

PLANET X91  
PRE-BEGINNING

CHAPTER ONE

THE DISCOVERY

THE MASSIVE telescope, the largest ever built, moved slowly across the night sky towards the West, its single eye staring, unblinking into the dark sky. This night the telescope would start searching at ten degrees above the horizon. The moon wouldn't rise this particular night, a perfect time to study the stars in the heavens.

Professor Oakland, a thin man of below average height, tapped several numbers on the ten-inch square computer console in front of him. For nearly a minute he couldn't see anything for his actions.

In a low and high orbit above the Earth, two giant telescopes slowly changed direction. In a few minutes, the three giant telescopes would be in alignment.

Professor Oakland got paid big money to discover a planet where humans might colonize, sooner than later and well before the Earth fell apart. Resources were exhausted, crime was on the increase, and fossil fuels were costing too much to mine due to the ever-decreasing levels. The cost of locating the few remaining reserves of coal or oil buried deep in the earth was blowing out to an unsustainable amount.

Professor Oakland stood. He stretched and rubbed his tired eyes. Noting he was starting to sway from side to side, he groped for the bench in front of him. Snorting heavily, he shuffled over to the coffee machine and poured two extra strong mugs of coffee. Carrying a mug in each hand, he shuffled back and placed them on the desktop. As he sat, he studied the computer monitor in front of him. He felt the whole world was holding their breath waiting to hear the good news that he had discovered a new home. Night after night, month after month, Professor Oakland sat at the computer monitor, studying the stars. He and twenty other scientists around the world were working as a team to accomplish the monumental task.

Mankind needed to evacuate the Earth before all commodities including fish in the sea, the minerals in the ground and the clean air were exhausted. They didn't have long. The clock was ticking. Professor Oakland knew his fate was sealed. He would die on the Earth. He must remain optimistic for his family's sake and all of mankind that he could find a new home amongst the stars. If he could, at least on another planet his offspring had some slim hope of a good and safe life.

Five hours into his shift, the Professor marched to the coffee lounge. In fact, it was his tenth trip. The three telescopes would again take a minute to realign. In the down time, he could take a break. He studied the wind sock outside the building. The cold front that was predicted to lash his location an hour ago had yet to fill the yellow sock. Glancing at the sky, he saw a few clouds. They were starting to move at speed across the sky. It wouldn't be long before the entire night sky was covered in cloud.

Returning to the desk, he looked at the monitor.

A dot was clearly visible at the bottom right-hand side of the monitor. Professor Oakland tapped a few numbers. The dot moved to the center of the monitor. Flopping onto his seat, he started to read the information that was being uploaded.

The dot represented a planet hundreds of light years from the Earth. The computer signaled the size and the temperature of the planet orbiting a sun mirrored the Earth. The only difference, three moons orbited this particular planet.

Professor Oakland photographed the planet. He had viewed this section of sky at least a dozen times over the past six months, not once had he seen this celestial planet before.

This mistake might be the biggest thing since dinosaurs were wiped out by a massive meteorite millions of years ago.

Completing an email, he sent the information to the other astronomers.

Staring at the computer monitor in front of him as the clouds started to blanket the building, Professor Oakland could only speculate if there would be life on the planet. Their next step, their only option would be to send a shuttle with robots to the planet. The moment the craft was in orbit, drones

could be deployed, and the information sent back at hyper-speed. A ship carrying volunteers, all in a cryogenically frozen state would be half way to the planet before they could receive the information.

Whether the information was good news or bad, there was no time to waste. They couldn't wait before they launched humans into space.

If they discovered the planet was no good, the spaceship will be in orbit long before Earth could send them an abort signal. A one-way trip to the stars didn't sound too promising a future, but as he sighed, he knew there was no other way.

Professor Oakland piled his photos and all the information he could find and stuffed it all in his black leather briefcase. He left the observatory in a rush; his destination, a meeting with the president of the United States. The moment he told the guard at the gate his news, he would be escorted into the white house without delay.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE ANNOUNCEMENT

"GENTLEMEN, MAY I have your attention, please. The clock is ticking. We need to get this meeting underway."

The partially grey bearded man who appeared to be in his late fifties stared at the one-hundred and forty scientists, which included VIPS from all countries.

An instant silence engulfed the semi-circular auditorium. All eyes in the room glared at the man on stage.

"Thank you," said the man, through a microphone. "My name is Professor Oakland. I was the astronomer who discovered the planet that I have named planet X188. This planet, I believe can sustain humans."

The ruckus from the many people erupted. The noise sounded deafening. The men on guard duty at the five exits scrutinized the people. One guard even started walking towards the front, his hand on his gun.

Professor raised his hands in the air. "Please, we have much to talk about."

Again, a silence quickly descended the auditorium.

"Planet X188 is further out into deep space from another planet I have named X91. Both planets appear to be able to sustain life. There is no way of knowing or judging which planet might be the best. The only way to be certain is to send a ship to investigate the better of the two. I understand this is a dangerous endeavor. If you will spare me a few more minutes, I will outline what I believe is the perfect plan."

"There's no way I will vote on or agree to send anyone so far out into space," jeered a man with an olive complexion. His balding head was shaking, vigorously.

"Maybe this is a vote the whole world needs to participate in," yelled a woman in broken English.

"Mankind has no option except to go," insisted Professor Oakland.

"Is there another planet closer than this so-called planet X188?" asked a scrawny man sitting in the front row, left of center.

"Except for planet X91, none have been detected," advised the Professor.

"Well keep searching," yelled the man.

The noise of the yells and clapping sounded louder than the crowd cheering at the Olympic Games. For the second time, Professor Oakland raised his hand and stood patiently waiting for the men and women in the room to quieten.

"Please, people in the room, we must remain quiet. All this yelling will make what I'm trying to relay to you all a whole lot longer than it should. I believe this discovery is our best chance. This might be our only option. You might be correct in keep searching for another planet, and we will, but if another planet isn't discovered and soon, we must go to planet X188. I will now hand the discussion over to Professor Richardson for more information on what the proposal entails."

A thin man of average height, wearing a grey suit and tie walked across the palladium to the pulpit. Staring at the crowd, he waited for complete silence before beginning a credible speech.

"At this time, we have many questions about how the human race will survive not only on the Earth but also out in deep space on another planet. As you are all aware, the Earth is a mess. Crime is out of

control. Food is becoming scarce. Venturing into deep space for a chance to survive is a mission I believe should be undertaken without delay.”

Professor Richardson stepped over to a large holographic board and pressed the on button. An image lit and started moving in slow circles ten feet off the floor. The fifteen-foot long image was that of a ship. Its sleek design captured the attention of everyone in the room. From the moment, it came into focus the room sounded graveyard quiet.

“This vessel everyone in the room is eyeballing is one hundred and twenty feet high by four hundred feet long and one hundred feet wide. Five hundred colonists will undertake the voyage of a lifetime. The ship will be stocked full of provisions the colonists will need to survive such a perilous journey. To get to Planet X188, they will be frozen in cryogenic sleep for the ten-year journey. Shuttlecraft will be on this as yet unnamed ship. Three giant engines will push the ship at light speed through space. AON drive will be their fuel. The giant collector at the front of the ship will pick up antimatter, turn it into matter and spit it out at the rear of the ship. To help push the ship antimatter will be placed in fuel rods, each weighing one hundred and fifty pounds. If matter isn’t collected fast enough, the anti-matter which is stored in the fuel rods will be used. When one of the engines has used the fuel the rod, it is automatically replaced by another.”

“The first part of the ship has already been built. For this venture to succeed, we need money and help from every nation.”

“How much is this venture going to cost?” yelled a man seated near the exit at the rear of the auditorium.

“A lot more than one country can afford.”

“How much?” grilled the man.

“The money is inconsequential.”

“We all want to hear how much?”

“Fifty billion dollars,” blurted Professor Richardson.

“I believe I speak for everyone in this room today. The cost is too high,” bellowed the man.

“If the human race is going to survive we need to spend that amount. You can’t put a dollar price on the survival of mankind.”

“What guarantee do we have this venture will succeed?”

The woman was sitting in the front row directly under Professor Richardson. She pushed her hair behind her ears while waiting to hear the answer.

“No one can guarantee something like this. In my opinion, the gamble is worth every cent,” grumbled Professor Richardson.

“How can we ask human beings to maybe sacrifice their lives on such an idea?” This time the woman stood.

“Who am I talking to?”

“I’m Kate Brignal from the local news.”

“I’m happy you brought up that particular question. If we’re going to spend so much money, I think it should be up to the people of the world to vote a yes or a no and this first trip of a lifetime should be completely voluntary. Of course, a special science committee will be set up to agree with the candidates who have volunteered.”

“What happens if a catastrophe happens?” asked Kate Brignal. “There will be no way to help the people.”

“Your question is duly noted.”

“So why don’t you answer it?”

“We will do everything we can to prevent any catastrophe from happening. The moment we receive even a minor fluctuation in the power source on board the ship we will automatically wake the captain and tell him to come back to the Earth.”

At hearing the ruckus beginning to erupt, Professor Richardson turned side on to the onlookers and walked off the stage.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SHIP IS NAMED

THE IDEA of a colony of people to volunteer to leave the Earth and go into deep space was explained to the leaders of each country. In forty-seven days, every nation had agreed and signed up. Five days later the funds for the ship had been collected.

Each country immediately set to work informing their people on how to be nominated for the trip, if they so desired. Forty-eight weeks to the day, the computer tallied the names of more than forty million people who had decided they wanted to go. Along with their name they were asked to name the ship. The winner of the naming contest would get first preference in being part of the ship's maiden voyage. The Captain and crew of the massive ship would judge the answers.

Nine weeks after the closing date, the ship's name was decided. The science council and the Captain of the ship decided, before announcing to the world the name of the ship, the person who submitted the name had the right to know first.

A few hours after deciding, a small vehicle was approaching a beachside suburb of Melbourne. The weather was cold. Dizzily rain splattered the windscreen. At the height of three hundred feet, the vehicle descended straight down. The moment the twelve-foot long vehicle settled on the landing pad on top of the flat roof house, the military man stepped down and marched the short distance to the elevator. He reached out and pushed the call button. A moment later the single stainless steel door slid sideways. Swiping his hat from his head, he stepped into the lift car. By the time the lift descended to the ground floor, he had peeled his rain coat off and dumped it in the corner. When the lift door slid open, the owner of the house greeted him. Both men reached out to shake the hand of the other.

"Welcome to my home."

"Thank you, Sir, Mr. Fawkes. Do I have your permission to enter your dwelling?"

Mr. Fawkes stepped to the side, allowing the man to step out of the lift. Both men entered the warm formal lounge.

"The woman you're looking at is my wife, Florian's birth mother, Karen."

"Good evening," said the tall man.

"Evening," replied Karen.

"I have important news," reported the man. "Is your daughter home?"

"I'm sorry, she's not. She has gone out to a school dance, tonight," explained Karen Fawkes.

"I see." The military man pulled a portable handheld scanner from his pocket. Lifting it to his mouth, he spoke seriously. "Track Florian Fawkes to her present location."

Several lights on the face of the machine blinked in rapid succession. Slowly a map came into focus. A dotted line was drawn across the screen.

"At the moment, she is standing on the basketball court at the closest school."

"This sounds serious," said Mr. Fawkes. "Is she being arrested?"

"Nothing could be further from the truth."

"Tell me what the news is?"

"I can't. My orders are specific. I'm to tell no one my information before I divulge the information directly to her. Goodnight Mr. Fawkes."

The military man walked back to the lift. The moment he stepped into the lift car the door closed.

Pulling on his coat and placing his hat on his head he stepped out into the rain, marched to his vehicle and slipped inside the craft.

"The Aspen secondary college," he ordered. "In fact, land in front of the basketball stadium."

The vehicle quickly ascended into the air. In a white flash, it streaked across the sky. As the craft flies, the vehicle settled into the grass in fifty-five seconds after departing Florian Fawkes' home. The rain appeared to be abating, so the military man stashed the wet coat, shook the water from his cap and carried it under his arm as he marched towards the main entrance.

Before he got inside the building, the thumping music sounded unbearable.

Using his small scanner, the military clad man found Florian Fawkes dancing amongst a group of ten girls. They looked to be living it up, by letting their hair down. The boys were standing at the side wall watching the girls.

"Miss Fawkes?" announced the military man, tapping the teenager on the shoulder.

"My name is Florian. I'm busy. Go away."

"I have important news," replied the man.

"What part of I don't want to be interrupted don't you understand?"

"My news will only take seconds to relay. After I have told you I will leave this place."

"You better go," yelled one of the girls. "We'll all be here when you return."

"I won't be long," grumbled Florian.

The man escorted Florian towards the main doors. At the halfway point one of the boys stepped in their path.

“Where are you taking the girl?”

“That is none of your business. Step aside, or I will be forced to make a scene; a very ugly scene.”

The lad saw the military man coil his fingers into a tight fist. He watched him smirk as he lifted it into the air. The lad raised his hands and back stepped away.

Florian and the military man stepped out into the night air. The rain had stopped, but everything was wet. Seeing the lad watching from a distance Florian glared at the handsome man looking at her.

“Has my parents been in an accident?”

“No, they are fine.”

“You better tell me the news?” growled Florian.

“The ship that will go into deep space has been named. In three hours, the name will be announced to the world.”

“So why are you here wanting to talk to me?”

“My orders are to tell you the name of the ship.”

“If by revealing the name of the ship will get you out of my life then tell me.”

“The USS Lock,” advised the man.

“That was the name I suggested,” Florian screamed.

“Exactly,” replied the man. “Congratulations. You won the naming contest. You and your parents, now have a free ticket onboard the USS Lock if you so desire.”

“Do my parents know?”

“Not yet. I was given explicit instructions not to say a word until you were informed.”

For the second time, Florian squealed with delight. Grinning mischievously, she reached up and grabbed the military man around the neck. Craning her neck, she kissed the man square on the lips.

“Miss Fawkes, I’m a married man.”

“Sorry, but this is an exciting time for me. I won’t tell a soul.”

“Neither shall I,” added the man. “Care for a lift home?”

“Yes, thank you. My parents and I have a lot to plan.”

“I can wait here until you have informed your dancing friends?”

Florian sprinted back into the building and weaved her way through the crowd of teenagers. She found her friends exactly where she left them. After a quick explanation and excited yelps from the girls, Florian sprinted outside. The moment the military man saw her running his way he opened the car door for her.

“I’m all set to go home,” Florian chatted.

The vehicle ascended straight up. Ninety feet above ground level, the vehicle changed direction and headed straight for Florian’s home.

Florian waved to the military man as he dropped her off.

“All the best for the future,” said the man.

“And you too.”

Florian opened the door and found her parents waiting for her in the formal lounge.

“I have great news,” she blurted. “The unnamed ship has a name; The USS Lock. Seeing how they chose the name I suggested I have three guaranteed seats on the ship.”

Florian thrust an official form under the nose of her mother and father.

“Well done,” yelled Karen Fawkes, looking up after reading the information.

Both girls started yelling and cheering as they danced in tight circles in the center of the lounge. Florian’s father waited for no more than a minute before expressing his opinion.

“Can I have my family listen, for one moment?”

Florian pushed her black fringe from her eyes and stared at her father. He appeared not to be enjoying the victory. Karen pushed her arm around her husband’s waist.

“This is a great moment,” she whispered. “Don’t spoil it.”

The handsome man, of average height, looked immaculate, wearing his two-piece suit and tie. He roamed his gaze between his wife and his daughter.

“I refuse to join in with this devastating news,” he growled.