

PLANET X91

THE DERELICT

Book 13

CHAPTER ONE

FLORIAN FAWKES sat deep in a deck chair on the Piper's roof soaking up the sun's rays. Feeling a gush of strong wind spraying her face and a large shadow blocking her warmth she opened her eyes and witnessed a shuttle craft landing. The moment the engine fell silent she saw Clay Silver stepping away from the shuttle's hatch and begin to walk towards her.

"Clay, what are you doing?"

"I decided to show off a bit and fly the shuttle onto the roof."

"Which girl were you trying to impress this time?"

Clay chuckled and sat on the only other vacant deck chair.

"The bright-eyed blonde sitting amongst four other young ladies over by the temporary stage I helped to build."

"Take it from me she won't be impressed."

"And why not?" he grilled.

"There's no element of danger flying a shuttle fifty feet across the grassland."

"Now I understand why she turned her head and looked at the forest."

Florian started to giggle. "Is that the only reason you decided to fly the shuttle?"

"You've caught me out. The real reason I volunteered for such a dangerous mission is that we need more room."

"You saw an opportunity to show off, and you took it?"

"Yes," answered Clay, truthfully.

"From a woman who knows, stop trying so hard to find a girlfriend."

"It's easy for you to say. Have you seen the way young blokes stop what they're doing just to look at you whenever you're around?"

"No, I haven't." Florian studied the men walking around the compound. They looked busy and preoccupied with their task for the day. Not one of them looked her way. "They do not so knock it off."

"Plenty of times I've seen them down tools just to have a gawk. It's not my fault you were born gorgeous," stated Clay.

"Enough," moaned Florian. "What's the idea behind needing more room?"

"I thought we could move the shuttles and build small individual homes for each colonist a bit closer to the force field. Our colony will be expanding soon. Homes will take up room for our crops."

"I reckon you should put your idea to the vote. It will be a good experience for the newly elected council, seeing how they haven't needed to vote on anything since being elected. Need I say I don't appreciate you landing the shuttle, so it will cast a shadow on my deck chair? Park the shuttle somewhere else."

"You can't just say park it somewhere else without an idea," groaned Clay.

"On the beach might be a good place to house the ten shuttles which are still flyable."

"And have all the salt in the air eat at their hulls?"

"Build a roof and four walls," suggested Florian.

"Your idea will be the council's second decision. The way we're going, they'll be busy and soon."

Seeing the glass tube lift ascending out of the Piper's roof, Clay and Florian walked over to greet the person.

Staring at the two looking at him, Josh waved a flippant hand gesture in the air and trotted over.

"It's been five weeks since we saw Lochabar and his ship enter the black hole and vanish from this galaxy. I was thinking last night when might the next adventure start," grumbled Josh.

"You sound slightly bored," blurted Florian.

"Me, never, I have too much to study," replied Josh.

"What subject are you reading now?" probed Clay.

“I was looking over the star charts Henry agreed to show me. There are many planets close to planet X91 which could sustain life. From the Earth, they are too far to be detected.”

Clay moaned heavily into his hands. “Josh boy give that brain power of yours a break.”

“I thought you boys would be trying to repair the damage Lochabar did to the laser rifle?” quizzed Florian.

Squinting in the sunshine, she pointed to the weapon still out of its hiding compartment. The blackened plate on the side of the weapon made the five-foot tall laser rifle an eye-saw.

“The thing is only good for scrap,” announced Clay. “I’m going to unbolt the weapon and bury it under your beach shuttle hangar.”

“What’s the Goss on a hangar?” questioned Josh. “Does the council know about this? And if so why wasn’t I asked to vote?”

“Clay you’re a barrel of laughs,” grumbled Florian. “Josh he’s daydreaming again.”

“If the hangar idea goes ahead I swear I will dig a hole and bury the weapon,” stated Clay.

“We still might be able to use some of the parts,” hinted Josh.

“I’ve looked at the melted circuit board. I highly doubt it,” growled Clay.

“Instead of burying the weapon in the sand, I think you should unbolt it and store it with the damaged robots,” said Florian.

“The way things are going the small room will be piled to the roof with derelict parts in a matter of weeks,” complained Clay Silver.

“We have plenty of room throughout the Piper,” blurted Florian.

“The Piper’s store room is full of spare parts.”

“We can always use more,” mentioned Josh.

“Need I say if we run out of parts you’ll have to show off your talent and muscles by building a flight hangar?” giggled Florian.

“It might be a good idea,” said Josh. “We could clear the section of land close to the beach. It’ll be out of the way and will give us a lot more room to harvest crops.”

“What about if we erect a building on the sand?” queried Clay sarcastically.

“Not a good idea. The salt in the air will corrode the structure in only a few short years.”

“I told you,” snarled Clay, glaring at Florian.

“I still think building a flight hangar is a good idea,” jeered Florian.

“I think so too,” echoed Josh. “At the next meeting of the council members, we’ll submit the idea.”

In the lull of the conversation, the trio saw Henry beginning to materialize. In seconds, the bright light vanished leaving the hologram in its place. Volleying his stares between Florian, Clay, and Josh they could tell he wasn’t happy.

“What’s wrong Henry?” questioned Florian.

“My dear girl, you have been sitting in the sun for far too long. Your cheeks, nose, arms, and legs are turning red.”

“I was enjoying a moment in the sun.”

“Forty-three minutes is a long moment,” growled Henry. “I must advise you to sit in the shade for the remainder of the day and ninety-nine percent of tomorrow’s daylight hours.”

“You are such a mother!” screamed Florian.

“As chief adviser to the colony, I must insist you leave the roof of this spaceship post haste. Besides, you three are required on the bridge.”

“Tell us again why you were elected to be a council member?” grumbled Florian.

“I’m the best adviser on this planet,” chirped Henry.

He started to wave his holographic arms wildly around in the air in an attempt to herd the trio off the roof.

Florian decided to have a little fun and stood her ground.

“Miss Fawkes, I insist you get off the roof of the Piper immediately.”

“What will you do if I refuse your request?”

Henry folded his arms and floated into the air.

“What good did that do?”

“I am trying to intimidate you.”

“Your little levitating trick didn’t even begin to upset me.”

Henry floated over till his nose was touching Florian’s. “Just like you humans say, don’t cross the line.”

“Back off you have invaded my personal space.”

Henry's face changed to a multitude of different colours. In fact, Florian couldn't keep up with the swirling streaks. They were almost hypnotic. The nauseous feeling in the pit of her stomach was worsening the longer Henry floated in her face.

Throwing up her arms she back stepped away and followed the boys down the narrow ladder welded to the side of the Piper and entered the ship. Walking down the corridor to the bridge Henry materialized at the half way point boasting a smile.

Florian sent him a murderous stare. "Happy, now I'm off the roof?"

"Yes. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, no thanks to you. What was the pyrotechnic light show displayed on your face?"

"It was my first attempt to get you to do what I said."

Henry flashed a grin and vanished.

"One of these days I will find a way to pull the plug on you," barked Florian.

Josh and Clay turned side on to Florian. They beckoned her to hurry. When she stepped level to Clay, he couldn't stop from adding to Henry's teasing.

"In your dreams," he whispered.

"Don't you start," Florian growled.

When the group burst onto the bridge, they heard the radio crackle.

"Mining group number two, Caden Hartley calling the Piper, how do you read, over?"

Josh snatched up the microphone and pressed the open button.

"This is Josh Quinn sitting on the bridge of the Piper."

"I was getting concerned you'd all left us," Caden advised.

"We're still here," said Josh. "You sound a bit frantic. Is there a problem?"

"No. In fact, it's quite the opposite."

Josh looked at Clay, and Florian then shrugged. "Are you going to inform us or do we have to come up to the mining camp?"

"I reckon when you hear the news you'll be here extremely quick."

"Don't keep us guessing spill the secret," said Josh.

"Seven days into our four-week stint netted us nothing, so we decided to pull up camp and relocate. We've moved to the blind side of the second moon seven hundred thousand miles from planet X91. After setting up camp, we were beginning to map the terrain when we discovered a vast crater full of the minerals we need for the colony. Copper and iron ore are in abundance."

"Excellent," replied Josh.

"The miracle is everything we need lies under a thin layer of Regolith. A fine powder made up of rock fragments and volcanic glass fragments."

"Caden Hartley its okay everyone listening to your voice here on the Piper's bridge understands what Regolith is," moaned Josh.

"Sorry. I'd been teaching mining for the last two years to first-year engineers when I got the call about coming on an adventure of a lifetime," clarified Caden.

"Fair comment," replied Josh.

"Moving forward, it'll be so much easier to mine the crater than to find and dig out iron ore from under the ground on Planet X91."

"I'll put it to the council," said Josh.

"Why you're at it tell them we have a bonus to all this. Negatively charged sand to refill our exhausted fuel rods is the layer of sand covering the iron ore."

"This is great news," bellowed Clay.

"We have also stumbled upon something you might find extremely valuable."

"Spit it out," said Josh, leaning forward in the chair.

"Near the crater, we saw several bright flashes. A few men and I decided to travel the short distance to investigate."

"You have our undivided attention," said Josh.

"Good. What I have found will blow your socks off."

"Did you discover what the bright flashes were?" asked Clay.

"We sure did," reported Caden Hartley. "We have found a half buried derelict spaceship only a third of a mile from our mining campsite. Josh, this ship appears to be identical to the Piper. A fuel rod must be leaking AON particles, hence the bright intermittent flashes."

Josh almost left the floor at hearing the news. Staring at Florian and Clay, he blurted in a serious voice.

"I'm on my way."

Josh's face erupted in a broad grin. He was too excited to observe Henry floating over. Clay and Florian on the other hand did.

"Clay, the leaking fuel rod from the derelict spaceship is what caused the intermittent bright flashes you saw when we were approaching the wayward asteroid. I have to confess I thought I saw something that day too," bellowed Josh.

"At least the report from Caden Hartley clears up the mystification," stated Florian. "I vote we go right now."

"Wait for one minute, the council has to vote on this," yelled Nick Benhill.