

PLANET X91  
THE DOUGHT

Book 5

CHAPTER ONE

“MORNING FLORIAN,” called Clay. “It’s a beautiful morning.”

Josh, sitting in the sun echoed his comment.

Displaying a puzzled expression, Florian decided to walk back from the rock pool to the Piper spaceship.

Clay finished feeding the horses, gave the closest mare a quick pat on the neck before walking towards Florian. Glancing over the grassland to the mountains the scene seemed peaceful. The light breeze blowing in from the sea teased the tips of Florian’s long black hair. She seemed to look more beautiful each day.

“Have either of you seen the rock pool this morning?”

Both boys shook their heads.

“There’s no water in it.”

“Interesting,” commented Josh.

“Don’t get too excited?” bellowed Florian, folding her arms.

“The grass looks dead too,” added Josh, swallowing another mouthful of grapes.

“Meaning?” asked Florian. She pushed her dark hair from her eyes, glaring at him.

“If we are to believe the grass acts the same as a barometer does on Earth, each blade of grass is telling us we’re in the middle of a drought.”

“We already understand how a barometer works,” taunted Florian.

“How can we be in a drought?” quizzed Clay. “We’ve just come through a mighty storm, or have you forgotten the face in the vortex of the twister? If I have to mention Florian and I both died.”

“I’m just glad the time machine in the small room with the green chair worked. In fact, I want to forget the whole ugly scene,” commented Josh.

“You forget something?” quizzed Florian. “Your memory is too vast.”

“Yes it is boy genius,” growled Clay sarcastically. “I again ask how the weather can go from torrential rain to a drought in a matter of hours?” he jeered.

“We have a lot to learn about planet X91,” replied Josh, shaking his head at the taunting. “The strange weather is just one of many questions we need to find the answer to if we want to see the colony onboard the USS Lock back here.” Glancing at the sky, he continued. “I wonder how they’re going.”

“Still in cryogenic sleep,” reported Florian.

Doc. Henry materialized in front of the trio. The six-foot tall hologram looked slightly different than on previous times. The uniform he wore appeared to be a different shade of white.

“I heard chatter. Is everything okay?”

“Josh believes we’re in the middle of a drought,” growled Florian staring at the hologram.

“I suspected it,” mentioned Henry. His voice sounded droll, almost flat.

Florian walked over to the hologram, studying his appearance.

“Why the different colour outfit?”

“I’m happy you noticed. I decided to change the colour of my medical uniform. What do you think?”

“You decided to change the colour?” argued Florian, eyeballing him.

“Yes.”

“How can a computerized hologram decide to do something on its own?”

Doc. Henry stood staring at Florian. “I refuse to answer the question.”

Clay strolled over to stand next to Florian. He hoped by being close to her Doc. Henry might feel overwhelmed. He hid his smirk knowing the trick shouldn’t work on a hologram. Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“Are you going to explain the unusual weather occurrence or do I have to guess?” asked Florian.

“I do feel slightly intimidated,” confessed Henry.

“How is it possible, you’re a computerized hologram?” asked Josh. He stood and brushed grass from his thermal shorts. Stepping over, he glared at Henry.

“My programming does consist of some human characteristics. How else can I accurately record data of the trial you three are on?”

“Are you going to reveal more about this so called trial?” quizzed Josh.

“Negative.”

“Why are you here?” growled Clay. “We didn’t summon you to appear.”

“Today is a special day. It’s Josh’s birthday. He’s now a teenager. It’s a big step from being twelve one day and thirteen the next. It’s the reason why I changed the colour of my uniform. I’ve been programmed to change my appearance on such occasions.”

“Good come back,” snarled Clay. “Who programmed you?”

“Captain Rowark.”

“This test we’re in the middle of, who brought us to this planet, I’ve forgotten?” asked Florian.

Doc. Henry’s reply came via a grin. “You three keep me on my toes, to quote an old human saying.”

“You failed to answer the question,” barked Clay.

“The answer is beyond my programming.”

Florian shook her head in disgust. To find out the answers to their questions about this stupid test they were supposedly on they needed to be more creative. She turned her back on Henry and smiled at Josh.

“The three of us are now teenagers at the same time.”

“Congrats,” snorted Clay. “If we knew, Florian and I could have had a present handy.”

“It’s not an important time,” blurted Josh.

“Don’t give me the sentimental jargon,” snarled Florian. “It’s an important part of your life. You feel like you’ve grown up. It’s a milestone you’ll always remember.” She marched through Henry and entered the Piper. She returned carrying a small box. “Happy birthday,” she sang handing it over.

“You knew?” quizzed Josh.

“I looked up our medical records two days ago. I discovered the date you were born.”

Josh pulled the lid off the small square cardboard box and studied the contents.

“Do you know what it is?” asked Florian.

“At a guess, I’d have to say it’s a hologram recording?”

“Nothing gets past you,” whipped Clay pushing his way in front of Florian.

“You’re right. I made the recording last night. I reshaped the tiny printed circuit board so it could fit on an oval shaped silicon base. I thought a short length of wire could go around your neck so you could wear it. I thought up the idea a couple of days ago. I found the printed circuit board inside the chest of a spare robot washed up by the storm. I tested it and found it to be perfect for what I required.”

Wearing a massive grin from receiving a gift, Josh picked up a small stick the size of a toothpick. He used the tip to push the start button. A small image of Florian no taller than three inches projected out from the middle of the unit. The image waved, blew a kiss at Josh and sang the happy birthday song double quick time. The hologram blew the second kiss before vanishing.

“I needed to shorten the recording several times to fit it in.” Florian looked at Josh, waiting for a response. “What do you think?”

Josh commenced nodding vigorously a few seconds before he spoke. “I love it.”

Clay rolled his eyes at the gift. Seeing how he couldn’t be bothered to think up a birthday present for his competitor he quickly changed the subject.

“How’s the room with the green chair coming along?”

“I think I’m making headway,” reported Josh.

“Happy birthday,” chimed Henry.

By the time Josh glanced at him, he’d already disappeared.

“I’ve seen the rock pool,” confessed Josh. “This hot weather is bad. The Piper’s water tank is already down by twenty percent.”

“What’s the big deal?” snorted Clay. “We’ll find a cloud to launch a missile full of ice crystals. In a matter of minutes, it’ll be raining.”

“I can’t spare the time to find a cloud,” confessed Josh. “Besides, have you seen the sky today? There’s not a cloud on the horizon.”

“I vote we ride the horses to the mountains. When we reach the top we can launch a small missile,” insisted Clay.

“Sounds like a plan,” said Florian thoughtfully.

"I have previously stated I don't have the time. If I can't figure out how the room with the green chair works, and soon, how can I go back in time to tell myself how to save you two. I saw you die once; I don't want to see it happen again."

"A few hours delay won't change anything?" growled Clay.

"It might. I have to get to the point of understanding the room before my future ME runs out of time to save you two. I only had minutes remaining when HE showed. Any delay could be disastrous."

"If we don't find water soon, we won't need the room," confided Florian.

"It's more the reason why we do. I can go back in time and tell us there's a drought on the way."

"This is all too confusing," jeered Clay. "I tell you what; I'll go to the mountains. When you see it raining, you'll know I succeeded."

Florian glared sideways at him. Reaching out she took hold of his collar. "I want to see you in private," she spat.

"I don't have the time."

"Make the time."

The two marched off towards the rock pool. At the halfway point, Florian stood in front of him almost nose to nose. She folded her arms and barked at him in whispers.

"I know what you're doing."

"What have I done?"

"It's what you're doing right now."

"Tell me, so we'll both know."

"You changed the subject off Josh's birthday to cause a ruckus."

"I might have done it subconsciously."

"You're full of it, fella."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You're a lousy actor, Clay Silver."

"I'm not acting."

Florian folded her arms tighter across her chest staring through him. She needed to bite her tongue to stop from giggling. She needed Clay to cave in before she did. Even though she viewed him as being handsome, she must stay in control.

"The way you're looking at me could easily melt an alien life form and everything around here."

Florian kept up her stare, determined to win.

"Okay, I admit I knew about Josh's birthday before you. I didn't know what to do so I didn't do anything. Satisfied?"

"You can at least go shake his hand and say happy birthday."

"Why should I?"

"He's part of this threesome colony. It's not a good thing coming across as his enemy. He's our friend. We're a team. Each one of us is supposed to be watching for danger."

Clay sighed and lowered his gaze to his feet. "Sorry, I've been slack. I'm still trying to get over the idea he's my competition. This time next year he'll be fourteen."

"Get over it," growled Florian. "This one-way competition you believe you're in, trying to win me over is ridiculous."

Clay slipped his arm around her waist.

Florian easily resisted his advances. "Go say happy birthday."

"I will if you give me a kiss?"

"In your dreams, Clay Silver," stated Florian. She wriggled free of his hold and marched closer to the rock pool.

The whole-time Clay walked towards the Piper he could feel Florian's stare boring into his back. He forcibly rushed his last several steps before Josh entered the Piper.

"Are you going back to the small room with the green chair?"

"Yes."

"How's it coming? The understanding I mean."

"It's doing my head in. There are so many computers and printed circuit boards in the room I just manage to squeeze onto the chair without touching anything."

"Whoever built the room should have made it larger."

Josh looked at him, deep in thought. He said slowly.

"I think you might have helped me make a major discovery."

"How, it feels claustrophobic just glancing into the room?"

"I think I've been looking at it completely wrong. We know the room is a time machine. To displace time and push it to the side so we can get past the vessel we travel in can't be too large; hence the small room and the smaller chair."

"You're talking gibberish," warned Clay.

"It's factual. It's not the room or the chair it's the person sitting on the chair which goes through time."

Clay reached out, quickly grabbing Josh by the shoulder, preventing him from running off.

"I have to go."

"Josh, I'm sorry I didn't have a present ready, for what it's worth happy birthday!" Clay sang.

"Apology accepted. If I'm right, and I believe I am, Clay you have saved me days if not weeks of trying to stumble upon the answer of how the time machine works."

Josh shook his hand. Grinning, the boys slapped each other on the shoulder.

"Was the act so hard?" asked Florian, wandering over.

"No," confessed Clay. "I know what I can give you for a present. When we return from the mountains, I'll personally help you in the room with the green chair."

"Don't take this the wrong way I'd prefer if you didn't help. The offer was a good present, backed up by what you just said. It'll be a memory I'll remember for the rest of my days."

"I have no doubt," taunted Clay.

The three teenagers laughed at the remark which slowly turned into chuckles at thinking Clay could have any input in a room full of computers and printed circuit boards. Time travel theory just happened to be out of his league.

"Josh, please join us going to the mountains," urged Florian. "We have to stick together."

"You don't want to go to the mountains due to the fact you're scared of physical exercise," teased Clay.

"I am not."

"Yes, you are."

"I don't like camping or walking through the forest. There are wild and prehistoric animals out there. There is danger all around us. Here, in the grassland near the ocean and the Piper spaceship, I feel safe."

"So dramatic," snarled Clay sarcastically. "If I promise to look out for you, will you vote in favour of going?"

Josh looked at his feet. He even kicked a small stone away from the Piper's hatch.

"On second thoughts, about the room with the green chair, if I go will you promise to help me study the room. You'd make me a happy person if you were there when I cracked the code to time travel."

"Are you saying you're close?" quizzed Florian.

"Extremely," replied Josh.