

The background of the cover is a vibrant space scene. It features a deep blue and purple starfield with numerous bright, glowing stars of varying sizes. Several galaxies are visible, including a prominent one in the upper left and another in the lower right. On the left side, a portion of a grey, cratered planet is visible. At the bottom, the curved horizon of a reddish-brown planet is seen. The overall effect is a rich, colorful depiction of outer space.

Skye's Secret Mission

Lucy Daniel Raby

SKYE'S SECRET MISSION

A prequel to the "Venus" Series

Lucy Daniel Raby

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SKYE'S SECRET MISSION

The minute Skye woke up he knew something was wrong with today. Or at least, that something was going to be wrong with today, at some point. And it wasn't just the Starmaths exam.

He slid out of his sleep pod and landed on the floor of his rather untidy bedroom. It was a typical boy room, the walls festooned with animated images of his favourite spacehoppers and Venturian pop stars, the floor piled up with zipper suits in every colour imaginable, for he was quite fashion conscious. Tripping over his favourite supersonic, turbo powered skateboard, he stepped lightly over to the window. The blinds rose silently at his approach, revealing the panoramic view that his home gave over Ishtania Province. The three moons still hung overhead like giant paper lanterns, but the purple rings of Isis had already begun to fade. The sky lit up as the huge, bloated red sun popped its head over the horizon, with a speed that would have been alarming to anyone who had not grown up on Ventura.

Daybreak happened very quickly on this planet, and in a matter of moments the landscape had filled with instant blazing warmth, as though someone had flicked on a switch. Sunlight picked out the jagged peaks of the Morphing Mountains that ringed the inland sea. Humanoid shapes broke the surface of the ocean as Mermians hauled out into the shallows to bask in the early morning sun. Soon after that, the distant cry of the giant seahorse echoed across the sea as he towed his cargo of schoolchildren from the outer islands of Western Nimrovia.

It was a familiar sight to Skye, but today there was something different in the air. He could feel it in his roots. Skye had no need of hair gel. The spiky black tufts on his head stood straight up on end, a feature of the Monrovia race. When he sensed danger or any kind of major change, they began to wave about with a life of their own. And that was what happening now.

Glancing up, he saw that the sky had already filled with a variety of silver flying craft,

heading towards the gleaming pyramids that sprawled along a low range of hills overlooking the sea. This was Amrylla, capital city of Nimrovia, shining metropolis of the North. Ishtania Province was a cluster of white buildings on the outskirts of Amrylla, scattered over the landscape like tumbled dice, one of the most sought after residential areas of the city. Their home was an elegant villa of stacked cubes and vine covered verandas, with unparalleled views over the city and the Straits of Pandora. It had every mod con imaginable, including a massive spaceport, a Geodome Observatory for viewing the night heavens, vidiscreens in every corner of every room, an Astral Ethernet connection to all the planets in the solar system and some of the galaxies beyond, its own temple to Sunev, its own private beach with an ocean going launch, and a fleet of robot servants. It had been a gift from Queen Andromeda to his parents for services to the crown, whatever those were. They were always in some sort of confab with her and often came home late.

Skye unfurled his ferny fingers and put a zoomglass to his eyes to get a closer look at the city in the distance. Flocks of Space Hoppers and Planet Skimmers were converging on the tallest building, a collection of pink mirrored towers that reflected the surrounding landscape. They hovered irritably, waiting to dock in the mini ports that jutted out of the towers. He frowned, his Monroviaan eyebrows knitting across his forehead. There weren't usually that many spacecraft heading for the city at this hour. He could hear his parents padding about downstairs and a palpable feeling of urgency pervaded the air.

Suddenly his little sister Nunya burst into the room and flung herself at him. Her third eye was open, flashing with excitement. 'Hey! Guess what! There's an urgent meeting been called by Queen Andromeda! Mum and Dad have to leave now!'

Skye groaned. That meant Sarsi2 would be giving them breakfast and seeing them off to school. She was an old fusspot, her voice was rusty and she clanked about the kitchen dropping things because she was really too old for the job and needed to be melted down and recycled. But her parents didn't have the heart to part with her; she'd been with the family for 20 nanoyears.

Minutes later there was a low hum as the spaceport doors slid open and his parents' brand new red Galaxia MegaG5 Planet Skimmer zoomed out and shot off towards the city. They always used it when on outings together. Normally his Mum used her 'little runaround', a small white Spacepod which could convert to interplanetary travel for when she had to visit neighbouring moons and planets in the solar system. In the old days, she was an Interplanetary Outreach Worker, always off doing community visits to neighbouring worlds and social work on the penal colony of Ventura's 3rd moon, Sisyphus. But those days were long over, since the Time of Peace came. Sisyphus was uninhabited and the other planets had no need of her services. Now she and Skye's father were close advisors to the Queen. Skye watched their craft disappear into the distance and wished they had at least come up to say goodbye and wish him good luck in his exams. This dawn meeting must be a very urgent matter indeed.

Nunya was now bouncing round the room like a pinball, sliding down the chute from his sleeping pod, trying on his new space helmet, tinkering with his latest Cloudberry holophone all at the same time. Suddenly a holophonic image of his best friend, Chokra, leapt out of the device and stood in the middle of the room, his blue face blinking in shock. Chokra was a Vishnuvian, so he had six arms, with which he was simultaneously scratching his bottom, scratching his head, rubbing his eyes, picking his nose or generally gesticulating to nowhere in particular.

'Wassup mate?' he croaked. 'I was fast asleep!'

Skye grabbed the holophone off Nunya and spoke apologetically into the speaker. 'Sorry Chocks. Nunya pressed the wrong button and dialled your number.'

'Oh fanks a lot!' grumbled Chokra. 'I was up half the night revising for the Starmaths

exam. ‘

‘Well at least you’ve got plenty of hands to make notes.’

‘Yeah, but I still only got one brain.’

‘Sorry! Go back to sleep. I’ll see you at school.’

‘Later..’ mumbled Chokra, as his image shimmered and dissolved.

Skye glared at Nunya and replaced the holophone on his workspace surface. ‘Now just calm down Nunny! Okay? Go and get dressed!’

But his little sister ignored him and continued pinballing round his room, pouncing on anything she could find. She seemed to go faster than time itself and he wondered why she didn’t disappear into a blur. Sometimes he wished she would. There was a crash as she landed on his skateboard and began charging towards his aquarium full of electric fish.

‘Jumping jiggernomes Nunya!’ he shouted. ‘Be careful!’ He stopped her just in time and scolded her roundly, picking her up by her skinny arms. ‘Come on trouble. Get ready for Kinderschool. I’ll see you in the kitchen.’

He dressed quickly in his favourite turquoise zippersuit, the one that enhanced his natural skin tones, and hurried downstairs, the uneasy feeling still nagging at him. The kitchen was a white space full of gleaming chrome and well concealed units, all of which powered themselves on and off by voice recognition. The waste disposal robot, Telko2, was busy emptying all the wastebins into the rubbish chute and grinding his jaws mechanically as he chomped on the more difficult items, like metal cans, to reduce them to a smaller size. Zoot3, the cleaning robot, was humming tunelessly, as he was programmed to do, his long jointed metal arms wielding a dustsucker round the main living area. Sarsi2 was scolding Nunya and telling her to eat up her cloudbeans and farkle eggs. Farkle birds were a hybrid species, a cross between hens, ostriches and turkeys, and every home had a flock of them in the garden. Their name derived from the noise they made every time they laid an egg. For some mysterious reason, farkle eggs were square shaped. Evolution happened in strange ways on this planet. There was a terrible screech from outside as one of the farkle hens laid a new egg followed swiftly by a maternal clucking.

‘Don’t like farkle eggs!’ whinged Nunya. ‘Nargy!’

‘Now eat up young lady and don’t complain,’ nagged Sarsi2, in her tinny voice. Her little green electronic eyes swivelled round as Skye entered the room and her mouth stretched into a mechanical smile that always looked genuine to Skye. He was really quite fond of her.

‘Ah! There you are young Skye! Welcome to another lovely day on the award winning planet of Ventura!’ It was tedious having to listen to this every morning, but all speaking robots were programmed to say this to their owners as a standard greeting. ‘Are you all ready for your Starmaths exam today?’

Skye felt a glow of pleasure. At least his parents had remembered this and programmed it into her memory. ‘Yes Sarsi. Thank you.’

Sarsi made them finish their breakfast and, clucking and scolding like a farkle hen, shoved their lunches in their backpacks and ferried them out of the house. She stood rooted to the spot in the doorway, waving them off with a rather grubby looking handtowel. Like supermarket trolleys, domestic robots were prevented from crossing the thresholds of their homes by magnetic devices.

Skye and Nunya skirted the shore and took the tarmac road that led past numerous imposing villas towards their local school. Nunya skipped along beside him in an intensely annoying way, and since they were holding hands, it jerked him about.

‘Just walk normally Nunny!’ he scolded. ‘Or I won’t hold your hand any more.’

‘You’re in a funny mood this morning,’ she grumbled. ‘Worried about your exams?’

‘No,’ said Skye shortly. ‘Now pipe down Nunya. I’m trying to think.’

She sulked studiously as they continued along the road. The School Planet Skimmer

zoomed past, carrying kids from the other side of the province. The school itself stood a little back from the beach, a cluster of brightly painted yellow domes decorated with images of six of the Seven Tribes of Ventura. This was designed to promote harmony and celebrate diversity in the younger population of the planet. A shoal of Mermians swam round the outside of the building, amongst blue-skinned, six-armed Vishnuvians, grey-trunked Mastodonians, winged Kumarians and of the course the main race that lived in the north, the Monrovians. A frieze of tall, upright Black Panthers, in gold ceremonial robes, ran all around the top of the building. These were the Plutonians, High Priests of the Holy Order of Sunev. They were an extinct species and not counted as ordinary folk, since they were capable of astral projection, transmigration, reincarnation and other such supernatural feats. Hairy Feral faces peered out of the painted trees, but of course the Chagrinians were nowhere to be seen, for obvious reasons.

As Skye and Nunya entered the school gates he glanced again towards the gleaming towers of Amrylla. His hair stood right up on end. The sky above the city was now thick with flying craft hovering over the landing pads, including official- looking grey Space Skimmers, which were used to ferry very important people around the planet. There was a sound of beating wings, and a massive bronze Super Chariot, drawn by eagles and accompanied by a flock of Kumarian outriders, soared overhead towards the city. This must be really serious. He was seized with a sudden urge to know what was going on over there, why Queen Andromeda had such an urgent need to summon tribal leaders from all over the Northern Hemisphere. He chivvied Nunya into the lower school building and hesitated. Then on impulse, he turned on his heels and strode in the opposite direction from the doors into the upper school.

‘Here Skye mate, where are you going?’ came a voice from behind him. He turned to see Chokra, in the flesh this time.

‘Er I forgot something,’ muttered Skye. ‘Gotta go back.’

‘What about the exam?!’ protested Chokra. He waved his arms about to demonstrate his point. (When you’ve got that many, you might as well use them all.)

Skye took out his holophone and handed it to Chokra. ‘Here, take my Cloudberry,’ he said. ‘You can use it to replicate my image.’

‘But we’re not allowed to take holophones into school for that very reason!’ hissed Chokra. ‘So people can’t play truant using their images. You know we have to hand them in at the door!’

‘Ah yes, but you can hold it in one of your hands and tuck that arm down inside your clothes and they won’t notice,’ said Skye.

‘What if the scanner picks it up?’

‘Put it behind that,’ Skye said, pointing at a huge decorative medallion hanging on Chokra’s chest. The Vishnuvians did love their bling. ‘It’s made of arcanium. It’ll block the signal.’

‘Nargons!’ said Chokra, shaking his long black braids. ‘Wish I’d thought of that!’

‘Then when you’re at the learning console, bring the phone out, press the ID button and turn it up to High Definition. My image will spring out and you can put it on the chair next to you. I won’t be long.’

‘You’ll miss the exam!’

Skye turned back. ‘Come on. What are friends for? You’re much better at Starmaths than me. Fill in for me till I get back.’

Before Chokra could protest, he sprinted off to the Skytram stop. In seconds, a gleaming metal tube hummed through the air towards him and hovered to a halt. Glancing round, Skye pressed his finger to the ID scanner and stepped in as the doors slid open. The Skytram quickly left the suburbs and entered the city, navigating the air lanes between the skyscrapers

and glass pyramids of downtown Amyrlla. Countless other flying craft zoomed past them, but none of them ever collided, because this city was run with clockwork precision. Within minutes he was in the centre, heading towards the pink glass towers.

‘Half way docking port, Andromeda High Command,’ said a disembodied voice. Skye alighted and wondered how he was going to find his way into the main audience chamber, where the meeting must be taking place. It was right at the top of the tower and guarded heavily by Mastodonian security personnel. Two of them stood on either side of the doors to the elevator, their arms folded over their bulky chests, their trunks wrapped firmly round their necks. Their little yellow eyes flickered around suspiciously, never staying still for a moment. There was a swish of displaced air as a tall Kumarian strode past him towards the lift, his wings still partly unfolded from flight. Quick as a flash, Skye slipped under his left wing and crept along beside him, unnoticed.

He gasped when he entered the audience chamber and nearly blew his cover. It was breathtaking; a tall arched space with a view to the surrounding city uninterrupted by any visible signs of construction; it was like hanging in mid air. The floor was made of glass and you could see right down a yawning stairwell to the ground below, several thousand hand spans beneath his feet.

Queen Andromeda stood on a platform, surveying the motley collection of tribal leaders crowding into the hall, stroking the lavender beard she wore for ceremonial occasions. Her shock of white hair stood upright on her head, stirring like a cornfield before a storm. Her third eye, which she kept discreetly shut most of the time, was flickering nervously. Skye found this rather worrying. She was known for her calm and serenity, but today she seemed to be struggling to conceal her fear and bewilderment. Right beside her were several advisors, including Skye’s Mum and Dad. They were both wearing the yellow robes of state and looked extremely grave. Andromeda raised her arms and the buzz faded to a silence.

‘Thank you for coming at such short notice today,’ she began. ‘I’ll get straight to the point.’ With a dramatic flourish, she unrolled an illuminated scroll. ‘This electro missive came through the Ethernet last night. “As the new ruler of the continent of Vardin, I am advising you that King Toglin is no longer on the throne,” ’ she read out.

A mighty gasp went up and many eyes rolled in their sockets. There was a general stirring around Skye and various tails, wings and limbs lashed about in agitation. King Toglin was the Ruler of the main continent of the Southern Hemisphere, the other most important person on the planet.

“‘Vardin is now under the dominion of the Supreme Ruler of this world and possibly the whole universe’ – those are his words by the way – “his All Encompassing and Extreme Holiness the Divine Emperor Tyranog,” ’ continued Andromeda, to a hubbub of rising hysteria.’ “We will be arriving on your shores shortly to assume control of your territories. Please prepare to hand over all goods, crops, lands, animals, properties, electro banking assets, infrastructures, administrative functions, places of worship, machinery of state and communication pods to the Supreme High Command of the New Order of Ventura. Please note that all jewellery and ceremonial head-dresses are included in the confiscation category. Signed, General Fintagula, Commander in Chief, on behalf of his Holiness.” ’

Skye had to stop himself from crying out in shock. But it didn’t matter, for a general weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth had started up all around him. The Kumarian next to him, under whose wing he had taken cover, rose in the air and left Skye standing there exposed to view. No-one noticed. The Kumarian sailed across the crowd, his giant wings fanning nearby hair arrangements, and landed in front of the podium, his head feathers waving about in agitation.

‘This can only mean one thing!’ Skye heard him cry. ‘The Chagrinians have risen again! Risen up from the deep! Returned to torment us!’

More weeping and wailing broke out, this time louder.

A Mastodonian raised his trunk and honked loudly. 'We will not fall under the yoke of tyranny again!' he trumpeted.

Andromeda held her arms up again for silence. 'Please try and stay calm my people! Defence strategies are in place! A force field has been placed around the city perimeters.'

'They will break through that! They did last time!' shouted a Vishnuvian, gesticulating wildly with all six of his arms.

Andromeda shook her head. 'That was many centuries ago, before we were born. Our technology has improved since then. Please take hope!'

'Hope!?' bellowed the Mastodonian. 'What good is hope!? What we need now is Divine Intervention! Sunev! The Holy One! Why is he not coming to our aid? Where is our Saviour when we need him!'

A loud chorus of agreement greeted this. The name 'Sunev' echoed round the hall. Andromeda indicated a holographic frieze behind her, depicting the Plutonian Priests. 'The last remaining member of the Holy brotherhood, Sunev's spiritual guardian, will bring our Saviour back when the time is right! It is not yet time for the prophecy to be fulfilled. He cannot return.'

There was a general cufuffle as everyone in the hall sank to their knees. Anxious that he would not to be left standing on his own and seen by his parents, Skye quickly dropped to the floor. Everyone around him began muttering strange, incoherent incantations, fingering the beads and charms that hung around their necks. A universal cry went up.

'Sunev, hear our prayer! Please come to our aid!'

Now Skye knew why he had woken with such a nagging feeling of foreboding this morning. He must have greater psychic powers than he thought. But there was something else bothering him, something beyond this immediate danger. Not enough was being done. Andromeda was being too passive. Just taking defensive measures, rather than striking back. And if the Chags had already invaded Vardin, what else might they be up to? What could they be doing that nobody knew about? Yet.

The pleading chorus rose to a crescendo and then everyone in the hall began to leap around in a sort of frenzy of terror. Skye took the opportunity to slip away unnoticed, dodging the security guards on the way out.

'Hey stop!' honked one of them. He sounded the alarm through his trunk, but Skye had long prehensile feet and his tribe could outrun most of the others on the planet. Minutes later he was on a Skytram, heading back to the school, where the Starmath exam was half way through. He crept along the floor out of sight, slipped into his place next to Chokra and nobody noticed he had been missing.

'I'll send you all the answers I gave to the Starmaths exam later on in an ethertext,' hissed Chokra. 'But this is the last time I crib for you, okay?!'

At lunchtime, it seemed that the news had already seeped though the Ethernet. As soon as the schoolkids got out into the playspace, they switched their holophones on and the news spread like wildfire, complete with holophonic images of Andromeda making her speech. How the news had leaked out nobody knew, but many of the people on this planet had thought transference abilities, especially the Vishnuvians. The air was full of electric speculation. Frightened school kids hung around the play area in groups, whispering and staring at the horizon. Kumarian children were all a flutter, lifting off even though they were forbidden to use their wings in the school grounds, the Vishnuvian kids couldn't keep their arms still and the Mastodonians were honking in alarm.

'What in Sunev's name is going on?' said Chokra to Skye as they clustered together with their mates. 'Have the Chagrinians really risen from the deep and invaded Vardin?'

'Yes. They have! I know cos I was there!' said Skye importantly.

His friends stared at him with new respect.

‘You were there?’

Skye nodded.

‘So that’s where you got to this morning!’ gasped Chokra. ‘You sneak! Why didn’t you take me with you?’

‘Two of us would have been noticed.’

‘But how did you get in?’ said Noog, a half blood Feral, shaking his shaggy mane in disbelief.

‘Never mind that.’

‘What happened?’

‘Everyone in Andromeda’s audience chamber was totally was narged out. They’re all running round like headless farkles now. Look!’ He pointed to the city skyline, where countless flying craft were dispersing in all directions like frenzied wasps. ‘They were all going on about bringing back Sunev back from his new incarnation before the Time of the Divine Prophecy!’

His friends gasped and their questions came thick and fast.

‘Sunev??’

‘But why? How?’

‘Where is he now then? Which planet?’

‘How old is he?’

‘Nobody seems to know. That’s probably all a state secret. But anyway, Queen Andromeda says it can’t be done yet. We have to wait till the Plutonian Priest who’s looking after him says the time is right for the Prophecy to be fulfilled. So I don’t know what they’re going to do! She mentioned something about a protective force field, but a lot of people seemed to think that’s not going to do any good!’

Nunya came hurtling out of the Kinderschool entrance in a state of high agitation and jumped into Skye’s arms like a monkey. ‘Have you heard the news?! That’s why Mum and Dad had to go to that meeting! Are we all going to die? What’s going to happen?’ She burst into frightened tears. ‘Don’t let those nargy Chags get me!’ she wailed.

‘No! I won’t let them,’ said Skye in a soothing voice and he held her close against him, glancing apologetically at his peer group.

A few moments later, the tannoy burst into life, and a voice announced that school was being closed early that day. Everyone was to go home immediately. Skye and Nunya poured out of the school along with all the frightened schoolkids and hurried home. Sarsi greeted them at the door and told them that their parents had sent a message that they would be home soon.

Dinner that night was a fraught affair. Skye’s parents looked drawn and pale, and Nunya kept asking endless questions which they obviously couldn’t answer.

‘But what do they look like? Are they coming here? Do they spurt green blood? Have they really got three sets of jaws? And lots of teeth? Are we all going to die?’

‘Calm down Nunya. The Queen has already put protective shield around the whole area. And plans are being made to ward off the invasion. She already has battleships lined up in the Sargossa Sea and many warcraft are being recommissioned. We can’t tell you anything else.’

‘But I thought the Chags had been driven away forever to that underground ocean place – the Chargrilledninny – ‘

‘Chagrinia,’ corrected Skye.

‘- Never to return again!’ wailed Nunya. ‘That’s what they’ve always told us! Why have they come back?’

‘Nobody knows,’ said Skye’s Mother. ‘Now stop thinking about it. It’s nearly bedtime.’

At these words Sarsi2 activated with a whirring sound and lurched towards them from

the corner of the kitchen.

Nunya was not keen on this idea at all. 'No! Don't wanna go to bed on my own! I'm frightened!'

'We'll be up in a minute darling. Now off you go.'

A reluctant Nunya was led off jerkily by Sarsi2 and Skye turned to his parents. 'So what's all this talk of bringing Sunev back before the time of the Divine Prophecy?'

His Dad's hair stood up with alarm and suspicion. 'How did you know about that?'

'Erm – just guessing,' said Skye, trying not to look too shifty.

'You know very well from your history lessons that his Serenity cannot return to Ventura before the time is right!' boomed Skye's father, his third eye flashing angrily. 'When he was assassinated by the Chagrinians, his soul was transported by his High Priest of the Plutonian Holy Order through transmigration. Moments after his death, Sunev was reincarnated to his parents, on another planet in a secret location somewhere on the other side of the Universe. The High Priest has been guarding him ever since. Cosmic Lore decrees that we must wait until the end of his natural lifespan for him to be reincarnated back here on Ventura.'

'You mean when he's an old man? And dies of natural causes?'

'Yes.'

'But that might be too late!' cried Skye. 'We haven't time to wait! I feel that something terrible is about to happen! Something more than what we already know. How old is his current incarnation?'

'Still young apparently, too young to die early,' said his Mum, looking sadly at Skye, probably imagining a child on some other planet. 'No-one should die before their time.'

'But – what if, he didn't have to die? What if he could be brought back here physically, just as he is, to help us as our saviour?'

His father looked thunderous. 'That is impossible! Not only is it impossible in space travel terms, but this reincarnation can only be achieved by transmigration at the end of a natural lifespan. You cannot interfere with Cosmic Lore! You are only a child and you mustn't concern yourself with these things. Let us deal with it.'

'I'm not a child!' cried Skye hotly. 'I'm nearly 169 years old!'

(This was the equivalent of 13 or 14 Earth years, because of course time moves faster there.)

'It's still young. You haven't reached full maturity yet. Let us deal with it. We are looking after your futures, all of you. That's our job,' said his mother in a conciliatory tone.

'But it's my planet too!' cried Skye, leaping up, his hair waving about angrily. 'And I think us young Venturians have a right to have a say in what's going on! I don't think it's a good idea at all for us to wait for Sunev to reach the end of his lifespan! He must be brought back here sooner!'

'How do you know?' said his father.

'I just have a feeling!' blurted Skye. Frustration boiled up in him. 'But you won't listen to me cos I'm only a child! I'm fed up with being treated like I know nothing. You won't let me start flying lessons and you still expect me to do everything Sarsi2 tells me! It's not fair! You're nargy parents, you're never here and when you are, you treat me like a baby!' And he stormed out of the house before his parents could stop him.

'Come back Skye!' called his mother from the doorway as he bounded towards the beach. 'It'll be dark soon! It's not advisable to go out at this time of crisis.'

'There's no curfew yet, so I'm going for a walk!' he flung over his shoulder.

He soon reached the family's private beach, fringed with whispering palms and shifting vegetation. The sea tugged gently along the shoreline and behind him, the massive sun was sinking behind the mountains. He could swear they had crept closer to the sea since last

week. The Mother Moon of Isis rose swiftly over the horizon and gazed down at him, glimmering a pale green, the three purple rings rotating visibly round her. The next one appeared shortly afterwards, popping over the crags with alarming speed. It was much smaller, pitted with grey indentations. Skye was glad his Mother didn't have to go to Sisyphus any more, even though he was annoyed with her at the moment. The next moon floated serenely into the night sky like a ship of gold, bathing the whole scene with a glowing light. Karma had a beneficial effect on everyone, and Skye began to feel calmer.

Suddenly there was a splash nearby and a dark shape broke the water. A Mermian had surfaced for some evening air. He hauled out and flipped his silver tail against the sand.

'Skye!' he heard a voice whispering. It sounded like the wind. Skye padded over to the dark shape and gasped in recognition. It was his Uncle Tilmo, except he looked almost unrecognisable now. His black spiky hair had turned green and trailed around his shoulders in seaweedy clusters. His skin had turned from turquoise to alabaster white.

'Uncle Tilmo!' gasped Skye. 'You've come back!'

More Mermians joined him and lolled in the shallows. Tilmo flipped his tail playfully, splashing water at Skye and grinned. Tilmo was the black sheep of the family, a taboo subject in the household. Years ago he had fallen in love with a Mermian woman, the beautiful creature who was now lolling against him fondly. He had spent more and more time in the sea with her and had grown webbed feet. Eventually he had run away to sea – or rather, swum away to sea, and now it looked like he was a fully converted Mermian. Mermians were frowned upon by two legged species, as they were thought lazy, hedonistic and unsociable. Skye had missed him since he defected, and he wished he could hug him right now.

'How are you Uncle? Are you happy?'

Tilmo began to speak, in a strange swishy language which Skye found hard to understand. It was Merspeak of course. It went something like this:

'Swishchhhhhwooooww....'

Skye sighed and shook his head. It was no good - his Uncle had completely migrated into his new trans-species form. His lips could probably not form the words now.

Tilmo's wife lifted a long alabaster arm out of the water and handed Skye a large conch shell. Skye waded into the shallows, took it and held it to his ear. There were more swishing sounds, but he listened harder and gradually began to make out some kind of language.

'Ssssunev is in great danger..... He needs your help....they are trying to kill him....you must go to him....look for the mark of Sunev on his cheek. The circle with a cross beneath. Your parents have the code for his planet.....you must find it. Ssssave him and he will ssssave us.'

Skye stood up and handed the conch shell back to his weird fishy Aunty, his whole body tingling with fear, excitement and anticipation. Now he knew that his instincts had been right. There was a lot more to this than met the eye. The Chags must be planning some sort of pre-emptive assassination. It would be too late if they waited for Sunev to die naturally.

He bent down and touched his Uncle's cheek. 'Thanks Tilmo,' he murmured, 'Have a nice life.'

Tilmo flipped his tail in farewell and the shoal of Mermians turned and swam off, rippling through the water in the moonlight. Skye strode back to his house. Now he knew what he had to do.

His parents had already gone to bed when he returned. He let himself in and stole into his mother's office. He knew what he was looking for – the secret code for the planet that Sunev was now living on. Skye was a very good hacker and in no time he was in his mother's etherfiles. And there he saw what he expected to see. 'Chagrinian warship detected leaving Realm of the Seven Galaxies, Venturian time stardate XxxV1111. Suspected plot to exterminate Sunev before Time of Prophecy. High Priest to protect his holiness until rescue

can be achieved. Co-ordinates for location on rehabilitation planet, SU9 NE5.'

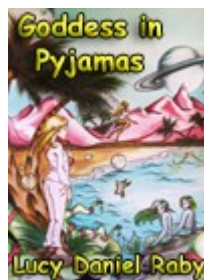
Skye stared at all the figures that came up on the screen and loaded them onto his holophone by air dragging. He loaded the ethertext Chokra had sent him, with all the latest starmaths figures. He might need them. Although it was school standard stuff it might come in handy. He placed his mother's control armband on his wrist; the one with the built in soul scanner, loaded up a map of the constellations and the galaxies and entered the co-ordinates. A holographic image of a solar system he didn't recognise sprang out of the bank of winking dials and screens and machines, a 3D virtual model of nine planets revolving round a fiery sun. The third one out from the sun was a beautiful blue and emerald globe, with one moon orbiting round it. Electrowaves emanated from it, indicating that this was the planet he needed to head for. It was in another galaxy far away. So far away he could hardly fathom it.

Skye shrugged into his mother's silver space suit, the one designed for intergalactic travel, and crept down to the spaceport via the service lift. His mother's Spacepod stood in the corner, a small white interplanetary craft about the size of a delivery van, in the shape of a diving bell, planted on mechanical feet, with a round window at the front. If he fed all the right co-ordinates in, it might just make the journey. He had to take this chance, because if he didn't, they would probably all perish.

He pressed the release button on the remote control armband and the doors slid open silently. Climbing in, Skye strapped himself into the pilot seat and switched on the power. There was a low hum and hundreds of winking lights began to flash on the control panel. He had travelled with his mother in this pod many a time, and watched her carefully as she piloted the craft. He pressed another button and the spaceport doors slid open, revealing the night sky outside. Taking the joystick, he began to manoeuvre the craft out of the spaceport.

Once outside, he fed the codes and co-ordinates into the pod's memory and pressed the lift off control. The pod hovered uncertainly above the ground. Skye pressed the intergalactic space travel button and the pod shot off into the night sky, heading for another world on the other side of the universe.

If he never came back alive, at least Skye would know he had tried his best to save his planet.



Skye's journey continues in Goddess in Pyjamas.....

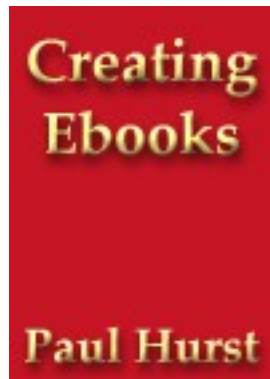
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