

## PLANET X91

### THE STORM

#### Book 4

### CHAPTER ONE

STANDING AT the threshold of the Piper spacecraft, Florian Fawkes stretched in the hot sunshine. Lifting her gaze to the sky, she counted on one hand how many white clouds were above them. The gang of three were more than happy at claiming the ship for their own and quickly settled into a rough routine of daily life. Glancing to her left, she viewed Clay Silver's handiwork. The pipe running from the waterfall to the giant crab shell so they could water the horses happened to be a brilliant idea. It appeared to be working perfectly. She lifted her hand to stroke the million-dollar gold nugget hanging around her neck the boys made. The gold vein they discovered in the tunnel was a massive surprise. She felt proud to know the two boys were watching over her well-being and took time out to make the necklace.

Florian looked back into the ship to make sure the boys weren't on their way outside. Jogging over to the natural rock pool she couldn't wait to be submerged in the cool water. If she were to guess, the humidity felt to be at least eighty percent.

Standing at the edge of the pool, ten feet from the waterfall, Florian removed her runners, shorts, and singlet and plunged straight down to the sandy bottom, seven feet below the surface. Surmising she'd be safe from the boy's prying eyes if ventured over to the rock pool, she swam directly under the waterfall. Several small jagged rocks were jutting up from the bottom. The waterfall created a turbulence masking her swim and making the sand wash down towards the entrance to the tunnel and onwards to the sea.

Obscured by the water cascading over the low wall she gripped one of the rocks. A two-finger grip on the rock saw Florian close to her favorite feeling; being suspended in the water unable to touch anything. She had yet to discover anything like it. The sense of absolute quiet where peace reigned supreme felt extremely pleasurable.

The moment Florian spied the water in the rock pool when they were searching for a place to land the Piper in the storm, she decided, if given an opportunity, she'd practice holding her breath. Stretching the time might pay high dividends one day in the future.

Florian closed her eyes so she could relax her naked body. She counted off the seconds in her mind. The moment she reached the number fifteen her eyelids flew open, realizing it was her turn to feed the horses.

'Surely, they could wait a few more minutes,' she thought. 'The weather's going to be warm again. The surface water glistening in the natural rock pool looked too inviting to ignore.'

Looking through the crystal-clear water gave her an unrestricted view of the sky from about halfway to the tunnel thirty feet away from where she sat.

Florian swiped her long black hair from her face to focus on the tunnel where only two days earlier Clay and she nearly died from hyperthermia. She shuddered at rethinking over their last adventure about the ice snakes. She viewed the encounter as a warning. They could never let their guard down over anything they did. The giant Pterosaur bird they killed when they first arrived on the planet, the giant crab and the snake-like creatures which could turn water into ice was something she'd never forget. Then there was the hologram; Doctor Henry. Thinking about him and the test he said they were in, her eyes slowly narrowed.

The USS Lock being too far away couldn't help. Josh, Clay and she were alone on Planet X91. For a few seconds doubt entered Florian's mind the three of them could survive long enough to be reunited with the colony on the USS Lock let alone finish this supposed insane test.

Seeing a face staring at her through the water Florian ascended to the surface.

"Clay, what are you doing?" she yelled.

"Josh and I have been searching for you. Tell someone before you go wandering off."

"Don't tell me what to do. Surely I'm allowed some privacy?"

Josh stuck his face over the edge of the pool holding a laser gun. “We thought you might have been in trouble.”

“You know what thought did. Turn away so I can climb out and get dressed. Both of you can stop perving on me.”

“She has a point,” whispered Clay, slapping Josh on the shoulder.

Florian waited for the boys to walk off before climbing the low rock wall. The whole time she dressed she watched to make sure the boys didn’t decide to skirt around to the other side of the rock pool so that they could watch from behind a tree.

Walking back to the Piper, Florian noted the grassland seemed greener than the previous day. The tips of each blade were moving ever so slightly in the warm sea breeze.

She caught up with the boys sitting on the grass leaning against the hull of the Piper, eating breakfast.

“Have you noticed the grass?” asked Josh, looking directly at Florian.

“I don’t want to talk about the grass. Both of you wanted to take the opportunity to get a free look. I’ll go so far as to say you two knew exactly where I went.”

“We didn’t know,” advised Josh truthfully. “We were concerned for your safety. After our recent adventure do you blame us?”

“On behalf of Josh, I want to say we want to protect you. We can’t if you don’t tell us where you’re going,” added Clay.

Florian glared at the boys through narrowed slits. She wanted to be angry for a long time, however, when the boys started to chuckle, she sighed heavily before bursting out into giggles.

“What am I going to do with you, boys?”

“We were concerned for your safety,” said Josh, honestly.

“Same here,” echoed Clay. “It’s not my fault we timed finding you to perfection.”

“Yes, how convenient.” Florian snatched up a plate of fruit the boys picked from the massive hydroponic garden inside one of the rooms in the Piper. She sat eating breakfast leaning against the Piper’s hull.

“Getting back to what I mentioned before,” hinted Josh. “Have you seen the color of the grass?”

“Yes, what do you make of it? Yesterday it looked a nice pale green. Today it’s a real dark green. How can it change overnight?”

Clay shrugged his shoulders. “I can’t see any difference.”

Josh walked over to a small clump of grass growing close to the Piper. Before marching into the spaceship, he picked a six-inch single blade of grass. Florian and Clay followed him, intrigued.

Ascending the glass lift to the roof of the Piper the trio marched across the roof to maintenance shuttle number one and climbed the stairs.

Inside the shuttle, Josh placed the blade of grass under the scanner. Seeing the others hard on his heels he flicked the on switch.

“Computer, inform me of the color registry of the grass?”

“What exactly do you mean?” asked Clay.

“I want to find the total amount of color in the grass.”

“On a scale of one to ten, one being the lowest, the color density is on eight. Eighty-two percent of the grass has color,” reported the computer.

“It doesn’t make sense,” said Florian. “Shouldn’t the color density be less?”

“The color is now at eighty-three percent,” reported the metallic voice of the computer.

Josh switched his gaze between Clay and Florian.

“Why the sterile look?” Clay questioned.

“We have a new problem.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense, spit it out,” insisted Clay.

Josh began to type a command on the computer keyboard. “I want to see the recording made by the drone plane when it hovered above the Piper; in particular, the grass next to the ship.”

A few seconds had elapsed before the photo came into focus.

“I believe my hypothesis might be correct.”

“Tell us what you’re thinking of?” squealed Florian.

Josh ignored her. He went back to the keyboard, typing another question.

“The green tone of the grass recorded by the drone plane; what is the density of the color?”

Again, the computer took a few seconds to answer.

“The color compound is at fifty-three percent.”

“I’m right,” announced Josh.

Florian pushed her fists onto her hips glaring at Josh. Clay stood pushing his hand down on Josh's shoulder.

"Explain to us right now what you're talking about?" ordered Florian. "I don't want to hear gibberish. I want you to talk plain English."

"The weather is changing fast."

"So what, it has to rain at some stage."

"I believe there's a storm on the way."

"We encountered a storm a while back," stated Clay. "You're not afraid of a little lightning?"

Josh gave him a serious look. The stone expression on his face shot a shiver down Clay's spine.

"This isn't a little rain. Somehow the grass is acting like a barometer does back on the earth. You do know what a barometer reads?"

"Yes, of course, I do," snarled Clay. "It measures air pressure. The gold-plated needle is used to show how much the black needle moves towards dry or rain in any given period, usually twenty-four hours."

"Exactly," said Josh. "The grass is similar; it changes color toning. Let me explain it this way. Back on earth what happens when grass is watered?"

"It goes darker," stated Florian.

"Yes, it does. Provided there's moisture in the soil it goes darker slowly."

"Spare us the teaching," advised Clay. "Get to the point."

"The grass on this planet seems to absorb the moisture in the air and change color instantly."

"I haven't noticed such a quick change," advised Florian.

"Me either," echoed Clay, rolling his eyes.

Josh volleyed his gaze between the other two. "Let's see if I can prove it another way." Walking over to the microwave he placed the grass on the plate. He pushed the start button. In one second he stopped the machine and took out the blade of grass. He sprinted over to rescan it. "Computer, report the color density of the grass."

"The color density is at forty-nine percent."

"Now if we wait for a minute, let's see what happens. By rights, the grass should continue to die due to water evaporation. If we were on Earth, it would die in minutes."

"I'm amazed the grass still looks good," hinted Florian. "Being in a microwave should have shriveled it."

A few agonizing minutes ticked off. Clay fidgeted. "I'm growing more bored by the second."

Josh looked disappointed. He commenced going over his idea letter by letter to see what he might have missed which in turn helped him to make an error in judgment when the computer crackled to life.