

The Starship pirates

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Part 1 – Space Princess

1

A lone human spacecraft carrying a small family was headed out towards far reaches of space towards a new home.

Cynthia Edwards sat upon the white covers of the bed within the small bedroom, holding up the electronic book as she read.

“After the Prince slay the horrible demon, he heard the faint calls from the Princess echoing down from the tallest tower. Moving swiftly, he climbed the one hundred and one stairs all the way to the top without pausing. At the top, he could hear clearly now, the voice of the Princess. With a heave, he lifted the bar that locked the door, and pushed his way inside.”

Cynthia paused in her reading, to give a dramatic silence before she continued. “The prince was hit by something, and he thought for a moment that he was been set upon by more of the demon’s henchmen, until he heard the Princess’s voice sobbing into his shoulder. ‘Oh thankyou, thankyou for saving me from that evil creature.’ She cried. The Prince carefully put away his sword lest he skewer the Princess, and held her briefly. ‘It is safe now my fair Princess. The demon is dead, by my very hands.’ He reassured her. Carefully, the prince led back down the stair, avoiding the remains of the demon, leading the Princess back to where his white steed await.”

Tiffany cooed in appreciation. “A real horse!” she said, scrunching the bed sheet in her hands as if she held real reins in her hands.

“Yes, a real horse dear.” Cynthia said smiling at her daughter’s enthusiasm.

Tiffany’s hands slowly let go of the bed, as she turned her face to her mother’s. “Mom, why can’t we have a real horse? I mean, where we’re going.”

Cynthia laid the electronic book down, knowing where this was going. “Well, the planet we’re going to has its own ecosystem, complete with its own forms of animals and plants. All of them have taken many years to adapt to the planet. A horse won’t survive there very long dear.”

Her daughter screwed up her face, the same that she used whenever she was annoyed at something that the adults couldn’t control.

“Hey, if we’re lucky, there may be an animal there that looks just like a horse.” Cynthia said, reaching out to shift some of Tiffany’s dark brown hair. “Maybe they’ll have wings, and a horn like a unicorn.”

Tiffany’s face changed for a moment, “Hey, unicorn’s don’t have wings!”

“But these one’s might.” Cynthia said smiling.

Her daughter’s face softened until it broke out into a smile. “Maybe they could fly in space, and a Prince will come and take me away!”

Cynthia let out a small laugh. “You still wouldn’t be able to breathe in space Tiffany. Your Prince would have to have his own ship to carry you in, along with his horse.”

“A small fast ship that can jump between planets.” Tiffany said, starting to build it in her mind.

“A white ship like his horse.” Cynthia offered.

“Nah.” Tiffany said, shaking her head enough to make her hair fly.

“What colour should it be then?”

“It should be silver, like his armour!”

“A silver ship.” Cynthia said holding hand to her mouth, faking surprise. “Who would have thought!” she said.

“With horses, and a kitchen that makes anything you want, and it’s own bedrooms and lavatory’s.”

“How many bedrooms?” Cynthia asked.

“Two.” Tiffany said, pronouncing it with her lips pouted. “One for the Prince, and one for the Princess.”

Cynthia smiled broadly thinking of the time. “I think it’s time for this Princess to go and clean her teeth.”

“Awe!” Tiffany said, braking into a yawn. “Can’t we read just a bit longer?”

“No. It’s time for little girls, and Princesses to be in bed.”

Tiffany obediently got up from the bed and went to the adjoining bathroom to clean her teeth. She returned to her bed, kissing her mother dutifully on the cheek.

Cynthia tucked her in, returning the kiss on Tiffany’s forehead. “Sweet dreams.” She said at the doorway, before switching off the light. The door closed as she left, plunging the room into complete darkness.

Tiffany closed her eyes, smiling in the dark as she drifted off to sleep thinking about dashing Princes in silver spaceships and flying horses.

The hum of the ship and the hiss of air moving through the vents was barely audible above the soft scuffing of her deck shoes, as Cynthia walked towards the bridge of the ship, automatically checking the environmental systems for the deck as she went.

It had been quiet ship wise, ever since they left the spaceport at *Mayfair*, making the journey very dull. They had many weeks yet until they reached *Dry Land*, 10 parsecs distant. Meanwhile it was going to be a lonely voyage with just the three of them.

She found Phelix at the bridge console, admin dozens of flicking displays and controls that ran most of the ship, with the ever-shifting redness of hyperspace beyond the plasglass. He sat there deep in concentration, tapping on the console every now and then comparing diagnostics as he checked over the ship's systems.

Cynthia stood there looking at the back of his naked neck, thinking about how ten years of hard work had finally gotten them their dream to settle upon one of the new colony worlds further out from Human space. Phelix and her had always seen that the new worlds were the place to be, with hard challenges and enormous rewards.

They'd lived half of their lives on the orbital station at *Mayfair*, working at getting a placement on one of the new colony worlds where they could earn big money as Terraformers. It was the big money industry that took worthless balls of airless rock, and turned them into prime cash earning real estate worth Mega Billions in credits to whoever had a share in the rock.

And now, they had their names firmly attached to the charter of a small planet called *Dry Land*. They weren't the only ones of course, as they couldn't afford to purchase access to a Charter themselves. There were at least a thousand other individuals who were also on the Charter, but the profits they would make from terraforming the small planet, will make them all rich enough to buy their own unformed planet later.

Cynthia's reverie was broken as Phelix sighed. He stretched his arms back over his head, drawing his clasped hands together about his neck.

"Hope you're not as tired as you look," Cynthia said.

"Huh?" Phelix turned his chair about to face her.

Cynthia moved up close, leaning over him. "I said," she moved both legs on either side of the chair, straddling him as she leaned close. "That I hope you're not as tired as you look," she finished, her face centimetres away from his, as her eyes met his.

"Oh!" He said feigning surprise, "I thought that's what you said."

He pressed his forehead against hers, tweaking her nose with his own as he dropped his arms over her shoulders.

"How is she?" He asked, his tone more serious.

"Our little Princess wishes she had a horse at our new destination, but otherwise she's coping better than I am."

"Hmmm. She's asleep?"

"She should be." Cynthia said, nuzzling him back.

Their lips met briefly. "What have you got in mind?" Phelix asked.

"I thought we'd do this," she said kissing him, "and that," she added and kissed him again, "and maybe some of this." She turned her head, kissing him a little deeper.

"Hmmm... how long did you want to do this for?" he said returning her kiss passionately.

"Well..." She leaned forward, pressing herself bodily against him, reaching one of the consoles, where she tapped expertly with one hand, as a display lit up.

"We've got another seven weeks." She said, drawing her face back. "I thought we'd try everything, at least twice."

"Twice ah?" He said, raising his eyebrows.

"Twice." She repeated, giving a deceptively demure smile before kissing him again.

They kissed more, each kiss building in passion as their hands strayed over each other's bodies, until Phelix stopped for a moment.

"Do we continue here?" he asked.

"We can sure start here." Cynthia said. "If Tiffany hasn't bothered us by now, she won't until tomorrow morning."

They pressed close together again, their passions increasing as they dared to explore each other's bodies with their hands.

Both stopped half in the process of removing each other's clothes, as an audible alarm started bleeping from the bridge console.

Cynthia frowned for a moment, looking over Phelix's shoulder to where a small display blinked iridescent red. "Proximity alert," she said.

"Can't be." Phelix said. "There shouldn't be anything out here."

They were two weeks out from *Mayfair*, travelling a hyperspace beacon that didn't run near any populated systems. The region of space was literally unoccupied by anyone. There shouldn't be anyone out here, except someone travelling between *Mayfair* and *Dry Land*.

Hastily Cynthia climbed off Phelix, allowing him to turn the chair around. He pressed controls, finding out which of the proximity sensors had gone off, in case it was malfunction. "It's the ventral hull." He said, trying to get a reading. He sat shocked for a moment until he read of the figure. "Less than two metres."

"Two? The airlock is on the ventral hull," she said thinking. "The vid. Quick the external vid." Cynthia said desperately.

He tapped at another console, almost thumping it to call up an exterior camera on the bottom half of the ship, which was used during docking procedures.

Taking up the entire view where hyperspace should have been visible, was a ship. It's hull plates were a uniform grey, and displayed no markings except for some blackened and scorched sections.

Even as they looked on, the ship grew closer still in the vid.

"Pirates?" Cynthia asked.

Phelix nodded, "I think so."

"Can we move?" She asked.

Before Phelix could answer, their ship rattled as a thud reverberated through the hull.

"I think it's too late for that." He said, knowing the inevitable.

"Tiffany!" Cynthia said.

"Get her to the escape pod!" He said.

"What about you?" She asked, one hand on his shoulder.

"Just go!" He almost yelled.

She gripped his shoulder, then turned, and almost ran down the corridor to Tiffany's room.

Tiffany lay asleep almost in the same position, as she'd left her.

"Wake up honey." Cynthia said, trying to wake up her daughter gently.

She half moaned, turning her head on her pillow.

"You have to wake up." Cynthia said.

Tiffany didn't move. On impulse, Cynthia dragged the sheets together, scooping her up bedding and all, and carried her out into the corridor. With deliberation, she turned towards the front of the ship as Tiffany squirmed in her arms.

"What's happening?" Tiffany said, half awake now from the motion.

"It's okay dear." Cynthia said wondering what to tell her child. She glanced at her face while deciding on how much to tell her. "Some people have boarded our ship, and I want you to hide in the escape pod."

"The escape pod?" Tiffany asked, yawning.

"Yes." Cynthia said, reaching the door.

She had to hold Tiffany up as she opened the sealed door with one hand. It hissed open, the lights turning on inside the pod automatically. Cynthia had to step inside to lay Tiffany down inside.

"You'll be safe in here." Cynthia said, kissing her child as she arranged the sheets.

She stepped out of the pod again, turning back to Tiffany. She had the brief thought that Tiffany actually did look like a Princess, with the white sheets splayed out like a beautiful dress.

"What's happening?" Tiffany asked; fully awake now and looking worried at been moved into the escape pod.

Cynthia wanted to hold her, to be with her, but Phelix was still on the ship.

"You'll be safe here." Cynthia repeated. "No matter what happens, you'll be safe." She promised, to herself and to Tiffany.

She stepped out and closed the door, sealing it from the rest of the ship as she pressed the controls readying it for immediate launch.

Cynthia turned to see Phelix coming her way.

"They're in the lower decks now, and they've taken the engine off-line." He said.

"That definitely isn't friendly," she said worried.

"I couldn't find anything to use as a weapon." He said, frustrated. There were no weapons on their ship, been a civilian vessel having left a major space dock. It hadn't stopped Phelix from looking for a long metal bar, but anything resembling a club was firmly attached as one of the ship's fixtures.

"It doesn't matter. Maybe they aren't pirates." She said hopefully, but hoping it wasn't true.

Phelix didn't argue with her, but he held the same hopes. He looked at her, seeing her clothes were still askew from their interrupted encounter. "You'd better fix your clothes up," he said pointing.

She looked down, realising she looked half undressed. Quickly she straightened herself up, and closed her blouse.

"There's no need to do that for us!" A voice boomed out from down the corridor.

Both Phelix and Cynthia turned to look, where at first one man, then two, then four appeared from the lower deck hatch.

Phelix noted with clarity, that each one of them held a weapon, two of which were pointed in their direction.

"What do you want?" Phelix yelled loudly.

"You're travelling in uninhabited space." The lead man said spacing out his words.

Phelix wanted to ask, *so what?* But he noted the synchronised movement of the group of four as they advanced slowly down the corridor towards them, almost as if they'd practised it before. The other two in the group checked side doors as they advanced forward, locking the doors open as they went.

"This region is in dispute." The front man said. He was dressed like the other three, in slim ship suits, suitable for the unchanging environment of ships, as they didn't offer any real protection against varying temperatures. His dark features were topped by roughish black hair, seemingly swept back with a hand from his smooth face.

"We need to make sure you aren't a claim jumper," the man said.

"A claim jumper?" Phelix asked, as the group were less than ten metres away now.

"Just you two on board?" The man asked, ignoring Phelix's perplexed question.

"Just us," Phelix said, almost lying through his teeth.

"Good. But we'll just check your logs the same," the man said half dropping his weapon to the deck as he approached them.

Phelix sighed, feeling that maybe they weren't pirates after all. He barely let the air out of his lungs when the man's hand came up again, and a pulse of energy spat out from his weapon, hitting him in the chest. Phelix could hear a scream from behind him, realising his mistake just before he died.

Cynthia heard herself scream as Phelix slumped to the deck, his body still. She looked up at the man, sure of what they wanted now. She stepped backwards along the wall as the man stepped over Phelix's body towards her. She felt the controls under her farthest hand for the escape pod's manual release button and jabbed it with a finger.

There was a jolt through the deck as the pod leapt free from the ship, igniting its engines as soon as it cleared its alcove.

"What did you do?" The man asked, looking from the controls she'd just pushed. He held his directly at her, with a threatening expression on his face.

Cynthia felt tears spill from her eyes, as she giggled lightly with near hysteria. She knew what was going to happen to her, but she knew that they wouldn't get her child. Not now.

"I saved myself." She told him cryptically.

She knew that her child was safe from harm now, that they could do anything and she would know Tiffany was safe from harm.

The energy pulse was like a glimmer of light out of the corner of her eye. She didn't even notice it until realised she was falling, and even then she was already dying.

The man said something but Cynthia didn't hear it, his words falling on dead ears.

Tiffany heard talking through the bulkhead and then a loud scream before the escape pod jolted underneath her. The sound of the engines firing drowned out her calls to her mother as the pod accelerated away from the two joined ships.

The engines continued for half an hour, pushing the small escape pod away from danger and the hyperspace beacon, further out into the uncharted reaches of hyperspace before they cut out, turning the pod suddenly quiet.

Tiffany called out in the quiet for both her mother and her father, before she broke into tears. The lack of sleep and the situation slowly caught up with her as she fell asleep in the sheets of her bed.

It was hours later that she awoke, alone and afraid in the pod. There was no sound, not even the familiar hum of the ship engines, except for the sound of her breathing within the confined space.

She sat there listening, waiting for her mother, for anything to happen for several hours. She was patient, not whimpering as she huddled against the padded wall, clutching some of sheets to her like a stuffed animal. She only moved when she felt the need to relieve herself, using the refresher unit built inside the pod before resuming her position on the floor.

By that night her time, she was feeling hungry enough to move from her position and go searching for food within the escape pod. She found the storage panels in the back of the pod, stocked with food rations. She took only a few, enough to satisfy her hunger until she slept.

It was days before Tiffany came to the conclusion that her mother wasn't going to open the door again. She slowly settled into the escape pod, wishing all the while that she were on the ship.

The escape pod could have drifted for decades through the backlit redness of hyperspace on its own inertia, if not for the fact its power cell was only designed to work for maximum of two years of sustained use.

The oxygen supply would last only as long as the power did, constantly scrubbed and regenerated along with the food supply. A determined group could last the two years, if not for the small confines and the lack of visual stimulation.

But Tiffany was but a child, not nearly a teenager yet, without anything to amuse herself, or her parents to talk to. She might have whiled away the time reading if she'd had her book, if... instead she sat against the bulkhead, holding her bed sheet over herself rocking herself as her mind wondered what had happened to her parents. Slowly during the days, she buried herself deeper into her own consciousness, wishing that her parents were there.

2

The void is home to more than just predators. There are those who watch and wait for something.

Inside the hull, the electronics pinged with an emergency signal, not audible to any form of hearing but detectable only within one-billion kilometres with sophisticated electronics, like those found on board any space faring ship.

The nearest human ship was light years away now, the very same one that had boarded Tiffany's ship. It had let the small escape pod go without chase, knowing that it would drift into uncharted regions, thus endorsing the death of the occupants when its batteries and oxygen eventually failed.

Unbeknownst to the ship, there was another ship in the uncharted regions, slowly closing in upon the small escape pod. It had detected the faint electronics of the pod from extreme ranges, with a much superior system than anything possessed by humans, for the ship was not of human origin.

It had watched with detached interest the meeting of the two vessels on long-range equipment, and the subsequent release of the pod. They watched and waited, curious but restrained, preferring to gather as much information as they could without interference.

It was a patient process, one they had performed many times before, for they were explorers, far from their own home system also. Their race had already found traces of civilizations only dozens of worlds, species that had evolved past the point of stone tools, developing religions, arts and sciences to explain the meaning of the stars above their atmosphere. They'd also discovered many dead worlds... Worlds that had nurtured peoples who'd eventually extinguished themselves in brief displays of power before burning themselves out of existence.

The number of space faring people found could be counted on two digits, and the single explorer ship believed now that they'd found a third one. One that appeared to be more advanced than the other two, possibly even more civilised than the other two also.

The reports passed back to the explorer ship, from the previous contacts were well detailed. The accounts of first contact, the communication and the eventual destruction of those contact teams. Their first two failures had come from contact with civilisations that may have had space ships, but were also violently dangerous.

The crew of this explorer ship had a bad history to overcome. Some of the crew would even profess to the explorer program been jinxed, and that any contact with alien species would be bad for them. But there was also the hardliners, those whose sense of curiosity and wanting to be the first, overrode their sense of self-preservation. They were there to explore, to discover new civilizations, and foremost, to make first contact.

Reluctantly they watched the two ships, until the escape pod appeared.

Many questions were asked, what it was, why it left the two bigger ships behind which continued along their previous vector. They sat and watched, as the pod continued at an almost sluggish pace through hyperspace.

The two ships eventually disappeared from their sensors, leaving the small pod behind which continued to drift un-powered, but emitting a continuous signal.

The crew watched with increasing fascination, as the pod drifted like a unclaimed credit slip in the wind, a possible treasure trove of information about the civilisation, just drifting away in space.

Several days after the disappearance of the two ships from their sensors, they decided to move. The pod was drifting out into regions they didn't know about, but were sure to be clear any alien activity, having watched the same region of space for over two months.

It was slow and cautious, manoeuvring the explorer ship slowly, all the while passively scanning both hyperspace and the pod for possible traps. There were a few on board who suggested that the pod was a garbage container, rigged with explosives to detonate it once clear of the local space lanes. There was other wild speculation about space born colonies, or maybe it was hazardous materials from the engines of the ships. Whatever it was, they still proceeded cautiously.

The pod never shifted or showed signs of doing anything else as they approached, which was a let down for some of the crew, hoping it would do something. After several weeks of watching the pod doing nothing except drift and make electronic bleeping, the decision was made to pick it up.

The pod was small, compared to the explorer ship. Small enough that it was carefully tractorred into the smaller of the two hangers, been very careful not to mishandle it or bump it unnecessarily. It was sealed and locked in a dampening field before the ship made its way out of alien space at a faster rate, just in case they were spotted, making high speed through hyperspace for more familiar areas of space.

The Captain and the Science chief stared at the angular shaped object within the field. They'd kept it contained for two days until they reached an area of space nearby and traversed back into normal space. It was a system, with a single star that had gone nova eons ago and no intact planets left. They stopped the ship outside of the orbital plane, where millions of asteroids drifted where several planets had possibly been.

"It looks safe enough." The Captain said, speaking their native language.

The science officer blinked. It was facial gesture passed down generations of their species that indicated an affirmation. "Yes. All scans indicate that it is quite safe. No hazardous substances, nothing explosive or even reactive. Not even antimatter."

"It won't do something nasty, like release some poison if we bump it?"

"No sir. Though it is hollow, the gases inside are benign. I believe we could breathe it without any difficulty."

Dafurn took a breath, as she knew what would come next. "It appears to be some sort of life capsule."

"A life capsule!" The Captain said, his voice raising two octaves as he turned to the Science officer.

Dafurn saw his face fur ripple with agitation before it settled.

"Is there a life form in there?" The Captain asked.

"Yes sir. But..."

"A alien life form." The Captain said, overriding her.

"It appears..." Dafurn tried to continue.

"I don't like this one bit." The Captain said, ignoring her.

"To be very small and inactive!" Dafurn raised her voice to make sure she was heard.

The Captain turned to look at her, finally hearing her. "Is it sick?" He asked, his tone still and octave higher than normal.

"I don't believe so, but I cannot confirm this without knowing what is normal for the alien sir."

The Captain turned to look back at the capsule, silent for a moment.

"Its just the one alien?" He asked.

"Yes sir."

He was silent again, thinking of the possibilities. "How are our containment facilities?"

"One hundred percent sir."

"Okay," He said blinking. "Transfer it, the whole capsule, to our main containment area. If there's anything there, transfer them somewhere else to make room. Match their atmosphere before you even breach that field. I don't want that thing reacting to our air. I want it done cautiously and safely. No shaving edges. The safety of this ship and crew is paramount. But I do want to have a live specimen to study, so treat it with due caution. We don't know why it was out here."

Dafurn stood there a moment, making sure that the Captain had nothing else to say.

"That's all," he said.

"Sir," she said, blinking once before he turned away.

The entire process of transfer took only a couple of hours, first moving a few live animal specimens to a different holding area, cleaning the place out completely, then building up the right mix of gases before transporting the capsule to the containment area with the advanced matter transport device, securing it within another dampening field before the final process.

Dafurn was in control of the entire situation. If anything went wrong, only she would be to blame. Out of a crew of 42, she couldn't expect any less. Analysing and examining all the new alien materials and life forms was her skill and profession. The Captain had his skills, and did well, looking after both the ship and crew, making sure they followed their mission plan.

"It's ready," Zaget called out. He was one of the younger crewmembers, getting his digits dirty for the first time on this voyage. He had plans to become a great zoologist some day, but first he had to overcome his fear of been bitten by anything with teeth.

"Okay, lets drop the dampening field," she said, "and watch those readings." She added, referring to one of the technicians who had her eyes on the capsule instead of her panels.

She had one eye on the capsule herself, but the other was firmly on the gas chromatograph, watching for anything even remotely suspicious as the hull of the capsule came into contact with warm air.

The readings shifted as the hull warmed up, but nothing happened for several minutes. Dafurn started to order on the technicians to run another scan, when the capsule made a sound.

Everyone in the room stood stock quiet as they watched two lights blink on one side of the capsule before it hissed as a door popped open on the side, lowering itself to the deck plates on the hiss of pneumatic coils.

"Watch those readings!" Dafurn said, telling the rest to watch the panels, but she was sure, like herself, that they were also watching the capsule. She only hoped that everything was been recorded.

With precision, the door stopped short of the deck, then everything was quiet again. No sounds, no flashing lights. Nothing.

Dafurn turned to one of the technicians, "Run an internal scan," she ordered.

The technician turned to her, his facial fur shifting angles.

"Now!" She said, raising her voice and octave.

The technician hurried to comply, tapping the console to run the complex scans of the capsule.

Dafurn moved over to the console, tapping in queries as data started flowing back. She had both eyes on the panels when the technician beside her brushed her shoulder.

She looked up at him, "What is it?"

"Look sir," he said, his face fur now fluttering.

She turned in looked towards the capsule, and saw a thing... no, a creature sticking its head out of the doorway.

It had two small dark eyes on a large pale bare face. The fur it did have, hung from its scalp as long as Dafurn's forearm. Curiously it also wore garments over the rest of its body, large white cloths that hid it from view.

Dafurn watched as the creature open its mouth, making incomprehensible sounds. It stepped out of the doorway, across the hatch, looking at Dafurn and the other technicians through the containment field.

The creature stepped to the edge of the hatch like it was about to take off with the large white cloth as wings, before it fell to the deck.

Dafurn cringed knowing it would have hurt, but instead of rolling over, the creature covered its face up and started making an awful mournful sound.

Upon the deactivation of the field around the escape pod, the sophisticated electronics in the pod detected a suitable gravity field and safe atmosphere. But the air temperature was still dangerously cold. When the temperature finally steadied at a habitable level, the pod's electronics opened the hatch automatically, dropping the door down outside for a safe evacuation from the pod.

When the hatch popped open, Tiffany was surprised. One moment the capsule was her haven, closed, secure from whatever was outside, the next moment it popped open by itself.

Tiffany stared at the open doorway, looking outside to a wall lined with unfamiliar patterns. Slowly she got up, hugging the sheet around her body, unsure and afraid. Her mother had told her that she'd be safe inside upon closing her inside, and now the door was open again. Tiffany thought she heard voices, and wondered if her mother was out there.

She edged her face around the doorway, to look upon a strange spectacle. Six tall, furry creatures stared back at her with bright blue eyes. When they didn't move, Tiffany stepped out of the doorway onto the deck, calling out for her mother.

There wasn't any reply, not even from the six creatures. They stood stationary like stuffed animals.

At the edge of the door, Tiffany suddenly found her foot caught upon the sheet. She waved her arms about to keep balance, but slowly tipped over, sprawling hard onto the deck.

She started to cry, both from the pain and been lost without her mother. She balled her eyes out as she pulled the sheet over her head wanting to block out everything, the pod, the deck, everything. She just wanted her mother back.

Tiffany didn't hear the chittering from the creatures over her sobbing, nor did she see the creature that past through the containment field with the sheet over her head.

Zaget and the other four technicians watched with some envy and more than a little concern as Dafurn entered the containment field.

They hadn't yet confirmed that the air didn't have any other trace gases that affected them. That it wasn't immediately poisonous wasn't the only concern. Particular trace gasses and atomic isotopes could have longer-term affects on them, which could possibly hurt them now and kill them later.

Zaget found that he was forced to run the final scans, determining that the air was indeed safe for them to breath. Relieved, he looked up to where Dafurn approached the creature on the deck, and then felt a wave of anxiety as she bent down over it.

As Dafurn reached the small creature, she experimentally put a palm on the white finding they were cloths as she suspected. The sound the creature made dragged through her lower ears, making her uncomfortable.

It didn't react or it didn't notice her when she pressing her palm down, finding it soft without any hard exoskeleton

Slowly, the creature ceased making its sounds. Dafurn withdrew her palm as the creature stirred. She watched with fascination as it lifted the cloth away from its face, revealing a smooth rounded face. It had two large ears placed high up underneath the long fur that trailed behind its head, and it had a nose that protruded clearly from its face, set just below two brown eyes.

Dafurn saw that the two eyes looked directly at her, not wavering.

It was uniquely fascinating to have a creature staring at her from such a close distance, without it either trying to eat her or run away. She had to remind herself that this creature was intelligent, and not just some sort of prosaic animal or adaptive plant form.

"Do you comprehend me?" Dafurn asked, speaking slowly.

She realised that chance of it understanding her was slim, but there was no risk involved in at least trying to find out if it did understand other languages intuitively. Scientists and philosophers from home also kept up the strange notion that it might be possible to read minds. Though they hadn't proved it conclusively, there was always the chance that other species could read minds.

"What is your name?" She asked. "I am called Dafurn."

The creature shifted, appearing to bend and sit up, but she couldn't tell under the folds of cloth. It faced her, tipping its head one way then another, showing a reasonable amount of flexibility in its neck.

It reminded Dafurn that they should get the creature into the high-resolution bio scanner when they had the opportunity, to find out what it looked like on the inside. Its skeletal structure appeared somewhat stunted. She didn't know if this was because it lived in a higher gravity or some other ecological conditions of its home planet. Only the scanner would be able to reveal a possible answer.

It moved its mouth, making odd sounds, which Dafurn didn't understand. She faced to the other technicians. "What's out status on the translators?" She asked them.

Fajur replied. "The ship's computer can process everything its says, but we'll need at least a thousand distinct words to build a simple translator vocabulary. It will be at least three months before we can get something working."

"Three months isn't good enough," she replied.

She saw the technicians become motionless, and Fajur's facial fur was sweeping backwards and forwards. Dafurn couldn't understand why, until she felt something touch the side of her face.

She turned her head around enough before fear gripped her, as she could see the creature had extended an arm from underneath the cloths, pressing its digits against her face.

Before her fear could wear off, the creature withdrew its palm to return to its seated position, making more sounds. Keeping an eye on the creature, she spoke to Fajur. "How is the status of the molecular implants?"

"A molecular implant translator? Are you sure?"

"Its one of the listed methods we're authorised to try if we warrant it. And I'm more than willing, if we'll get results sooner."

"Shall I start prepping one?" Fajur asked.

"Yes, but just a moment."

Dafurn looked at the creature, and extended her palm towards it slowly, indicating that she meant no harm. It watched her palm without any particular reaction other than to shift its head. Carefully she touched the creature, find the pale pink skin warm and oddly smooth.

"Use one of the enhanced implants. If we can get it to learn our language, we might as well learn everything we can from it."

"I'll start right away."

"Fajur?" Dafurn asked once more.

"Yes?"

"Move slowly when you leave please."

"Okay."

3

The foot bone is connected to the anklebone; the anklebone is connected to the leg bone.

Dafurn returned to the other side of the containment field before a force fields was engaged. The creature had been as curious about them as they were of it. It spent an appreciable amount of time watching the technicians through the force field.

It stayed behind the field after it discovered it couldn't pass through it, spending some time testing the invisible field before resuming its watch over them.

Dafurn spent some time with Fajur; trying to figure out the best way to accomplished implanting the creature.

"We'll need to get it into the bio scanner, so we know where to locate the implant," Fajur said. "And to implant it, it'll have to be subdued. It cannot be moving when I implant. We'll need to drug it, but we have no idea what affects it or how, until..."

"We get it into the bio scanner." Dafurn finished for him. "I understand. We need information to get us access to more information. So we use the best tools we have on palm."

"This is so."

"Except we don't want to be scaring or hurting the creature, since we don't know what it is capable of."

"There were no weapons found upon the capsule?" Fajur asked.

"No, but it does not mean the creature itself cannot cause us harm in some way. Or that it might harm or kill itself. We'll loose a good opportunity of close study because of something as simple as stubbing one of its digits."

"That is so. Then we must be careful. No force should be used, only coercion at the most. Have you considered trying to scan it during its sleep cycle?"

"I have, but it is too difficult. It spent its time within the capsule, which we cannot get the scanner into. It will require some cooperation from the creature. Some creative thinking will be needed."

Dafurn had the bio scanner brought right into the containment area, where the creature could see it. It certainly looked intimidating to her, elevated up on its end, and large enough to hold a large alien within its scanner bed. Next to the capsule, it was almost as big, only lacking the same mass as the capsule.

Dafurn knew it was a matter of confidence, trust, and a little communication. After it's sleep cycle, the creature came out of its capsule with a little trepidation to see her waiting with the bio scanner.

It didn't have the large cloths it had had when it first came out, but it still wore long clothing that covered it bodily.

"I'd like you to get into the bio scanner." Dafurn said, knowing that the creature wouldn't understand her. She talked to it anyhow, sure that it knew she was trying to communicate something to it. She looked to the bio scanner, to point it out to the creature, but it took no real notice of it. "There seems to be no universal language to says how to indicate something of importance," she said, more to herself than to the creature.

She considered that this would happened, so she approached the bio scanner, making sure the creature watched as she lay against the inclined bed.

"Run the basic scan," she told Zaget who stood on the other side of the containment field at the consoles. "And project the images up onto the wall."

She could see the creature from her position but not the wall, which was behind her. But the reaction was unmistakable when the filtered image from the scanner was projected onto the wall.

It directed its attention between her and the wall, to see Dafurn's skeleton and major organs projected in proportional depth.

She stayed there for an appropriate amount of time, moving her arms a little, and turned her head from side to side, displaying what she expected of the creature. She could only hope it did the same when she eventually stepped out.

The creature looked up at her, before lifting an arm and levelling it first at her then the scanner and the wall in turn.

Dafurn hadn't seen this gesture before, and asked the others. "What do you think it means?"

"Stretching its arm?" Zaget suggested.

Panewt, one of the other technicians made a suggestion. "Maybe it want's to see itself on the wall."

Dafurn accepted this, and swivelled the heavy scanner towards the wall where the projection had been.

Turning back to the creature, she indicated for it to get into the scanner again.

For a moment she wondered if she had to re-demonstrate the scanner again, when the creature approached her. It stepped up into the scanner, and turned about to look at the wall.

The bio scanner was still turned on, as and image appeared instantly upon the wall. The creature made some sort of sound, not like its normal speech but it stayed in the scanner bed for the moment.

"Run the full scan," Dafurn ordered Zaget. "But keep the projection only of the basic internals."

To Tiffany, the creatures had proved funny looking, resembling large teddy bears from one of the stories her mother had read to her once some time ago. She wasn't sure what to make of them, except that they proved to be friendly.

When she woke up the next morning, she wasn't sure if the bears would still be there when she exited the escape pod, wearing her pyjamas.

One of the bears stood there next to a large bed like couch. She couldn't tell if it was the same one as yesterday, as it appeared almost the same as the other bears who hid behind the invisible force field she'd found, with tan coloured fur, and the dark eyes and ears.

As she looked at the bear, it made odd movement with its head as it made the same sounds as yesterday, as if it were speaking to her. She watched as the bear stepped into the couch, speaking something.

When the wall lit up, she was impressed by the colourful display. It moved and shifted like a real person, until she recognised it was like an x-ray machine. She looked from the bear to the image, making out its skeleton amidst several other objects.

Tiffany pointed to the couch when the bear got out.

"You mean that creates the pictures on the wall?"

There was a moment of talked between some of the bear, until the one who'd been in the couch, turned it towards the wall.

"Oh, you want me to play with it!" She exclaimed with joy, before jumping up into the couch.

Almost instantly an image formed.

"I can see my insides!" Tiffany said as she moved about, turning first to one side then another, as she tried to work out where her bones were.

In a moment she was making hand gestures, finding out if closing her eyes made any difference, and generally playing around with the machine. It was like a big toy to her, something to play with and to occupy her mind for a few hours since she'd had no nothing to do for several days before the opening of the escape pod's hatch yesterday.

"It is strange how long that creature stayed on the bio scanner," said Zaget.

"We got enough reading then?" Dafurn asked.

"Enough for a complete molecular breakdown," Fajur replied.

"What's the status of our progress then?" said Dafurn.

"The preliminary results show implanting will be very successful within the creature's high brain areas," Fajur explained. "At the moment, we are trying to narrow down the best possible location for minimal disturbance."

"We also have the drug proteins chemically suited to immobilising and negating the creature's cognisant functions for the operation," Zaget added. "I'm just synthesizing enough for the operation at the moment."

"So we'll be ready by the time the creature is in isn't next sleep cycle?"

"Yes." Zaget and Fajur answered together.

"Good. Make the necessary preparations, and finalize the implant. Hopefully by the time the creature wakes up, we'll start seeing results."

Dafurn proceeded after the creature had gone back into its capsule for another sleep cycle.

No testing was required for the neutralising drug. They released it directly into the ventilation systems for the containment area, and waited for a few minutes before cycling the air back.

Six of them entered the containment field, pushing an operating bed between them.

"This is your show," Jazir told Dafurn. She one of the medical officers for the ship, but she also had preliminary training with alien biology, so she had the task of implanting the creature.

"Okay, you get ready and I'll fetch the creature," Dafurn told them, and turned towards the capsule.

She approached the open doorway with a little trepidation. She was unafraid, but unsure of what actually lay inside. They'd run full scans of the small craft for anything and everything, but entering something made by aliens thrilled her. It was the whole reason she joined the Explorer group, to discover new technologies and aliens, and get the chance actually meet something that couldn't be conceived by her species.

Dafurn stepped up, putting her palms on the doorway, as she felt someone brush her arm.

She turned to find Zaget right beside her. "In case you need some help," he said.

She was appreciative of the gesture, blinking her eyes at him before returning her attention to what lay inside.

The first thing she noticed was how small it looked on the inside. The outside of the capsule hid the fact that the inside was small. She could only guess that much of the capsule's systems lay within the hulls.

Scattered about the floor and seats in casual abandon, were the same cloths that the creature had first appeared with.

They were spread about in a chaotic manner, with the creature in the dead centre, like an insect caught in the middle of a web. The walls were a dark uniform grey, very unappealing to the senses. Maybe that was why the creature wore such bright clothes Dafurn thought to herself.

She stuck a single digit out, dragging back one of the cloths from the creature carefully. There was no telling what could be hidden underneath, but nothing moved, and the creature didn't stir.

It lay there, with its long fur loose about it and its upper limbs beside it. She prodded one limb, before picking it up. It was quite supple. Dafurn hadn't given much thought about how to do this. She'd thought she would simply pick it up, and carry it out to the waiting operating bed. She'd have to come in close contact with it to carry the alien creature. They had verified that it was safe to be with it, that they wouldn't catch anything harmful from it, but it didn't shake the deep fears.

Dafurn steeled herself, and carefully lifted one side, finding that she had to slide both arms right under the creature to pick it up. The creature remained limp in her arms, as she carried it out, placing it upon the bed.

Jazir got to work straight away, setting up the instruments above the creature's head.

"I did not know it looked so pale," Fajur commented as he looked upon the creature.

"Those are the cloths it is wearing," Zaget said assuming Fajur was talking about the clothing. He found a seam in the clothes, and lifted a portion up to look underneath. "See, it's colouring it the same underneath as its face and palms."

"Fascinating," Fajur said, leaning closer as Zaget lifted the other side up.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't move the creature," Jazir said as she looked up from one of the monitors. "I'm trying to align the molecular traverser."

Zaget withdrew his palm, to stand back with Dafurn. "Some of the preliminary biology results from the bio scan show that the creature is female. Taking a look just now, I would concur with the report. There are some other indications that it is not as old as we were expecting."

"Then this could be a child?" Dafurn asked.

"If I were to compare it to a Kailee, I would say yes. It's has a comparative stature to one of our children, and all the scans show that it growing."

"An alien child." Dafurn murmured, wondering at the value of such of first contact. "It should prove easier to learn our language then."

"Quiet down there!" Jazir said.

She had her face pressed against the viewer as she manipulated the controls, aligning implant site within the computer. Though the computer could track any movements that the occupant on the bed made; she felt better that there wasn't any. Having unrelated conversation going on in the background also tended to distract her.

Once the target site was aligned, she ran the micro scanner to make sure nothing had changed within the brain tissue. It came out the same as before, a perfect place for an implant. There would be some tissue movement when finished, but the nanites would correct any adjustment, as well as help to heal any tissue that was damaged.

Jazir initiated the implanting, and watched closely. Though the process was automatic, she watched anyhow as infinitesimal fields were extended from the instruments into the creature's skull, were it created a micro cavity at the target site. Though it produced a vacuum, the field held it back as the implant was transported directly into the cavity, taking up a space not much bigger than a hair. The implant wasn't the only thing transported, as it was coated with a layer of nanites that would help in integrating the implant.

Once the implant was in, the field was diminished until the brain tissue was almost in contact before it switched off automatically. There was a chime from the computer signalling it had finished. Jazir drew her face away from the viewer slowly, to look up at the others. "It's done. The implant will start to establish connections immediately as the nanites help to re-establish the brain tissue, before they disperse into other areas of the body through the blood stream. From there, it's all up to the creature."

"Thank you Jazir," said Dafurn. "Can we move the creature back to its capsule?"

"You could," Jazir replied hesitantly, "But I wouldn't risk it. Give the implant a couple of hours to make some firm connections first."

Dafurn blinked in understanding.

"So we wait," Zaget said.

"No, we get on with our other work," Dafurn said. "There's still a hundred samples collected from the last planetoid that need identifying."

Zaget made a snuffling sound in disgust.

Tiffany rolled over as she woke up, looking up at the partially illuminated walls of the escape pod. There was a prickly sensation on the back of her head, which she scratched at underneath her hair with one hand as she yawned. As she sat up the feeling passed away, leaving her sitting wondering what had woken her up.

The bear like creatures had occupied some of her time yesterday, as she wondered if they had something else to show her today.

She grabbed a couple of ration bars for breakfast before she stepped out of the escape pod to find one of them standing inside the field, as if it was waiting there for her. There were a couple of other's behind the field at consoles, but not as many as before.

Tiffany looked around, wondering if they were going to show her anything, but the bed from yesterday was gone, and there wasn't anything else to be seen. It was just the single bear, standing there.

It looked at her as stared back at it, wondering if it was going to do something.

As she waited, it opened its mouth and started to say something in its chattering language. There was a slight delay before a few guttural sounding words of station speech seemed to echo through her head. "Welcome to our ship."

Dafurn wondered for a moment if the implant hadn't worked. Maybe it hadn't had enough time to integrate itself into the creature's brain. Maybe it hadn't been able to decipher its language from its memory. Or maybe the implant just wasn't working. She was about to turn to Fajur who was sitting behind her when the creature spoke up.

There was a choking sound before a few almost recognisable Kailee words came out. "You can talk?"

Tiffany clutched her throat, trying to understand what had just come out of her mouth. It hadn't been station speech. It had sounded more like one of the bears. She hadn't tried to imitate them, yet that was how it came out, and she couldn't understand how.

The creature in front of her spoke again, the voice in her head almost catching up with the creature.

"Yes, we can speak. And now you will be able to speak with us."

"How..." Tiffany felt her throat and mouth shift to form shapes that she wasn't used to, but continued, "...can I understand you?"

Dafurn has expected such a question, and was hesitant to give a truthful answer. It wasn't acceptable for them to operate on another Kailee without their knowledge. How another species would react, especially one more primitive, was a concern. So she avoided the specifics.

"We have a device that allows you to speak and understand our language. That is why we need you on the bio scanner before we could get it to work on you."

Tiffany had little understanding of bio scanners or whatever they had used to get her to understand their language, but she was slowly coming to like it.

"You are strange looking bears."

Dafurn noted that the implant seemed to be quickly learning the characteristics of the creature, as its words were becoming clearer, but obviously there were some inconsistencies between their languages still.

It took some time, between asking precise questions, answering questions, talking non-stop about their own species, that Dafurn slowly learnt what she could of the creature.

She kept thinking of it as a creature, but it was a defined species. Unfortunately it didn't understand what it was, as it was too young to comprehend. But it knew it was a girl, defined as a young female, and called Tiffany. The name did not translate too well; as did her own name to Tiffany, but it was more than comprehensible.

Other than calling it by its name, Dafurn kept reminding herself to call it by a pronoun when not in its company.

"So how is the creature? I've read your reports so far that you've sent back home, but it doesn't sound very compelling that this creature is anywhere as intelligent as us," said Captain Rastu.

To Dafurn it sounded as if the Captain had doubts about Tiffany, but she knew better. He had little or no interest in aliens, meeting them or otherwise. But still, he always tried to keep informed of things, anything and everything on board the ship because it affected his duty.

"She has adjusted well to our language, and takes great interest in learning anything she can about us."

"Isn't that dangerous? Might she learn something like how to poison us and take over the ship?" Rastu said.

She looked him in the eyes, wondering if he were joking, but she'd never seen him trying to act humorous before. "I'm only telling her the barest of facts about our people and our culture. I've said nothing about the ship or its systems at all, and nothing that could jeopardise its safety."

Rastu seemed a little consoled by that, blinking in response. "We have several more months to finish exploring this chain of stars. What are your plans with the alien before we return home."

"There have been requests for more information on the technological level of the contact species. Tiffany, the creature appears to have little or no knowledge, so we have plans to reverse engineer the capsule. We expect to get a good understanding the base levels of technological ability."

"I expect you'll be careful," Rastu said.

"I won't be involved in the reverse engineering directly sir. Panewt will be heading that task as I make sure the creature is comfortable without the capsule," said Dafurn. She could still see the look in the Captains eyes, "But I'll make sure Panewt is well aware of your concerns sir."

"See that you do."

4

**Though a tower may seem impregnable, the Princess is still vulnerable to attack
from within**

"We'd like to take apart your capsule," Dafurn told Tiffany. She hadn't actually told her before what they had planned to do, but had hoped she would agree.

Tiffany was quiet for a moment, as she looked from the escape pod to the Kailee who were waiting nearby to begin work on it. She remembered her mother's words promising her safety, but she had never come back. It had been many days now, and Tiffany didn't know what to expect. She believed she'd see her parents again, but she didn't know when.

"Will you take me apart too?" Tiffany asked, looking up at her.

Dafurn was aware for the first time, of the innocence of Tiffany as she saw a streak of water run from one of her eyes. She was uniquely alone, a single child of her species amongst aliens who seemed to care more about what they could get out of her than for her as a intelligent and independent entity. She could only half conceive what it might be like to be amongst aliens, been asked odd questions, poked and prodded by their alien technology, wondering what was going to happen to her.

"We don't want to take you apart," said Dafurn. She tried to put on the most congenial attitude, and hoped it would come through the translation correctly. "We couldn't learn more by taking you apart. It would be ineffective, and..."

Dafurn could see it wasn't coming across right, and it wasn't the translation process. There was an understanding to Tiffany, and that was she was a child. Even Kailee children didn't talk the same as adults. She hadn't had children herself.

Most of the crew on the ship didn't have children, as they hadn't reached their reproductive cycles yet, but she'd been around children. She'd been a child herself once, and she knew they needed to be talked to in a certain way. She knew she should have realised this when talking to Tiffany before, but she'd been analytical about it, thinking as an adult talking to an alien, not talking to a child.

"We've not going to take you apart, because it would be too messy, and we wouldn't be able to get you back together again. Panewt there will take your capsule apart, then put back together again, exactly as it is now. So you won't even know that it had been apart. Okay?"

Tiffany seemed to accept this. "Yes," she said, blinking at the same time almost like a Kailee.

"We'll get what you need from the capsule, and make you a space in the next room just for you whilst they work on it here. We can decorate the space whatever way you want."

"However I want?" Tiffany looked up, with a sudden change in expression, from the sad to almost happy expression Dafurn had learned from her.

Dafurn had thought Panewt was going to do the hard work in taking apart the capsule piece by piece, recording everything from atomic content in the alloys used in construction, to electrical pulses and circuit maps of all the systems and computers on the capsule. But she hadn't figured that equipping one of the smaller containment areas, as a liveable room for child, even if it weren't Kailee, would be so difficult.

There were the amenities for sure. A reclamation system for solid and liquid body wastes just like most life forms, and storage for the nutritional foods that was transferred from the capsule. Dafurn had tried one of the ration bars as Tiffany had called them, after a thorough analysis of their content for toxins of course, and found them mildly distasteful.

No, it wasn't just that. There were the additions that Tiffany wanted, that were hard to describe until Dafurn understood their functionality. There was the bathing container that had warm running water, placed behind a partition with the reclamation system. A large cushioned sleeping cot, and then there were the hanging cloths around all the walls as decorations.

What Dafurn didn't understand, was why they had to be all one colour. There was no trouble in creating what she wanted, as the ship systems could cope. Dafurn just didn't know why it had to be all white.

"It's because all Princess's have white rooms," Tiffany said.

Dafurn found that the word couldn't be translated. Something in the meaning or the description couldn't be interpreted.

"What is a..." she found she couldn't say the word.

"A Princess." Tiffany supplied.

"Yes, that. Please describe it."

Tiffany looked at Dafurn, "You don't know what a Princess is?"

"It's not known to me."

"A Princess is a beautiful girl, with long hair, and ride big beautiful white horses. She usually gets into some sort of trouble because of someone who wants to do harm to her, where a Prince will ride to her rescue, to slay demons or climb mountains, or anything to save her."

Dafurn wasn't completely clear of the meaning, as there were a few other words that were incomprehensible. But the space had been assigned to Tiffany, and the description partially matched her.

"A girl like you?" Dafurn asked.

"My mom and dad used to call me their little Princess," she replied, looking despondently about at the half decorated space. She wished her parents were there, for her mother to tell her stories, and her father to swing her around the play centre. He used to tell her that she was getting big and some day he wouldn't be able to do it.

The places she'd seen on the alien ship were plain by comparison. Everything was uniform in colour. No patterns, no pretty colours, and no children. She hadn't seen any of the Kailee anywhere near her height. They were all big and adult sized.

"Your mom and dad. They gave birth to you?"

Tiffany looked to Dafurn and blinked in response.

"We only know our parents for a short time, before we join the schooling community, to learn about life and everything," Dafurn said.

"You get separated from your mom and dad?"

"By no means. We still get to see them whenever we want, but we live separately. My siblings and I lived with many others my age as we grew up, learning many things, including those that maybe we weren't supposed to know." There was a deep sound from Dafurn's throat as her neck fur vibrated. "But that was normal. There were perhaps a few things I could have done, some feelings I should not have hurt. But that is life."

"You had brother's and sisters?"

"Three sisters, and one brother. Rajur. Though Kilar seemed to take most of his time. I think they have become a pair now."

"I wish I had a brother or sister. Mum and Dad only ever had me. They said they'd think about another child when we reached our new home."

"You are an only child. That is terrible," said Dafurn, very empathic.

A single Kailee child was very rare in Kailee culture, and usually treated badly by other kids. Usually it meant that they'd come from unfit parents, who weren't allowed or unable to have more than one child because of medical reasons. Sometimes it was a genetic defect, which usually carried to the children. Other children don't actually know what the problem is, but know that child isn't normal. It is only fortunate that they learn all about genetic problems when they get older, finding it wasn't the child's fault, and usually not the parent's fault either.

Dafurn was beginning to learn a new respect for Tiffany. She wondered what her own children would be like some day, if she did take a partner for further the species. She wasn't old enough yet to be eligible to have any, but Tiffany was becoming a substitute for her own affections.

"Come. There is more to be done to decorate this properly for a Princess," Dafurn said, carefully using Tiffany's word.

Tiffany smiled happily, as she joined Dafurn in finding suitable decorating materials.

Dafurn spent time educating Tiffany the Kailee way, introducing her to their way of thinking and rudimentary skills in various areas, that were suitable to Tiffany's age in Kailee years.

This was between learning more of Tiffany and her world, learning about horses and such, and still doing her own work as the explorer ship continued its trek through several star systems, mapping new planetary biology and ecologies.

Dafurn took Tiffany sometimes to see what the capsule looked like, to find bits and pieces of the capsule spread over floors and makeshift racks inside the containment area. Panewt was to be found with several technicians, pouring over instruments as they examined anything of interest they found, whether it is the scrubbers of the air reclamation system, or the data storage for the capsule's computer as he was today.

Panewt found the technology of the capsule fascinating. Some of the systems were antiques compared to most of their own, but the degree of difference of the way some systems had been made, showed an amount of ingenuity for that level of technology.

He was busily perusing the data storage; trying to determine what data it held. He'd already catalogued what looked like flight and navigation records for the capsule, as well as life support systems. But there were large blocks of other data connected to a second set of navigation records that drew his attention. It took some time, working with one of the crew in TacOps to match the timelines of the capsule's navigation records to their own and discover that the second set of records were from the parent ship that the capsule had jettisoned from.

Getting the time sequences was all Panewt needed then, to breakdown the large data blocks in a video record.

He was pretty excited, as he rushed to see Dafurn and Tiffany who were looking over the empty framework of the capsule.

"I've discovered a visual recording on the data storage disks."

Dafurn looked at Panewt, seeing dirty scuff marks on his fur from something on the capsule. It streaked across his body, not wholly unpleasing. "Have you seen them yet?"

"No, I wanted you to come see them, even have..." Panewt stumbled for a moment on what to call Tiffany, "her look at them, and tell us what it is on the recording."

"You want to look at this recording?" Dafurn asked Tiffany.

"Yes," she replied, blinking.

"Lead the way," Dafurn instructed Panewt.

"Just here," Panewt said, bring them over to the consoles he had been working up. "I'll bring up the wall screen for us to have a better look at."

Dafurn and Tiffany looked up at the wall as an image formed, blurry and distorted.

"There's some additional data mixed in here too. It must be audio tracks," said Panewt, almost to himself as he ran something through the console. "Okay, yes. That'll isolate the audio, but I can't quite get it at the moment, though the visual detail should be fine."

Panewt looked up at the wall screen as the image cleared up perfectly, showing an expanded fish eyed view of a ship's corridor with a large creature facing a wall, away from their view.

"Mummy?" Tiffany spoke up, recognising her mother's form as she worked at some controls in front of a doorway.

Dafurn looked from the image to Tiffany and back again, wondering what was happening as the figure passed into doorway, where it arranged something on the floor out of view. She wished that Panewt had the audio working then realized that she wouldn't have understood anything said by the creature anyhow.

The large creature backed out of the doorway, closing the door again with the controls, making further actions on the controls than would seem normal.

The creature turned now, and Dafurn had a good look for the first time, at an adult version of Tiffany. The differences were unremarkable, except for the physical size and shape. The skin colouring, she realised was all too evident, was the same as Tiffany's, but the hair colour differed, and the length also markedly different. The most significant thing she noticed however, were the clothes. Full-length clothes, that covered foot and leg, right up to the neck and palms.

Another creature approached into view from the end of the corridor coming into proper view, as it got closer to whatever had recorded the images. This one was different. A pronounced shifting in physical shape, that was even noticeable under the clothes.

"Daddy?" Tiffany called to the image emotionally.

They all continued watching the screen as both of the creatures talked, Dafurn could see, as their mouths opened and closed in sequenced bursts, until the first creature adjusted the clothes on its body.

There was a shuddering on both of them, which Dafurn picked up immediately, confusing her own Kailee perception between a sense of anxiety and pleasure.

Both creatures turned towards more figures that approached from down the corridor, making what Dafurn had thought she understood, to be even more confusing. Disgrading any ideas of communication, she watched as the new group of creatures advanced further into view, showing a lack of grace in movement.

But there was a sense of distrust, with the lead creature holding something, possibly a weapon towards the first two. Dafurn didn't know what to expect, but when the object discharged, Tiffany screamed, loud and piercing that it disrupted everyone in the room and those nearby.

Tiffany watched the image of her father slump down, all the while letting out an ear piercing shrill. Her mother shifted away from the unknown man, pressing the controls she'd touched earlier. The image jolted, as the man pointed the weapon directly at her mother. There was a pause, before the man fired again, killing her mother.

It was all Tiffany could bear, as she sat upon the deck and covered her face with her small hands as she cried into them. She had just seen both her parents slaughtered by a man, someone she had never seen before. The fact that her parents had been killed many days ago did not enter into her comprehension. It was as if they'd been still alive until a minute ago, and she'd just witnessed their deaths on a live broadcast.

Panewt was hard pressed not to react. Violence in their society had long been eliminated, though there were always malcontents and the usual percentage of unstable Kailee within the population. But the slaughter he'd just seen, jarred his primal fears, and locked him motionless as the rest of the video record played out.

The creature with the weapon stepped without pausing, over the two bodies, tapping the controls on the wall beside the doorway. There was frantic movement between it and the others.

Quite slowly, the image began to fade as static washed over the screen until the recording stopped.

Dafurn had been immobile also, and remained that way for a few more seconds before she moved over to Panewt.

"Is there..." She paused, trying to block out what she'd just seen, "... and more of the visual record."

Panewt had to shake himself off, as if there had been something spread across his fur. "No," he whispered too quiet to be heard, and then raised his voice. "No, that was all."

"I don't think we will want to see that again," said Dafurn, as she looked back to Tiffany, sitting on the deck sobbing quietly now.

"Don't bother about the audio record now," she added. "Keep a copy of the whole lot for home, but I don't want to see that played again."

"Yes I understand," Panewt replied in a subdued voice.

It was all the instruction he needed, as he closed down the wall screen, and stored the data in the ship's systems.

Dafurn was ill at ease in carrying Tiffany back to the space set up for her. She made pitiful sounds within her arms, barely moving after putting her down on the bed, that it concerned her enough to stay with Tiffany the entire shift, and most of the next.

Tiffany remained inactive for all that time, never speaking or acknowledging her presence.

5

The tail of a horse

"She hasn't touched her food, or drink for two days," Dafurn said, really concerned now.

Jazir stood at the threshold of the area, ignoring the bright white decorations that seemed a little too excessive to her tastes, as she looked upon the rolled up form of the alien.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was dying," said Jazir nonchalantly.

"Dying?"

Dafurn turned to Jazir, really concerned now. "She can't be dying!"

"That would be my opinion if she were a Kailee, but... she is not, is she?" Jazir took Dafurn's lack of movement as a sign of approval to continue. "I have some copies of a few case studies on lower primates from back home, which describes a motionless like this, after the primate has been separated from its mother at a young age."

"You mean its mother died?"

"Generally, but not usually the case."

"So how were they helped?"

"The primate was sometimes given to another primate as a surrogate mother, but often this didn't work, an instead someone would become a surrogate instead of the natural species," Jazir explained.

"A surrogate mother..."

Jazir said, "It takes trust, and time."

The Captain's official meeting room was a cramped space, even for two people. Dafurn sat, regarding the dark colourings on the wall behind the Captain as he spoke.

"Is the creature dead yet?" Asked Rastu. His voice wasn't discourteous, but his question was bluntly spoken.

"I've been making progress with Tiffany, though it has been slow," Dafurn explained. "It not a social problem that has ever affected our people, so it's not familiar with the current orthodoxy of medicine. The only guidance I've had as been the material's lent to me by Doctor Jazir, regarding the studies of lower form primates."

Rastu sat unmoving and unimpressed at the form of research been used.

"I'm working on something now, which I hope will bring her round to a more impressionable state."

"This has to do with the request to transport down to the planet currently in orbit?"

"Yes it does sir," Dafurn said with formality.

It was quiet between them for a moment. Dafurn tried not to stare at the Captain, instead focusing her eyes on the difference of textures between the carpet and the wall, but it was hard not to notice the fur shift back on the Captain's face when he came to a decision.

"Take the next shift down to the surface with the creature. But I'll be submitting my own report on the status of the creature during the next transmission to home world."

"Thank you sir."

Dafurn took it as a concession, even though many more people would be getting involved with her progress now, back on the home world.

Tiffany didn't want to go anywhere, but Dafurn had been insistent for her to see something. Something she would like.

There was only one thing she knew would like, only one thing in the universe that could make her happy again, and that was to see her parents. She missed them terribly, that it pained her so much, that she let herself be taken along by Dafurn.

It was into part of the ship that she'd never been allowed before, down a corridor like most she'd already seen, into a room not like others, at it was almost circular in shape.

The walls were not plain, but had functional displays; with many images all the way around, and inside was a ringed area with a strangely tiled floor.

Tiffany only had time to glimpse at one screen as Dafurn beckoned to her from the centre, where she stood waiting.

"What are all the screens?" She asked.

"Don't worry about them," said Dafurn. "I want you to close your eyes."

"Close them?"

"Just do it."

Dafurn was insistent, so she obeyed.

Tiffany had her eyes closed, but she could hear Dafurn speak. "Take us there."

"Take us where?" She asked.

"I'm just telling the operator," Dafurn explained.

She didn't understand what was happening. "Can I open my eyes yet?"

"In a moment."

Tiffany waited, and the floor seemed to change under her feet, from the familiar flat and solid to something peculiar, and the air around her was suddenly moving.

"Open them now," she heard Dafurn tell her.

She opened them, finding a sight totally unexpected. The room in which she'd just been standing had disappeared, and instead of a ship, there was nothing.

Not exactly nothing, but space as far as the eye could see, with a deck coloured green that rolled away to the distance, where it met a ceiling of blue that the eye couldn't focus upon.

Tiffany was astounded, that any thoughts about her parents disappeared as she looked about.

She turned, feeling a little queasy that the distances were so far away, but kept to her feet as she spread her arms about to keep balance on the unfamiliar deck.

"Where are we?" She asked.

"This is a planet," Dafurn explained. "Our ship is in orbit somewhere overhead." She pointed above.

Tiffany looked up, finding the endless blue sky overwhelming. She windmilled her arms a moment before falling over on her back, ending up with a view straight up at the sky.

Dafurn's neck fur vibrated with amusement as Tiffany fell over.

"You cannot see it. It's very far up."

She helped Tiffany up onto her feet again. "You have never been upon a planet?" She asked.

"No, never," said Tiffany. "I was going to live on one... with my mom and dad."

Dafurn didn't press any further. Instead she had more to show Tiffany.

Tiffany had little trouble with the differing gravity, and the slope was so subtle that she didn't notice it as Dafurn led her off in one direction.

There was something on the field below them that seemed to flow and shift upon the green expanse.

"What is that?" Tiffany asked.

In reply, Dafurn removed a set of binoculars and held them out to Tiffany.

"Hold them up to your eyes," she told Tiffany didn't respond at once.

Tiffany drew them up to her eyes to look through the eyepieces.

She held her breath as the image came into focus. There was a blur of moving shapes that didn't make any sense.

"There are only blurry things," she said.

"Open your eyes wider, and you'll see more," Dafurn replied from somewhere beside her.

Tiffany did so, and the image seemed to expand by its own violation, revealing the blurs to be the sides of many creatures, moving back and forth on the plains below.

Her eyes picked out one creature or another as it entered her vision, and the image would move accordingly to track whatever she looked at. And Tiffany couldn't believe what she looked at. The creatures had four long legs from a large body, with a thick neck and a head upon the top, almost resembling a horse.

"Horses! They're real horses!" Tiffany called out.

She was so thrilled, she forgot all about Dafurn for a while as she just looked.

When she finally lowered the binoculars, she asked, "Can we get any closer?"

"It is too dangerous," Dafurn replied, knowing that they couldn't predict what the alien creatures would do if they got any closer. It was best to be safe. "We can see them easily enough from here."

Tiffany just stared at her for a moment before replying, "You sound just like my mother."

It was the strangest comment, one that Dafurn hadn't expected. She watched as Tiffany looked through the binoculars again at the horses.

To be told she was like Tiffany's mother, gave her the impression that maybe she was a mother. It was just as Jazir had described it to her. She felt a deep delight to be called a mother.

The horses were beautiful to Tiffany. They weren't exactly like the pictures her mother had shown her, but there was no distinction in her mind between those and the ones she saw now. This is what her mother had hoped to show her. Something she could no longer do, because of a man she had seen before, hadn't known of. Someone who'd killed both her parents. Someone she wanted to hate, but didn't know how. How can you hate someone you have never met?

She thought of her parents again, and tears appeared in her eyes, blurring her vision of the horses, but she didn't move, not wanting to disrupt her view.

Her mother had died wanting to show her new things like this, new places, and a new world where they could live. A world. Probably much like this one.

Dafurn had shown her this, this planet, and the horses, and she hadn't asked for anything in return. If anything Dafurn had been a friend like the ones she used to have. A friend who acted like her mother, who showed her things, warned her of dangers, and just spent time with her.

She did wish her own mother was here to see the horses, but she knew in her heart that she wouldn't.

After a while she lowered the binoculars and wiped her eyes.

"Can we go now?" She asked Dafurn.

"Of course," replied Dafurn, before she had them transported back to the ship.

Dafurn stood on the bridge, looking out into the dark void of normal space at a binary star system.

The planet on which she'd gone down to with Tiffany was light years away now and several months back. She'd spent a lot more time with Tiffany, building a close bond that she'd come to value.

The binary star system was some distance away, but under the bridge's special optics, the two stars were easily visible next to one another. The light filtered out so it didn't blind the entire bridge crew.

"They want us to bring the creature home," said Captain Rastu.

He was one of the few who hadn't taken to calling Tiffany by her name, instead continuing to refer to her as the creature. He was one of the hardliners. Safety of the ship, the crew and the home world was paramount. Anything different was seen as dangerous. And anything dangerous was best left well away.

It had been a difficult thing to take on the captaincy of one of the Explorer ships, but the Council had seen his attitude at the time, as one of his virtues rather than a problem, to keep the safety of the species paramount in everything.

The fact that they had brought an alien onto their vessel, along with its technology had gone against his every thought, but he had realised it was the right thing to do at the time. And it was close to 250 operational days since they'd done that, and nothing had gone wrong. None of the so-called disasters that had stuck previously explorer missions had touched them. Not even the smallest hint.

They'd taken on the alien, implanted some of their own technology into it, communicated with it, and learned much, both from it and from its life capsule. And now, the home world wanted them to bring it home.

Only now, did Rastu feel a chill run down his back. The idea of bringing the alien home, to their world, did not sit right with him.

"We're to cut short our expedition?" Dafurn asked.

"That's the idea."

"A single creature of her species, to be poked, prodded, examined, until the day she dies? Then to have her body vivisected, dissected and examined every way possible?"

Rastu didn't give a verbal answer, only blinking his eyes in confirmation.

Dafurn could well understand what they at the home world would intend to do if they brought Tiffany home with them. It would be a death sentence, if not now, then sometime in the future. She wouldn't be allowed to leave. Ever.

But it wasn't something the Captain should have to worry about. She understood his stance on this sort of topic, which was why she didn't understand why he seemed so hesitant now. Dafurn looked at Captain Rastu closely, seeing the conflict in his eyes. She felt there was something he wasn't saying, something more.

"What is your opinion?" Rastu asked her.

Dafurn was put back by the question. It wasn't normal procedure to ask the opinion of the ship's crew. They followed orders, especially when they came from home world.

"Sir," she started out. "I think you already know my opinion."

He didn't react.

"A few months ago I would have," he said. "But your status has changed, and I'm not sure I know what it is any more."

"Does it really matter?" Dafurn said, regretting her posture when she said it.

Rastu decided to put himself out.

"Dafurn, I'm going to explain to you what I know," he said. "I value your thoughts, even though I don't quite understand your status on all things."

Dafurn blinked her eyes in response. She had to listen, though she considered she wouldn't like the outcome.

"Ever since home world learnt that we'd acquired a living alien, they have been very interested in everything it did. It was hard not to choke up our communications with every little video record, or report. The requests that I have received back, number in the tens of thousands, from mundane questions to absurd things about if it can survive in vacuum. Mind you there have been other questions which border on the disgusting."

Rastu made a snuffling sound when he finished.

"I have not read all the questions myself. I have read only a few hundred in fact, but the intense interest from home world is quite evident, as well as the ignorance. They ask questions about what it eats, whether it dreams, how big will it grow. But nothing I've seen so far even asks about how dangerous it can become. What diseases it carries that may infect us."

Dafurn fur shifted, wanting to respond, but Rastu held her back with a digit. "I know you have done the medical scans and tests, but they have been known to be wrong. And it is also possible that the creature can carry diseases that are not known to us. We could well be infected now, and have no knowledge that something is wrong until we discover that we are melting from the inside out. And this is only the medical danger. We were witness to an attack by its own species. They are most definitely a danger to themselves. How will this one creature be with us, on our home world?"

Rastu paused before continuing. "For a first contact situation, I have been happy with the results we have gotten, but to go any further than this point. To actually bring this creature home, it is too soon. We don't know enough about them as a species. The potential danger to us is too great."

Rastu's voice was peaking at a higher octave.

"I need you to agree with me. Not necessarily for my reasons, they can be your own, but I need to know that I'm making the right decision."

"What about home world?" Dafurn asked.

"They'll only read whatever I send them. The decision and the reasoning will be all mine, but I need to know if it's the right thing."

Dafurn blinked slowly. She thought she understood. Several things had gone through her mind when he'd mentioned bringing Tiffany home. But she hadn't voiced the one uppermost in her mind. She didn't want to expose Tiffany to her world, or her people. She knew better than most what would happen. She become a living specimen, with everyone's eyes upon her and her life would become one huge experiment to find out what she was like. She'd never be herself again, never see her own kind, find companionship, or have children.

Dafurn couldn't bare the thought of putting Tiffany, or anyone through that. It wasn't just.

"We should send her home," she said. "Back to her own kind."

"That might risk the ship." Rastu said, sounding almost like he normal self.

"No, not if we Hyperspace fold in from an unpopulated region and set her adrift outside of their detectors."

"This is workable... but, no. She will still know where she has been."

"That will be less of a problem," she responded. Dafurn was happy that she'd decided to go the route of implanting Tiffany with one of the advanced implants. "We can set up the implant in her brain to block all the memories. The implant can sustain this, and feed in false impressions. It won't be very difficult."

"Aren't the implants easy to detect?" Rastu asked.

"I had one of the advanced one's installed. It can be programmed to conceal itself from scanners and detectors. Even if one of our doctors opened her head up, and used a high resolution visual scanner on every square microzarn they wouldn't find it."

Captain Rastu was quiet for a moment, thinking. Sending the creature back to its own kind with the implant raised the possibility of making contact later. They could use the creature to learn more about them with them knowing. It raised options and opportunities, which he hoped home world would understand. "There are some things I still need to consider, but you've been more than helpful Dafurn."

"Thank you sir," she replied, knowing that her session with the Captain was over.

She turned to leave the bridge, but Rastu interrupted her. "Dafurn. I'm going to make a formal decision known later today. I hope what we are doing the right thing. Both for us, and for Tiffany."

Dafurn blinked in affirmation, and headed off the bridge. She felt her face flutter, as she suddenly realised the Captain had called Tiffany by her name. It was the first time she'd known him to call her by anything but a creature.

6

A jigsaw puzzle, is still a jigsaw puzzle even when you have plans

The word came through the personal video mail with most other messages. Much of it wasn't news worthy by the standards of the ship, except that they would make furthest incursion into known alien space prior to returning to home world, marking the end of their current expedition.

It was one whole month away. But when word reached Panewt, he was in a panic.

"A month! One month!" He almost screamed at those around him. "We have to get this thing back together in a month!"

He was standing over the all the parts from the capsule, but he couldn't see it except for the mess that it appeared to look like.

"Everybody, stop whatever you are doing," he called out.

Most of those working on the capsule put what they were working on down to listen.

"You there!" Panewt walked over to Fajur who was still examining something and touched him on the shoulder to get their attention. "Whatever it is you're working on Fajur, it just got cancelled."

Fajur groaned as he put down the internal gyro he'd been examining.

"Examination of the capsule has finished. We're to starting putting all of this junk back together again, and have the capsule back in its original condition inside of three weeks."

Panewt cut off a week from the schedule, knowing there would be mistakes, and they needed the extra time to check everything over, comparing it to the scans they'd made to make sure it was in the exact same condition before he had to make additional changes outlined in the plan to return the capsule back where it came from.

"Everyone up now! Fajur, go get the deconstruction plans up now, and have the computer reverse it so we can build this thing back together again."

Panewt watched as the technicians started moving about, putting whatever they had been working on back to its original place on the deck.

Dafurn looked upon Tiffany, who marvelled at the reconstructed capsule. It looked exactly the same as she remembered it. All the panels were in place. Even the scraps of litter she'd left on the floor. She looked all over the inside and then the outside, but couldn't find any fault. The facilities and the small electronics all worked inside.

Panewt stood away from the pod with Dafurn, so they couldn't be heard.

"Everything is exactly the same as the original scans, baring faults in our scanning equipment," Panewt said.

"What about the rest of it?"

"All the computer systems are functioning the same as before. I've had one of our technical offices write a worm program, which we embedded into the capsule computers before we put it all back together."

"It'll remove any hints at our presence?"

"From re-writing the navigation records to the scenario we thought up, to depleting the resources of the pod to make it look like it has been lived in for this long, clogging up the recycling systems, and generally making it look like it's been in use."

"You only have to add the external damage to the capsule then," Dafurn said.

"It's the last detail, then it's ready to fly."

Dafurn blinked in agreement. It was almost time, almost time to say goodbye. She hadn't told Tiffany a thing. She hadn't wanted to say a thing, but she knew she should for Tiffany's sake. It wouldn't be right to just put her unconscious, and remove her memories. She knew it wouldn't feel right, but she couldn't bare saying goodbye just yet.

There was still time, a few hours at the most. It was time.

What could she say? What should she say? That for some reason she'd miss Tiffany? There were strange feelings she was feeling that she couldn't explain, feelings for Tiffany. She was afraid and concerned. Was the right thing to do, to send Tiffany back? Back to her own people where she no longer had her parents? Of course, it was better than to their destination, where she'd live out her days as an experiment. She had to go back. It was the best possible course of action.

Dafurn caught sight of Tiffany poking her head outside of the capsule's doorway and smiling at her, human fashion.

Yes, Dafurn realised as she approached the capsule. Tiffany was happy with the familiar capsule. She'll be happier to return, back to people who are familiar to her.

"What do you think Tiffany?" Dafurn asked.

"It looks the same as before," Tiffany commented. "What's going to happen with it?"

It was now, Dafurn thought. "We're sending you home in it."

"Home?" Tiffany looked confused.

"Back to your own people, where you belong," said Dafurn. "You should return to your own people. All of us liked you here. Especially me. But we're returning to our world soon."

"Can't I come with you?" Tiffany asked, concerned that something was wrong.

I wish you could, Dafurn said to herself. "It's not suitable for you. And you wouldn't like it. There's many trees, lots of green things."

Dafurn was saying it more for another reason for Tiffany than the real reason. She didn't want to frighten her, into thinking they all wanted to experiment on her.

"But I'll adapt. Mom and Dad were going to live on a planet with all that on it."

Dafurn knew she didn't have a winning argument on this issue. "It's better this way Tiffany. You need to go back to your own people to grow up. Think of it this way. We can come back and see you again. Then we talk to each other about all the new things we've learnt since now. How does that sound?"

Tiffany thought on it some before replying. "I have to go back," she stated.

Dafurn hadn't told her everything yet. "You won't be able to tell anyone about us either," she said. Before Tiffany could ask why, she continued. "We're going to block your memories of us."

"I won't remember you!" Tiffany said loudly.

"They're still going to be there," Dafurn said. "You just won't be able to recall us. Nothing is going to be erased," Dafurn appeased her.

"We just need to go see Jazir," she said, leading the way to the Doctor's work area.

The changes to the capsule were done swiftly once they had the go ahead to seal the containment area, and expel the atmosphere and remove the gravity.

Using stray debris taken from a nearby Hyperspatial sinkhole, Panewt bombarded one side of the sealed capsule with precisely measured forces, creating the effect that the capsule had been struck by a free floating asteroid in Hyperspace. But he was careful in the way he did it, conferring the amounts of damage to non-life threatening parts of the capsule.

Once finished, the capsule was left to drift inside the containment area, ready for its passenger.

"I don't want to go!" Tiffany complained, as she halted just inside the doorway of the ship's designated medical facility.

The two with her was Jazir and Dafurn, who stood within the room waiting.

Tiffany didn't want to go. She had become used to the ship, and everyone on board. She had made friends too, ones that she didn't want to leave.

"You have to Tiffany," Dafurn said. "It's the best thing."

"But I'm going to forget you!"

For once, Dafurn regretted telling Tiffany about removing her memories, but she knew that it wasn't permanent.

"The memories won't be gone forever. They'll come back to you some time in the future. But for now, it's best that you can't remember us, so you can't tell anyone about us."

Tiffany still stood defiantly near the door.

"It's best for all of us, that you return," Jazir said, trying to help. "Many of our people at home won't be as appreciative or as friendly toward you if you came with us."

"You have to go," Dafurn implored.

Tiffany looked at her face, and could see that her face fur was shifting backward and forwards. She could tell Dafurn was nervous about wanting her to go. It seemed so important to Dafurn that she go, even though she didn't want to.

Tiffany finally acceded to their request and came forward, sitting herself on the edge of a bed.

Dafurn only looked from Tiffany to Jazir, as the Doctor prepared something to put Tiffany to sleep.

"I'll get my memories back?" Tiffany asked when Jazir approached her. "Every one of them?"

"All of them," Dafurn replied, feeling happy that Tiffany was going through with it.

"Including the horses?"

"Even the horses."

Tiffany jumped off the bed and embraced Dafurn with her small arms. "I'm going to miss you," she said.

Dafurn could only return the gesture, until Tiffany let go and sat back down.

Jazir held a small container towards Tiffany's face, and sprayed something into the air. Almost immediately Tiffany became drowsy, lying down upon the bed.

Jazir picked up another oddly shaped instrument, returning to Tiffany's sleeping form. Holding the head to the side, she held it to the back of Tiffany's head for a moment, until it made a tone.

"It's all done," She reported.

"That's it?" Dafurn asked, bewildered.

"She'll sleep for the moment. We can shift her back to her capsule when you are ready."

Dafurn was silent a moment.

"I'd like a few moments with her first," Dafurn said.

Jazir left silently, leaving Dafurn alone.

Dafurn carefully touched the long dark hair lying next to Tiffany's face. Such a strange creature, and yet so... Dafurn couldn't find an appropriate word. She knew she felt for Tiffany. Worried for her. Wanted to keep her safe, yet she was sending her back to an unknown region of space, with creatures that'd already murdered her natural parents.

Dafurn had second thoughts about all this, but knew it was right. Somewhere, she felt it was the right thing to do.

Dafurn touched her once more as she whispered lightly, "I'm going to miss you too."

Captain Rastu stood on the bridge, listening to the chatter and hum of ship systems and crew alike. It was the sounds of a working ship.

No longer the ship that was drifting in empty space, or sitting silently in orbit of some astral body. The entire crew were active, if not on active duty, to watch the approach near the space of a known alien species, before making their way home.

"We are clear for Hyperspace fold," came the words from the navigator.

"Take us through," Rastu commanded.

They'd already approached as far as they could, scanning out the planned location of their entry back into normal space from the fold, before shifting back into hyperspace to release the capsule.

The fold itself was instantaneous, yet the slight feeling of having one's fur shaved off was hard to ignore.

The crew automatically sent the ship into Hyperspace, where the red swirling energies made never ending patterns in the view screens.

"Do we have our sphere of detection minimized?"

"Sir, levels of emission are at zero," one of the crew reported. "We have no foreign contacts in normal space or Hyperspace."

"Good, proceed with the operation." Rastu kept his last thoughts himself, hoping to be well away from here in as quick a time as possible.

Tiffany has already been transferred back inside the capsule. Dafurn had personally seen to it, allowing herself one last personal moment alone with Tiffany's drugged sleeping form. She had embraced Tiffany closely, before settling her on the cushioned seating and arranging her long hair.

She'd had a wicked thought about staying on the capsule when it was sent back, but she knew it wasn't right and the crew wouldn't let her. Captain Rastu wouldn't let her.

No, it had already been planned. Staying on board the capsule would only complicate matters.

Reluctantly, Dafurn had herself transferred from the closed capsule, leaving the crew to perform last minute sweeps to remove any last traces of their presence from within before it the entire capsule was transferred outside the ship.

The bridge crew, with ship systems synchronised with the worm program, activated the tractors to push the capsule of into Hyperspace, on a course that would take it towards a heavily trafficked area of space where it should eventually be detected.

Dafurn could only watch the capsule recede from view on a small screen near her quarters, before the view shifted and disappeared as the ship jumped through Hyperspace to start its journey home.

She wished good fortune for Tiffany, and that someday they would meet again.

The escape pod was once again drifting free in Hyperspace, surrounded by the swirling and shifting red that resembled the water currents of an ocean.

Its single occupant awoke with a seeming lack of awareness of what had happened to her for the last several months. She had memories of sleeping, of eating, of waiting, and of crying for what seemed like eternity.

There seemed no difference between now and yesterday for her. There were only her memories of her parents that kept her going.

Memories of their smiles... Memories of their voices... Her mother's stories... Her father's antics... Most of all she remembered their love for her.

It's all she thought about for the next week, as continued doing what she'd been doing the day before. Staying alive in her barely functioning escape pod.

Travelling through the void of Hyperspace was a Navy scout vessel belonging United League of Planets, a Coalition of major stations planets including Earth. The scout vessel wasn't alone, as it been accompanied by four small fighters barely large enough to accommodate their single pilot.

Together they plied the marked hyperspace lane between two major Space stations that was regularly used by commercial and civilian traffic, watching for pirates, or any ships that may have gotten into difficulty.

The scout vessel unlike its escort sported a crew of twelve in a ship that was mainly engines and weapons than anything else. It was gun platform, designed to peruse, and defend itself when necessary.

But the weapons and the engines weren't its only assets. The crew maintained a vigilant watch of the surrounding space with computers and scanners, checking transmissions on every frequency and scanning every object that comes within its range of influence.

"Delta four, this is Cats Claw. We have a small-unknown contact with a metallic signature drifting in from quadrant four. Could you go check it out?" Came a voice across the small speakers within the cockpit.

"This is Delta four, roger that," replied the pilot.

"Maybe it's just some junk," came the voice from one of the other fighter pilots.

"Probably another ejected sewage pod," said another. The sound of laughter echoed across the open communication channel from the other fighters.

The pilot of Delta four swung his fighter round in an arc, heading towards the navigation point that had been transmitted from the Cats Claw, designating the position of the sensor contact. The aft burners lit up, accelerating the small fighter rapidly, straining at the limited inertial dampeners and pressing the pilot into his seat until he relaxed the burners, letting the fighter fly on inertia alone.

The pilot ignored the limited scanners of the fighter to search for the object visually within the visual distortions of Hyperspace that swirled all around the cockpit.

It was difficult to see anything, as Hyperspace seemed to produce light and dark spots randomly, creating phantom images of things floating out there. The swirling redness was said to be able to drive any sane person crazy if they stared into it for too long, yet the pilot continued searching, blinking his eyes whenever it was starting to get too much to look at.

Glancing at the display, he was sure he was near the point where the Cats Claw had detected the object, yet he still couldn't see anything.

Just when he thought he'd missed it and have to turn around, he thought he saw something. It could have been just a shape formed in the swirling of Hyperspace, but after blinking his eyes, it seemed to form a constant shape.

He opened the comm channel, "This is Delta four. I think I've found it."

"Delta four, we need confirmed Ident on visual," Cats Claw responded.

"Roger that. I'm moving in now."

The small fighter reoriented at the touch of the pilot, igniting the thrusters that sent it flying in closer to the unknown object.

Coming in closer, the small scanners of the fighter were able to pick up the object, allowing the pilot to track it without straining his eyes.

"Looks like..." The pilot started talking to himself, until he pressed the communications switch.

"Cats Claw, it appears to be an escape pod," the pilot said.

"If it's an escape pod, we should be picking up a transponder signal."

"It looks like the pod's been damaged by something. Maybe that's why it isn't working."

"Hold your position Delta four," Cats Claw responded.

The Delta four pilot brought his fighter to a stop in relation to the escape pod, trying to think why they were taking their time.

The pod could well have been jettisoned by accident, which could also be why the transponder wasn't working. Or... it could be a trap!

"Delta four, this is Cats Claw. We want a closer inspection of the escape pod."

"Roger Cats Claw. You know this could be a Trojan?"

"We're well aware of that Delta four. That's why we need you to make a close range scan for occupants."

The fighter pilot was well aware of his expendability, and that of his craft. The scout ship and its crew had a greater value. Using one small fighter to check a possible Trojan bomb was sensible. Though it never felt like that to the person who was out risking their life.

Slowly the Delta four drifted in towards the escape pod, as the thrusters were fired with careful touches to the fighter's controls.

The fighter could well have glided in towards the event horizon of a black hole without touching it, with the amount of concentration the pilot put into bringing the craft together.

Outside the stumpy nose of the fighter he could clearly see the slightly larger escape pod and its damaged hull.

As the fighter's scanners started bringing back data, the pilot was relieved at the readouts.

"Cats Claw, this is Delta four. We have a confirmed presence in the pod. One survivor."

