



PLANET X91

THE BEGINNING

Mark Stewart

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Book 1

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ISBN: 9781301272198

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By Mark Stewart

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Earth orbit departure date: 2177AD

Destination Planet X188: center of the Orion belt.

Ship: USS Lock.

Payload: Five-hundred crew members.

Crew status: cryogenic freeze.

Goal: colonize planet X188.

Earth departure time: Five years three months thirteen days.

Orbit ETA: five years two months twelve hours

CHAPTER ONE

DAY ONE

FIVE YEARS from Earth's orbit found the USS Lock almost halfway to the ship's destination.

Overhead lights flickered on, highlighting five hundred cryogenic freezer tubes in a large rectangular shaped room an area the size of four house blocks. There were ten rows of the tubes side by side. Inside each tube, behind the frosted glass a single person lay frozen.

The frosted glass dome on top of one of the freezer tubes slid back. A metre-tall cleaner robot near the tube didn't look up at the noise. His job description; vacuum the entire ship.

Nothing else moved in the ghostly quiet.

A lone figure blinked. He stretched his arms up and slowly lifted himself from the deep freeze of cryogenic sleep. Stepping out of the glass unit his smile looked slightly crooked.

In silence he moved about the area. His footsteps were deliberate. He walked past several frozen women crew members, hesitating only long enough to give them a sideways glance.

The buzz of the cleaner robot coming closer forced the man to stop. He watched it roll past. A red light on the side of the unit signaled it needed to get back to its magnetic

compartment to recharge the batteries. In around twenty hours it would start its cleaning duties again.

The man walked on.

He changed direction, deciding to march towards the right-hand side of the ship designated for the children. The metal shutters protecting the portholes were closed. The figure didn't slide one open to see the view.

The first freezer tube he stopped at contained a teenager. He unplugged the unit and wheeled it towards the shuttle bay.

The lone figure made three trips.

He picked out two boys, one twelve; the other sixteen. He knew the female was fifteen. Each person was allocated a number. Hers was 16494. The other two were 27459 and 18450 consecutive. He wheeled them into maintenance shuttle number one. He could have picked any one of the small twenty ships, but he didn't have the time to waste. The closest one was the most suitable. The man silently walked out of the airlock, pushing a button to close the hatch. Boasting a satisfied smirk, he walked back to his freezer unit, clambered in and waited.

The USS Lock, the first ship of twenty vessels, was on its maiden voyage. Two trips per ship each lasting twenty-years were planned. The massive ship, cylindrical in shape, fifty metres high; forty metres wide, stocked full of everything the colonists needed to survive and set up a new home for the thousands who were to come.

Forward in the nose of the ship was the bridge. Twenty lights blink methodically on the flight computer monitor. Five were red, seven were yellow; eight were green. What they represented, nobody except the pilot and navigator knew.

At the rear of the ship were the engines. Maintenance workers called the entire area the heart of the ship; a fifty-billion-dollar heart. If one of the five engines were to fail the ship might take longer to reach its goal. The five hundred men, women and children will wake too early and might not see the new world.

The Earth was fast turning into a planet with no future. Natural resources were almost exhausted. Every country was over populated by ten million people and the lawmen couldn't control the crime. Something needed to be done or the human race could find themselves extinct as the dinosaurs.

The search for a new home had begun in earnest.

Professor Oakland was an Astronomy Major. He discovered Planet X188 in the exact center of the Orion's belt by accident. After extensive analysis he believed the planet to be perfect for a new colony. Travelling through space was an extremely risky idea. Ten years of cryogenic sleep would see the colony of brave eager humans in orbit above Planet X188. What they might find when they landed could be a challenge of catastrophic proportions. At the time of their freezing each colonist was thinking and hoping for a successful landing.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FIRST glass lid of the three freezer tubes which were placed in the maintenance shuttle slid open. An arm extended into the air. A young lad of sixteen blinked rapidly in the dull light. He rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers through his short blonde hair. He slowly sat, shaking off the effects of the frozen sleep.

The lid of the second freezer tube opened. Slightly amused at the sound it made the lad turned his head to watch the third lid slide open.

The sixteen-year-old male placed his feet on the metal floor. Eventually he stood. His first tentative steps saw him walking across the metal floor to a black leather chair.

Everything around him didn't make sense. Thinking back to when the Captain of the USS Lock personally gave his group a guided tour of the ship, nothing seemed familiar. The shutter covering the viewport at arm's length had been left open. He focused on the planet filling the whole glass panel.

The person from the second tube walked over. She flopped into the next available seat, pushing her black hair from her face. For a few seconds she sat looking at the lad. Both teenagers displayed the same expression; total puzzlement.

"You're a girl," commented the lad.

"I'm happy you can tell the difference."

"I'm Clay Silver." He reached out to shake the girl's hand.

"I'm Florian Fawkes," she replied.

"Good to meet you, Flo," said Clay.

Instead of Florian shaking his hand she shook a fist at him. "My name is Florian. I don't like being called Flo."

"Feisty," added Clay. "Have it your way. You can call me Clay."

"Where are we? What are we doing in this shuttle?"

"I've no idea."

"You were the first to wake, you should know the answers."

"I was first by no more than thirty seconds," said Clay.

Florian leaned forward in her seat, focusing on the planet filling the entire viewport. It looked like a huge ball in space. "We're close enough to see land and dark blue oceans."

"I've noticed."

A third passenger dropped into the seat directly behind Clay. "It looks hostile."

Clay and Florian turned to look at the sandy coloured haired lad.

He smiled, reaching out his hand. "I'm Josh Quinn, number 18450. I'm twelve-years-old."

"Great," said Clay. "At sixteen, I don't want to baby sit a kid."

"I don't need anyone watching over me," he replied.

"I turned fifteen when I entered the freezer tube. I don't like your attitude," jeered Florian, shifting her attention back to Clay.

"Happy birthday," said Josh. "What's the date?"

Clay looked at the console in front of him. He read the numbers on a small square monitor. "It's been only five years since we broke Earth's orbit."

"Unbelievable," snarled Florian. "We're only halfway to Planet X188."

“You two, quit the bad attitude,” said Josh. “To be exact we’re not halfway to our destination. By the way, if we don’t do something quick, we’re in serious trouble. The planet directly in front of us is getting larger.”

“You said a mouthful,” said Clay. He raised his eyebrows to cement the fact.

“I don’t want to land on the planet,” growled Florian. “Locate the USS Lock and high tail it back.”

Josh pulled the instruction book from the back of the seat. He commenced to read.

“Pull up!” squealed Florian. “Listen to what I’m telling you.”

“I would if I knew how to get the auto pilot off,” argued Clay.

Josh dug his nose out of the small book.

“This is a maintenance shuttle. To be exact it’s ‘number one.’”

“How do you know?” questioned Florian.

“I took the handbook from the pocket on the back of Clay’s seat. The number of this shuttle is on the console above your head.”

Florian snatched the book from Josh. “Are you trying to tell me you read a seventy-page book in ten seconds?”

“No, the book has sixty-one pages. I read it in thirty seconds.”

Florian flashed Josh a distasteful look and turned her back on him.

“What can we do to get back into orbit and locate the USS Lock?” asked Clay.

“Impossible,” said Josh. “I’ve already told you this is a maintenance shuttle. It has no light speed capabilities. We are low on fuel, there’s no navigation equipment and the computer is in charge.”

“We’re screwed,” said Florian.

“Maybe not,” corrected Josh firmly.

Clay glanced over his shoulder. “You have ten seconds to explain before we hit the stratosphere.”

Josh pointed to the flight console. “We have four minutes of fuel; not enough to follow the USS Lock let alone stay in orbit. Our best option is to trust the computer in landing this shuttle. You said we’re on auto pilot. Punch up the short-range scanner to see we’re our destination lies.”

Clay squeezed his hand past Florian’s and pushed a button on the flight console. A location came up on the square monitor in front of him. “The short-range scanner shows the computer is going to make us land close to a large building.”

“Why?” quizzed Florian.

“I don’t know.”

“How many minutes remain until we land?”

“Four minutes, seven seconds,” answered Clay.

“We’re short by seven seconds. We’re going to crash,” stated Florian, her voice staying remarkably calm.

Josh cleared his throat, slowing his voice. “Computer, where did you get the orders from to take us to the destination you were programmed for?”

A metallic voice came through the speaker next to Josh’s ear. “Medical emergency.”

Florian and Clay said at the same time. “What medical emergency?”

“Three frozen humanoids were placed in the maintenance shuttle.”

“You took it upon yourself to decide on a medical emergency?” asked Clay.

“Affirmative.”

“That explains why we’re here,” said Josh.

“What is the name of the person who programmed you to make shuttle number one leave the USS Lock?” asked Josh looking at the speaker.

“Unknown,” reported the metallic voice.

“A mystery,” hinted Florian.

Josh said firmly. “Computer, if the medical emergency is to be successful what is the reason why the humans were placed in a maintenance shuttle with limited fuel?”

“Insufficient data.”

“Computer, I need to see the flight records of maintenance shuttle number one?” ordered Josh.

The monitor in front of Clay went blank for a few seconds. When it brightened a complete record containing the shuttle’s details came up.

“Records indicate shuttle number one was flown around the USS Lock for a final external inspection while the USS Lock was still in Earth’s orbit. The craft re-entered the airlock at 17:00 hours and supposedly re-fueled,” said Josh reading the report out loud.

“Somebody obviously forgot,” suggested Florian.

“Or it could have been deliberate,” added Clay.

“It doesn’t matter now,” said Josh. “We’re going down. There’s nothing we can do about it.” He continued. “Computer, send a mayday signal to the USS Lock.”

“Vital software is missing from the memory chip.”

The shuttle dipped and entered the stratosphere. It rocked slightly when pressure commenced to push against the hull. The computer quickly stabilized the shuttle. The nose dipped fifteen degrees thrusting the three occupants forward.

“Buckle up,” yelled Clay.

Florian quickly reached for her harness. She only managed to strap one shoulder down before the shuttle’s nose dipped again. Three and a half seconds later the craft dropped from orbit.

“The outside temperature is a warm 200 degrees,” announced Clay. “Hold onto something, this might be a rough ride. We’re almost out of fuel.”

“How long do we have until we’re on fumes?” Florian quizzed.

“One minute three seconds.”

The shuttle bucked, rolled from side to side, threatening to invert. The craft skimmed the top of the clouds. Seconds later it dipped into the dense cloud bank. Water formed on the viewport. At five hundred feet above sea level the shuttle burst out of the cloud, into the bright sunlight.

Josh said. “The manual I’ve just finished reading explains what steps to go through in a crash situation.”

“I’m open for suggestions,” said Clay.

Florian grabbed hold of the secondary joystick from the co pilot’s seat. “I hope you can fly a shuttle?”

“I’ve ten hours simulated,” admitted Clay.

“It’s more than I’ve done. I have only ever sat in the co-pilots seat, watching” confessed Florian. “What about you?” she asked glancing over her shoulder at Josh.

“I’m only twelve. I’ve been banned from stepping inside a shuttle.”

“For the record, I’m sixteen and a third,” said Clay.

Josh started to quote the steps from the manual on crash landing. “Push the auto pilot toggle switch to the off position. Its location is above your head and is marked ‘AP.’”

Clay looked up. He found the toggle switch. Flicking it to the off position he simultaneously grabbed hold of the joystick.

“Locate a soft-landing site if possible,” said Josh quoting step two.

Clay and Florian lifted off their seat to view the landscape.

“Not looking good,” said Clay. “The only things I see are trees.”

“Trees fill my side of the viewport too,” reported Florian.

Josh momentarily paused as if flipping to another page in his memory. “If possible, hover and wait for the shuttle to flop onto the canopy of the forest.”

Clay glanced over his shoulder, flashing him a doubtful look.

“Yeah I know what you’re thinking. That is what has been written in the manual.”

Dead ahead the trees thinned. The large metal building came into view.

Florian clutched the arms of her chair in a death grip and pushed her back deeper into the seat. Her gaze was firmly glued on the console in front of her. “We have to land this bird. We’re almost out of fuel. Eighty seconds. Sixty seconds, of fuel remaining.”

“What happened to the missing ten seconds?” asked Clay.

“No idea,” replied Florian.

“We’re using up too much fuel,” said Josh. “Pull back on the joystick. You have to slow our travel.”

Clay pulled back on the joystick. The shuttle’s nose tilted upwards forcing the craft to slow. At a height of three hundred feet Josh barked out an order.

“Computer, deploy parachute.”

They heard a hissing sound then a pop. The shuttle seemed to stall in midair.

“Computer cut engines.”

The engines quickly died. The visitors sat in ghostly silence. Above the shuttle the parachute appeared to be fully inflated. The weight of the shuttle threatened to rip the material from the wires. Fifty feet above the canopy of the trees the shuttle finally started to drop, belly first.

“The building looks strange,” commented Florian, craning her neck to look out of the viewport.

“Forty feet to the trees,” called Josh.

“Hold on,” said Clay. “We’re about to scrape the trees.”

The shuttle dropped into the canopy. Leaves were thrown up above the shuttle’s roof. Tree branches cracked and broke, falling to the ground far below.

“I’m praying for a soft landing,” said Clay.

“Let’s hope the miracle happens quickly. We’re seconds away from crashing through the thin top layer of the trees. Soon the trunks will be too thick and start to smash through the hull,” stated Josh.

“You’re a bearer of good news, aren’t you?” snarled Clay.

“Computer, retract parachute,” ordered Josh.

A whirring noise could be heard above the sound of the splintering trees. The shuttle fell level like a lift in a building. More trees cracked. The thinner branches fell away. The shuttle’s descent slowed considerably. The approaching ground looked rock hard.

“Why did you retract the parachute?” questioned Florian. “We need it to slow our fall?”

“Trust me we might need the parachute in one piece sometime in the future.”

Total silence came next.

There was no movement, no fire, no explosion, nothing, only a deafening silence.

For a few minutes Clay, Florian, and Josh didn’t move a muscle. They dared not breathe. Eventually someone needed to talk. Florian spoke first. Her three-word conversation came in a whisper.

"Is everyone okay?"

"I'm fine," said Josh.

"Me too," added Clay.

Josh leaned forward to view their new world. His croaky voice gave away how he felt. "We're still in the trees."

Clay decided to be the first to stand. He stood holding onto the back of his seat for a few seconds. Sighing heavily, he walked to the side of the shuttle and pushed a button on a panel. A small square metal plate slide down. He pressed his face against the porthole glass in an attempt to get a good look outside. He squinted in the sunlight. He counted several white clouds in the sky then focused on the ground. "I reckon we're about twenty feet off the ground."

"Maybe we should take off so we can be closer to the building," suggested Florian.

"We can't," said Clay. "Even if we got this bird in the air we have only seconds of fuel remaining. We'd barely clear the tree tops. At a guess I reckon the tree branches will look like a web under the shuttle. I'd be surprised if we're not wedged tight. Whether we like it or not, we're stuck in the trees."

"What happens if it gets windy?" quizzed Florian. "What if the tree branches we're sitting on breaks? How do we live in a tree? How do we find food, water?"

Clay lifted his hand to stop her questions. She viewed him through dagger eyes. "You have lots of questions. At this time, we have no answers. I'm sure if we thought about everything step by step we'd have too many questions to answer."

"Okay genius what do we do first?"

Clay returned to his chair. He sat staring at the other two. He shrugged.

Florian began her endless list of things which needed to be done. She'd always been good at coming up with solutions to problems, itemizing the more important ones first, down to the incidental. "First thing we should do is find out if the air is breathable."

"Good thinking," said Clay.

"What if it's not?" asked Josh.

"Our life expectancy is about twelve hours," reported Florian.

"Love the idea or hate it, we're stuck on this planet. Each time we start up the computer we use power. I've made a rough estimate on how long it'll be before we lose too much power to start the computer. When it happens we're on our own," said Josh.

"How long?" asked Clay.

Josh cleared his throat. "Two and a half years. Not enough time for the USS Lock to arrive at Planet X188, realize we're missing, scan space, pickup on our mayday signal, provided we can send one, organize a rescue mission then find us. Summing up; chances of a rescue, is remote at best. I agree with Florian, we need to find food, water, and if possible fuel or some means to extend the life of the computer. It's inevitable no matter how hard we try to keep it going the computer will eventually fail. Either we'll have no power or it will break down. At this moment we are safe in this shuttle. For how long, who knows? I reckon our best option is the building directly ahead. It's not more than two hundred and fifty metres. After all, the computer did set it aside for this shuttle to land here for a medical emergency. If we're lucky there'll be someone who can help us get back to the USS Lock."

"You've said a mouthful again," admitted Clay.

Florian interrupted his speech. "All this is providing there is breathable air outside."

Josh scrunched his nose. "Yes."

“Other than opening the airlock is there another way to determine the air quality?” asked Florian.

“Not really,” said Clay.

“We can ask the computer,” said Josh. His voice reeked of confidence.

“It’ll use power,” said Florian. “There has to be another way?”

“If you know of something, by all means please share your idea. In my opinion we have no other choice than to use the computer.”

Florian shook her head.

“I guess we have to agree on the computer idea,” said Clay, not too convincingly.

Josh said. “Here goes nothing. Computer, is the air quality on this planet fit for humans to breathe for indefinite periods?”

For over ten seconds they waited for the computer’s report.

Finally, Clay whispered. “Do you think the computer is broken or doesn’t understand the question?”

On a sigh Josh was about to repeat the question when the computer’s metallic voice erupted from the speaker. “The oxygen level is perfect for humans for indefinite periods.”

Josh, Florian, and Clay screamed at the top of their lungs at the great news.

Clay walked to the center of the shuttle. “Finally, something has gone our way.”

“What are you up to now?” asked Florian.

“We might as well open the hatch to the outside world.”

The three gathered around, staring at the floor.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Florian.

“We don’t have much to lose,” said Clay.

“Only our lives,” whimpered Florian.

“I trust the computer,” stated Josh.

Clay reached up above his head, touching the small red button. “I’m too nervous to push the button.”

Florian shook her head, reached up and pushed the button. It started flashing. The one metre square hatch in the floor slid back, revealing the outer skin of the hull.

“I didn’t know the space between the inner hull and the outer shell was only one inch thick,” said Clay.

Florian reached above her head, pushing the button to its stop. A red light under the metal floor flashed. Three seconds later the outer hatch slid inside the cavity. A warm breeze blew in moving Florian’s long black hair upwards. The moment the internal and the external air pressures equalized her hair fell about her face.

Josh took a deep breath. “The air smells clean,” he commented.

Clay squatted, touching the leaf of a tree. He pulled at it, breaking it off. He walked to the scanner at the side of the shuttle.

“What are you doing?” asked Florian.

“I’m going to have the computer analyze it.”

“Don’t waste the power. We know it’s a leaf.”

Clay went red in the face. “I wanted to make sure it has the same composition as the leaves on Earth, but you’re right, I shouldn’t waste the power.”

“I vote we spread out searching for food and water,” said Florian.

“I agree,” echoed Josh. “I’m hungry.”

“What if there’s something dangerous waiting for us?” cautioned Clay.

“Are you scared?” questioned Florian.

“No,” Clay snorted. “Think about it for a moment, if we’re attacked by anything and we’re hurt in any way what first aid equipment is on this shuttle?”

“You have a valid point,” said Josh.

“I think we should make some sort of weapon, besides, by the looks of the sun we don’t have too many hours of daylight remaining. By the time we have a good solid plan thought up the sun will be gone. Not to mention we need to find a way to get down to the ground and back again,” said Florian. “The trees below the shuttle are a tangled mess.”

“You come up with an idea, I’ll be able to build it,” said Clay.

“What about my hunger?” Josh asked, rubbing his growling stomach.

“I have yet to think up an answer,” said Clay.

“I must admit I’m a little thirsty,” admitted Florian.

Josh stepped to the side of the shuttle. He stood in front of the narrow hatch, pushed the red button then the green. Both hatches slid away. He set to work studying the tree they were wedged in. Thick branches wide enough to walk along grew out from the main trunk. When they reached the shuttle, they were broken from the landing and crisscrossed underneath the entire craft.

“I think it’s easy to see we’re safely wedged,” Josh said.

Stepping onto a thick branch no wider than a standard diving board, he walked away from the shuttle towards the trunk. On the other side of the tree he spied berries growing. He easily reached the clump, picked a large bunch and returned to the shuttle.

“Don’t eat the berries. We should scan them first to make sure they are safe to eat,” Florian cautioned. She broke off a single berry and walked to the scanner. She placed the berry on the glass slide, flicking the on switch.

The computer whirled to life. A narrow beam of white light flooded the top of the berry. When the light went out a metallic voice erupted from the speaker.

“The fruit is red in colour, white flesh on the inside; ten percent water, nutritious, full of vitamins and minerals to sustain human life.”

Josh placed a single thumb size berry in his mouth, biting it in half. “Tastes good.” He immediately reached for another.

The trio devoured the bunch of thirty berries in no time flat.

“The only thing missing is water,” said Clay, swallowing the last berry.

“We can only survive three days without the fluid,” stated Florian.

“The computer did say each berry contains ten percent water,” hinted Josh. He stepped up to a metal cupboard and started rummaging through the scant equipment. He soon found a tool box. He scooped out the few tools and walked back along the branch for more berries.

The trio looked comfortable seated in their leather seats looking out of the viewport watching the sky slowly turn dark. Thanks to the berries their stomachs were full and their thirst, quenched.

“What a first day,” whispered Florian.

“It sure was,” replied Clay, looking sideways at her. “I’ve been thinking. The colonists on the USS Lock have no idea what happened. They won’t find out for five years. We could be dead by then.”

“In your opinion what do you think our chances are of surviving tomorrow let alone five to ten years?” asked Florian.

Clay shook his head. “I don’t want to even start to think about it.” He glanced over his shoulder at Josh. “He certainly is a genius. The way he can read so fast and understand what he’s read is amazing. I’m glad he’s asleep.”

“Why?” asked Florian.

“I don’t want you to take what I’m thinking the wrong way. Has it occurred to you us three might be the only humans on this planet.”

“Meaning?” asked Florian.

“If anything should happen to you the new colony of humans will be extinct in maybe forty years?”

Florian leaned closer to Clay. “Don’t take this the wrong way either.” She closed her eyes and kissed Clay. The kiss lasted a long time. They didn’t know Josh took to watching from behind them.

Eventually he said. “Get a room you two.”

Florian moved away. Clay frowned at being spied on.

“Go back to sleep,” whispered Clay.

Florian made her way to the other end of the shuttle. She sat on the floor staring at her feet, sobbing quietly. Clay walked up and sat next to her. He didn’t know what to say. Instead of talking he studied the hull. It seemed intact. White walls with a few cupboards. Small round lights of various colours flashed intermittently throughout the ship. The only thing missing is the amount of fuel onboard.

“I’m not ready to have babies,” whispered Florian, blunt. She looked up at Clay waiting for him to respond.

“Good, I’m not ready to be a father,” he replied focusing his attention on her.

“I love nothing more than planning things for the future. Mine was mapped out until the day I died.”

“What were your plans if you don’t mind me asking?” whispered Clay.

“I did have my eye on this bloke. He’s your age. His name’s Nick. He talked to me when we were lining up to enter the USS Lock. We swapped smiles. He asked me when we’ve settled on Planet X188 could he get to know me. I said yes. He held my hand. Just before we were frozen, I decided he’d be the one to see me into my old age. We’d marry in ten years, have five babies and live happily ever after. Of course, there’s more to my exact plan, but there’s no need to say it now.”

“Best laid out plans have a way of changing. They start out how you want. All’s right in your life. You wake one morning realizing you have to re-plan.”

“What did you expect out of life?”

“I’m a kind of bloke who lives life as it comes.”

“It sounds disappointing,” said Florian.

“I don’t think so. It’s kind of exciting not knowing how your future will form. Go with the flow. See where the river takes you.”

“Careful on the river, your boat might tip if you hit turbulent water, that in turn could see you drown.”

“I’d wing the moment. Which brings me to a thought, I’ve been thinking about for the past hour.”

“And that is?”

“Why are we here? If you look logically at the question, why were the three of us picked? Out of five hundred colonists our lucky number came up, why? What is it about us three? What connects us together? The facts are: We were placed on a shuttle and jettisoned into space? Josh is a genius. I’m not like him. I can make anything provided someone comes up with an idea. I guess it’s where you come in. You have great ideas. If you take our three abilities and place them together it’s possible whoever brought us three to this planet wants us to survive. I’m finding myself thinking, why?”

"I have no idea," said Florian. "I'm devastated my future has no plan."

"Make a new one," Clay whispered.

"It's easy for you to say."

"Staying a live is a good plan," said Clay.

"What are the details to see your idea stays intact?"

"Condense your long-term goal into single days. You have a long-life plan, sure. To fulfill it, plan to see the sunset at the end of each day."

Florian looked at the scene outside the viewport. She nodded slowly "I could that?"

Clay displayed an awkward grin. He placed his hand on her knee. "Good for you."

"What if Josh gets jealous of us in the future?"

"I guess we'll have to work it out somehow," said Clay.

"What if there are animals out there in the forest?"

"We'll have to deal with them too. Come on, let's get back to the nose of the shuttle. I'm tired. We have a lot to do tomorrow."

"Thanks for the chat. I'll fall asleep making up a brand-new plan. I'll try my best to make a short term one."

Clay helped Florian to her feet, pushed the closed buttons of both airlocks and helped her back into the copilot's seat.

The moment they finally settled down for some sleep fatigue quickly overpowered them. They fell asleep looking at the rising moon. The only difference between the moon orbiting the Earth and this one; there were actually two moons.

CHAPTER THREE

DAY TWO

THE SUN shone through the viewport extra early. The wind brought a few dark clouds which dotted the horizon.

Clay opened his eyes. For a long time, he squinted in the sunlight, recalling what they went through the previous day. He looked across at Florian. She was curled into a ball and asleep on the co-pilot's seat.

A small hand touched his shoulder. Josh whispered in his ear. "Whatever you do don't move."

Clay whispered a two-word reply. "Why not?"

"If you look directly out of the viewport you'll see something you never want to see. The computer is filming it. Don't make any sudden moves. Don't talk too loud; don't flinch."

Clay slowly turned his head so he could look out of the viewport. His eyes bulged at what he saw sitting on the nose of the shuttle. Florian stirred, opening her eyes. Clay reached out, clamping a hand over her mouth.

"Whatever you do, don't scream," whispered Josh.

Clay signaled for Florian to look out of the viewport. She moved her pupils sideways. Clay successfully muffled her scream.

The bird turned its head. In one slow movement the creature extended its massive wings. In a loud screech it took flight.

Florian scrambled out of her seat. She ran screaming to the other end of the shuttle.

“What the hell was it?” questioned Clay. His gaze searched the sky hoping to see it again.

“I know what it is, I just can’t believe it,” said Josh. “The bird must be at least eight times larger than a pelican. Computer, analyze the recording. Give a quick summary.”

“The mammal is a prehistoric bird called the ‘Pterosaur.’ It has a wing span of twenty feet. From the top of its head to its claws, a fully-grown male can measure six feet. Its head is the same size as an adult human. It’s not uncommon to have a beak ten inches in length. Its claws are razor sharp, capable of easily slicing open its prey.”

“I don’t care what it is I want to go back to the USS Lock. Make preparations to leave this place.” She glared at the two boys. “Now,” she yelled.

Clay and Josh ignored her screams. They were searching the sky and the trees around the shuttle for anything else moving.

“I don’t see anything,” whispered Josh.

“Me neither,” announced Clay. He walked to the airlock, pushing the green button.

Florian raced at him “What are you doing? That thing might come back. If it gets in here we’re its breakfast.”

“I reckon we’re safe. I’m positive your screams will prevent it from returning.”

“I don’t care. The only action we can do is to stay locked in here until we’re rescued.”

Josh stared at Florian. “Get a grip. We’ll die of thirst in three days. Besides, I’m hungry for breakfast. The only thing we found so far is the berries.” He pointed to a branch thirty feet from where he stood. “The bunch of berries was enough for the three of us yesterday. We need those berries.”

“There’s another urgent matter,” said Clay. “We have to find a toilet.”

Florian paced the shuttle massaging her temples. The moment she stopped she squared herself to the boys. “I know you guys are right. I have to face reality the USS Lock may never come back. I cried myself to sleep last night. This nightmare is too hard.”

“It’s okay,” said Clay, placing his arm over her shoulder. “I’m here to protect you.”

Florian cuddled into him. “I’m hoping there are no more animals out there, only people.”

“I’m hoping the same thing,” replied Josh.

“Me too,” added Clay.

Florian straightened. She stopped sobbing and wiped her eyes. “Right, it looks as though it’s us or them. We can either surrender our lives right now or we fight to survive. I vote we survive.”

Clay nodded vigorously. “I vote yes.”

Josh said. “Unanimous. Three votes to none. We will survive.”

“I vote we all have a vote on everything we do from this moment forward. Each decision we make could impact on what happens in the future,” hinted Florian.

The boys yelled yes. They made a pact to watch each other’s back, never letting their guard down for a minute.

“Survival takes precedence over everything,” announced Josh. He turned to Clay. “No matter what, out of the three of us Florian is the one who must survive. Without her there will be no future generations to tell anyone who comes to rescue us we were even here.”

“Don’t talk like that. I don’t want to lose you guys, ever,” scolded Florian.

Clay said. "It'll be okay. It's good we found out about the giant bird before we disembarked the shuttle. At least we'll be prepared. Now for the first thing we need to work out this morning."

Josh and Florian watched him walk to the tail end of the shuttle.

"I thought we were going to vote on everything?" questioned Florian.

"We will. I think this decision will be wholeheartedly agreed on. It's urgent we find a toilet."

At the rear of the shuttle Clay spied a small door situated next to the engine room. He reached out and opened the door. Inside he found a small toilet. "It's a good start for the day." He stepped in, shutting the door behind him.

Florian giggled.

Josh nodded. "Now the commotion has settled, I'm busting too. It must have been the water in the berries."

After completing their first task of the day, Clay walked to the small porthole to study the sky. Josh and Florian stepped next to him, looking out.

"I can see breakfast waiting," said Josh.

"What happens if the prehistoric bird comes back when you're out there?" whispered Florian.

"I'll have you two standing guard. If you spot it, whistle, I'll be back inside the shuttle in seconds."

"Provided we can give you enough warning," said Clay, nervously.

"I'll trust you."

Josh marched to the small maintenance cupboard. Inside the narrow cavity he found the toolbox he used the previous day and walked to the airlock.

"You might need two hands to grab hold of a branch if you slip," warned Florian.

Clay slipped his leather belt off from around his waist, handing it over. Josh pushed the belt through the handle of the dark green plastic toolbox then connected the ends to form a loop, placed his arm through the hole and nestled the toolbox under his armpit.

"I'm off to get take away," he said, jokingly.

"Make sure you're not the one who is taken away. We don't know how many giant birds are out there," Florian cautioned.

Josh studied the sky. Satisfied he'd be safe, he stepped out of the airlock. He hesitantly completed his first step. He didn't want to leave the safety of the shuttle, but someone needed to play the hero. He was hungry. He surmised the other two might be craving food too.

He finally let go of the shuttle, quickly walking to the main trunk of the giant tree. He easily skirted around to the other side by hugging the main trunk. He glanced over his shoulder. Not being able to see the shuttle un-nerved him. He needed to fight the panic slowly rising inside his brain. He coped by focusing his full attention on getting to the berries.

Florian called out after several agonizing seconds had ticked off. "Josh, how are you going? Please say something."

"I'm okay," he called back. "I've studied the sky from this side of the tree. The only dangerous objects I've seen are clouds and tree branches full of leaves."

Florian and Clay sighed heavily. They finally saw Josh making his way back to the shuttle carrying his tool box full of berries.

Five steps from the airlock, Florian screamed as she pointed to the sky. The giant bird dropped through the top of the trees, its wings brushing the leaves and branches.

Josh didn't have to look over his shoulder to know the bird was closing fast. He sprinted for the closing hatch, managing to dive through the narrow gap in the nick of time. The giant bird only managed to scratch the door using its razor-sharp claws. It squawked loudly at losing its breakfast. Eventually it gave up. Clattering along the roof, it jumped back onto the nose of the shuttle. The three occupants ran to the viewport to study the bird up close.

"I think it's looking for a place to nest," suggested Josh.

"How can you tell?" whispered Florian.

"I read somewhere birds come back to the same place quite a few times trying to decide where to build. The bird needs to feel safe."

"There must be another?" whispered Florian.

"A male," added Clay.

"Afraid so," said Josh.

Clay spoke seriously. "We have to get rid of the bird."

"If we make enough noise the bird might fly away, never to return," whispered Florian.

Both boys displayed a blank stare.

"What's wrong?"

"We have to permanently get rid of the bird," hinted Josh.

"We don't have the right to kill it," growled Florian in a matter-of-fact-voice. "I can't allow it."

"It's the only way," said Clay.

"If we don't we'll always be watching the sky. We need to get to the building this morning to see if there is anything useful we can use to help in our survival. If the bird is alive it will make our survival much harder," explained Josh.

"If luck is on our side we might be able to send a signal to the USS Lock," added Clay.

"I can see your point about allowing the bird to live," admitted Florian. She started to nod slowly.

"Then it's settled," said Clay.

"After we make a few weapons we need a rope," suggested Josh.

The three finished breakfast, stowing the remaining two bunches of berries back into the toolbox and placing the lot onto the fourth seat in the cockpit.

Clay said eagerly. "We need to search the shuttle for anything we can use to make weapons."

The trio commenced their search. Every item they found was carefully scrutinized and placed on the floor in the middle of the shuttle.

"Let's see what we have," quizzed Florian.

Clay squatted, sifting through the small heap. "A good range of spanners, square metal patches, several sized bolts, a few small screws, washers, a couple of hammers, three hacksaw blades, a small welder and not much else."

"What we need is a hand-held laser," hinted Florian.

"We've struck out on that idea. You won't be able to use any of the things we've found for an effective weapon," groaned Josh.

Clay turned to Florian. "You're good at thinking up ideas. Any luck?"

"What we could use is a bow and arrow."

"You've said, it I'll make it," said Clay. He walked off to find anything they may have missed. He came back carrying a roll of thin wire they left in the cupboard. "I can use this for the string. I can use a tree branch for the bow. The smaller branches will make good arrows."

Florian looked impressed. "I take it your talent really is making anything from nothing?"

"Yes," said Clay. "I'll use a hacksaw blade to cut a branch."

Josh saw Florian's frantic expression. "Don't worry. If the two of us keep an eye out for the bird, Clay will be okay."

Josh and Florian followed Clay to the hatch. They studied the sky for a long time.

"All clear," announced Florian.

"Go," whispered Josh. He pushed the button on the side of the hull.

The hatch door slid open.

Clay immediately spied three perfect size branches. Each one appeared to be four feet long and at least half an inch thick. He checked and rechecked the entire area. Convinced the other two were watching for the giant bird, and with the safety of the shuttle no more than fifteen feet behind him, Clay slowly cut the branches off and stripped the leaves. Holding the tree branches he scurried back to the safety of the shuttle. Two more trips saw him holding enough material for twelve arrows.

Back inside the shuttle, Clay quickly set to work. He wrapped the wire around one end of the branch he had set aside for the bow. At the exact place where the branch could bend without breaking, he knotted the wire. Using all his strength he pulled the wire tight. The wood bowed causing the wire to be piano wire tight.

"Now for the other two bows," said Clay.

Josh set to work whittling the thin straight branches smooth. Florian sharpened the point of each arrow. Twenty minutes later, the first weapon was ready to be tested.

Clay opened the hatch, raised the bow to eye level and pulled the arrow back. He locked his left elbow and made the arrow fly towards the tree.

The arrow tore through the air. The sharpened point wedged into the middle of the tree trunk.

He faced the onlookers. "Perfect. All we have to do is finish more arrows."

A further half an hour saw the weapons finished.

"I've got second thoughts about killing the bird. After all it is a living creature," admitted Josh.

"Yes, it is and like us, it is hungry for meat. If you won't kill it, I will," barked Florian.

"I agree with Florian. It's too dangerous to let it live," advised Clay.

"I take it we agree?" said Florian.

"Unanimously," said Josh.

"I think we should shoot the giant bird before we set out," stated Florian.

Josh said cautiously. "Judging by the position of the sun it's nearly midday. To get to the building and return in the daylight we have to be leaving soon."

Josh pushed the button and watched the hatch slide open. He climbed the rungs welded to the side of the shuttle and clambered onto the roof. He stood searching the sky. Florian came next, stepping onto the roof. Clay climbed the tree, breaking through the canopy. The view took his breath away. Stretching out to the horizon he could see the forest. To his left at the edge of his sight he saw the sea. Behind him he studied the round metal building. He could just make out its featureless flat roof. The surrounding area looked barren of life. A couple of questions entered his mind. 'What kept the grass short? Why were there no trees in the area around the building?'

A large shadow crossed his face.

"Get ready," Clay called through a cupped hand. "We have company."

The prehistoric bird's ear-piercing screech drowned out the reply. The bird's talons tore several branches away when it came through the trees. The giant bird landed on the roof of the shuttle. It quickly hopped onto the nose in front of the viewport. Its massive head swung around. Its large black eyes bore into Josh and Florian. The bird thrust its head forward. It screeched again. Its giant wings opened. Florian estimated them to be fifteen feet across. She gulped when it jumped onto the roof of the shuttle and started clawing its way towards them.

Clay quickly climbed down from the top of the tree. By the time he started up the rungs of the ladder the bird had already made it to the center of the shuttle. Clay stood behind the bird as it studied its next meal. The creature's head swayed back and forth. Its claws were fully extended, tapping against the metal hull. Clay stepped forward. Florian and Josh stepped back. The bird lowered its head, extending its wings to full width.

To Clay the bird was in position to swoop. He quickly placed the blunt end of the arrow against the bow wire and lifted the arrow to eye level. The body of the bird straightened. Its beak opened. Florian and Josh readied their bow. The bird thrust its head at the meal in front of it. The bird opened its mouth and slowly inched closer. Florian and Josh stepped to the edge of the shuttle. Below them the tangled mass of tress, easily supported the shuttle's entire weight. If any one of the branches snapped the shuttle might nose dive to the ground.

Florian took the first shot. Her arrow struck wide of the bird's chest, wedging into its wing. The bird's screech came as an angry loud cry. Clay let an arrow fly. It glanced off the bird's head. It seemed to be dazed, yet it remained staring at its meal.

Florian hurriedly fired another arrow. It wedged in its side.

The bird quickly closed the gap.

Josh looked too scared to shoot his arrow.

Clay quietly walked up behind the bird. He raised his second arrow to eye level. When he closed to four feet he fired. An extra loud screech filled the air. Another arrow shot from Florian and finally one from Josh struck the bird's chest. Clay shot the seventh arrow. The bird swayed, staggering sideways. It teetered on the edge of the shuttle for a few seconds. The trio watched the bird fall. They sprinted to the side of the shuttle in time to see it land head first onto the ground.

Florian stared at her feet in silence. "I thought it might have been party time, but I feel we have just sentenced a species to extinction."

"Better it than us," stated Josh.

"We have to remember we did it for our survival," said Clay. "We might have to kill again for our safety. Come on, we have to climb down to the ground and get to the building. By the way, when I was above the trees I saw the sea."

"Interesting," mumbled Josh.

CHAPTER FOUR

CLAY PUSHED a small square red button next to the hatch in the roof making it slide open. The trio reached up and pulled the parachute to the floor of the shuttle. A thin saw blade was used to hack the material into strips. Florian tied a knot along the entire length

at two-foot intervals. The ropes from the parachute were carefully wound and stowed about their waists.

“Okay, we’re ready to go,” reported Florian. “I still can’t understand why we needed to cut the parachute into lengths? I thought we might use the trees to climb down to the ground.”

Clay pointed to the last ten feet. “When we are on the ground there’s no way we can reach the first branch. The parachute will act as a temporary ladder. In time we can build a sturdy one. Today, we’ll have to climb the parachute. Besides, if we come across any dangerous animals we can easily climb up, retracting the parachute ladder to stay safe.”

Josh descended to the lowest branch first, followed by Florian. Clay came last. The trio stood on the thick branch waiting for Josh to tie the material around the branch.

“Who should be first to touch the ground?” mentioned Clay.

“Do we have to vote on everything?” asked Josh.

“Yes, I think we should. I vote for Josh,” said Florian.

Clay backed her up.

“Why am I the lucky one?”

“You’re the monkey in this unit,” announced Florian.

Josh raised an eyebrow at her. “What if there is an animal prowling around the forest floor?”

“We’ll signal you. Besides, I’ll be right behind you,” Clay reassured.

Josh hunched his shoulders, checked the immediate area under and around the shuttle and climbed down, using the knots in the material for hand and footholds. When he stood on the ground he turned in circles, surveying the forest.

Clay quickly climbed down. Holding his bow and arrow at the ready, Josh signaled for Florian to join them.

Both boys stood guard ready to shoot an arrow at anything that moved while Florian clambered down. In seconds she stood next to the boys also examining the area.

For a long time, the trio dared not move. They stood back to back listening to any sound. The only thing they heard was the breeze blowing through the trees. It seemed to whisper their names.

Florian saw movement high above them. Focusing her gaze into the trees, she watched a single leaf fall from thirty feet up until it landed on the ground.

“Let’s make a move,” whispered Clay, pointing away from the shuttle, deeper into the forest.

“There’s no point standing here,” added Florian. “If we want to reach the building we have to be brave and go.”

Cutting a narrow path through the forest, the three castaways walked in a slow single file, each scrutinizing the forest ahead, behind them, to the right and to the left. Each picked up a short solid branch to use as a backup weapon. Josh made a trail in the ground by dragging his stick in the dirt so they could easily follow the trail, retracing their steps back to the shuttle, especially if they needed to sprint. There was no way they wanted to get lost.

A third of the way to the building Florian, Josh and Clay still heard and saw nothing moving in the forest. Even the breeze was gone. One positive thing about the quiet, another prehistoric bird hadn’t turned up. The ground felt slightly spongy thanks to the years or possibly decades of fallen leaves covering the forest floor. The filtered light seeping through the canopy made for an unsettling sight. The giant trees growing straight

were at least one hundred feet tall. Few branches grew close to the ground providing a quick escape up a tree almost impossible.

At the halfway point Clay signaled a halt. They ducked under a giant tree which lay almost horizontal, fallen over from a long-forgotten storm. The tree's four-foot girth looked to be rotting. Florian swiped her hand along its surface and watched pieces of bark fall about her feet.

"What's wrong?" asked Josh.

"Nothing, I can tell. This seems too easy," said Clay.

"I'd have to agree," said Florian. "I'm having trouble stopping myself from thinking we're walking into a trap."

"I hope you're wrong," said Josh.

"What do you suggest?" asked Clay.

Florian was the first to inject her thoughts. "The way I see it we have two options. Get to the building or go back to the shuttle. Going back will see us where we were before we climbed down from the tree. I think we should keep moving."

The boys nodded. After careful examination of the forest ahead, Clay took the lead.

The teens moved on to the next tree. Its girth looked wide enough to hide behind if they were caught unawares.

A strong breeze sprung up causing the trees to drop some of their leaves. As the group walked on they heard a dry leaf rustle. The trio froze in their tracks to scrutinize the ground and the trees. Two leaves fell onto Florian's hair. She lifted her hand to swipe them away.

Clay's forehead dripped sweat. Again, a dry leaf rustled. Florian's eyes were bulging. Clay felt amazed they didn't fall out of their sockets.

The third time a leaf rustled the noise came from behind Florian. She whirled around expecting to find the male prehistoric bird coming at her. She faced her aggressor in stunned silence. A lizard the size of a skink raced about the leaves in the search for food.

The three stood exhaling their stress of the noise. Finally, Clay spoke on a sigh.

"We should be going."

Josh took the lead this time. Clay out stretched his hand to take Florian's. She refused the invitation.

"I guess you think I'm being paranoid over the slightest noise?"

"The thought never entered my mind," replied Clay. "It's good to be extra careful. This is our first excursion away from the shuttle. We don't know what to expect."

Florian relaxed the moment she saw his smile. She took hold of his hand. By the time they caught up to Josh they were almost at the clearing. Their confidence quickly grew. They squatted behind a large bush summing up the land.

"The entire area is a perfectly rounded cleared site," whispered Florian. "From this angle it would have to measure at least five acres."

Josh and Clay studied the open land and each blade of grass noting any movement.

"The grass appears short all over," replied Josh. He leaned sideways, swiping up three stones.

Clay watched him toss the first stone near the middle of the clearing. They saw it bounce. He repeated the procedure to his left and to his right.

"The grass covering is the same thickness, and the stones tell us the ground is firm," reported Josh.

"I'm curious why there aren't any trees," queried Clay.

“At a guess I’m thinking along the line of whoever built the place cleared the forest for safety,” whispered Josh.

“I reckon the building is a spaceship,” Florian said.

Josh glanced at her. Refocusing on the building, for a long time he studied the structure directly in front of them. When he finally looked sideways again at Florian, he started nodding. “I think you might be right.”

“I’ll have to agree with both of you,” said Clay.

Florian looked slowly around the area. “I have a strange feeling something is watching us.”

Josh said. “I don’t share your thoughts; however, we have to be brave enough to walk across the clearing and get inside so we can find out what’s in there.”

“What if we encounter more animals?” questioned Florian.

“We have our bow and arrows and a short sturdy tree branch each. If we’re extra quiet, watch our backs, we’ll be okay,” said Clay, trying to sound extra confident.

Josh gazed at the ship’s hull, studying every square inch. When he found what he was looking for he said. “I believe I’ve found a hatch. Provided there’s power to the door it’ll be a snap to get in.”

“What if there’s no power and the animals turn up, we’ll have nowhere to run,” warned Florian, sounding slightly agitated.

“You have a valid point,” said Clay, scratching at his ear.

“I think only one of us should go,” suggested Florian, putting an idea forward.

“I think we should all go,” corrected Josh. “We can watch the other’s back.” He looked at Clay. “What do you think?”

“I believe both ideas are right, but I think we should stick together. I’m voting for safety in numbers.”

“Okay, I’ll agree with you two,” said Florian.

Josh pointed at the ship. “In my opinion, at this distance the best place to enter the ship is through the airlock closest to us. I’d be surprised if the ship doesn’t have several to choose from.”

“Is your opinion from a professional point of view?” asked Clay.

“No, from an angle I hope I’m right,” answered Josh. “Besides, from here I can’t see any others.”

The three moved to the fringe of the clearing. They scoured the entire area time and again.

Josh pointed to a small rock half way to the ship. “We should call that rock the point of no return. If we’re discovered by a dangerous animal this side of the rock we turn away from the ship and sprint back here. The other side of the rock we run for the ship.”

“Josh, I’m counting on you to get us inside the ship in seconds if we’re cornered,” said Clay.

“I’ll be ready,” he replied.

Half stooped the trio ran across the open space one behind the other. Clay brought up the rear. Florian came second while Josh took the lead. The three held their bow cocked, ready to shoot an arrow at the first sign of danger.

After stepping over the rock at the halfway point Florian felt nervous. She couldn’t shake the idea something was definitely watching them. The closer they got to the ship the worse she felt. She was positive if they didn’t get inside quick, she’d vomit.

When they got to the ship Josh immediately commenced to study the hatch; trying to discover a way in. Florian stood guard while Clay looked over the wall of the ship.

The side they were standing at appeared to be at least forty feet in each direction, at least twenty feet high and the width, too hard to imagine at such an early time.

‘The roof might make a good home,’ thought Clay, hearing a click.

Josh had discovered a small panel next to the door. He pushed the top right-hand corner, popping the cover open. Inside the panel there were three buttons. He pushed what he hoped could be the entry button. No light flashed. He waited a few more seconds then pushed the next button.

Nothing moved.

Josh pushed the third button. From inside he heard a whine. At least five agonizing seconds had ticked off before the hatch slid sideways, revealing the interior of the ship. Overhead lights blinked on, lighting a narrow corridor.

The three visitors quickly moved inside. Slowly, quietly they started down the corridor. More lights lit the way the deeper they walked.

The trio didn’t want to talk, each one taking in the surrounds knowing and feeling the danger. With their bow and arrow at the ready they looked inside the first room on their left.

There were rows of racks stretching from the floor to the roof full of equipment. Florian couldn’t contain her excitement at the Christmas presents.

Quietly they moved on to the next room. The hatch slid open revealing a giant room which appeared to be at least 500 square metres full of vegetables. The countless plants were growing in water.

“This Hydroponic garden is about half the size of the one on the USS Lock,” whispered Josh. “There’s enough food in this room to feed us three times a day for years.”

Clay stepped back into the corridor to keep guard. Every few seconds he looked back into the room. Florian took off her shirt, placing the material on the floor. She wasted no time in picking fruit and vegetables, placing them on the material. Clay and Josh caught on, throwing their shirts onto the floor. The air felt moist and warm against their bare shoulders. The thermal singlets they were wearing always kept their body temperature relatively the same.

“How is this garden even possible?” whispered Florian.

“Somebody must have planted the crops,” said Clay. “Let’s keep moving. Hopefully we’ll find him. The coast is clear. Bring the bounty.”

“The ship must have enough power to supply fresh water to the garden,” hinted Josh deep in thought. “Someone must be running the show. Why else would there be food growing?”

Clay answered him cautiously. “This place has brought up more questions than answers.”

When they stepped out of the room the hatch closed automatically.

Florian led the way down the corridor. At the end they were facing a hatch. Josh stepped up to the metal door to start finding a way in when the door opened. The trio stood gob smacked at what they were seeing.

“This room looks like the bridge,” whispered Florian.

Josh rushed through the doorway, stepping up to the bouquet of monitors in the middle of the slightly elevated room. “This equipment has taken me to heaven.” He moved to sit on a chair when he spied a dark stain covering the entire black leather surface. He followed the stain to the other side of the bridge where it vanished. “Interesting,” he whispered.

Clay didn't squander any time and commenced to search the round shaped room. Except for the bridge in the middle, the room was barren. When he felt satisfied there was no animals he relaxed for a few minutes, joining the other two on the bridge. "What's the dark stain on the chair?"

"I have no idea," said Florian, scrunching her nose.

Josh moved his fingers at speed over the many buttons on the flat screen monitors. No sooner had an image cleared, it was replaced with others.

"What are you doing?" questioned Clay.

Josh answered without looking at him. "I'm trying to find a way of copying the entire information this ship holds on the discs I found on the shelf under the middle monitor. As for the chair I'm working on the answer. I love working with computers. Hopefully I'll have the question answered over the stain on the chair in a minute."

The answer came in a couple of seconds.

"Here it is. The Captain of this vessel left a video recorded message."

An image of a man's face appeared on the monitor directly in front of Josh. A mid to late fifty-year-old man looked to be in excruciating pain. The three explorers stood listening to the message.

"Let me start by introducing myself. My name is Bill Rowark. My title reads; I'm a priest. God bless you, where ever you're from. Thank you for finding my recording. My ship, 'The Piper,' the planet and whatever life forms remain walking about belong to you. How did I get here, where am I now? These are questions I believe you might be asking yourself. I pray I'm in heaven. I don't have much time to live so I'll make my summary short. My ship's stabilizer was damaged in a meteor shower. I scanned space. I found this planet to have air which could sustain me while I made repairs. As the ship entered the stratosphere a piece of meteorite struck the dome directly above your head. Oxygen was sucked out into space at an alarming rate. Life support turned critical. Believe it or not the clearing around the ship was heavily treed. I didn't have much of a choice. The ship came in hot. I managed to set the ship down before I blacked out from the lack of oxygen. The moment I landed I hit the hatch switches. All the hatches sprung open, including the animal cages. They escaped. In the few days I spent trying to round them up I caught only a third. When I realized I was dying, I let them go. Thanks to 'The Piper,' I have been able to travel back and forward through time, collecting specimens, from prehistoric to modern 3012AD back on Earth. I discovered a new species of mushroom growing right here on this planet. I didn't scan the fungi. I know I should have. I couldn't wait, they looked delicious. I ate one raw. It tasted magnificent. The only trouble is they are poisonous to the human body. My goal was to collect a lot of species, a male and a female to populate another world. If you don't find my body the animals dragged me away. Watch out for the Pterosaur birds they are extremely clever. Anyway, the dome above your head is too far gone to be fixed. If you can't replace it, I'm afraid the ship will never enter space again. I didn't get a chance to fix the stabilizer. Thanks for listening to my final recording."

"The Captain of the Piper signed off nearly twenty Earth years ago," said Josh.

"I feel sorry for the man. To live through the crash only to be poisoned by a mushroom," said Florian.

"What a horrible way to die," said Clay, adding to her comment.

"At least he helped us survive by reporting about the poisonous mushrooms," said Josh. He glanced about the bridge. "This ship might make a great home. Captain Rowark did say it's ours."

Clay nodded vigorously. "You might be right. There's certainly more room in this ship than the shuttle."

Josh tapped a series of buttons on a flat screen monitor to his left. "I'll see if I can start the internal cameras."

Florian saw a monitor light up. She set her gaze on the scene. "Guys take a look at this," she said pointing.

Clay and Josh gazed at the monitor.

"It's not a good sign. If I'm looking at the monitor correctly the other side of the ship is full of large and small cages."

"They're all open exactly how Rowark reported," whispered Florian.

"Is there a ledger on what animals were in the cages?" asked Clay.

"I'll see if I can find out," said Josh. He ran his fingers over the screen, tapping the glass at speed. A library full of animal species came up. "Eureka."

Florian read the names of the animals. "Lions, tigers, snakes, lizards," her voice trailed off into mumbles. "Guys this list is endless."

Josh continued by reading the next animal on the list. "Prehistoric bird, Pterosaur: Large wing span, massive head, long beak with a crown on its head, excellent carnivorous killer, eats only fresh meat."

Clay whispered, looking sideways at Josh. "Add razor sharp claws. Finish copying everything you can. I don't want to be here any longer than we need to be."

"Agreed," whispered Florian, looking around nervously.

Josh tapped the monitors faster. He touched a small screen on his left. It lit. The schematic drawing of the ship came up. Josh spied a narrow slot directly below the monitor. He touched the edge. A disc three inches in diameter sitting in a black frame was ejected. A main menu came up on the screen. On the top of the menu list he read the words. 'Copy entire files.' He touched the okay button. Almost immediately the disc was sucked back into the computer and the files started copying to disc.

Clay heard the computer whirr to life and stepped over.

"The copy disc will take two minutes twelve seconds," announced Josh.

"Good going," said Clay. "The moment it's finished we're out of here."

Josh brought up the menu again and scrolled over the files. He stopped at the word homing beacon. It was highlighted and flashing.

"Is something wrong?" asked Florian.

"I believe the Captain pushed the button to activate the homing signal before he died. My guess is the USS Lock picked up the signal. The moment we were placed in the shuttle the computer took over, mounting a rescue."

Florian picked up on the thought. "The computer must have decided we were the rescue party."

"The idea could explain why we were delivered to this exact location, but, I'm not one hundred percent positive I'm correct. How we came to being inside the shuttle in the first place still holds a mystery," said Josh.

Florian placed her arm over his shoulder. "Your hypothesis is good enough for me. At least we know why we were sent here."

Clay tapped Josh on the shoulder. "How's the copying going?"

"Ten seconds."

"Let's wrap this adventure up. We're moving out." Clay led the way to the hatch. When the door slid open he stepped into the long narrow corridor.

Florian walked right behind him. She turned, whispering to Josh through a cupped hand. "Come on, we're going."

"Coming," he called. The disc popped out. Josh snatched it from the black plastic frame and accidentally dropped it. When he bent to pick it up he spied a small hand-laser on the floor under the chair. He placed the disc inside his thermal singlet against his stomach. Holding the laser in his hand he ran for the closing hatch.

"You took your sweet time," growled Florian.

"I apologize." He picked up his bounty of food and swiped his bow from off the floor.

With the bounty slung over their shoulder, the bow and arrow at the ready, Clay led the way down the long corridor to the outside. Florian walked in the middle, Josh came last. The three walked quietly, observing everything. Hoping not to encounter a lion, the three didn't breathe too many times. At the room where the vegetables were growing Clay signaled they should stop. He silently walked to the outer door. He stood at the threshold studying the clearing and the trees.

Florian came up behind him, whispering in his ear. "What do you see?"

"Nothing, that's what's wrong," he whispered back.

Josh crawled between the two. "After reading the animal list I think we're just spooked. We can't stay here all day. The sun is moving towards the ground. Soon it will be too dark to find our way back to the shuttle."

"He has a valid point," said Clay. "It's safer to walk during daylight hours. Besides, we don't know if there are any animals around here. It has been twenty years."

"Yeah, I know, but something is watching us. I can feel it," said Florian.

Standing at the open hatch, the three kept up a silent vigil for the next five minutes. Disappointed, Clay finally stepped out into the sunshine. He looked back at the blank face of the other two. "Forget what you feel, we have to go."

Florian froze as she stepped outside. "Did you hear the noise?"

Clay and Josh shook their head.

Florian raised her bow to eye level, preparing to shoot an arrow. "I heard something again," she whispered.

Clay turned to look towards the trees in time to see a lamb emerge from the forest. A second and third lamb quickly came into view.

Florian dropped her bow and walked towards them. A deep throated growl made her freeze in mid-step. It came from the forest directly behind the lambs.

A lion leapt from behind a large bush. It pounced on the closest lamb. The attack lasted only seconds. The small animal didn't know it died. Josh and Clay back stepped inside the airlock leaving Florian three large steps from the safety of the Piper, completely unprotected, totally frozen in fear. The lion glanced up at her. Its bloodied mouth opened, showing its razor-sharp teeth. He discarded the dead lamb and walked towards Florian. Clay wrapped his arm around her waist, dragging her inside the corridor. The lion quickly picked up speed, the magnificent dull red mane on the back of its head swayed in the running movement. If the hatch wasn't shut in time the lion could easily slip through the gap. Inside the ship it'll have a three-course meal. Clay raised his bow to eye level. He pulled back on the arrow, firing a hurried shot. The arrow went wide of the lion. The beast growled again. A lioness emerged from the forest. She spied the easy meal and started running towards the ship.

Clay raised his bow again. This time the arrow landed short. The two animals were within seconds of the open hatch. Florian swept the shock from her mind, snatching her

bow from off the floor. In one easy movement, she loaded an arrow and fired. The arrow struck the lioness in the foot. It growled but kept coming.

A condensed beam of light cut through the air. The first lion hit the dirt in full flight landing at the entrance to the hatch.

Florian screamed.

A second beam of light hit the lioness in the exact center of its head. It died where it fell.

Clay glanced back at Josh, noting he still pointed the laser at the forest. Slowly he lowered the weapon and looked at Clay.

Florian's sentence was a stammering whisper. "Where did you get the laser from?"

"Somehow it wedged itself under the seat on the bridge of the Piper. I didn't have time to find out if it actually worked. I'm glad it did."

"Me too," said Clay, exhaling his fear.

"Thanks for saving my life. If you didn't find the weapon I'd be dead by now," said Florian, her trembling starting to subside.

"I think us three would be dead," advised Clay. "Come on, I think we've had enough excitement for one day."

"What about the lambs?" Florian asked.

"We'll see to them tomorrow. When we're back in the safety of the shuttle, I'd like to propose a plan."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TRIO jogged back to the shuttle. Josh tied the end of the parachute material around the bounty of food and with Florian in the lead they climbed. Safely off the ground and standing on the branch they carefully hoisted the bounty of food from the ground and carried the lot into the shuttle.

Josh pushed the button to close the hatch. They sat on the floor eating until they were full.

Eventually Florian sat back against the wall. "I've eaten enough."

Clay joined her while Josh finished off his portion. Breakfast was carefully set aside which consisted of tomatoes, zucchini, corn, several pods of peas, and an apple each.

"I reckon the feast will be worth waking up to in the morning," said Josh.

"I've been scrutinizing the plan I thought up. Now we know the medical building is a spaceship, I'd like to put forward my idea," mentioned Clay.

"Okay, let's hear it," said Florian.

"I need both of you to have an open mind."

Josh and Florian gave him their undivided attention.

"I know this shuttle is a safe place to live, but it's only temporarily. We can't stay here indefinitely. If the wind picks up the shuttle might dislodge from the trees and crash to the ground. I also believe it might be a matter of time before one of us falls out of the tree."

"The shuttle is a bit cramped," admitted Florian.

“Not to mention we have to climb down each day to walk to the other ship for food,” added Clay. “Now we know there are more dangerous animals out there the probability one of us might be hurt has doubled if not quadrupled.”

“I didn’t think of that,” moaned Florian.

“I think there’s a more sustainable idea,” continued Clay. “I vote we find a fuel rod in the other ship, bring it back here, fly this shuttle and land it on the roof of the Piper so we can be closer to our food source. Once we’ve accomplished the move I think we should call the Piper our new home.”

Florian immediately tried to think of a way to make improvements on the plan.

Looking around the shuttle Josh nodded in agreement. “I love the idea. I vote yes.” He stared at Florian. “What about you? We need three yes votes.”

“I think we should consider a slight improvement.”

“I can’t see any way to improve the plan,” grumbled Clay, sounding skeptical.

“Me neither,” said Josh.

“I vote we do what you two have already agreed on, but I think we should move the Piper towards the sea. Before you jump down my throat, hear me out.”

The two boys closed their mouth, deciding to sit back and listen.

“The Piper is massive, great for privacy. It has plenty of food and room. However, long term we need more food and we need a water source. We have to find a river, maybe a small lagoon where we can have a bath, wash our clothes. We have to consider the real possibility we might never be rescued. I think we need to find ground somewhere which is flat so we can grow food. The clothes we are wearing will quickly wear out. When it happens, we have to find something to wear. If we catch the lambs again we can shear their wool to make clothes. To do everything I’ve mentioned we can’t stay here, in the forest. Judging by the clouds it must rain sometime. If it didn’t, there’d be no trees. I also think us three should sleep on the idea. We can make a more judgmental decision in the morning.”

Clay nodded. He walked to the viewport to look out at the fading late afternoon sky. He sprinted to the hatch, sliding it open. Climbing the rungs of the ladder to the roof he stood watching the clouds. Josh and Florian scrambled up to the roof to see what happened.

“It’s a beautiful sunset,” Clay announced, pointing.

The three watched the sun reach the horizon and dip behind the black clouds. In a couple of minutes, it vanished and the stars came out.

DAY THREE

The trio woke early. By five in the morning they had almost finished breakfast.

Florian wasn’t in a good mood. She sat glaring at the boys. Not knowing what they decided made her more irritable. Eventually she asked. “Neither of you voted on my plan.”

Clay stopped eating to look at her. “I’ve been thinking about what you said most of the night.”

“What did you decide?”

“Your plan is gutsy. I vote yes.”

Josh stood. “I have to agree too. Long term, the plan is a goer. I think we should get moving. Have you seen the sky this morning?”

Florian and Clay marched to the viewport. The cloudless sky of the previous day was a blanket of grey.

“It looks like it’s about to rain,” chirped Florian.

“Come on, we have to get to the Piper and bring a fuel rod back.” Clay stopped in his tracks. “I propose we leave the shuttle behind.”

“We can’t leave it in the trees. The shuttle is too valuable. You don’t know when or even how we might have to use it,” insisted Josh.

“Okay, the vote is still unanimous” said Clay, marching towards the hatch.

“Before we attempt anything maybe we should take a look at the disc I copied yesterday.”

Josh sat in the pilot’s chair. Leaning forward he pushed a button on the console. A small black frame ejected from the cradle. He placed the disc in the frame and sent it back into the computer.

The computer whirled. The monitor lit. Josh immediately typed in a series of questions on the keyless screen.

‘How many fuel rods are onboard the Piper?’

The answer came back in a cursory blink: ‘Ninety-five.’

‘Can the ship fly?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can it go into space?’

‘Negative.’

‘What does a stabilizer look like?’

A picture of a part the size of a medium sized suitcase came onto the screen. It resembled a black rectangular box. Three wires protruded out of the top.

‘Exactly where is the damaged stabilizer situated?’

‘Engine four.’

‘Are there many spare parts on the ship?’

‘1,364 parts remain ready to be used. Ask for a specific item, a fetcher robot will locate it.’

The three castaways jumped for joy.

“Okay, it’s settled. Come on, moving day has arrived!” exclaimed Josh, sounding excited.

Florian, Josh and Clay scrambled down the tree to the ground. Holding their bow and arrow at the ready and Josh’s hand-held laser pointing out in front, they started for the Piper.

The clearing came without incident. Florian saw four lambs eating the grass around the spaceship. They wagged their long tail when she walked up to them.

Josh opened the hatch, herding them inside.

“Now for the fuel rods,” said Clay.

“Have you two forgotten about something?” questioned Josh.

Florian and Clay looked blank at each other. They faced Josh who took to studying the area.

“The lion and the lioness are gone.”

Clay immediately lifted his bow and arrow, ushering Josh and Florian into the Piper.

“Something big must have dragged the animals away,” hinted Florian, swallowing the lump in her throat.

“If they were eaten there’s something big loitering around the trees. I certainly don’t want to see it,” said Clay.

Josh closed the hatch. As he watched the metal door slide shut, he scrutinized the land. He sighed in relief at seeing nothing dangerous and turned his attention to the internal area of the ship.

The trio quietly walked down the long corridor. The bridge seemed more of a morgue than the lifeline of the ship. Overhead lights blinked on the deeper they walked. On the bridge Josh jumped in front of a monitor. He immediately started tapping on the keyboard.

‘Close all external hatches.’

Noise from around the ship could be heard when the many hatches, too numerous to count, closed.

“Let’s hope there’s nothing in this ship, except the lambs and us,” whispered Florian. She looked slightly nervous.

Clay beckoned the other two to follow. “The engines are down the corridor behind us.”

The three walked across the bridge room. The hatch leading to the next corridor opened automatically. It seemed endless. Overhead lights slowly flickered on.

“Who wants to go first?” asked Florian.

Josh looked to be having an attack of nerves. He wasn’t blinking. His eyes were bulging. Clay gulped down the lump in his throat. He forced his feet to move. He took a step. He flashed Florian and Josh a semi confident expression and started to walk. He deliberately chose to walk down the middle of the corridor. At about the twenty-foot mark Florian began her walk. Josh counted to ten and entered the corridor. The three made sure they didn’t get any closer to the one in front. Every ten steps Clay stopped to listen.

He heard nothing except silence.

Clay stopped at the first doorway and looked through the small square window no larger than a dinner plate situated at head height. Inside the room he saw open cages. He checked the four corners of the room. Satisfied nothing dangerous lurked inside he walked on.

At the fourth doorway Clay glanced through the same size window as the first. The room looked the same. An object in the corner stopped him from walking further along the corridor. He beckoned the other two to catch up. They were by his side in a second.

“There’s a snake inside the room,” whispered Clay.

Josh looked through the small window, followed by Florian.

“We have to get rid of it,” Clay advised.

“Why don’t we take it outside to set it free?” suggested Florian.

Josh spoke informatively. “It’s a tiger snake. Whoever gets bitten dies! Back on Earth I’d say let it live. We’re alone on this planet. We can’t take the chance. We don’t have anti-venom.”

“Maybe there’s some locked in a cupboard?” said Clay.

“Do you want to take the chance?”

“Get rid of it,” jeered Florian, hardening her heart.

Josh quietly and slowly stepped into the room. Lifting the laser and aiming it at the coiled lump he pulled the trigger. The narrow beam of light hit the snake in the head. The reptile convulsed violently and died. Florian quickly searched the room for another. Fortunately, there were no more.

“What sort of person collects poisonous snakes?” questioned Clay.

“Rowark must have viewed himself as a zoo keeper,” answered Josh.

The trio made it to the end of the corridor. They were now facing a double closed hatch.

“According to the schematic diagram of the ship this has to be the engine room,” reported Josh.

Florian pressed the green button on the wall. The doors slid open revealing a massive clean room. Mounted at the far end were five engines. Each one looked to be the equivalent size of a normal single-story house. They were strategically placed for maximum mobility. She surmised there must be a bouquet of smaller engines encompassing the entire ship for thruster control.

Josh let out a low whistle.

“Incredible,” whispered Clay. “The magnificent looking room takes your breath away.”

“Where do we start?” asked Florian. “I’m having doubts about the whole moving idea.”

“Don’t let the size of this room cloud your mind. Think of it as no larger than our shuttle,” hinted Josh.

“An almost impossible task,” answered Florian, noting the size of the room.

“Keep guard while I find the exact part which needs replacing.” Josh walked over to a wall mounted computer. Touching the screen, a menu came up. A few more taps and a small door covering a cupboard slowly slid upwards. Two green eyes stared at him. Josh aimed the laser directly at the eyes. His finger twitched on the trigger. The green eyes belonged to an object no more than two feet tall. Rolling along the floor on stainless steel rollers the figure beeped every three seconds.

“It’s a fetcher robot,” whispered Florian.

The three trailed the robot to a side hatch. The door lifted when it came close. The robot rolled across the threshold, entering the room. Rows of spare parts in racking filled the entire house size room. The robot stopped. It squared itself to the first row of shelving. Slowly the machine extended to fifteen feet tall. In one slick movement it slipped two arms under a box the size of a small suitcase and started to shrink quickly back to normal size. The robot retraced its path, placing the item in the middle of a yellow square on the floor. It beeped, reversing into the cupboard.

“Fantastic little gem,” remarked Florian.

“I wonder if I searched for the fuel rod it will bring one back here?” questioned Josh. He set to work, located the item on the computer and pressed ‘go’ on the screen.

The fetcher robot commenced to repeat its trip.

“Come on, by the time we finish installing the stabilizer unit the robot will have brought a fuel rod,” said Clay.

They marched to the right-hand side of the Piper.

Josh pointed to the ladder welded against the side of the engine. “The location of the stabilizer should be somewhere up on top.” He squatted to give the unit a quick once over. “The spanner in the box must fit the four bolts around the base.” He shrugged. “The stainless-steel cylinder seems easy enough to replace.”

“Try not to take too long. I’ll be here standing guard waiting for the robot to return,” advised Florian.

The two boys climbed the ladder. Clay carried the box. They stepped off the ladder, onto the top of the engine. In the center they spied a black metal box.

Josh pointed. “It must contain the stabilizer unit.”

Clay walked across the metal roof of the engine. Josh was three steps behind him.

When the two boys disappeared Florian felt abandoned. She tried to play down the fear rising up on the inside of her. For several seconds she drifted off into a daydream. They set up house and were walking along a narrow path to a short water fall where they could

shower and take a swim in the shallow lagoon. The sound of the waves breaking on the beach made her stop to smell the fresh salty air.

A noise from a closing hatch and the robot's return brought Florian away from her paradise thoughts she was daydreaming about. She grinned at the little fetcher robot then she froze in fear. Her peripheral vision had spied movement off to her right. She slowly turned to face the movement. A second tiger snake was slithering directly towards her. Florian wanted to call out, but fear stifled her words. She spied the fetcher robot travelling towards her at full tilt. It crossed into the path of the snake. The reptile lashed out to strike. The robot casually placed the box onto the head of the snake. Its tail moved violently back and forth several times. While Florian watched, the tail went limp and stopped moving.

The robot made his way back to the cupboard and disappeared behind the closing door, leaving Florian alone to stare at the snake's tail.

Clay pulled the cover off the black box. He snatched up the spanner ready to start undoing the four bolts which held the stabilizer unit in place. They came out easily. Josh disconnected the three wires, pulling the unit out. Clay placed the new unit into the black box and tightened the nuts. Josh connected the wires, packed the old unit in the plastic box and fired up the computer pad on the new item. Four lights flashed yellow then green.

"We did it," yelled Josh excited at their victory.

Both boys didn't waste any more time. They sprinted over the rooftop and back down the ladder. They found Florian standing motionless staring at the tail of the snake.

The moment Clay's feet touched the metal floor he ran over to give her a bear hug. "What happened?"

Florian closed her eyes, pushing her head against his chest. "I let my guard down. I allowed my mind to wander. I didn't know the snake was in striking distance. The fetcher robot dropped the box on the snake's head." Florian started sobbing.

"It's okay," he said smoothly, wiping the tears from her face.

Josh pieced the explanation together. "The robot must double as a protector for the crew onboard the ship. Provided it's fetching something they're on guard duty."

"I've heard rumors they used to make those sorts of robots. They became too unreliable," reported Clay.

"Fortunately, our little friend in the cupboard is the exception," said Josh.

"I'll second the idea," whispered Florian.

Clay readied himself to lift one end of the large metal box the fetcher robot brought back. Florian backed away looking more than confident to shoot the hand-laser at the snake. Clay slowly lifted the end of the box. Josh pulled the dead snake away, throwing it against the hull.

"What a heavy box," groaned Clay, dropping it back on deck.

"It should be," said Josh. "If the fuel rod is full it should weigh one hundred and fifty pounds."

"You're joking?" queried Florian.

"I wish," Josh groaned.

Clay opened the box to examine the contents. Josh and Florian looked in.

"The glass casing on both tubes looks to be intact," said Josh. He ran his fingers along the three-foot-long glass cylinders packed in a heavy foam casing. "They're both dry. It's good, they aren't leaking."

"One glass tube is empty while the other looks to be full of wet sand," commented Florian.

“It’s not sand,” Clay corrected. “If the glass is broken the radioactive material inside will pollute the air. We’d be dead in five minutes.”

Josh pointed to the blackened ends. “The tubes from the engine connect to each end of both tubes so it can suck out the material. The anti matter in the tube which looks empty, mixes with, what you said, ‘the wet sand’ triggering a chain reaction inside the engine which in turn pushes the ship forward.”

“Thanks for the scientific analyses,” Florian giggled.

“You asked,” said Josh.

“If the box is so heavy, how are we going to get the fuel rods back to the shuttle?” questioned Clay looking doubtful.

Florian quickly thought up an idea. “Save the trouble. I vote we leave the shuttle behind?”

Josh shook his head. “We can’t afford to. We might need the equipment.”

“He does have a point,” said Clay.

“It’ll be a massive task to get the fuel rods up the tree,” said Florian.

“Trust me it’ll be worth it,” said Josh.

Clay lifted his end of the box. “I’m ready, let’s get started.”

Josh heaved his end off the ground. He needed to use all his strength just to hold it up and walk backwards at the same time. Florian ran ahead ready to shoot the laser at anything that moved.

Halfway along the corridor Josh and Clay switched ends. By the time they entered the bridge room, Josh was forced to put his end down and step away from the box.

“I’m done,” he croaked.

Florian took hold of the handle. With Clay at the other end, she started to shuffle. Again, at the halfway point to the outside her and Clay swapped ends.

At the threshold to the hatch to the outside they placed the long metal box down so they could rest.

“I’m exhausted,” said Florian.

“We all are. If we’re ambushed now we won’t have the strength to run,” admitted Clay.

“I didn’t think the task would be this hard,” Josh moaned.

“Do you think it’s still a good idea taking the shuttle?” grumbled Clay, looking at Josh.

“I do, I just didn’t know I’d be this exhausted.”

“At least the trip back here will be easy,” stated Florian looking at the positive side.

The boys stared at her through slits.

“We’ll be flying the shuttle back.”

Clay and Josh managed to drag their tired body to a standing position and take hold of a handle each.

“Onward,” whispered Josh.

Between the three of them which included swapping ends every sixty seconds, the trip back seemed quick.

Josh tied one end of the parachute around both handles of the box while Clay slowly climbed the parachute material to the first branch. Florian came next, followed by Josh.

“Okay,” said Clay after they’d rested for five minutes. “I’ll pull the box up. When the box is sitting on the branch I need both of you to keep it balanced. I’ll climb higher and haul the box to the next branch. We can repeat the sequence at each level.”

“Whatever you do make sure the box doesn’t fall out of the tree,” warned Josh. “There will be a massive explosion.”

With much effort, Clay hauled the box up to the first branch. Josh secured it while Clay climbed to the next branch.

Ten minutes of hauling saw the plan working perfectly. Only the short distance to the shuttle remained.

Clay called a rest stop.

“We can’t stop now,” said Josh. “We only have a few feet to go.”

“I’m exhausted.”

“We can rest after the box is in the shuttle,” suggested Florian.

Clay gripped the handle at his end. Josh gripped the handle at the other end. Slowly they inched their way towards the shuttle door. Florian watched nervously from the shuttle’s airlock. Three feet from the hatch Clay placed his back foot too close to the edge of the branch, rolling his ankle. He tried desperately to stay upright. The box tipped. Florian lunged to his side. Just as he fell sideways, Florian took hold of his shirt, throwing him straight at the shuttle. She placed her foot under the front edge of the box in an attempt to keep it balanced. Josh steadied his end by squatting, securing the box. Clay flew through the air. Losing height, he tried not to panic. He reached out and groped for the bottom rung of the ladder which leads to the roof of the shuttle. He used every ounce of strength he could conjure up to hang on. Hearing Florian groan, he started to swing like a monkey. Clay’s muscles screamed for mercy as he started to climb. His feet finally touched the bottom rung. Using the strong foothold he was finally able to take a moment to rest. Only then did he see why Florian was moaning. She saved their lives by placing her foot under the front edge of the box. Clay closed his eyes, praying no bones were broken.

Josh yelled to Clay. “Help Florian to get back to the shuttle, I’ve steadied the box my end.”

Clay could tell Florian was trying desperately to be brave. By the time he reached her, tears were rolling down her cheeks. Hanging onto the branch above, he yanked the handle of the box upwards. Florian pulled her foot out. Clay grabbed her around the waist. Together they hobbled into the shuttle. Clay wanted to stay to console her. The fuel rods must have priority. He marched back and grabbed the handle of the box his end. The boys shuffled into the shuttle via the hatch, placed the metal box on the floor and stepped over to Florian.

Clay looked into her eyes. “I’m so sorry you were hurt,” he said gently.

“It’s not your fault. We should have rested like you recommended. I thought if we left the box on the branch, it might fall.”

“You did a brave thing,” said Josh. “How does your foot feel?”

“It’s extra warm at the moment.”

“I recommend you leave your boot on,” said Clay. “On my seventh birthday a horse stood on my foot. I wanted to take my shoe off. Both my parents ordered me to leave it on. They explained it stops the swelling.”

“It hurts,” sobbed Florian.

“I bet it does,” replied Clay. He placed his arm under her shoulder, helping her to stand. “Can you move your toes?”

Florian concentrated. “Barely,” she whispered, wincing at the pain.

“Excellent. There’s a good chance no bones are broken,” said Josh.

Clay carried Florian to the co-pilot’s chair and sat her down. “We have to finish the job.”

“Can’t it wait five minutes?” she asked.

Josh brought handfuls of fruit and vegetables for lunch. "I vote we have a rest."

The trio ate what little they had in the way of fruit and shared the two remaining carrots.

Clay leaned in, kissing Florian on the forehead. "I feel bad about your foot."

"It's okay. The pain has gone." She undid her shoe lace, gently pulled off her boot and carefully peeled her sock off. Her relief came on a heavy sigh. "My foot still looks intact." She slowly wriggled her toes and feebly stood. "My foot is a bit tender and the bruise might be delayed, but I think I'll be fine." She took a careful step followed by a second. By the time she returned to her seat she seemed to be walking normally.

Josh studied the boot. Your foot has come through unscathed. I'm sorry to say your boot didn't. The top has a deep gouge in it. You're one lucky girl."

Florian reached up kissing Clay on the lips. She then turned her attention to Josh. He received the same loving treatment. "Thanks guys for watching over me."

The boys went bright red. Both would remember the feeling long after the memory of the effort to get the fuel rods onboard the shuttle had faded.

"This is why we need to get out of the trees," said Josh firmly. "One of us is bound to slip up eventually. Next time it happens one of us mightn't be so lucky."

"Even though attempting to get the fuel rods into the shuttle nearly proved disastrous, I believe taking the shuttle with us is the right thing," said Florian, quickly.

Clay and Josh were nodding when the trio crowded around the box. Clay opened the lid. For a long time, they stared at the glass tubes. Josh and Clay reached in, lifting the glass tube full of the wet sand material from the foam. They slowly walked to the engine compartment. Florian followed, carrying the empty rod under her arm.

Josh warmed the computer up by voice command. On the side of the engine a long metal flap popped open. The tubes were lifted and carefully rolled onto the inner frame.

Josh cleared his throat. "Computer, load fuel rods." He manually closed the long flap. Through the inspection window he watched the rods slowly moving into the center of the engine where they were stowed. Next, a needle size pipe came out of the front of the engine. It was inserted into the tube. A second needle sized pipe was inserted in the other end of the tube. The empty glass tube went through the same procedure.

Clay turned away from the window. Looking triumphant he reported. "It looks like we're ready to fly."

The three walked to their seat and strapped themselves in.

"Okay, I'll fire up the computer," said Josh. He looked across at Clay. "I's all up to you."

"I will try to navigate by sight," said Florian. "After clearing the trees, make a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn."

"Drive slow," suggested Josh. He leaned forward, tapped away on the monitor and pushed 'green' for go."

The shuttle's engine began to vibrate. Clay gripped the joystick firmly. His shoulders were rigid and tight. He stared at the monitor in front of him. To engage the engines, he pushed the blue button on top of the joystick.

The shuttle started to rise.

Florian leaned sideways. "Don't forget to breathe."

Clay's nod was sharp. Sweat had made his shirt damp.

Florian stared through the viewport. The trees thinned as the shuttle gained altitude. When they were completely clear of the tress Clay moved the joystick slightly to the left. The shuttle's nose began to turn. The craft changed direction at a snail's pace. Florian saw

the sea way off in the distance. She also saw the grey clouds were quickly turning black. On the top of the mountains a blanket of fog had made the summit disappear. Underneath the shuttle the tops of the trees swayed from the wind. The weather looked to be rapidly deteriorating. The shuttle shuddered when the first strong gust of wind hit it side on. The shuttle rocked slightly. The computer quickly brought the ship back to level. Florian glanced sideways at Clay. He'd lost his handsome tanned face, replaced by concentration.

The shuttle shuddered again.

Clay clutched the joystick with a white knuckled death grip.

The craft completed its one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. Clay slowly moved the joystick back to center. For a long time, the craft hovered. Clay slowly pushed the joystick forward. It was a heart stopping few seconds before the shuttle started to move towards the Piper.

The clearing came into view after an agonizing five minutes. Clay slowed the forward motion further. Eventually the shuttle hovered directly over the top of the Piper. In the monitor, the massive craft looked like a giant metal plate. Slowly Clay pulled back on the joystick.

The shuttle descended.

At a height of five feet Clay slowed the shuttle's descent. It took nearly a full minute to finally touchdown on the roof.

Josh commanded in a deep voice. "Computer, stop engines; activate magnetic lock."

The engine fell silent. The shuttle settled lower onto the roof. Clay exhaled. Eventually he let go of the joystick. He sat back in the seat, closed his eyes and massaged his hand.

Florian unclipped her seat belt. Stepping behind Clay, she massaged his shoulders.

"You have wonderful hands. I feel as though I've run a marathon," he whispered.

"You did a great job," admitted Josh.

"How did you know about the magnetic lock?" asked Florian looking directly at Josh.

He displayed a proud expression on his face. "The information is in the handbook." He pulled the book from the rear leather pocket of his seat, handing it over.

Florian looked at it. She scrunched her nose, dropping it onto her seat.

Josh winked, walking to the hatch. He bounded down the two stairs, stepped onto the roof of the Piper and jogged over to the dome. Squatting, he began to examine the glass dome.

"What is he doing?" asked Florian watching him through the viewport.

"I've no idea. Let's go find out," said Clay.

They sprinted over to Josh in time to see him stand.

"What's up?" asked Clay.

"I wanted to take a closer look at the dome. He pointed to the middle. "There's a hole where the alleged meteorite struck. Judging by the cracks in the whole thing there's no way this ship will ever enter space again."

"Unless we can replace the dome," stated Florian.

"Yes. If we could get our hands on a new one we'd be able to catch up to the USS Lock," said Josh slowly.

"Can we still fly this ship in the atmosphere?" asked Clay.

"I don't see why not. The only thing we have to do is not go too high or too fast."

"In that case I think we should prepare to depart the forest."

"Sooner than later," said Florian pointing at the sky. "There's a storm on the way."

CHAPTER SIX

THE TRIO fanned out, combing the rooftop, searching for a way in. Josh found a round cover the width of a person. He discovered a flat narrow panel five inches long and three inches wide adjacent to the almost invisible cover. Josh tapped the entire surface. It sprung open, revealing a button. He pushed it. A metal plate rose from the rooftop. Connected to the plate was a glass tube. It stopped when the tube extended to a length of six feet.

Josh whistled at Clay and Florian. He waited for them to start running towards him before stepping inside the glass tube. Almost immediately it descended into the spaceship. "It's a lift," he yelled. "I'll send it back."

Clay was hugging Florian when the tube reappeared. Florian stepped into the tube. Again, it descended.

Clay paced the rooftop, waiting. Nightmarish thoughts flowed through his mind. They'd done so much in such a short amount of time he didn't think about any new danger Florian might be in. Josh seemed like a nice boy. What did he know of him or for that matter what did he know of Florian? They could be brother and sister for all he knew. Worse still what if Josh tried to murder Florian when they were alone. He did seem eager to enter the Piper. Had it been a calculated move to leave him outside? What if Josh actually knew how the ship worked? What if he and Florian planned to leave the planet, expecting him to die after being swept off the roof? Clay was entertaining the thought Josh might want Florian for himself when the lift came back. Clay sighed heavily as he stepped into the glass tube.

Inside the ship, in front of the bridge console Florian and Josh were waiting. Clay stepped out of the tube flashing them both a heartless stare.

"Is something wrong?" asked Florian, innocently.

"Nothing," replied Clay.

"The way you were glaring at us I'd say you thought we might have deliberately left you outside?" questioned Josh.

"I was thinking crazy thoughts. Let's drop the subject. We have to get underway."

Josh shrugged "While waiting for you two, I read the instructions on how to fly this ship. It's similar to the shuttle. Clay, you did a marvelous job getting us here you shouldn't have any trouble flying the Piper."

"Right," he replied.

Josh punched a series of buttons on the keypad. The engines came to life. "We'll give them a minute to warm up. They haven't been started in twenty years."

"I don't think we have the time to wait," reported Florian. She positioned herself in front of a monitor, punched up the menu and pressed the short-range scanner. "The computer has picked up a band of wet weather closing in on the Piper."

"Does the computer recommend another good landing site?" asked Clay, still slightly worried over his ugly thoughts.

Florian busied herself by tapping the computer keyboard and entering in the relevant information. She then entered a few of her own ideas; 'Fresh water, a pool of water, food, flat ground and the sea.' "Yes," she reported. "Enter the following course into the flight computer."

“We don’t have time or the knowledge to figure out how to pre-flight the computer, we’ll have to fly manually,” suggested Josh.

“To be on the correct flight path to a perfect destination, we have to fly directly towards the storm. In exactly fifty-seven seconds make a ninety-degree turn,” said Florian.

“Whose perfect destination, yours or the computers?” growled Clay.

The other two looked sideways at each other. “We have no idea why you sound upset?” quizzed Florian, looking puzzled.

“I hope not.”

“Tell us what you’ve been thinking?” urged Josh, firmly.

“Later, we don’t have time. It’s starting to rain.”

“I think you should tell us,” said Florian.

“If we crash and die it will make no difference,” spat Clay. Instead of positioning himself in front of the flight joystick he walked off the bridge.

By the time Florian and Josh cornered him near the elevator tube he was trembling uncontrollably.

“What’s wrong?” asked Florian.

“I can’t say.”

“Us three made a pact to vote on everything. If what your thinking has anything to do with the safety of our short journey Josh and I have a right to know.”

“I can’t fly this ship.”

“Why not?” asked Josh.

“It’s too big.”

Clay could hear his voice starting to betray his fear by the stammer in his words.

Josh bravely said. “I can understand your fears. Look at the ship as if it were the shuttle. You didn’t have a problem flying here. Trust the computer, this baby practically flies itself. The only thing you have to do is move the joystick slightly in the direction you want the ship to go. Rowark fully automated the ship. It’s a one-man operation. What’s changed?”

Clay opened his mouth to spill the news on what he’d been thinking, but forced it shut. He didn’t want to say.

Florian picked up on the vibe and placed her arm around his waist. “Something far worse is bothering you.”

Clay felt his head starting to nod. He looked into her blue eyes. His hardened heart melted. Her beautiful round face was too much to ignore. He broke down.

“When you two came down the lift and left me alone on the rooftop, I was thinking crazy thoughts. It entered my mind you two might be brother and sister or planning to leave me on the roof when you took off into space or Josh, you were in fact murdering Florian.”

Josh back stepped away at hearing the news. “How could you even think those thoughts? I’d die to make sure Florian lived. I look upon you as my brother. I could never contemplate doing anything to jeopardize our lives. My ultimate goal is seeing us three rescued.”

Florian didn’t wait for Clay to respond. She placed her hands behind his neck, reeling him in. He needed a long reassuring kiss and she felt determined to give it.

Josh returned to the bridge. He checked the weather. Florian, holding Clay’s hand, led him back to the flight controls.

Clay stood in front of the joystick. "Forget what I said. You're right, we're a team. We have to go."

"The only thing we can do is our best," stated Florian. "If something bad happens at least we know we tried."

Knowing the conversation had come to a satisfactory end, Josh glued his gaze on the flight monitor. Florian focused on the navigation monitor in front of her.

"I'm ready," admitted Clay, clutching the joystick.

"Do exactly like you did with the shuttle." Josh pushed the ignition button. "We have a five second count down, four, three seconds, two, one, ignition."

The ship vibrated slightly when the engines surged. The lights on the bridge dimmed. Three seconds later they failed completely blanketing the entire area in total darkness. Almost instantly the air smelt stagnant and felt claustrophobic.

Florian didn't like the feeling. She started to panic. A scream erupted from her mouth. "You can't tell me this is a normal situation?"

Josh spoke calmly. "It probably isn't. Don't forget the engines haven't been used in a long time. Give them a minute. I'm positive the power drain is only temporary."

The slow drone of the engines turning over lasted for only fifteen seconds. The revs grew constant. The lights came back on, faint at first then as the seconds ticked off they brightened. In a couple of minutes, the engines were pulsating in normal rhythm. The lights were back to full brightness.

The trio relaxed and manned the monitors in front of them. Clay forced his ugly thoughts from his mind. He alone must make the Piper arrive where they were going in one piece.

The ship lifted off. Dirt, grass and twigs flew into the air. Some landed on the roof, spraying the shuttle's viewport.

The Piper ascended ever so slow, no more than a few inches a second.

"I'm going to warm up the fifth engine," said Josh.

"Do you think it's a good idea?" asked Clay.

"I hope so. At any rate the vibration will stop."

Josh's fingers swept the menu on a monitor. He scrolled down the page, highlighting the picture of the number five engine.

The fifth engine boomed to life. In seconds it was brought up to speed by the computer.

The Piper's vibrating stopped altogether, helping the ship to quickly gain height.

Clay appeared to be enjoying having control.

At one hundred and fifty feet above the ground, Florian looked over. "We've cleared the trees. Now move directly towards the storm. In exactly fifty-nine seconds, hover and change course ninety degrees. We'll be travelling in a north-east direction."

Clay gradually moved the joystick, swinging the ship around to Florian's course. He forced the ship to rise to a height of nine hundred feet.

Seven minutes into the flight, twenty-three minutes to the destination, rain bombarded the ship. In seconds the wind increased ten-fold, billowing close to two hundred kilometers per hour. The ship shuddered. The computer compensated for the wind. The trio heard a bang. The ship ducked and dived before leveling. Florian and Josh were knocked from their feet. A warning buzzer sounded on the flight monitor. A red light on a picture of another stabilizer began flashing.

"Number one engine has done a stabilizer," yelled Clay.

Josh set to work sending the computer a message to have the fetcher robot go get another stabilizer. He looked at Clay. "We have to go fix the unit."

“No. To fix it we have to set down on the ground. By the looks of the forest there isn’t anywhere safe to land,” yelled Florian.

Clay stared at the monitor which viewed the ground underneath the Piper. They were directly over the mountain peaks. “Florian is right. The area anywhere close to here is too steep. The only thing we can do is keep going.”

Josh said. “If we don’t fix the stabilizer now we won’t be able to fly level to our destination and if we’re blown off course we might crash.”

Clay nodded in agreement. “Okay. Make it fast.”

Florian stared at Clay. “If you can hold the fort, I’ll go help?”

“I’ll be right. I’ll try to hover above the storm. If we’re hit by too much rain, water might find a way through the crack in the dome and swamp the bridge,” advised Clay.

“It’s not a good thought,” moaned Florian

“The storm has given me an idea. Maybe we can use part of the shuttle to fix this ship?” said Clay.

“It’s worth investigating the idea,” answered Josh.

“Provided you don’t crash the Piper,” said Florian.

“I won’t. Hurry with the stabilizer,” groaned Clay.

Josh and Florian were tossed from wall to wall as they stumbled down the corridor towards the engines. Josh picked Florian up by the arm each time she fell.

Finally, they reached the hatch leading into the engine room. Josh pushed the button on the wall. The door slid open. The Piper dived again. Josh lost his balance stepping through the open hatch. Florian helped him up. They staggered across the massive room clinging to the vertical struts which helped form the frame of the ship. The fetcher robot entered the engine bay through a separate door carrying the stabilizer. Josh took it and was immediately thrown against the floor, spilling the stabilizer from the box. Florian dived to save it from crashing into the hull.

“Good catch,” called Josh, crawling over. “We have to hurry. The ship mightn’t be able to take too much more. If a computer chip fails Clay won’t be able to stop the Piper from heading for the ground.”

Josh and Florian crawled across the bucking floor. Josh grabbed the first rung of the ladder on the number one engine, looking over his shoulder at Florian.

Carrying the stabilizer up the ladder proved to be an almost impossible struggle for her.

“I’ll carry the unit to the top of the engine,” said Josh, taking the box from her.

As Florian stepped onto the roof she bit at her top lip. “How are we going to stop from being thrown over the edge of the engine?”

“We’ll have to manage.”

Florian copied Josh by crawling across the roof. When the ship tipped they lay flat, pushing their hands and feet hard against the roof of the engine. When the ship settled in a lull in the wind they hurriedly moved on. A few minutes of crawling saw the two hanging onto the stabilizer box in the exact center of the roof. Josh went straight to work.

“What do you want me to do?”

Josh opened the black lid. “You can disconnect the wire plug from the old stabilizer and connect the new one.”

Florian felt the ship start to tilt. She clung to the lid. Josh lost his hand hold, skidding across the roof towards the side. If he slipped over the edge he’d fall ten feet to the metal floor. Josh pushed his toes and fingers against the metal roof. He groaned from the effort. When the ship slowly drew back to level he ran back to Florian. He found her connecting the wires to the new stabilizer and quickly undid the four bolts holding the old unit.

Florian lifted the stabilizer out; Josh placed the new one in the box. In a race against time they started to bolt the new unit into place. The bolts were finger tight when Florian and Josh were thrown across the rooftop. To their horror they fell over the side.

When the ship dipped further the computer couldn't compensate. The Piper was heading for the ground.

The Piper cleared a mountain peak by only inches. It skimmed a treed valley before Clay managed to pull the ship out of the nose dive. On the viewer he spied the sea directly ahead. White caps on the crest of the turbulent water looked inhospitable. For the first-time lightning lit the sky. Clay felt like he was on the verge of panicking. He needed to slow the speed of the ship. He didn't want to crash into the ocean or be hit by lightning.

Clay did his utmost best to keep the ship level. His arms were tiring when the ship nose dived again. He lost count how many times he needed to correct the Piper.

The ship entered another down draft, dropping to fifty feet above the ground. Thanks to the computer, slowly the ship ascended back to one hundred feet. Hail peppered the ship. The wind howled, slamming into the side. Finally, the Piper reached the location Florian reported. The site did look perfect. Clay placed the joystick into neutral. He used his entire strength to fight the storm to keep it in place. The ship was finally under control for the first time in ten minutes when one of the engines faltered, starving for fuel. It was the first sign the ship used up a fuel rod. It would take a few seconds for the engine to inject the next rod and come back to one hundred percent; a lifetime when he was manually fighting a storm with a blown stabilizer. His thoughts drifted to Florian and Josh. The ship bucked and dived. He prayed they were okay and close to finishing the job they set out to do. If the new stabilizer wasn't in position soon their landing might be a nightmare. It would be a miracle if they survived.

Finally, the starving engine fired. Clay managed to gain some height, fighting the joystick the whole time. Sweat had soaked his shirt. Clay saw the solid black rain cloud approaching. The wind created an illusion the rain was falling sideways. He braced himself for the onslaught.

Florian hung onto the edge of the rooftop by her forearms. She made slow progress in getting back onto the roof of the engine.

Feeling the ship leveling, Josh clambered back onto the roof, grabbed Florian by her wrists, arched his back and dragged her to safety.

"I want you down the ladder. I'll go finish tightening the bolts then press the button to get the stabilizer online."

"I'm coming," she answered.

Florian shadowed Josh back to the black box. Kneeling, she commenced to tighten two of the bolts.

Josh finished using the spanner and handed it to Florian. When she said the word 'done' he pushed the start button on the side of the stabilizer. A light came on. In seconds the computer stabilized the ship.

The Piper finally hovered level.

Running back to the ladder, Florian and Josh descended to the floor and sprinted towards the bridge so they could stand next to Clay.

Florian took up her position as chief navigator. "Good job. We're close," she advised.

"Welcome back. How many minutes until we're at the exact location?" Clay groaned.

She shrugged.

"Tell me anything to keep me going."

"One minute."

Clay gritted his teeth, mentally urging himself to hang on.

The ship finally hovered over the flat land. The grassed area looked perfect. Water flowed along a river which came to a water fall. The coastline lay twenty feet further on. Wild grass grew out of the sand dunes.

The ship descended to fifty feet above sea level.

Florian called the wind speed. "The gusts are eighty miles an hour and falling. They're now sixty, fifty, forty miles per hour." She looked across at Clay. "Go now. I think the wind is about to increase."

The final fifty feet to the hard deck was a heart stopping five minutes. Clay, Florian and Josh held their breath.

Florian called out the distance. Forty feet and falling: Thirty feet, twenty-eight feet, nineteen feet."

The wind increased in strength, buffeting the ship. Clay held the joystick in a concrete grip. The new stabilizer kept working perfectly.

"Twelve feet," reported Florian. "Eight feet: two feet."

The three travelers heard a slight scraping noise when the ship finally touched the ground. Josh cut the engines. The large ship settled onto the wind-swept grass covered plateau.

For a long time, the three travelers savored the eerie silence, each one to his or her, own thoughts; their brain working overtime at what the future may bring. They prayed one day for a chance they might be finally rescued. Josh stood back from the monitors, looking at the other two. Florian stepped towards Clay.

"Congratulations." She punched him in the arm. "And you said you couldn't fly the Piper. You did a great job."

Clay looked at her through exhausted eyes. She needed to prize his fingers from the joystick. Florian craned her neck, kissing him on the lips.

Josh stepped over, slapping him on the shoulder. "Well done."

"Thanks," croaked Clay. "I couldn't have done it without you two. I was getting worried at the reason why you were taking so long."

"There were a few anxious moments," admitted Josh.

"Us three make a great team," said Florian. She leaned over, giving Josh a hero's kiss. "Let's go out in the rain to see our new home."

The trio marched down the long corridor. At the hull, Clay pushed the button. The hatch slid sideways. The storm was starting to move away. The sea breeze felt warm. The rain looked to be slowing to a drizzle. In minutes the sun would be out. The boys allowed Florian to step outside first. They laughed at her antics, happy in themselves to be alive. Florian lifted her arms, walked in circles, yelling.

"Welcome to our new home."

To the reader of Planet X91, the beginning. I hope you enjoyed the first book in the series.

My novels are based on the Australian culture. Some of the spelling is Australian. Thanks for your understanding.

Again, thank you for your support, for without you, the reader, I wouldn't have anyone to read my work.

Here is a snippet of Planet X91 book two the new home:

FLORIAN TURNED in slow circles, feeling the rain on her face. Josh and Clay looked at each other before rushing out of the spaceship to join in on the fun. The trio couldn't remember the last time they ran around in the rain. It certainly was the first time on this planet.

Their jubilation would be short-lived.

The three castaways were about to discover the first secret hidden deep inside the Piper. The spaceship they adopted for their own; the one they knew would keep them safe at night.

The shape of the Piper was round. Certainly, from the air, she didn't appear large. However, the interior of the ship seemed massive. What the kids didn't know was that something was always watching their every move.

Could the ship be haunted?

By Mark Stewart

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Heart of a spider
I know your secret
Copycat murders

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Kiss on the bridge two
Kiss on the bridge three
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Blood red rose
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Blood red rose trilogy

Legendary Blue Diamond
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About the author

Mark Stewart is an inspirational author.

The transformation from when I started to edit his work until now has been amazing. His hard work and dedication has helped him to write more professionally.

Mark is undeniably the one to watch.

Mathew Lang

Mark Stewart is an acclaimed author.

He loves to write fiction right across the board from romance adventure to crime and onwards to science fiction and children's books. His fast paced novels will keep you on the edge of your seat from the first word to the last.

Mark lives in Melbourne Australia and tries to keep to the Aussie lingo and customs.

Rosemary Cantala



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