

PLANET X91 THE FIRE

Book 6

CHAPTER ONE

“HEY, GUYS have you seen the sky this morning?”

Florian stepped out of the Piper spacecraft flicking her long dark hair from her eyes. She wandered over to sit on the grass opposite Clay and Josh. She folded her arms tight across her chest. Internally she felt hot but displayed an ice-cold expression. Florian wanted to relay the fact she happened to be in the foulest of moods. The longer the boys ignored her, the hotter she grew.

Yesterday the three of them came through the drought, the attack of the one-metre tall prehistoric spider and the alien camp unscathed, all thanks to Josh.

Both boys glanced up at her brooding face.

“What gives?” asked Clay.

“Aren’t you hungry? You haven’t even started breakfast,” added Josh.

Florian pushed her hair behind her ears. Glaring at the boys she growled. “I’ve been awake all night. Don’t you care about the warning?”

“Not really,” answered Clay, casually waving his hand in the air.

“Josh, when you used the green chair in the small room to go through time, in an attempt to save Clay and I, you warned us about the fire and a plague, why aren’t you concerned?” jeered Florian.

Josh stood, brushing himself down from the crumbs of breakfast. “I am concerned. I must point out I have no idea what I meant either. I’m sure the Piper spaceship can survive a fire. My future ‘ME’ should’ve been clearer in what I meant. The fire mightn’t even arrive until next year.”

“Why give a timely warning if it wasn’t going to be urgent?”

Both boys shrugged at the same time.

Florian threw her arms into the air. She frowned at the boys before walking briskly back into the Piper.

“She’s a bit testy today,” Clay scoffed.

“I’d have to agree. I’ll go talk to Florian.”

“Good luck. You are one brave lad.”

Josh grinned at the comment. He walked along the corridor after Florian. Halfway to the bridge, he heard a creaking noise. The metal floor under his feet started to vibrate. The trembling sent shock waves through his entire body. Pushing his back against the wall of the ship Josh studied each end of the corridor. The outside where Clay sat amusing himself in the sun measured no more than twenty feet. The bridge at the other end measured about the same.

“Strange going’s on,” he whispered. “The corridor should be twice the distance.”

The second round of rumblings followed by loud creaking and groaning under his feet, adding a round of blurred vision forced Josh to drop to all fours. His hands felt the massive vibration. He could feel the metal floor moving. When he again checked the length of the corridor, it seemed even shorter.

A high-pitched scream from Florian replaced the sudden lull in the noise. Feeling no more movement from the metallic structure of the spaceship, Josh rubbed the remnant of the blurred vision from his eyes before running towards the bridge.

The solid door near the middle of the spaceship slid open revealing the heart of the Piper. The bridge still looked intact. The green lights on the computer monitors were flashing in unison. Not one of them seemed smashed. Josh glanced around the entire area. The glass tube lift near the front also appeared to be in perfect working order. Everything on the bridge was where it should be. He couldn’t see anything wrong.

Florian picked herself up off the floor by clawing back into the chair in front of the bouquet of monitors. Josh watched her backside hit the indent in the leather chair. Almost immediately she hunched her shoulders over the computer keyboard so she could start tapping the keys.

Josh hurried over. Standing next to her he read the monitor. “Computer, explain what made the rumbling noise?”

Waiting for a response, she glanced up at him. “Did you feel the vibration?”

“Yes, I could hardly miss it,” replied Josh. He too waited for a reply. When none came, he said quickly. “Ask the computer why is the Piper shrinking?”

Florian’s fingers hovered over the keyboard. She slowly swiveled her head to look up at Josh. “What do you mean shrinking?”

“This ship is growing smaller.”

Florian moved her gaze to the corridor, estimating the distance to the sunshine. The length looked to have shrunk to thirty feet. “Doctor Henry. There is an emergency,” she yelled.

A bright light appeared on the other side of the bridge in front of the glass dome lift. In seconds, Henry’s hologram appeared. “What’s the emergency?”

“I want you to promise not to vanish on us.”

“I’ll stay till I decide I’m not required.”

“You are one frustrating hologram,” growled Florian through clenched teeth.

“We need answers,” said Josh.

“Is any one of your questions medically based?”

“We’re not going through this same old argument,” yelled Florian. “I asked you to materialize. I expect answers to my questions.”

Henry switched his attention back to Josh. “She’s a bit testy today.”

Florian stood. “I so wish you were human. I’d take great pleasure in punching your lights out.”

“Miss Florian Fawkes, I can assure you I will never be human.”

Josh stepped over to Henry. “The question, why is the Piper spaceship shrinking could be interpreted as a medical emergency.”

“Explain, it to me Josh Quinn.”

“If the ship shrinks too much while we’re in it, we might be squashed.”

“You have argued well,” stated Henry. “At this moment in time, I’m not obliged to answer. Another test is on the horizon.”

Henry vanished leaving Florian and Josh blinking at each other.

Florian lifted her fist into the air. “One of these days Henry, I’m going to pull the plug on you.”

Josh started chuckling under his breath. He was still shaking his head when Clay stepped onto the bridge.

“The Piper’s shrinking act must have something to do with the bright light near the mountains. I heard the rumble. I just stepped into the corridor when it shrunk. I managed to get inside before the ship reduced in size a second time.”

Florian stared at Clay Silver. His handsome features and strong square shoulders made butterflies flap inside her stomach. She felt torn between thinking he might be a compulsive nuisance and a nice bloke. She pushed the butterfly feeling to the side by staring at Josh. Average looks and height. He’s the brains behind the threesome. His hair looks slightly darker than Clay’s short blond hair. His facial features didn’t stir her into a frenzied feeling. She viewed him as a younger brother.

Florian sighed heavily. Both boys saw her chest rise and fall.

“To tell you the truth I’m tired of the tests we’re being put through. Why can’t we have a few days off to relax, chill and enjoy Planet X91?”

“It’s beyond me,” whipped up Josh.

“What’s beyond you genius boy?” taunted Clay.

“Henry reported there’s another test on the way,” answered Josh.

“I have to admit I’m over these so-called tests too. Do you hear me Henry?” yelled Clay.

Florian pointed towards the long corridor to the outside. Staring through the open hatch, she stammered. “It’s time you two take a gander at the sky.”

Clay looked up from the computer monitor in time to see her worried expression. “What’s wrong?”

“The sky seems to be on fire. It looks worse than five minutes ago.”

Josh stopped tapping the keys on the computer keyboard. He jumped off the bridge and sprinted down the corridor. By the time, Florian and Clay caught him up, they found him studying the sky.

“Get the horses inside the loading bay,” Josh yelled abruptly.

“Why?” asked Clay.

“We have a big problem.” He lifted his hand to point at the mountains.

“Will you two forget about the sky for one minute? We have to discover why the ship is shrinking. Add to the list of questions how small will it get. If it shrinks too much our food and the tank holding all our water will be crushed,” said Clay.

“I have a feeling the ship won’t shrink too much,” stated Josh. He sent Florian an uneasy look.

“You don’t sound too concerned at all,” barked Clay, eyeballing Josh. “We just got through getting rid of the alien spaceship a few hours ago. I agree with Florian. I vote we take a couple of days off. Speaking for myself I feel like shit.”

“There’s no time to argue,” urged Josh. “It’s exactly how Florian reported. The sky’s on fire.”

Clay moved his attention off his shipmates to stare at the mountains.

The clouds soaring over the high peaks were reflecting a multitude of colours. Orange, red, green, yellow and browns. Right at the base of the mountain, he saw a bright light.

“Let’s go take a look,” suggested Clay.

“We don’t have the time,” argued Josh.

“Any ideas on what the light might be?” asked Florian.

“At a guess, I’d have to say it’s a product of the alien spaceship blowing up. Florian, you hit the nail on the head when you reminded us, ‘Me’ from the future reported there’s a fire on the way then a plague,” said Josh.

Clay gave the thirteen-year-old a sterile look. “Josh boy, the trouble is you’re scared of everything. A fire, please, what’s the big deal? Put it out using the water from the tank in the Piper.”

“It’s not that kind of fire,” hinted Josh.

“What’s another sort of fire?” asked Florian. The croak in her voice made her out to be growing nervous.

“A plasma fire,” stated Josh.

Clay shook his head. His angry words were drowned out by the alarms on the bridge. The high pitched shrill they created sounded deafening.

“The temperature outside the ship is rising,” reported Josh, covering his ears.

Florian copied his move. Clay remained obstinate. He folded his arms, watching Henry materialize. Pacing the floor in front of the three teenagers the Doc said seriously.

“You have to stop the fire.”

“Any ideas?” asked Josh.

“None what-so-ever,” replied Henry.

“Please turn the alarms off,” pleaded Florian. In the few seconds, it took Henry to react she wondered if he even heard.

Henry raised his hand in the air. Coiling his transparent fingers into a fist, the alarms ceased.

“Thanks,” snarled Florian, massaging the side of her head. “I can feel a splitting headache coming on.” Looking directly at Henry she growled. “I don’t need any antibiotics.”

Henry chuckled at the trio staring at him. He returned a snappy smile before vanishing.

After he’d gone the silence still sounded deafening. Even though Florian saw Clay’s lips move she couldn’t hear a word he said. It took several moments before her hearing returned.

“I don’t know about you guys; the alarm sent me deaf.”

“You and me,” said Josh.

“I wasn’t concerned in the least,” growled Clay. Switching his attention to Josh, he continued his taunt. “Okay genius boy, seeing how you think water won’t put out the fire, what’s your idea?”

Instead of answering him Josh turned his back, walking off towards the horses.

Clay cupped a hand around his mouth, yelling. “Just as I thought, you’ve finally realized the great Josh boy isn’t so clever.”

Florian scrunched her nose up at Clay before shoving a fist at him before running off towards Josh. She walked up behind him, noting his arms were folded. He stood straight, staring at the light near the base of the mountains. For nearly a minute she stood next to him in silence.

Josh talked without looking at her. “Every-once-in-a-while Clay rubs me up the wrong way.”

“How did you know I happened to be thinking the same thing?”

“You’re a caring young woman.”

Florian could feel her cheeks reddening. “Thanks for the compliment.”

“It’s not hard to tell the truth.”

Quickly changing the subject, Florian continued. “We all heard the heat alarms sound on the Piper, but the temperature feels the same, so what’s the Goss on the supposed plasma fire?”

“Don’t be fooled by the seemingly normal heat. It’ll soon get real hot. At this early time, the alarms pick up another sort of temperature. They have been programmed to detect plasma.”

“So there’s no actual fire?”

“The fire is on her way,” reported Josh, sounding uneasy.

“I’m not following what you mean. I know you called the bright light and the billowing clouds over the mountain a product of the exploding alien spaceship; I want to know exactly what’s going on.”

“Call it what the phenomenon is.”

“Okay, I will. What is it?”

“I believe it’s a plasma fireball.”

“I’ve never heard or read about such a thing.”

“I have,” hinted Josh, sarcastically. “It’s relatively unknown. The information I read seemed sketchy at best.”

“If the bright light is what you said, in your opinion what’s a perfect solution?”

“I’m not sure there is a way to get rid of it.”

The two teenagers fell quiet, studying the light at the base of the mountain. Both were contemplating a different idea on what they were looking at.

“How positive are you the light is from a plasma fireball?” grilled Florian.

“Totally convinced,” answered Josh. “Light from a normal forest fire isn’t usually so bright.”

“Why don’t we fly the Piper off the island away from the plasma fireball?”

“The idea sounds good. I’m sorry to say it won’t work. The fireball is attracted to metal. It’s magnetic. Every second the Piper is drawing it closer. Even if we took up house on the other side of Planet X91, it would still come.”

“What’s another alternative?”

For the first time since she’d met Josh his eyes told her he felt scared. He always seemed to know what to do. When things looked to be at the worst Josh always came through. He’d radiate a beacon of light signaling a safe harbour.

“You must have some ideas,” whispered Florian. “Why can’t we shoot a laser-guided missile at the core of the thing?”

“It’s a plasma ball. It’ll devour the energy, making the ball of fire larger. Besides, I’d have to make one. We don’t have the time.”

“Look up missiles on the parts menu computer. There must be one on board the Piper.”

“There’s not enough time,” he insisted.

“How many minutes left before it gets here?”

“Not long,” replied Josh.

“That’s not an answer. Tell me how many minutes left?”

Josh bowed his head, mumbling. “Honestly, I don’t know.”

Florian grabbed him by the shoulders. “Have a guess. If you can’t, make something up. Give us some hope to live for.” Hearing the frantic words made her tremble from head to feet. The nauseous feeling in the pit of her stomach started growing steadily worse. “There must be something we can do.”

For a good minute, Josh stared at the grass between his feet going through any information he’d ever read or heard about the plasma fireball. Finally, he lifted his gaze to look directly at Florian.

“We can drop it in the ocean. The water will short out the ball of fire. The core will solidify. Once the metamorphous has been initiated it’ll sink like a stone in a mighty gush of steam. By the time the plasma ball hits the ocean floor it’ll be a ball of nothing; a black hole the size of a pin head.”

“Let’s do it,” said Florian sounding excited.

“The only problem I can see it could be a suicide mission.”

“Are you sure?”

“At this early time no. I’ve only read about a plasma fire once. If the facts are correct all personnel onboard the ship died. I must stress it happened to be a different scenario than what we’re about to face. The three hundred and thirteen victims were in space at the time. The captain reported they were going to try to outrun the plasma fireball by flying full tilt at a supernova. At the last second, they were going to skirt around the hot gasses, hoping to fling the plasma ball off their tail and into the exploding star. The captain’s last report read he failed.”

“We have to get into space,” urged Florian. “The Piper can easily out run it. You said the ship could travel at fifteen times greater than light speed.”

“We can’t go into orbit. We’re stuck on this planet until we can form a metal plate to cover the dome. We have to weld it perfectly into place. There mustn’t be a single crack before we can even think about entering the stratosphere let alone start our long journey back to the colony aboard the USS Lock.”

Florian sounded unperturbed over the newest information. “We have to hurry.”

“There’s no time. The plasma ball will be here in less than two hours.”

“How can you be so sure?” Florian glared at him through slits. “I thought you told us you didn’t know how long before it arrives?”