

PLANET X91

THE HIDDEN CATACOMBS

CHAPTER ONE

“IT’S BEEN nine days since the council voted unanimously to give Caden Hartley permission to begin mining the second moon for iron ore, anti-matter for our fuel and copper,” announced Florian.

Josh swallowed more of his lunch and looked up at her. She seemed to be enjoying the sea breeze blowing across her face. To prove his theory, she sat and nestled her back against the hull of the Piper.

“What are you concerned about?” he asked.

“Has Caden sent any news on how the miners are progressing?”

“In fact, he did last night,” advised Josh.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

Florian folded her arms. She stared at him through slits.

“Don’t get too upset I didn’t know until twelve minutes before you walked up. Reltso took the call and handballed the information to me.”

“How detailed was the report?” asked Florian.

“The miners have completed their first three-hour stint. The thin layer of anti-matter was successfully mounded at the side of the moon’s largest crater they have named Hartley’s sea. When the second team is ready, they’ll start to refine the anti-matter, and fill our empty fuel rods. The iron ore has been exposed and is ready to be sucked up into the holding tanks inside the storage shuttle set aside for this particular phase of their operation.”

Florian’s cold expression slowly turned warm. Smiling at Josh, she unfolded her arms and moved that bit closer; so close their shoulders were touching. Straightening her legs, she crossed her ankles and watched the deep green grass swaying in the warm breeze.

Josh finished his lunch, leaned back against the Piper’s hull and closed his eyes.

“You’re acting like you don’t have a care in the world,” hinted Florian. She swept her long black fringe from her eyes, waiting for a response. She was fishing to hear what he’d been thinking about for the past several days.

“It’s not that I don’t have a care in the world, I’m a little tired,” confessed Josh.

“Why?”

“I didn’t sleep much last night.”

“Josh, the trouble is your brain is keeping you awake. It’s always ticking over ten different facts at the same time. You need to take a break. If you don’t, you might burn out.”

“I’m fine,” he mumbled. “Besides, I have to be thinking of at least three different subjects at the same time.”

“Is this a new thing since we were frozen for the long journey here or have you always been like this?”

“I’ve endured the phenomenon all my life,” confessed Josh. “To put the explanation into simple terms, I have this fear if I’m not thinking of at least three different ideas simultaneously I feel as though I might explode. That’s why I must be thinking all the time.”

“Are you going to tell me what the ideas are?”

“You might get upset,” mumbled Josh.

Florian slapped him playfully on the leg. “To prove you won’t explode from not thinking about something I recommend we build a small yacht and go sailing like you’ve always wanted to do. There will be nothing except me, you, the boat, the wind and a white sail. It’ll be fun.”

“There are too many unknown species living in the sea we have yet to discover. We could run into some giant fish. Need I say nothing has hunted them from the time they were set free into the ocean.”

“There you go again. Stop allowing your brain to dictate what you shouldn’t be thinking about.”

“I’ve already admitted I need to think. The action soothes my nerves.”

“What about your fantasy of being a Captain of your very own yacht?”

"I'd rather be on the bridge of the Piper staring at the DNA of a dead Crenoxian."

"You would not," snarled Florian. "I reckon you were awake all last night thinking about when will be the next time you'll have the chance to kiss me."

"You can't be any further from the truth, and I was only awake most of the night," corrected Josh. "To table my thoughts on what has held my concentration for the past four days; I've been thinking about the missing men."

"You have not Josh Quinn, and you were correct when you said that you weren't thinking about our next kiss. In fact, you've been busy planning for the day when we can take the Piper through the black holes."

Josh looked away. He didn't want to see Florian's murderous expression.

"That too," he confessed. "Plans are well under way."

"Take a break," jeered Florian. "The day might never eventuate."

"Yes, it will and soon."

"Even contemplating thinking about travelling through a black hole makes me feel nervous. We all know it's impossible."

"Why does everything we haven't done yet be deemed impossible?" questioned Josh.

"Each and every famous scientist back on Earth has always taught it will never be possible. Light can't penetrate a black hole and gravity inside a black hole is too intense. Nothing can survive."

"Human rules and theories have always been broken. The sooner we prove to the colonists we can travel through the black holes the better."

"Josh, everyone in this colony, including me wants you to do us a favour and give that brain of yours a rest."

"Okay, I will," replied Josh returning his focus on Florian. "From now on I'll keep my ideas to myself."

"That's not what I mean, and I can almost guarantee you won't."

"You know me too well," Josh chuckled.

"Just tell me," insisted Florian.

"No," Josh insisted a little more firmly.

Looking across the grassland towards the forest she watched Clay exit his tent. The moment Clay spied Florian and Josh he marched over. He hovered over the brooding pair, blocking the sunlight.

"What's up?"

"Not much," replied Josh.

"You're blocking my sun," grumbled Florian.

Clay sat next to Florian and pushed his back against the Piper's metal hull. He closed his eyes, and he too soaked up the sunshine.

"I must admit this past week has been a bit of a bore," Clay continued.

"Don't say it too loud something will happen," giggled Florian. Looking sideways she saw Josh begin to grin. Her giggles instantly ceased.

"Speaking of the next adventure I think we should go search for the missing men," announced Clay.

"The same ones who went in search of the invisible creature a while back?" questioned Florian.

"Yep," replied Clay. "At the moment, there's nothing else to do so we have enough time."

"I must be honest here I thought they might have returned by now," admitted Josh.

"They will never find the creature. If they had returned a couple of days after they walked away from this camp they would have discovered we got rid of it," growled Florian.

"Too right we did," snarled Clay. "If there is ever another invisible entity I'll personally get rid of it too."

"It was a team effort," corrected Florian.

"Yes, it was," added Josh. "I suppose we should summon the council members. We should put the idea to a vote in whether to go searching or to wait a little longer."

"Henry front and center," chirped Florian.

Staring directly in front of her she pushed her long dark hair behind her ears and swatted the fringe from her eyes waiting for the hologram to arrive.

A thin bright light materialized seven feet in front of the trio. It took a few seconds to disperse. After it had vanished, a transparent Henry remained. The hologram floated a few inches above the grassland. Boasting a grotesque style face that appeared slightly skewwhiff and distorted Henry floated back and forth in front of the group.

"What are you doing?" jeered Florian.

“Miss Fawkes for your information I am trying to look as you humans would say: scary.”

“Forget it. You look silly. I know the boys aren’t scared so I must believe you’re trying to scare me. Why?”

“Your Earthling calendar has revealed some interesting information,” reported Henry.

He waved his hand in front of his face. In a heartbeat, his appearance had returned to normal. He stood to his usual full six-foot height as his feet touched the ground.

“We’re on planet X91, not the Earth” moaned Clay. “I shouldn’t have to teach a computer the Earth is many light years from this planet.”

“Of course, you don’t. Earth computers break down and go slow. I’m a Crenoxian design. I never break down, my speed has never diminished from the moment I was created over two thousand Earth years ago, and I never forget anything,” advised Henry.

“For a computer program, you like to boast a lot,” giggled Florian. “Henry, I’ve already had enough suspense for one day, tell me why you wanted to try and scare us?”

“On Earth at this particular time of year, it’s the 31st of October.”

“It’s Halloween,” said Florian.

“I recommend every colonist should dress up in a costume,” advised Henry. He nodded and immediately wore a Captain’s uniform. “These clothes represent exactly what Captain James Cook wore when he sailed his wooden ship the Endeavour. He discovered Australia in 1770. He went ashore on 22nd August of that same year. He named the landing place Botany Bay. If you don’t like the uniform, someone could dress up as a pirate. I believe you Florian would look cute wearing a black eye patch over your eye while holding a sword.”

“A pirate didn’t look cute,” growled Florian.

“I’m going as a Crenoxian,” advised Clay Silver.

“Masquerading around as a cannibal alien might get you killed,” stated Henry.

“I’ll dress up as myself,” blurted Josh.

“Mr. Quinn, why are you such a party dampener?” asked Henry.

“What a formal attitude,” barked Reltso. “Henry, from now on you can call me Major.”

Reltso had returned from the beach and heard the discussion while he walked up to the Piper. He stood staring at Henry while boasting a smile.

“Sir, that is not funny,” remarked Henry.

“What’s with the wearing of the old uniform?”

“Apparently, it’s Halloween,” laughed Florian.

“It might be back on Earth, but not on this planet,” barked Reltso.

“Henry, sound the sirens to summon the council members,” ordered Florian.

Henry’s uniform vanished. After nodding Henry’s old fashioned uniform was replaced by his normal grey attire stretching from his neck to his feet. A moment later the Piper’s sirens sounded three sharp shrills.

The remaining council members came running. Nara sprinted over the sand-dune on her return trip from her usual morning fitness schedule which included a five mile run along the sand and a quick swim in the sea to cool off.

Sergey Swyers brought up the rear of the group. He couldn’t hide the sparkle in his eyes. He loved the idea of being on the council and most of the time he could be seen trying to persuade each colonist to vote for him so he could make it permanent.

Florian, Josh, and Clay followed Henry over to the rock pool. The sound of the water cascading endlessly over the rocks at the end closest to the mountains always sounded soothing. The group sat on the grass in a tight ring at the side of the pool waiting for the others to arrive.

The warm breeze blowing in from the sea felt comfortable. The few white clouds dotting the sky didn’t even raise a glance. Clay watched each of the group sit.

When all council members had arrived, they sat completing the circle. All eyes were staring at Florian.

Reltso sat straight-backed listening to the sounds wafting in from the forest.

“Why are we here?” asked Sergey, breaking the silence.