

PLANET X91
UNWELCOME VISITOR

Book 12

CHAPTER ONE

FOR THE third time in as many minutes Major Reltso slowly brought the shuttle craft out of the three-hundred and sixty-degree loop. Before Florian could catch her breath, the craft started to barrel roll. Inwardly Reltso counted the rolls. After completing the seventh, he looked to see how Florian was enjoying the stunt flying. By the look on her face, Reltso could tell she loved every minute. After all, she did confess she wanted to have some fun. For what it was worth, Florian Fawkes deserved it.

The weather happened to be perfect for stunt flying. No wind blew across the desert sand dunes. The clouds were infrequent. The next storm front wasn't due to arrive for at least a week.

Reltso's next series of anti-clockwise corkscrew tumbles followed by a vertical climb towards the stratosphere lasted no more than fifteen seconds. At the height of forty-one thousand feet above sea level, the craft was violently buffeted by what he thought might have been a strong gust of wind. The console lights dimmed and went out. Sparks rained down from the many switches built into the roof of the passenger shuttle. The forward motion of the craft slowed then the engines stalled and fell mute. For a few moments, the shuttle hovered. In complete silence, the craft began to plummet towards the desert landscape far below. Reltso's military training instantly kicked in. He reached up, pushing the parachute activation button.

The chute failed to leave the long narrow compartment.

Florian reached up to re-push the switch.

Seeing a bright flash behind them Reltso and Florian looked between the leather seats. They saw Josh's image staring at them.

"Forget about trying to deploy the chute. The electronics have been fried. Make a move," Josh yelled.

"What have you done?" Florian rasped.

"There's no time to explain. Get to the hatch and bail out," spoke Josh's transparent holographic image.

Florian unlatched her harness. Reltso mirrored her move. He grabbed the teenager by the arm and yanked her out of the seat.

"It's time to leave. The shuttle is a falling block of metal."

"How could this happen?" She probed. "Why?"

"I have no idea, and there's no time to figure it out. If we don't bail out, we won't be walking away from the crash."

While more electronics shorted out over the entire craft, Reltso half dragged Florian towards the hatch. Hundreds of sparks fell about their feet. For a few short moments, the shuttle remained level before slowly tilting nose first at the sand covered ground.

Reltso opened a small compartment next to the main hatch, snatching up a single parachute. Florian began to wind the handle to open the hatch.

She watched him reach out and clip the belt around her waist. The wind created by the falling shuttle started to scream through the gap in the opening hatch.

"At the speed, we're falling one chute won't be large enough to stop two people from falling to their deaths," screamed Florian.

Reltso sent her a knowing look. Tears welled up in Florian's eyes. The cold air pouring through the gap started to freeze her tears.

"I know," yelled Reltso.

He finished securing the belt around her waist. Pulling her hand away from the manual handle he clasped it and wound the handle at speed. The hatch opened faster.

"I'm not going to jump alone," yelled Florian.

"Yes, you will."

"I'm not going to argue. We'll do this together and hope for the best."

"I'm staying. You're going. If I have to throw you out through the open hatch I'll do it," bellowed Reltso. "We have about five seconds left before we are level with the only cloud in the sky. Florian, it's time to grow up. Get set to bail out. If it's any consolation, I think you've done a great service to the colony. After you jump, I'll get back into the nose section and try to restart at least one of the engines."

"Josh reported the electrics had rendered the engines incapable of restarting."

"It's okay," yelled Reltso.

Florian reached for the buckle on the waist belt. There was no way she was going to jump alone. They'd bail out together or not at all."

A bright light materialized behind them. Josh announced his presence for the second time.

"Bail out now," he said in a ghostly calm.

"The chute won't save us both," warned Florian.

"It doesn't have to. Trust me on this one. Jump now. The shuttle is at ten thousand feet."

A few more turns of the small handle and the gap in the hatchway looked wide enough to exit.

Reltso reached out and wrapped his arms around Florian's waist.

"This is going to be interesting," he mentioned. "When I say, activate the chute."

Reltso backed Florian towards the open air. His bear hug was restricting her breathing. Leaning out of the shuttle he saw the ground coming up fast. Together they tumbled away from the shuttle. Florian caught a glimpse of the cold engines as the shuttle picked up speed.

"Activate the chute," yelled Reltso.

Florian pulled the cord. Reltso's bear hug intensified. The small pilot chute exited the backpack followed by the main chute. The air quickly filled the material. Their descent slowed, but not by much.

"What now?" Florian yelled. "In less than a minute, we'll hit the sand. Our velocity won't be slow enough. We'll be lucky to survive."

Reltso pointed to an air bike piloted by Josh approaching from his right side. Clay appeared to be tethered to the seven-foot square metal plate.

"Our ride has arrived," Reltso yelled.

Maneuvering the air bike, so it appeared to sit directly under Reltso and Florian, Josh ascended a few feet. The chute went limp. Reltso quickly gathered the material while Clay clipped Florian to the plate. Josh piloted the air bike away from the falling shuttle. Hovering a thousand feet in the air and at least a mile from the intended crash site the group of four waited for the last few seconds to tick off.

The shuttle's nose hit the sand first. The speed was fast enough to bury the entire shuttle. The moment the walls of the AON drive were breached, the anti-matter unit on the side of each of the three engines exploded.

The fireball mushrooming into the air felt intense even from a mile away. The entire craft disintegrated, leaving a fifty-foot round and a thirty-foot deep blackened crater in the sand.

Descending slowly to the hard deck Josh expertly piloted the bike to a soft landing between two sand dunes.

Stepping off the plate Florian's feet sank into the warm sand. She folded her arms and glared at Josh.

Reltso wore a puzzled look.

Clay sat on the edge of the plate dangling his legs over the side of the bike. His widening smile infuriated Florian even more.

"Josh Quinn what did you do?" she growled.

"I saved your life."

"It's not what I mean, and you know it."

"I think a full explanation is in order," suggested Reltso.

"Are you positive you want to hear it?" asked Clay.

"Yes, and right now," Florian demanded.

"Take my advice and let the explanation slip on by."

"No way," yelled Florian. "Start talking or I'm walking back to the grassland."

"We're ten thousand miles from the Piper spacecraft," snorted Josh.

"I don't care."

Florian kicked a large clump of hardened sand at Josh and the same at Clay.

"Settle down," said Josh.

For his comment, Florian marched over and pushed him hard in the shoulder. Josh over balanced and fell hard onto the sand.

Florian straddled the lad. Glaring down at him she wore the look of a murderer.

"You both died," Josh blurted.

Florian's eyes widened. She back stepped away. Reltso sat on the sand looking at the boys.

"For your information, we are still alive," snarled Florian.

"I warned you not to insist on an explanation," said Clay.

"Shut the hell up," growled Florian.

"Both you and Reltso died in the crash," whimpered Josh for the second time. He got to his feet so he could look directly at Florian.

"What did you do?"

"Have you forgotten what I told you seventeen days ago?"

"No, I haven't. I thought we had an agreement to leave things alone. I don't expect any special favours," yelled Florian.

"I never agreed," barked Josh. "I will always put you first. No matter what happens you will live."

"Tell me you didn't use the time machine onboard the Piper?"

"I won't lie. I did."

"Why?"

"I've already told you. Reltso and you died in the crash."

Reltso watched Florian begin to back step away from Josh and the air bike. She was sending him a wild look. Pointing her finger at Josh Florian began to shake her head. Screaming at the top of her voice she fell over a patch of desert grass. Her arse left a dent in the sand-dune. Reltso did all he could to stop from laughing. Clay couldn't control himself and chuckled uncontrollably. Josh, on the other hand, marched across the hard-packed sand and held out his hand. Florian took it and pulled him down. They tumble rolled across the hot sand time and again, coming to a sudden stop at the base of the sand-dune. They lay next to each other staring at the clouds. While Reltso talked with Clay, Josh and Florian looked at each other.

"You shouldn't have used the time machine," she whispered.

"It was the only way to save you."

"What about Reltso?"

"What about him?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about Josh Quinn."

"Inform me."

Florian leaned on her elbow staring at Josh. His coy expression didn't sit properly.

"I'm waiting," he announced.

"You and Clay and that damn competition. Admit it you don't want to lose."

"We've both given up on it."

"Since when?" she snorted.

"Since I discovered I had won your heart and one day we will wed."

Florian lovingly punched Josh in the arm. He chuckled at the touch. When she reached out and touched his cheek that was the moment he knew he didn't have to tread carefully.

"I want you to stop using the time machine."

"I'll only use it to save your life."

"I mean it. No more."

"I promise."

"I don't believe you. Agreeing came too easy."

"Trust me on this."

"The trouble is Josh; you are too intelligent."

"It's a family trait."

"Hey you too, get back here," called Reltso.

Florian and Josh jumped to their feet and climbed the low sand-dune. On the crest, they looked to what Reltso was pointing at.

"That is some crater!" exclaimed Josh.

"I think we should take a closer look," suggested Florian.

"I'd have to agree," added Clay. "We might be able to ascertain why the shuttle fell out of the sky."

"Seeing how you used the time machine to save us do you have any idea on what happened?" questioned Florian.

"None at all," Josh mumbled. "I didn't want to waste time in asking Henry either."

"Surely you thought about the consequences?"

"No. I watched the whole thing live on the computer monitor. I saw sparks dropping from the ceiling. I saw the nose section begin to go straight down. You and Reltso were still securely strapped into your seats. Reltso you were quite the professional. You tried everything to get the shuttle to pull

out of the nosedive. At twenty thousand feet, Florian, you tried to manually crank open the hatch to deploy the chute. It jammed at the halfway point. The chute was ripped in half. Reltso unbuckled his harness. Florian, you did the same. By the time, you got to the hatch; it was too late. I saw the shuttle explode on impact. Before realization struck me down over what had happened, I sprinted for the room with the time machine punched up the relevant time line and pressed the go button.”

“That must have been when we saw you,” said Reltso.

“Yes.”

“You saw me again when you were arguing whether to jump or not. After that, I sprinted for an air bike. Fortunately, Clay was about to take a bike for a test ride. I yelled let’s go as I relayed the coordinates of the shuttle. Clay pushed the air bike into the red. The Plasma bubble which protects us from the wind when the air bike reaches light speed only just finished forming when we were at ten thousand feet above sea level. We arrived in time to save you.”

“The last one to get to the crater must pilot the air bike back to the Piper,” blurted Reltso.

He led the charge to the crater. Clay followed in his tracks. Florian and Josh brought up the rear. Still fifty feet out from the fringe of the hole Florian grabbed Josh by the arm.

“I haven’t said thanks for saving my life.”

“And Reltso’s,” added Josh.

“Yes, of course.”

Josh brushed Florian’s long hair from her eyes. He leaned closer. Florian matched the angle he was leaning. She closed her eyes and puckered her lips, waiting for them to touch. The feeling came quickly. Florian gave her hero a nice long kiss. Josh returned the feeling.

“Hey you two, get over here,” yelled Clay.

Florian’s and Josh’s eyes opened simultaneously. Both walked backwards at the same time. Looking slightly sheepish they quickly marched to where Clay stood.

“Thanks for joining the expedition.”

“No worries at all,” whimpered Josh.

Reltso chuckled under his breath.

“Don’t you start?” barked Clay, looking sideways at him.

“We better take a look at the crater,” whispered Florian.