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THE SECOND SKIN

Chapter One

The coming of the skin

Miriam sat on the edge of the bed. She pushed her index fingers into the recessed release valves of the Serdian battle armour, and the armoured chest and back plate separated with a hiss. She placed them on the plasti-floor next to the helmet and pulled the loops on her heavy boots, letting them slip from her feet. She stood to lower the combat leggings and pants, and lay back on the bed wearing only the utility harness with the weapons. And of course she still wore the skin. She hadn't taken it off since she was eleven, because there was no way to remove it, even if she wanted to.

She let her eyes drift down over her body. Not bad for an eighteen year old she supposed, except no man was going to look at her while she wore the skin. Or did this grey green mottled skin wear her, she mused. She supposed that this was most probably the best skin-tight outfit a girl could hope for. Your own second skin, about four cells thick. Snugly fitting every contour of your body.

Miriam closed her eyes and let her mind drift back to Prowa 10 and the skinny, gangly eleven-year-old girl sitting on the hill watching the stars. Below her lay the valley and the mines, and the small miners prefabs where her parents and the

other three hundred odd miners lived and died extracting the titanium from this soulless planet. A planet so barren and lifeless that even after terra forming it still couldn't support one sustainable crop. Just the mines and the trade. That was what the future held for her she had thought. That was before the coming of the skin.

While she sat watching the stars events above the planet unfolded, hidden from her view. The ship had come out of folded space with no advance signature. The automatic defence satellites had locked on and beamed the identification signatures. The ship had ignored them and continued towards the planet. The ship had no Federation or guild signatures, and was classified as an intruder, warned, and then fired on. It had performed manoeuvres that later astounded the human engineers and pilots reviewing the holo playbacks, but it had not escaped the orbiting satellites. At least four beams had hit it solidly, but it was the kinetic missile that sent it careening towards the planet.

Miriam had seen the streak of light that signified a ship entering the atmosphere, and even with her little experience she knew that the ship wasn't going to make it, the light was too bright, moving too fast. She had seen what had happened to the other ships that came in like that. She jumped to her feet, excited that she had such a grand view this time. The ship was going to pass directly over her.

It did pass over her, and then suddenly seemed to gain control of its mad plunge, banked and straightened and then continued it's descent. She marvelled. She hoped the pilot made it, because that was good, that was a skill no flying school could teach. Miriam watched it come down in the wasteland about two Kays away. She started running, her long spidery legs pumping in the mad rush of youth. She was going to be the first one at the scene, she knew that much. Even if the watch got into the terrabugs now they wouldn't beat her to it.

She reached the site of the crash with her heart pumping and her breath rasping in her throat, sweat staining her flimsy play space suit. She looked at the oily smoke and boiling flames and thought that there may be a chance that he had made it, the ship was still in one piece, if that was a ship. It was like nothing she had ever seen on the holovids. Like nothing anything of the nine races of the Federation had ever produced. It was smooth and almost organic, not bulky and metallic like the

normal ships. And it was too small. Ships were not supposed to be the size of terrabugs. They were supposed to look huge, powerful, imposing. This looked like a child's sand skimmer.

She ran forward, ignoring the danger, because this was hers, the first big thing in her life, and she wanted to be the one to tell the stories at the eduroom, and impress the others with her adventure. As Miriam closed in she saw what must have been the pilot, a small reptilian grey-green quadruped, dragging itself from the ship using its forelegs, its hind legs and stubby tail mangled and useless. This was it, she thought, this is the greatest story, because this was a new race, not one of the nine. She reached the little thing as it stopped moving.

It lay on its side, looking up at her with limpid violet eyes. She sank to her knees and reached out a trembling hand. The creature tried to pull back, she saw the pain in its eyes, and she withdrew her hand. She stared into the eyes, and slowly bent her head down, speaking to the creature in her soft girlish voice, telling it that it was fine now, someone would be along soon to help. The creature lifted one of its little clawed hands towards her. She reached out to the three-fingered hand, shaking with excitement, and in the back of her mind she fleetingly thought of the quarantine procedures.

The three fingers closed around one of hers, gently, and the creature warbled softly as its eyes faded and closed. She stared at the little face, looking so small and timid on the black rock surface. A tear came to her eye. A new race. A new intelligence. She had made first contact and now it was gone, because she knew the creature had stopped living.

She felt a slithering movement on her hand and looked down. The grey-green layer covering the little creature had spread halfway up her skinny arm. She jerked her hand away, but it moved slowly, the rubbery texture keeping it from pulling away. The hideous creeping thing was spreading fast. She looked back at the dead creature. The covering seemed to be slipping off its body, and she saw that the tiny pilot was actually black and scaly. By the time she had gained her feet the creature was totally black, and the layer of moving flesh had covered half her body. She screamed and clawed at it. Miriam turned and ran, blind with terror and fear, but the world faded to black, and she felt a dull pain as her body hit the rocks. Her mind

slipped into unconsciousness rather than face the dread that was building to a hysterical panic.

She opened her eyes, confused, and looked into the masked face and eyes of Winston, the bio-mechanic of the mining village. He was speaking to her, but the sound was far way and deadened, her ears felt like they were filled with cotton wool. He asked if she could hear him, and she nodded. He looked concerned, the crease between his eyes deep, and she knew something was wrong, she must be hurt bad. She looked down at her body, which was strapped to a medibed. She was naked and in one piece, except that her skin was now the grey-green colour of the little alien. There was no pain. She felt comfortable. She swivelled her head and looked around the room. Her parents were standing next to the bed, looking lost and scared. The marshal and the Federation ambassador stood by the door. Everyone was wearing white quarantine suits.

Her ordeal lasted for days. They tried to remove the skin-like layer with brushes, chemicals, scalpels and fire. They cut her numerous times, and burnt her hand badly, but the skin would peel back from the flame, and then flow back as soon as the flame was removed. It would open up when the scalpel came close, and reseal itself when the scalpel pulled back. But when they burnt her, and the skin flowed over the burn, the pain disappeared almost instantly, and when they cut her with the scalpel the skin stopped the blood flow and took the pain away.

They gave up and stopped trying to remove it after three days. Winston had taken off his quarantine suite and sat on the edge of the bed next to her. He spoke to her like an adult, for the first time in her life, and told her what they thought the skin was. It was a living biological parasite. It had connected itself to her blood stream with thousands of microscopic capillaries, and was feeding itself nutrients and minerals from her body. It was connected to her nervous system, and it kept her body temperature steady. If she was injured it would recognise the hurt and heal her. If she was in pain it secreted anaesthetics into her skin and if she was bleeding it stopped the blood flow and helped her heal three times faster than was normal for a human. It had not spread to anyone else, so they assumed it was one organism, not a disease. It was a symbiote he told her, it would not harm her, at least they didn't think so, and would look after its host in exchange for sustenance.

Miriam was kept isolated in quarantine for four months. They tried every experiment they could, and finally managed to cut a small piece of the skin from her, and study it under a microscope. It was carbon based like most of the life forms in the universe, and the cells died quickly. They estimated it was a four to five cell layer over most of her body, slightly thicker where the blood flow was greater, and about fifteen cells thick around her head. It had killed all the hair follicles on her body, and she was totally hairless under the skin. Over her eyes it was one cell layer thick they told her, and those cells were transparent. It extended into her mouth, down into her lungs and throat, but it didn't cover her tongue or teeth, and they didn't think it went down as far as her stomach. Her hearing had improved, and she heard everything clearly now, as if the skin realized she needed to hear through her ears. It extended into her nose, where it became porous and actually filtered the air for her.

It didn't interfere with her other bodily functions, and her ablutions were the same as they had always been. She ate normally and well, and Winston joked it was because she was eating for two. The skin was comfortable and she couldn't feel it on her body. It kept her cool when it was hot, and warmed her when it was cold. After two months her eyelashes started growing back, as though the skin realized that they were necessary. She had problems cutting her nails in the beginning, but after a while the skin learnt to draw back smoothly when she brought the clippers close, and flow back normally when she was finished, as if it saw that the cutting off of nails was not an attack on itself or the host.

Winston was her constant companion, the only one not afraid of the skin, and spoke to her for hours. He told her that the skin had left its previous host when it died, and she had been the closest living being capable of supporting it. If she had not been there, it would have taken the next living thing that came along, or it would have died.

The new sentient race was being called the Mir, an abbreviation of her name because she had had first contact. The little reptilian pilot had been the only occupant of the spacecraft and they had no indications of where it came from. The ship was mostly undamaged, but it was dead, they could not get it to operate.

Technicians from all nine the Federation member races were studying the ship and the pilot, but were no closer to answers than before they started. The ship's drives ran on a very advanced nuclear system, and folded space like most other ships, just much more efficiently, that's why it could be built so small. There was machinery and technology in the ship that they could not understand, and the scientists were at a loss to its origin.

The pilot was carbon based, like the other nine races, but it's skin was plated with an organic scale-like layer not seen anywhere else in the universe. As far as organs were concerned its internal structure was not that strange. It had a heart, one lung, some organs similar to kidneys and livers, and a digestive tract. It did have some organs whose functions were unknown, but they most probably fulfilled the same functions as the multiple organs in the Paut, the smallest of the nine Federation races.

Technicians, biomechanics, doctors and scientist from all nine races came to see her, to prod at the skin, and to ask her how she felt. They scanned her, and made computer holo images of her, inside and out, but they all agreed with the original diagnoses, it was a symbiotic parasite, and they could not remove it without killing her.

The first time the Logue came to see her she cringed and pulled away from the fearsome plated insectoid monster. He was gentle, and chirped like the beetles on the holovids, and Winston laughed at her, because the Logue were the most peaceful of the nine races. Despite standing two hundred Cee-Ems tall, and dwarfing everyone else in the room with its bulk, the Logue moved with grace and touched her lightly, because it knew humans instinctively feared it's insect-like appearance.

The gigantic Logue were not insects at all, but millions of years of evolving on a planet that was becoming a desert world had hardened the outer skin into an armoured carapace to protect it against the abrasive sandstorms, and to prevent the loss of moisture. Taking to space had been natural for them as flying beings, and their physical makeup allowed them to prosper on planets that the other races found inhospitable. They were peaceful to an alarming degree, vegetarians with no natural predators on their home world, and they found the concept of fighting amongst themselves impossible to imagine. Winston whispered that they were like the cows

on Earth, just with two hundred thousand years more evolution behind them. She didn't know what a cow was.

The Logue stayed with her for two days. It was overly cautious with her, as if it was afraid it might injure her by touch alone. It never needed to sleep, but sat patiently waiting while she did. It performed its tests in an unhurried and professional manner, and left satisfied that the skin was no danger to its race, and just another one of the millions of strange life forms in the universe.

The aquatic Ueal was the only one of her visitors that wore an enviro-suite to see her, because even though he breathed air he needed the liquid environment to sustain his body temperature, and it was strange to see the round eyed face study her through the face plate of the suite. The Ueal were a telepathic race, but only among themselves, so he wrote his requests on a space pad for her.

The Ueal were the only one of the nine Federation races who had never invented space travel, one of the conditions for entry to the Federation. They had advanced beyond any of the other races in the fields of medicine and science, mathematics and philosophy, but being aquatic they had never ventured into the sky. They were approached and asked to join when the Reter virus from the newly discovered jungle moon of Ater had threatened to extinguish all life in the universe, and their medical knowledge had been all that saved the Federation. They were not interested in technology and the ship, just the pilot and the skin. The Ueal spent days with her, and Winston told her that his final report said that she had the skin for life, and it would not harm her, and would only leave her when she died.

So, at the age of eleven, Miriam met and dealt with representatives of each of the nine sentient races of the known universe. She saw them work, saw their technology and their manners, and wondered how creatures as radically different from each other as day and night had managed to accept each other and live in peace. Well, lived in peace now. She knew it had not always been so, and her storybooks of the great wars came to life in her head with every new visitor.

After four months of probing and studies, they were satisfied that the skin posed no threat, and they let her go home. Her parents pulled away from her and would not touch her. She knew that despite their protests they saw her as an infected child, an abomination in their home. She told no stories of her great adventure at the

eduroom because the children ran from her. Her friends could not look at her, and she knew that she was doomed to a life of loneliness, just her and her friend, the silent brainless parasitic skin. She stopped going to the eduroom when the children started whispering freak, and told her to take her disease away from them. She sat at home and watched holovids, determined to educate herself. She learnt to live with the skin, and she discovered the wonders of the skin.

The skin never slept. It kept her safe from the flying moisture flies, poisoning them and killing them instantly whenever their needle tube mouths tried to suck liquid from her. It was alive and flowed with her, helped her to walk and run, and lay motionless when she slept. It pumped adrenaline into her blood when she needed it, and tranquilizers when she needed to calm down. It heightened her sense of touch, sharpened her vision and hyper-tuned her ears, and it saved her life.

She was eating fried rock crabs with her parents and every time she tried to swallow, the skin gave her a violent gag reflex. Miriam couldn't get the food down. Her parents were hospitalized the following day with severe cases of food poisoning, and her mother suffered for four days before dying retching in Winston's lab. Her father survived but he became a sullen man, and his eyes told her that he felt she had been the one to take his wife from him. He became cold and distant and ignored her, providing her with food and shelter, but not love for his alien contaminated child.

She left home at fourteen and lived with Winston at his lab. She cooked and cleaned and ran his household, and he in turn taught her biomechanics. He spoke to her for days of the medicines and biology of the nine races. The strengths and weaknesses of each race, what they ate, how they thought and how they reproduced. He gave her all the edudiscs she could absorb and she buried herself in them.

Miriam studied history, the myths and legends of earth, the journeys to the stars, the first contacts, the wars, the pacts, the establishment of the Federation of five races, the discovery of the other races and their inclusion into the Federation. She learnt about the other sentient races, whose planets were off limits until they discovered space travel on their own.

She studied geography, the size of each race's sector of space, the free areas were anyone could mine and farm and colonize, the locations of the off limit planets of the emerging races, the no-go zones where the planets and suns were so hostile

that it was not worth terra forming. She studied the star maps of the frontier, the outer limits of the known universe, and knew that beyond that lay much more, like the home world of the small pilot who gave her the skin. She read the stories of the free worlds, which owed no allegiance to the Federation, and the strange world of the warlike Serd. The race who would not join the Federation and who shunned all contact with the other planets. The race that had perfected space travel and would not use it. Their home planet Serdia was so ravaged by centuries of war that it was barely able to sustain life, but the Serd would not leave, would not relocate to another planet.

Miriam studied biology and her mind marvelled at the myriad types of life. From aerial plants that floated above gas giants to giant burrowing worms that ate the rocks on airless planets. Creatures that dwarfed the whales on earth and small animals that lived in hives numbering trillions. Crystal life forms that had intelligence but no biology and planets filled with life forms that had evolved for millions of years, and not one of them had ever advanced beyond the eat or be eaten stage.

The lonely human girl studied maths and science, read books of fiction and listened to music. She looked at the art of alien cultures, some long extinct and some so primitive that they would not travel to another star for thousands of years to come. She did all this alone, with only Winston who ever asked how her day had been. She hid from the rest of the mining village because she hated seeing their eyes filled with revulsion when they looked at her smooth and hairless head, with its alien parasite living off her blood.

When she turned sixteen Winston baked her a cake, and they had a party for two. She realized that she had not been sick since her adoption by the skin. She did not get colds, her puberty had been trouble-free, and the occasional cut was mostly painless and healed in hours, not days. Her eyesight was phenomenal, and her hearing acute. She was always fit and healthy, and the muscle tone on her body was that of an athlete. The skin was looking after her.

But some things were beyond the skin, and the skin could not help her when Winston died pulling miners from a burning ore truck. The new bio-mechanic made no secret of the fact that after he had studied her and the skin, he had no more

interest in her, and she was not welcome to stay. She had sold the miners hut she had inherited from her father, so she had some money, but no income, no home, and no prospect of finding work on Prowa 10. No one wanted the infected girl with the alien parasite around them. Miriam hung around the small spaceport for days, trying to buy a passage to another world. She did not have enough to pay a passenger fare, and no one needed a parasite infected sixteen year old from a mining village as a crewmember.

Then the Trojan Horse arrived. An outdated, bulky Terran trade ship, most probably long past its due date for federal inspection, leaking radiation and looking like a survivor of the Freeworld Wars five centuries earlier. The pilot was a seventy-year-old space veteran with solar burns on his face, too much alcohol in his veins, and a temper to rival that of the legendary Tasmanian devil from earth. He swore oaths from all nine races at the port officials, argued with all the traders till they bought his goods at inflated prices just to shut him up, and got himself barred from all five the drinking holes on Prowa 10 on his first night on the planet.

His first words to her was a string of curses, but she managed to read between the spittle and the hacking cough that he thought she was either very ugly or that he should stop using so many chemicals. He hired her. He told her that anyone brave enough to fly in his ship was either an idiot or a hero, and she was a hero because he didn't call anyone idiots until he knew them. On their way back to the ship he called everyone he met an idiot. They left Prowa 10 with a cargo of titanium, cases of cheap liquor and unsettled bills in four or five of the trading houses.

Once they left the planet and started accelerating to reach space fold speed he was a changed man. He introduced himself as John Steppe jnr, which she found very amusing as he looked like father time himself. He taught her to fly the Trojan Horse in two days, never asked about her skin, and marvelled at her intelligence. He told her stories about his travels, some so amazing she was sure he was lying, but he showed her his mementos. He had holovids of space battles with raiders, taken from his ships scanners, and he had holopics of his wives and some of his fourteen children. He showed her his cupboard filled with books and artworks and weapons taken from enemies too numerous too mention, or bought on worlds she had not heard of.

He had the skull of a Detsaw wraith mounted on his pilots seat. He told her he had killed it with a laser blade, and showed her the claw marks across his chest and thighs that the wraith had given him. The Detsaw wraith was the most efficient hunter-predator in the universe, combining the best qualities of a leopard, a glider bat and a chameleon. It didn't sound to her as though he was lying about that one.

It normally took four days to reach fold speed in a modern ship. It took the Trojan Horse six, and for six days he spoke and drank liquor and didn't seem too sleep. She learnt more about space in those six days than all the holovids and edudiscs could ever have taught her. He taught her how to operate the laser turret, how to use an electron blaster, a kinetic sidearm, a laser blade and beam cannon. He showed her how to navigate and plot a course, how to keep the ship from falling apart, and how to drink cheap liquor. They entered folded space smoothly, and emerged much farther from the water planet than they should have.

He sat her down and said he had planned it that way because they needed to talk. He told her that he didn't use the chemicals most space pilots did, it was part of his sales technique to act frazzled and cranky, and yes, he knew she had an alien parasitic skin when he met her, but he had seen another before, on another world. It didn't bother him. He had seen much worse in his travels, and he needed a crewmember. When they landed she was free to leave, but he wanted her to stay.

“There's nothing on these planets for one like you.”

The words still rang clear in her head. He helped her land the Trojan Horse on a giant floating dock and they traded titanium for salt and the serum of the sea dragons used in medicines, and she left the planet with him.

Once they were in space he gave her a dress he had bought for her. It was an elaborate evening gown made from the skin of the translucent sea hawk. It changed colours as she moved in the light and she danced around the small cabin like a child in her first party dress.

“You may never need it, but every girl should have a pretty dress.”

He taught her how to dance. The waltzes from earth and slow bobbing dances from the Perium Empire, mathematical dances from Logue worlds and silly jumping dances that he said were 'Scottish'. By the time they reached the fifteenth trade world she could speak all four the languages of the nine in the Federation that

humans could vocalize, and she could understand the other three that were in the audible range for humans. He also taught her how to drink liquor that wasn't cheap, and the proper way to eat the Bower fish, the most complicated delicacy in the universe. He told her she was pretty and she loved him for that.

They traded well, and he spent all the profits on fixing the ship. He seemed to have found a new pride in everything he did, and insisted on the best parts, the newest gadgets, and the most modern additions. He went without liquor to buy two new pilots chairs.

“John, why are you doing this, fixing the ship and spending all your credits on new parts?”

“My girl, when I go, you are not going to inherit a pile of space junk.”

He went when she was seventeen. He died quietly in his sleep, with a smile on his lips. In his hand was a space pad with his last letter to her. Her called her daughter, and left everything to her, including a house on a planet no one had ever heard of. She didn't bury him in space, but paid for a grave on a desolate planet with a small hunting community, and left her evening gown in the coffin with him.

She took off from the planet in the Trojan Horse, a sparkling gleaming ship that reached fold speed in three days, and she sang songs of sadness in four languages with tears in her eyes till she entered the fold, and emerged above Namuh as the owner of a trade ship with a Federation inspection clearance certificate and a hold filled with the finest skins of the rarest animals.

The first trader she saw took one look at her, decided that an eighteen year old with a parasitic skin was an easy target and tried to inspect her insides with the aid of a laser blade. She and the skin moved with a speed that surprised even her, and she put two holes into his chest with the electron blaster before the skin had managed to flow back over the cut across her stomach. The Federation marshal was quick to take her side, get the matter cleared and sealed, partly because he did not want to be too close to the infected girl for too long. She walked away from her first killing feeling strangely unmoved.

She dragged the Serdian battle armour from the trophy cupboard on the ship, and spent two days learning to use the shell. The skin seemed to welcome the armour, as though it had worn it before. It padded and adjusted itself to make the

armour fit better, and she adjusted and re-adjusted the settings till it felt as though she had a third skin. She poured over the intergal database, reading and studying till she felt she knew how to use all the weapons and functions of the suit.

Then she went back to the traders. No trader thought that a grey-green skinned girl in Serdian battle armour was an easy target. Hell, no one in Serdian armour was an easy target, because that was the armour of the most warlike race in the universe, and most people only knew rumours of what the armour was capable of. She traded and bargained with a quite voice but steely eyes, and booked into the space-rest a richer and harder person.

She opened her eyes and looked down at her body. Seven years in an alien skin. From a skinny eleven year old girl on a desolate mining planet with a future as the wife of yet another miner in a mining shack, to the owner of her own trade ship and a house on an unknown planet. Life was good. Even for the owner of a parasitic skin. Her very own skin she thought, as she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.