”

“I can fully understand what you mean,” whispered Florian. “You were going to say something?”

“Yes. We have an obligation to all the colonists to be certain this planet is safe for the thousands of humans who will be leaving the Earth permanently and coming here in the not too distant future. Descending into the ice tunnel to discover what the so-called face is all about must be done even if the one who volunteers to descend into the tunnel dies.”

“If there is a slim chance the person might die it’s too risky a task,” jeered Clay. “I don’t want someone’s preventable death on my conscience.”

“What do you recommend we do?” Lomeny questioned.

“Stay away from the hole in the ice. Mark the place as a no-go area.”

“If we do we will never know anything more about the face or how dangerous the thing is. We have to know.”

“I agree with Lomeny,” said Florian.

She saw Clay shake his head. He certainly didn’t look happy.

“I want to say one last thing, and that’s a massive thank you for rescuing me. I was wrong to lose my temper and disregard orders to stay in the safety of this well-equipped camp. I had tunnel vision. I wanted to rescue my brothers or die trying.”

“So, you want to force your opinion on someone else. This time around the person just might die,” growled Clay.

“Of course, I don’t want anyone to die. Let’s face it we have to know what’s in the ice tunnel.”

“Sergey, we all know how important it was for you to have saved your brothers.” Reltso pushed his hand into the air forcing the man to remain quiet. “We weren’t trying to force you to stay in the camp last time. This time around I agree with Clay. Putting an innocent man’s life in danger isn’t up to one person. All things considered, I have to agree with you too. Be advised we the council members agree with what you’ve just said. We have an obligation to make this planet safe. That said I vote yes to go and check out the ice tunnel.”

Nara yelled, yes, followed by Florian.

Henry what’s your opinion on the idea of going to the South Pole?” called Florian.

The hologram materialized next to the table. The six-foot tall Crenoxian hologram folded his arms. In a distinct tone of voice, he sounded out his idea.

“The Piper will be ready to leave in three minutes.”

“I vote we ride the Piper to the ice tunnel,” said Clay. “Henry will be able to scan Ravina’s injuries and make a more thorough medical diagnosis.”

“Your hidden agenda is to play host and have Ravina sit at the table while you serve her a nice dinner,” giggled Florian.

“That too,” confessed Clay. “It’s the least I can do seeing how I’m volunteering to descend the ice hole.”

“You’re such a loved starved puppy,” groaned Nara.

“I’d have to agree,” mumbled Clay. “Ravina is a nice-looking woman. I’ve seen her walking about this camp on many occasions.”

“I have news for you,” said Florian. “I’ve watched you hiding amongst the wooden crates hoping to catch a glimpse of Ravina.

“So what if you did. I love the way her dark hair bounces when she walks. Each strand captures the sunlight. Her smile is to die for.”

“You want to convince Ravina to give you a kiss and send you on the way. I vote you stay out of the tunnel,” laughed Josh.

“There’s no need for anyone else to volunteer to descend the hole in the ice,” stated Reltso. “I’m military. It’s my job.”

Hearing the many engines beginning their distinctive hum as the Piper built up power for lift off, Florian helped Lomeny to his feet. With Clay on the other side of the man, they helped him out of the ship.

“I’ll be okay sitting on the deck chair under a tree soaking up the sun,” whispered Lomeny.

“We have to go,” said Florian. She crouched and checked to make sure he was comfortable.

“You better go. The ship sounds like it’s ready to ascend,” advised Lomeny.

Henry materialized next to Florian. “The injured man will be fine. It’s time for the Piper to depart.”

Florian and Henry marched back into the Piper. The moment they reached the hatch the metal door started to slide shut. Even though Florian could feel the massive ship rising into the air her steps didn't falter nor did she lose her balance on the way to the bridge.

Lomeny watched the Crenoxian ship ascend then saw a white streak being created from left to right across the sky.

In less than two minutes the Piper's shadow blanketed the small weather station camp.

Descending the last three hundred feet to the hard deck the tail end of the storm couldn't even buffer the Piper. After settling into the snow-covered plateau, the group of five grabbed thick lined coats from the narrow cupboard next to the loading bay. They pushed thick gloves over their hands as they disembarked the Piper.

The glisten off the ice-covered mountains in the background looked spectacular. Everywhere they looked was fresh powdered snow. The billowing fog bank moving away from the camp looked fierce. Though the wind buffeted their windbreakers, the sun was starting to shine through the gaps in the low cloud. Halfway to the hatch of the closest shuttle the wind had abated to a steady breeze.

"I'm glad the storm is moving away," announced Florian. She pushed her fur-lined hat from off her head, shaking her long black hair to full length.

"Yes, it appears to be a well-timed landing," Clay replied.

Reltso led the group towards the three shuttles that made up the temporary camp. The nose of each shuttle craft faced each other. In the middle of the crafts, the camp's equipment appeared to be abandoned. A table and five chairs was half buried in snow. The small pile driver connected to an air-bike looked frozen. Stepping into the area between the shuttles the temperature felt colder than near the Piper. Two of the shuttles looked to be half buried in snow while the third was completely buried.

Before the group got close to the first shuttle the hatch to the airlock slid open. A single figure, clothed in a thick fur lined coat and pants stepped onto the newly fallen snow. Watching the group marching towards him, he beckoned them to hurry.

Blake greeted the group by reaching out to shake the hand of each one of the council members. Two at a time they entered the shuttle. Blake brought up the rear and closed the hatch.

"This is cozy," chirped Florian. She stepped further into the craft, looking at several burly men ready to greet her.

"The temperature is a warm twenty-three degrees," reported Blake.

Clay pushed his way through the crowd so he could talk directly to Ravina who was now sitting comfortably in a seat.

"Hello, Ravina."

"Clay, welcome aboard," she recited.

"I think I should carry you to the Piper so Henry can examine you."

"I'm comfortable sitting in this seat."

"So much for the romantic dinner," whispered Florian. She had leaned sideways so she could talk into Clay's ear. She did try hard not to giggle but lost out big time.

"What's the joke?" growled Ravina.

"I had hoped to make you a nice meal back on the Piper," explained Clay.

He stared sideways at Florian who in turn grinned at his serious face.

"Thanks, but no thanks. Blake made me a meal fifteen minutes ago." Seeing Clay pout Ravina quickly added. "I might take you up on the offer when I'm feeling stronger."

To Clay, her statement buzzed of hope. Florian remained convinced Ravina was only trying to be polite. She had no intention of being alone with Clay.

"Henry, please materialize and give Ravina a full medical," called Josh.

A bright narrow light appeared three feet from Ravina. When the light vanished, Henry was standing and staring at the patient. He immediately got to work. Henry swept his hand from Ravina's left side to her right then back again.

"My diagnosis is one hundred percent accurate. In this case, Ravina, you will be able to walk in a few hours. Nothing is wrong on the inside. You were hit with an electrical charge. Hence the two black burns on your upper chest. To be more precise, the charge was static electricity. Knowing you had been in an ice tunnel I can back you up on the face report."

"At least someone believes me," growled Ravina. She was glaring at her crew who were all displaying a doubt expression.

"I have no doubt your facts are accurate," advised Henry.

"Now the storm has gone I think we should go take a look at this so-called face you think you saw," said Blake.

“I did see a face. It started off small about the size of a tennis ball. The longer I stared at it, the larger it grew,” groaned Ravina.

“Henry I want you to scan the hole,” said Josh.

“At this moment my scans are ineffective,” reported Henry.

“Why?” asked Clay.

“They are being blocked.”

“Any idea on how?” quizzed Josh.

“At a guess, I’d have to say by the face in the tunnel.”

Florian slammed her hands onto her hips. She turned slightly to stare at Henry.

“I thought you’re a Crenoxian invention.”

“I am.”

“The great Crenox aren’t so great after all?” she snarled.

“Is this a private argument?” questioned Ravina, volleying her gaze between Henry and Florian.

Josh started shaking his head. Clay joined in by laughing.

“You boys never back me up when it concerns alien technology,” growled Florian.

“Yes, we do,” corrected Clay. “It’s just whenever Henry can’t do something or even if he disagrees with you all hell breaks loose between you and him.”

“It does not.”

“See, I rest my case,” laughed Clay.

“There must be a reasonable explanation for the blockage,” probed Josh.