

The Fate of One Planet

by Ian Dow

Chapter 5

Spiky

"What the hell!?" The head of a naked Jay bumped into a soft surface. After some fumbling, Jay found the torch in his rucksack so he could put clothes on and explore.

This was a different ship once again. This time, with a smaller Parallelogram, in a smaller room with very soft walls. There were no doors; just holes that were heading off in various directions. It wasn't completely zero-G, but there wasn't a particularly heavy downward force either.

Again, there were no lights, and the holes were slightly different colours. They weren't straight but instead, gently corkscrewed through this Ship. "Another day, another dead alien spaceship to explore." Jay sighed as he crawled through the holes, which were about four feet in diameter. After a while, Jay came to a dead end. The wall material here was different- this time it was hard and cold, and he noticed the torchlight diffracting and reflecting.

"Is this surface translucent?" Jay could not see through the walls, so he turned the torch off. After a few minutes in the dark, Jay could make out stars. Then as his night vision improved, he realised he was in a long transparent cone. "This is the Spiky Ship! I'm inside the Spiky Ship!" As he looked out, he could also see some of the other nearby ships. He studied them for a while, and then headed back to the parallelogram room to investigate further.

Another hole led to a junction room. This was a spherical space with multiple holes leading off. To avoid getting lost, Jay stuck plasters along the route to mark his journey. After several minutes of crawling, Jay came to a blockage. It had a ribbed surface, was light in colour and felt hard like a ceramic.

As he touched it, he found it to be roughly the same temperature as the walls. The surveyor in Jay decided to tap it with a 'mark 1 knuckle'. It sounded hard and hollow.

A scraping noise coming from the blockage caused Jay to jump! He backed up slightly and watched the blockage in the torchlight. The scraping noise continued. After a short while, a light appeared through the blockage, slowly becoming brighter. More scraping and more light came from the blockage, which was now getting thinner and thinner. Then, multiple long translucent teeth broke through. Jay was already gone. Rats up a drain pipe had nothing on him at that moment.

"Not another dead ship!" He exclaimed when he had retreated to the white Parallelogram room. "Oh fuck! This alien is at least four feet across and has lots of long, very sharp teeth that are very good at chewing through hard material."

"Why have you revived me from my death sleep?" Asked the sharp-toothed alien.

The Spiky Ship's AI replied, "I have acquired a new type of maintenance drone. It is an ugly quadruped, but I have been told it could be useful."

"Why did it slither away?" asked the alien

"I think you frightened it," replied the Spiky Ship's AI.

"How did you know it was frightened?" the alien asked.

"I have been told this type of drone emits methane from its exhaust port when frightened," replied the ship.

"Stop!" Jay said out loud to himself. "Take a deep breath, and don't panic. This is the toothy alien's ship, not mine. I am the alien and the intruder here. I did not come here on purpose. Someone or something made me come out of the White Parallelogram. These ships all have an atmosphere that I can breathe and a temperature range that I can tolerate. The Black Ship warmed up and dimmed its lights to suit me. I am not seen as a threat if these ships want me here. Maybe I am seen as something useful...but then, what do they want with me? I was the mortuary assistant on the Black Ship, taking the dead bodies to the Parallelogram. So, what is my purpose on the Spiky Ship? There is only one way to find out." His ramble came to an end as he journeyed back to the spherical junction, sat down and waited.

After a short while, the teeth appeared in the hole. The alien's entire body poured out into the junction. Apart from its enormous mouth of long transparent teeth, its body was covered in crystal scales that were internally lit. The twenty-foot-long alien turned sideways onto Jay and produced a multi-spectrum light show from its scaly body. This was very bright, so Jay found and put on his sunglasses.

"What did it just do?" The alien continued to enquire with the Spiky Ship's AI, questioning Jay's actions.

"I think it put neutral density filters over its vision receptors. You are shouting, Ma'am! This drone is not clever enough and cannot understand you. Try the old, idiot sees, idiot does, method on the drone."

The teeth swung around at Jay, and then headed back the way it had come. Jay followed. When they got to the broken ceramic cocoon the alien had been in, he found the alien waiting on the other side. The alien pushed some of the shards of the cocoon towards Jay. Then it gave them another push. Jay grabbed a shard and pulled hard. It may be low G, but a large mass still had inertia and friction. The toothy alien gave the shard a shove so that Jay could start dragging it down the hole. After he tumbled into the junction, Jay pulled his end into the mouth of the hole leading to the parallelogram. When the alien appeared, it gave the far end of the cocoon shard a shove.

The shard was presented and soon sucked into the White Parallelogram, and then the alien headed back. Ten more journeys and all the cocoon shards were finally in the Parallelogram. Jay sat on the lip of one of the holes of the spherical space to take a break. He retrieved a bottle of water from the rucksack and took a drink.

White light poured out of every scale on the alien, causing Jay to cover his eyes. The distressed alien said, "Moisture, it has H₂O and put it in its mouth!"

"I'm told it needs this for maintenance purposes, Ma'am."

The Spiky Ship's AI flashed lights back at its Mistress from the walls. "Don't worry, Ma'am, it has not shown any aggression as of yet."

When the bright white light show from the alien did not stop, the ship flashed all of the walls green at once.

"Stop!" shouted the ship's AI to its alien mistress.

"The drone is *way* smaller than you. Stop being such a pupa!" The ship's AI chided.

"Let me try to communicate with it." The ship's AI continued.

Jay was still sitting on the lip of a hole, bottle of water in hand and sunglasses on, watching the lights. The ship's walls shone four beams of light at the water bottle. Jay raised the bottle, and the beams became brighter. He straightened his arm, which moved the bottle towards the alien, who brightened in her light output and the wall beams, which focused on the bottle, started flashing. Jay pulled the bottle back. The flashing stopped, and the alien dimmed.

"You don't like the water bottle," said Jay, "Sorry."

With that, he put the bottle in the rucksack. The wall beams stopped, and the alien dimmed.

"There you are, Ma'am; the moisture container has been put away, and it may even have apologised."

"Excellent, I like good manners," said the alien, "What about the Fallen Ones?"

"Lead it there, Ma'am and demonstrate your wishes. I will also assist you. The walls of the spherical camber lit up with a soft glow, and one hole also lit up.

"Why are you humming? She asked.

"To guide the drone, Ma'am. The drone may also put away its shouting stick."

"Break over," said Jay, "time to go to work."

He put away his torch and followed the lit hole until he came to a long pile of teeth, scales and other body parts he could not identify.

The alien arrived, picked up a mouthful of scales, and headed back to the Parallelogram room. Jay picked up two hands full and followed the alien. The alien blew the mouthful of scales into the Parallelogram, where they disappeared in flashes of light. Jay threw in his own handfuls of scale. "This will take forever!" said Jay. He walked up to the Parallelogram and said out loud. "Empty rucksack," four times.

Jay picked up the four rucksacks that came out of the far side of the White Parallelogram. He clipped one of the rucksacks to his front and another to his back and dragged the third and fourth sacks, all full of dead alien remains. They then headed back to the parallelogram room where the alien blew them into the machine. The lit holes took him to another dead alien who was also put into the Parallelogram.

On Jay's travels, he found several cysts in the tunnels. After the second dead alien was recycled, Jay was exhausted, so he climbed into one of the cysts and went to sleep.

The Spiky Ship informed the other ships that its drone had also stopped working.