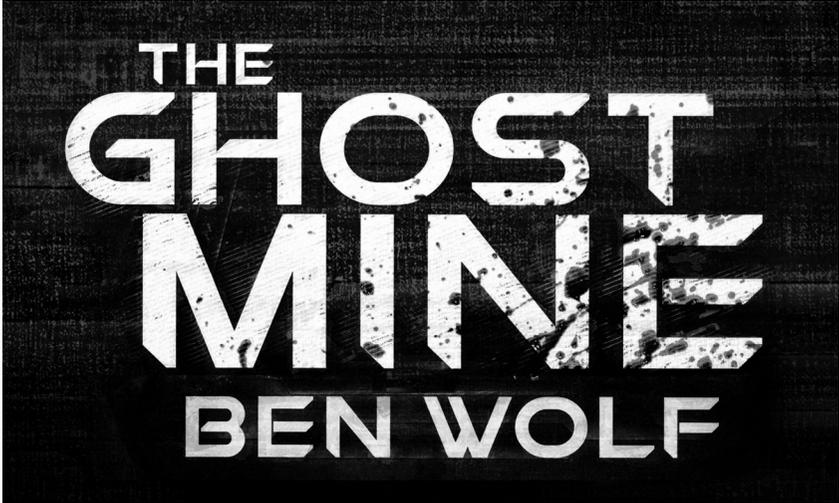


FISSURE

CHAPTER 1 OF *THE GHOST MINE*



A SCIENCE FICTION/HORROR NOVEL

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FISSURE

an excerpt from *The Ghost Mine*

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FISSURE

CHAPTER ONE OF *THE GHOST MINE*

Andridge Copalion Mine 1134

Sector 6

0900/2700 Hours

“Do this wrong, and you will put the whole operation at risk.” Etya Stielbard observed the hundred or so workers down in the mine from her box-shaped office. It loomed fifty feet over them and protruded into the mine by about thirty feet.

But she was speaking to one of them in particular.

Mark Brown, her fiancé, kept drilling, but he turned his head toward her and frowned. “Do you always have to be so melodramatic?”

Etya smiled. Mark always had a way of making her smile. “I am not being melodramatic. I am being serious. Be careful.”

Mark shook his head. It reminded Etya of those stupid bobble-head figurines he kept on the mantel by his bed, and she smiled again.

“We’re fine, Etya.”

“That is *Doctor Stielbard* to you, Mark.”

“Well, then it’s *Foreman Brown* to you.”

“Scans show erratic radiation levels.”

“They’re well within a safe range, Etya.”

She sighed. As much as he made her smile, sometimes he also made her want to smack him. “*Doctor Stielbard*.”

“Like I said, they’re fine.” Mark pulled his left arm back, and the robotic appendage attached to his mech suit retracted with it. Many of the miners around him wore comparable suits, each composed of a network of wires, hoses, and casings supported by a lightweight alloy skeleton.

Mark wielded an old-fashioned drill bit on the left arm of his mech suit and a dozer-style scoop on his right. Despite Etya’s prodding, Mark insisted on using the archaic versions of the advanced tools the other miners used. He’d started using them years ago in one

of Andridge's other mines on Omiris-8 and hadn't switched back since.

Etya touched a holographic image projected onto the glass window in front of her. It turned from green to red, then back again, signaling that she'd sent the image to Mark's suit. "The seismograph is also indicating potential for increased tremors in this sector."

Down below, the green image blinked onto the clear protective shield that framed the enclosure around Mark's head. It disappeared just as quickly. He'd hardly looked at it.

Etya frowned. "Perhaps we should—"

"Please, *Doctor Stielbard*. We're fine." Mark's drill revved, and he extended it into the crevice below him again. Chips of dark blue rock pelted his protective shield and bounced off.

"What is the point of having me onsite if you refuse to heed my warnings?" Etya asked.

Mark grinned, but he didn't stop drilling. "Your accent really sharpens when you're angry."

Etya rolled her eyes.

"Um... you guys know we can hear everything you're saying, right?" Gruden, another miner operating a mech suit, turned toward them both. Unlike Mark, he used a class 4 purdonic laser to do his drilling.

"Do not complain to me." Etya folded her arms and nodded toward Mark. "He is the culprit."

Gruden huffed. "I don't care whose fault it is. Keep your pillow-talk to yourselves."

"Just focus on your drilling, Gruden," Mark said. "Last time you lost your focus, you nearly turned Omar into a eunuch."

Etya failed to stifle a laugh, and a round of guffaws sounded over the comms. Mark looked up at her, and their eyes met.

She'd lucked out. Mark was handsome, despite the jagged scar that ran down the right side of his face. She loved his eyes the most. They were dark blue like the rocks from which they now mined copalion, the most efficient—and most volatile—energy source known to the galaxy.

But unlike the blue rock that made up this godforsaken planet, Mark's eyes housed his soul—vibrant, rebellious, and enrapturing.

They'd captivated Etya the moment she first saw them. Now only his eyes held her attention more than the glimmering diamond on her ring finger.

She smiled.

"I think I need therapy for that, man," Omar said. He and two others not wearing mech suits crouched near an electrical panel in the leftmost corner of the cavern.

Omar headed the mine's maintenance team, and today was his second day back on the job thanks to Gruden's laser and recovering from the subsequent skin graft on his inner thigh.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever." Gruden pointed his laser at the crevice before him, and it flared to life with a beam of harsh yellow light.

Gruden's laser melted the rock into glowing purple lava, and his left mech arm scooped it out with a compressed energy shield that resembled a large, misshapen spoon made of green light. He piled the molten rock onto a nearby mound of dark blue, and it oozed down the sides and slowly hardened.

"When's lunch?" Harding's mech straightened up with a severe quiver. The mechs were made for heavy labor, but Harding exceeded the maximum operator weight by at least fifty pounds.

Etya hadn't yet seen it, but Mark had once described how it took two men to cram Harding into his mech every morning.

"Forty-two minutes from now," Jeffries replied. When Gruden eyed him, Jeffries shrugged. "What? I may be a third of Harding's size, but I'm just as hungry."

A few more chuckles sounded over the comms, and Etya shook her head. She opened her mouth to say something snide, but a red flicker on the glass in front of her stole her words.

"Mark, the sensors are fritzing."

He kept drilling. "Which ones?"

"The seis—"

A tremor rocked the cavern, and Etya steadied herself on the computer console, but as quickly as the shaking started, it subsided.

"The seismograph?" Mark asked.

"How did you guess?"

"I know a good geologist."

Etya smiled again. "According to protocol, we are supposed to—"

Another tremor began, this one slower as it built to a full quake. The men crouched in their mechs to lower their centers of gravity, part of the protocol Etya had started to cite. Upright mechs on shaky ground often meant broken mechs on their sides or backs later on.

The other hundred or so miners in the sector leaned against walls or the numerous support beams that framed the cavern or also crouched and covered their heads in case of falling rocks.

Etya gripped the computer console again to keep upright, but she eventually had to crouch as well to keep from falling over. The quake continued for close to a minute.

When the trembling finally ceased, Etya slowly stood. "That is two in a row, and the second exceeded any tremors we have registered so far. According to company protocol, we need to evacuate the area until we can ascertain what is causing the seismic activity."

"Woohoo! Rock-surfing, then an early lunch." Jeffries's mech nudged Harding's mech with one of its alloy arms, and they both laughed.

Mark's mech straightened up, and he nodded and relayed the order. The miners began filing toward the doors down and to the left of Etya's glass office. One of them tapped the screen on the access terminal adjacent to it, but nothing happened.

Mark looked up toward the office. "Terminal's not working. Open the blast doors, Etya?"

She didn't bother correcting him this time. When she tapped the screen to disengage the door locks, it beeped in the negative and displayed an error message.

"Etya? The doors?"

"I am trying." She tapped it again and again, but the same error message appeared each time. "The computer keeps generating an error. The doors will not open."

"What's the error code?"

Etya adjusted her glasses. "624B-CON. Hold on a second. I will look it up."

"Don't bother. It's a containment breach. Something's wrong with the air system. The quakes must've knocked something loose." He looked up at the enormous turbines embedded in the cavern ceiling.

Etya followed his gaze. The turbines had stopped spinning.

The turbines ventilated excess noxious gases from the sector and pumped a purified blend of nitrogen, oxygen, and a touch of hydrogen in to replace them. No turbines spinning meant a potentially harmful buildup of toxic gases, although in a cavern this size it would take awhile to cause anyone any serious harm.

Murmurs spread among the gathering miners, but Mark stepped before them with his mech hands raised.

“Take it easy, everyone,” he said. “We’ve trained for this scenario. We have plenty of time before the gases in here can accumulate to harmful levels, so I want all the mechless miners to *calmly* head to the nearest safety lockers and grab a filtration mask. Put them on, and then we’ll work on getting out of here.”

The miners formed orderly lines leading to the four safety lockers in the cavern and began extracting transparent filtration masks.

In theory, Etya should’ve been safe from the gas. A separate air processor provided ventilation, but she put on a mask anyway. Mark would’ve insisted. It sealed to her face, pressurized, and clouded slightly with her first shaky exhale.

“Etya, can you run an override?”

She nodded. “Yes. I can try.”

“Good. Work on it.” Mark turned to the mechs while Etya typed her override code into the system. “Power down your mechs and get masks on. They should have plenty of charge, but I’d rather conserve power in case we need them later on. I’ll stay in mine for the time being, but I need one of you to toss me a mask.”

Gruden powered down his mech first, and the others followed suit until all of them stood free of their alloy monsters.

Mark’s protective shield opened, and he released the bindings on his left arm. The mech’s left arm lowered to his side, limp.

Gruden tossed a mask to Mark, who caught it and secured it to his face. Mark closed his shield and strapped his arm into the mech again.

The computer beeped in the negative when Etya confirmed her override code. She frowned and entered it again. As a department head, her code could access just about everything in the mine. Perhaps she’d mistyped it.

“Any luck, Etya?” Mark asked.

“Not yet. I’m trying again.” She typed the last digit of her code onto

the screen and tapped the “Confirm” button on the glass. It again declined her code. “The computer is rejecting my code.”

“Can you patch my mech into the computer from there? I can enter my code and see if it works.”

Etya squinted down at him. “My clearance is higher than yours.”

“I know that. It’s still worth a try. We can’t stay in here forever.”

“If you say so.” Etya tapped the screen a few more times and connected Mark’s mech to the office system. “Okay. Try it now.”

Below her, Mark’s fingers moved in a flurry on the inside of his glass shield, and green lights traced his imprints. When a familiar red light glowed on Mark’s face, Etya knew it hadn’t worked. He swore under his breath, but Etya still heard it over the comms.

“Told you,” she muttered.

Mark shot her a glare. “Alright. We’re staying here for awhile, then. Let’s make sure to—”

The ground rumbled again, another burst, so short Etya didn’t have time to steady herself before it stopped.

If the tremors worsened and they couldn’t get out, the situation could become exponentially more dangerous—even deadly. She looked at the platform elevated high up in the cavern, near the turbine fans, connected by a network of catwalks, ladders, and access stairs.

The sector’s mainframe terminal was up there. It served as a fail-safe for situations like this, and they hadn’t needed to access it thus far, but someone might have to climb up to it today.

With only Mark still in a mech, Etya could communicate to him over the comms without anyone else hearing. “This is ridiculous, Mark. My code should override this. But the good news is that the atmospheric sensors are not showing a significant increase in toxicity.”

“I don’t know what’s going on either. Does Admin know what’s happening?”

“Any time something like this happens, Admin is automatically made aware.”

“Have they contacted you?”

“Not directly, but I see that a response team has been dispatched to our location.”

“Then we’ll get out of here one way or another. Someone in Admin is bound to have an override code that will—”

A loud, deep *crack* ripped through the cavern, and everything shook. Etya stumbled back, then she pitched forward. Her hips hit the edge of the console, and she doubled over.

Pain gouged her pelvic bones, and she grunted as she gripped the edges of the console to try to stay upright amid the tremors. She lamented the inevitable bruising that would come later.

The rumbling persisted, and the cavern groaned. More cracks split the air.

When Etya looked through the glass again, she saw columns of black gas erupting from expanding fissures in the cavern floor.

Etya’s eyes widened.

Phichaloride gas. Thick, with mutagenic and paralytic properties, and absolutely lethal.

Red lights flashed around her, and her screen, once a mix of greens, yellows, and oranges, glowed red with alerts. An alarm blared behind her, beside her, and in the cavern below. The sector’s work lights still shined their bluish hue, but red alert lights flashed among them.

“Back up! Back up now!” Mark’s voice ratcheted over the comms and throughout the cavern.

Miners scrambled away from the fissures—the crevices which Mark and the other mechs had been drilling into. But they’d widened substantially. The miners pushed against the far wall.

“Get away from the fissures!” Mark shouted.

The quaking continued as more and more black gas billowed from within the planet. An electronic voice boomed throughout the cavern, *“This area is under containment protocol. This area is under containment protocol. This area...”*

Etya looked up. Without the turbines in the ceiling functioning, no new air would pump into the cavern, and the phichaloride gas couldn’t pump out.

“Mark!” Etya screamed. “Get to the doors!”

He shook his head and looked up at her. “If they wouldn’t open before, they won’t open now.”

“You are in a mech suit. *Make them open!*”

Mark looked at the doors, then at the other mech suits. “Gruden, Jeffries, Harding, and everyone else who can pilot a mech, suit up now. Forget the containment protocol. We’re breaking out of here.”

Etya checked the door to her office, but it refused to open as well. And unlike the mechs below, she had no means to try to force it open.

They are coming for us. She returned to the glass to watch the scene below unfold. They will be here soon to set us free.

Mark’s mech launched toward the doors, and his drill whirled to life. He drove the drill into the metal doors, and sparks flew from the grinding metal.

Now completely locked out of her system, Etya could only watch as the cavern filled with more and more phichaloride gas.

Then a new alert pinged on the screen, and a frantic ticking crackled over the comms.

A radiation spike.

No—not a spike. The levels had spiked, and now they continued to increase from that point. Filtration masks, standard protective gear, and mech suits wouldn’t protect the miners from radiation at these levels.

“Mark, the radiation—”

“I know!” he shouted over the screeching metal just beyond his fingertips.

Gruden donned his suit first, and he pointed his laser at the doors. “Stand back, Mark.”

Etya’s breath caught in her throat.

Mark glanced over his shoulder. “Gruden, no!”

Gruden’s laser flared to life. The beam hit the door, refracted off of it, and knifed into the glass office toward Etya.

She dropped to the floor, and the yellow beam carved into the ceiling above her, right near the miniature turbine that served her office.

Etya rolled away from dripping globs of melted metal, rock, and plastic that seared the carpet where her torso had just been. Part of the ceiling collapsed onto the floor next to her, sending a plume of dust over her.

She chanced another look up and saw a trio of man-sized metal

tanks exposed, marked with an O, an N, and an H. Part of the office's air-processing system.

"The doors are an anti-purdonic alloy, you idiot!" Mark shouted.

Gruden's laser stopped. "I didn't mean to—"

"Don't you remember the briefing?" Mark hollered at him. "Etya? Are you alright?"

She checked herself over. Apart from a bit of dust in her hair and on her clothes, she was untarnished. "I am fine."

Black gas seeped through the opening Gruden's laser had cut into her office, and the unmistakable smell of the gas, like burnt rubber, hit her nostrils. Her filtration mask filtered the toxins, keeping them from reaching her lungs—she hoped—but the smell remained.

"Then I'll point it at the wall instead," Gruden yelled. "We gotta make a new door."

"No!" Etya shouted. Gruden really *wasn't* remembering the briefing. "The sector's walls are framed by the same alloy as the blast doors. They may be covered with rock, but the laser will just have the same effect once it cuts through."

Gruden swore. "Then we go deeper into the mine. Go to the end, carve our way upward until we get to the surface."

"No. I'll keep drilling the door." Mark headed over to the door, and his drill whirled to life again. "Something will give."

He pressed it against the door, and the metal shrieked.

"That ain't gonna work, Mark."

"We're *miles* underground, Gruden," Mark shouted amid a new stream of sparks. "Carving through would take weeks, if not longer. Our mechs would power down long before then."

"I hate to laser on your parade," Gruden countered, "but your drill won't break through that door any sooner."

Mark stopped and held up his drillbit. Half of it was gone, and in place of a point, a glowing red piece of rounded metal remained.

And the door was barely scratched. Mark cursed.

"Then we dig under the doors and come out on the other side," Mark said. "Aim your lasers at the floor near the base of the door, about ten feet out, and dig at a harsh angle. I don't want to risk hitting that metal again." He turned to Omar. "Get to that panel. See if you can hotwire it open."

The sector wall might go down that deep. But Etya didn't know for sure. There was only one way to find out.

Omar nodded and rushed forward, and his two maintenance underlings followed.

Etya tried to access the console again, but it continued to repel her attempts. She glanced at the platform high above them. "Mark, I think someone needs to try to access the mainframe terminal to override the doors."

Mark nodded at her. "I'll head up there in a moment. We need to start digging first."

Mark drove his drill bit into the rocky floor and carved a line. Jeffries, Harding, Gruden, and the other mechs took aim at Mark's line and unleashed their lasers, turning the floor into molten, purple slag.

Mark stepped clear of the other mechs and miners. For all his posturing, his old-fashioned tools wouldn't do any good here. "Etya, I'm heading for the mainframe. But you need to get out of here. I don't want you exposed to the gas or the radiation."

"My door will not open either," she replied. "And I would not leave until I knew you were safe anyway."

The quaking restarted, and the fissures widened. Mark steadied himself in his mech, not advancing toward the catwalks and ladders that led up to the platform. Though Gruden's blast had eviscerated half of Etya's screen, it still showed the radiation and toxicity levels catapulting to new heights.

"I think we may have something!" Omar jammed some sort of tool into the open terminal, but nothing happened. "Just a little more..."

Then a violet glow emanated from the rock floor beneath his feet.

Mark yelled, "Omar! Move!"

Too late.

Omar pulled back from the terminal and stared at Mark with his eyebrows scrunched down.

A vibrant beam of yellow light pierced through the rock below him.

It knifed through Omar's stomach and split his torso along a diagonal line from his hip to his shoulder. His cauterized halves slumped to the floor.

Etya looked away, horrified. The mechs' lasers had failed to get beneath the wall. They had refracted back to the surface.

"*Stop!*" Mark shouted. "Mechs, for the love of God, stop!"

The mechs didn't stop firing.

Etya had to look back.

Omar's assistants succumbed to comparable fates from the mechs' refracting lasers, and four other beams pinwheeled throughout the cavern, carving through whatever they encountered.

The miners dove for cover, but at least three others failed to escape the lasers.

The beams knocked out about half of the overhead lights, and another seared through the corner of Etya's office. She dove clear of the beam, but a third of her office plummeted to the cavern below, crushing more miners.

Where is that response team? They should have arrived by now!

When the lasers finally stopped, the quaking escalated. Through the new opening in her office, Etya watched Mark's mech topple forward on the trembling ground.

The other mechs staggered, and most fell over as well, unable to maintain their balance amid the tumult. The drone of the alarms and the containment warnings drowned out the miners' shouts.

Mark pushed up with his mech's arms and looked up at Etya. The sorrow in his perfect blue eyes stabbed her gut, and she shook her head.

Then the ground opened under Mark's mech.

Etya gasped.

He dropped into a chasm of dark blue, but his mech's dozer claw dug into the edge of the fissure and suspended him there.

Teal light, reminiscent of raw copalion, glowed from beneath him.

The quaking subsided.

"*Mark!*" Etya yelled. Out of reflex, she reached for him, but she still stood fifty feet above him in the office. "Help him! Someone!"

Gruden and Jeffries managed to get their mechs upright and plodded over to the edge, both shouting something about towing cables.

Mark's claw sank deeper into the rock.

He looked up at Etya. His brow creased with strain, but his eyes remained peaceful.

With his mouth closed, he gave her a loving half-grin, and the long scar on his right cheek crinkled.

The rock under his claw crumbled, and Mark and his mech dropped into the teal abyss.

Etya screamed, but amid the chaos resounding in the cavern, she couldn't even hear herself. Tears stung her eyes and pooled on the inside of her filtration mask.

Mark was gone.

Gruden and Jeffries stumbled back, away from the fissure and back toward the door.

Gruden's voice filled the comms. "We need to go up. That's our only chance now. The mainframe can get the doors open, right? Or the ventilation system can get us out of the mine? We need to get up there."

"The lasers shredded the access stairs and ladders." Jeffries pointed with his mech arm.

"We're doomed, man!" Harding wailed, just now getting his mech upright again. "We're all dead!"

"Use your tow cables," Gruden ordered. "Fire them at the lowest catwalk, and pull a section down to make a ramp. Then we'll work our way up there. It's the only option left. Try to yank one end of the catwalk down so everyone can climb up."

He fired his cable first, and it harpooned a steel grate that hung level with Etya's office across the cavern. Jeffries followed suit, and together they yanked on the catwalk.

It didn't budge.

All Etya could do was watch, breathe, and cry. What did it matter now if they got out or not? Her life was over. Between losing Mark and the inevitable radiation poisoning that would follow even if they managed to escape, she had nothing left to live for.

Jeffries and Gruden yanked again, and Jeffries's tow cable ripped free from the catwalk. It whipped into the crowd of miners pounding and shouting at the blast doors, and then one of the miners dropped. The others trampled him, quickly taking his place.

The cavern shook again, and Gruden yanked once more on the

catwalk. Metal shrieked and snapped, and the end section fell to the cavern floor with a loud *bang*, creating the ramp.

But then the other end broke free and fell as well, removing their last possible escape route.

A litany of profanity ignited the comms.

“It does not matter, Gruden,” Etya whispered. “We are all dead anyway.”

He couldn’t have possibly heard her amid the commotion, but he glared up at her just the same. Then he turned toward the blast doors again and took aim with his laser.

The yellow beam hit the doors above the heads of the frantic miners. It zigzagged around the cavern, damaging anything and everything but the door and slicing through anyone in its path.

Then Harding screamed and fell over.

Gruden’s refracted laser had shredded Harding’s mech suit and severed his left leg—mech and human—from his body at mid-thigh.

But Gruden didn’t stop.

In that moment, Etya no longer wanted to die. Not by Gruden’s laser. Not by a random beam of fate. Not like Omar, the other miners, or now Harding.

She turned and bolted toward the door to the science office. She jammed her code into the terminal mounted to the right of the door, but it mocked her with the same damned error code as the screens had shown.

All the while, the taunting, robotic voice droned, “*This area is under containment protocol. This area is under containment protocol...*”

Etya slammed her fist against the terminal’s screen and shouted Russian curses.

Gruden’s laser burned in her periphery and arced toward her, then it vanished. It reappeared on the ceiling near the hole he’d carved minutes before.

Near the gas tanks.

She turned her head in time to see the beam connect with the tank marked “H.”

Light flashed, a deafening boom sounded, and fire exploded into the science office. Her right side slammed against the office’s blast doors, and pain consumed her left side. She slumped to the floor.

Stunned, and with vision remaining only in her right eye, she looked through what remained of her filtration mask at her engagement ring.

It was gone.

Along with her left arm, most of her left leg, and some of her torso. She wanted to gasp, but shock froze her burning lungs.

I am going to die.

She lay her head back, and as she exhaled her last breath, a shaft of blue light shined on her. Then it widened.

“Get her out of here!” someone cried.

Dark figures blocked most of the light, then everything went black for Dr. Etya Stielbard.

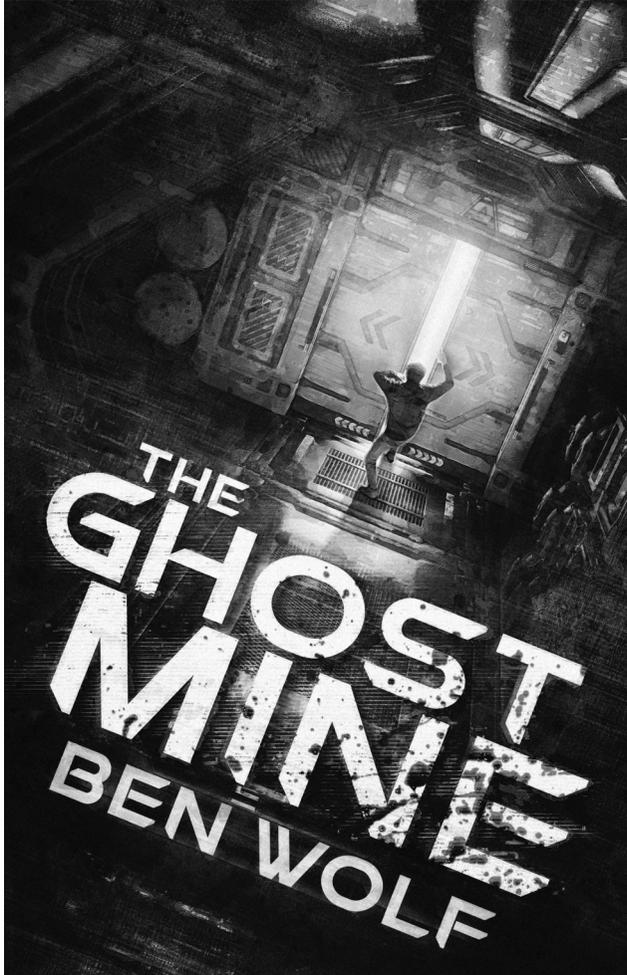
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