THE CAT SPIRIT

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Children's Book Trust, New Delhi
Prologue

Millions of light years away from the sun, a star began the process that would end her life. She had exhausted her nuclear fuel and now she must turn upon herself. The temperature at her core would rise to 4000° C and she would be so hot as to burn off all the helium in a flash. She would then begin to oscillate; shrinking and expanding and shedding some of her layers into outer space. Eventually the helium at the core would heat up and the unused outer layers of hydrogen would expand into outer space to form a ring of nebula. Her core would become a bright star, but she would be a miniature form of what she had been. In her death throes, she would have engulfed the innermost planets, if she had any and the inhabitants she might have in any of them.
Chandru! Your dinner is getting cold!"

Chandru could hear his Mom calling from the dining room. He looked up with a start at the clock on the wall opposite him and saw that the hands showed 8.16 p.m. He was a minute late. He put down the test tube he was holding over the burner. He was reluctant to leave the experiment half done, but he knew that he could not be late for dinner. He needed another hour to finish. He sighed. He could not finish it anyway. He had loads of homework to do. Ugh! How he hated that! "I am coming, Mom!"

He took the test tube to the washer and poured the contents down the drain. They were of no use to him now. They had to be heated at a stretch. He washed the test tube and placed it in its stand. He looked around his den-cum-laboratory. 'It is a nice place to be in,' he thought. One wall of the room was covered by a huge rack of books. He had to use a stool to reach the top-most shelf. Another wall was occupied by a small, yet comfortable table that served as his lab-top. Rows of chemicals, reagents, materials and
test tubes were arranged neatly. The top of the table was mottled with patches and blotches of chemicals. He could not avoid those however hard he tried. His school books and study table stood in a corner. A sports bicycle stood leaning against a French window that opened out into the backyard.

Chandru went to the window and looked out into the night. All was still outside. A few crickets chirped. He could hear a cuckoo sing somewhere. The stars twinkled from their distant worlds. A gentle breeze was wafting in the smell of wild grass and rain. Chandru took a deep breath to cleanse his lungs off the smell of chemicals. He loved his den. He closed the window and looked at his reflection on the dark glass. He ran his hands through his tousled hair. He was tall with a build to match his height. He looked at his eyes and was proud to see an intelligent glint in them. He smiled at himself and touched his reflection, patting its cheek. He turned away and looked around his room. A warm smile caressed his face. He switched the light off and closed the door.

He hurried into the dining room and washed his hands thoroughly. Dinner was laid. He could smell the hot korma. His Dad and Mom were already at the table, waiting for him. Dinner was a family affair. Everybody, which was only the three of them, made it a point to be on time and have dinner together.

So, how is the new experiment coming on?" his Dad asked, with a twinkle in his eye.

Mr. Sivam was a top-most scientist working in the Department of Energy for the Government of India. He was based at a place curiously named Mount
Pleasant. It was curious because the place was not a
hill station but a small town situated at the base of a
hillock. It was a pleasant one for sure though tiny by
modern standards. The major landmark of the town
was the Research and Development (R&D) wing of
the Department of Energy. None of Mr. Sivam’s family
knew that he was actually the head of the R&D
division for the development of new and alternate
forms of fuel, though they knew that he worked in
the energy department.

Mr. Sivam was proud that his passion for science
and research had been inherited by his son. This was
compounded by his incredible intelligence. He was
extremely pleased that Chandru, though only
fourteen, showed signs of becoming a bigger scientist
than him. He remembered very well the day he had
first noticed this.

It was Chandru’s tenth birthday and he had asked
him what he would like as a birthday present. He
could not conceal a smile when he remembered how
he was taken aback and in shock had spilled hair oil
on his shirt front, when Chandru asked for a
laboratory set!

The seed had been sown then.

Now he was asking his son how his new experiment
was coming on!

"Fine, Daddy! Oh, if only I could find the right
temperature for the mixture though," Chandru
replied. "While I am sure about the components and
their proportion, it is only the temperature that is
eluding me. Oh, Daddy! I am so excited. I am on the
brink of finding a new fuel. We can use this for all
our energy purposes. We need to make only slight alterations in its composition and proportion. Just imagine, Daddy! One fuel for all our purposes! We do not have to depend on any other country for our fuel needs. We could become the next space power! Our whole economic deficit could be wiped out."

Chandru never asked his Dad for any help with his experiments. His Dad too, made it a point not to offer any clues or hints to his son's problems. His parents were pleased with their son's enthusiasm, yet they did not want to force anything on him.

"Your lab time for today is over, Chandru. You better finish you homework and get to bed early. Tomorrow is Sandhya's birthday, remember?" said Mrs. Leela, his mother.

"Oh, Mom! How could I forget? I have been looking forward to it for a whole week now. I have made a special present for her. I cannot wait to see her face when she opens it."

Even his parents did not know what present he had made for Sandhya, their neighbour's daughter and Chandru's best friend. Sandhya's family lived next door and like Mr. Sivam, Mr. Moorthy, Sandhya's father, worked in the same department. In fact, Mr. Moorthy was Mr. Sivam's deputy in the R&D department, though neither family was aware of it. They never went to work together nor discussed office matters outside.

Sandhya's mother, Mrs. Nalini, was the chief librarian of the city and that served to stoke the unquenching fires of both teenagers' curiosity.

Chandru got excited as he thought about the
present for Sandhya. He had made something for her with his own hands and was looking forward to see the joy on her face. Sandhya was a year younger to Chandru and so in a class junior to him, though in the same school.

Chandru got up to help his Mom clear the dishes. As his hands worked at drying and stacking the plates, his thoughts flew to the next day. Tomorrow would be the last day of the summer term. After that they would have two months' vacation. He would finish his experiments, he vowed, and go back to school as the inventor of the revolutionary fuel. He could not wait for dawn.

Mrs. Leela could sense her son's excitement. "Are you thinking about tomorrow, son?"
"Yes, Mom," Chandru answered with a grin. "I will clean up. You can go now," she offered.
"Oh! thank you so much, Mom. I promise I will make it up in the vacation. Goodnight!" He gave his Mom a huge hug and running up the steps to his room, he yelled a Goodnight to his father who was engrossed in his crossword.

His parents could hear him whistling for a while as he prepared for bed. Then the whistling stopped and the lights went out.

The disappointment

"Oh, no!"
The scream from Chandru's room in the early morning hour awakened his parents who came running.
"What? What happened?" Chandru’s father asked, bewildered.

"Are you all right, son?" his mother seemed worried.
Chandru was standing near his bed and looking into a box with dismay. A model of a UFO was standing in the box. It looked exactly like those found in books. It was saucer-shaped and stood on three legs. Various lights were blinking on its undersurface. The top half was covered with a translucent glass and the whole thing was the colour of an overcast sky. An arrangement like a ladder led up from the bottom of the box to an opening in the saucer. Small models of curiously-shaped creatures were descending the steps.

Chandru stood looking at the box. His parents sensed he was disappointed.

"Is this your present for Sandhya, son?" asked Mrs. Leela, gently.
Chandru nodded, a tear rolling down his cheek. His parents realized he was deeply upset.

"It was working well last night," he managed to say with a catch in his throat.

A small remote control was lying on his bed. Mr. Sivam recognized it as the remote control for the toy helicopter he had brought for him. 'So, he has taken apart the helicopter and fitted its mechanism to that saucer-shaped thing,' he thought.

"What am I going to give Sandhya now? Oh, how can I wish her without a present?" and Chandru started sobbing, his head buried in his hands.

For a few moments Chandru’s parents were at a loss for words. Then Mr. Sivam went to his son and
patted him on the shoulder. "It is okay, son. We will think of something. You have school today. Start getting ready."

Chandru wiped his eyes and got up. He was not reassured but realized that he could not afford to mourn his misfortune and miss the last day of the summer term. He closed the box and pushed it under the bed. He was sure he would never open it again.

Chandru picked his food at the breakfast table. Mrs. Leela exchanged worried glances with her husband, her expression suggesting 'do something'. "Hey, Chandru! Why not I pick you up at lunch? We can go to a store and buy a present for Sandhya. In fact, we can take Sandhya with us and ask her to choose her present. How does that sound?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Right then, it is fixed. I will see you at lunch time."

"Yes, Daddy!"

Chandru finished his breakfast listlessly and left to pick up Sandhya. They always rode together, to and from school.

The birthday present

Sandhya's day started better than Chandru's. In fact, it started excellently. She had woken up with an inner excitement that was caused, not just by the fact that it was her fourteenth birthday, but by some intuition that told her that something was going to happen that day. She thought about it as she got ready for school. Her parents had wished her just as she had opened
her eyes in the morning and had given their presents. She had asked for a higher resolution telescope and tore open the gift box impatiently. The telescope gleamed in its brass outer case. It was of a model that had to be stood on a tripod. She unclasped the tripod from its case, unfolded the legs and kept it on the table near her window. For a moment she was afraid to touch it; afraid that it might be an illusion and that everything might vanish into thin air the moment her hands touched the metal.

However, the feeling vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. She ran her hands over the cold metal and watched the traces of her fingerprints left on the gleaming surface. She lifted the telescope out of the case, fixed it on the tripod and checked its range. Focussing on the distant horizon made her heart skip a beat. Birds in the sky, miles and miles away, flew at an arm's distance from her. She could not wait for nightfall, yet she did not want her birthday to end so quickly. She was torn between a feeling of suppressed excitement, joy and anticipation.

She jumped away from the telescope and threw her arms around her parents. They had stood quietly all the while, watching their daughter explore and enjoy her present. "Thank you, Mom and Daddy! This is really the best present I have ever had."

"Okay, Sandhya. We believe you. Now get ready for school. You do not want to be late on your last day, do you?"

"Oh, my God! I had totally forgotten. Chandru will be here soon. Once again, thank you, Mom and Daddy. I will be down in a flash."
Her parents were already at the breakfast table when Sandhya joined them. She gulped down her breakfast.

"Do not worry, Sandhya, you still have time before Chandru comes. Eat slowly," said her Dad.

"Yes, Daddy, I am trying to but I cannot wait to tell Chandru about the telescope."

"So, which distant galaxy are you going to visit tonight?" asked her mother, with an indulgent smile on her face.

Sandhya had a passion for astronomy. She could name any visible star in the sky at any time of the year. She could point out all the constellations in the sky blindfolded. Her passion had started when she was old enough to understand what the moon and the stars were. Her favourite stories were that of men flying away to distant horizons. When she had been six, she had seen the movie *Extra Terrestrial*. From that moment onwards, Sandhya had become hooked on to the idea that there was life on the distant planets in distant solar systems. She had started to read fiction about aliens. When she found that the stories did not quite answer her questions about extra-terrestrial (ETs), she graduated to documented events of UFO sightings on earth. By the time she was in her teens, her knowledge about UFOs was extraordinary. Her collection of books and articles had grown so much that her library was equal to that of her father's.

As her knowledge grew, so did her conviction that extraterrestrial beings really existed. After a while her conviction turned into certainty and instead of trying to convince herself and others about the
existence of ETs, she started looking for proof of their existence. She firmly believed that ETs had already visited the earth and she started hoping that she might one day receive a guest from outer space. With her precious present she could chart an imaginary course through the Milky Way and other galaxies and hop in on some distant heavenly body which might surprise her with its inhabitants. She had had many such imaginary courses to imaginary planets on faraway solar systems that she was convinced existed and had life.

"I do not know, Mom. I have been wanting so much to explore the Ursa Minor. Maybe this time I can visit it. I have been saying that Ursa Minor has a solar system similar to ours. Perhaps I will find proof of it this time. I do not know. Gosh! I am so excited!"

"Well, good luck, dear. Now come down to earth and finish your breakfast," said her Dad.

As Sandhya finished her milk, she could hear Chandru’s cycle tyres scrunch up the gravel pathway. She knew that she would hear his bell ringing in a moment. She leapt out of her chair, gathered her school bag and rushed outside.

"Hi, Chandru!"

"Morning, Sandhya. Wish you a very, very happy birthday! Here, I picked you some flowers."

Chandru had detoured out into the woods a little way from their backyard and had cried his heart out. His tears were both for himself as well as for Sandhya. He could not bear the thought that his handiwork had failed at the last moment, robbing him not only of the satisfaction of being a creator, but also the joy of
giving it to Sandhya. He was bitterly disappointed that he would have to find some other present for Sandhya. He knew that her passion for UFOs equalled his passion for science and research. This was one of the reasons why she was his best friend, for she understood what it was to be obsessed about something so as to devote one's spare time to it. Now, all he had to give her was a bunch of flowers.

"Oh! they are beautiful, Chandru, and they smell so sweet." Sandhya buried her face in the flowers and took a deep breath.

Chandru watched her with surprise. Sandhya was not the type to go sentimental over a bunch of flowers. He felt that it was not just the flowers. She was excited about something else which was transferring itself over his flowers. Watching her made him feel better. He began to come out of his depression and actually felt some of Sandhya's excitement rub on to him.

"So, how does it feel to be fourteen?" he asked.

"Oh, great, Chandru! Just great! Now I am the same age as you," she replied.

Chandru watched her with a smile. Sandhya loved to compete with him, though their competition was not aimed at beating each other. Instead, they just wanted to be equal in everything, even in age. If Chandru did better in one subject, he would help Sandhya improve and Sandhya reciprocated the same care to him.

Chandru was proud of his friend. She was unlike the other girls he had known. She bothered the least about clothes, hairstyles, make-up or any other thing a girl would be interested in. She could not stand the
fuss of having long hair and so she had it cut to shoulder length. Even then she could not bother to keep managing it and she always put it up in a pony tail. She dressed almost like Chandru, wearing mostly a pair of jeans over a T-shirt. She was about as tall as Chandru and anyone looking at them from afar could easily mistake one for the other.

Chandru patted her head affectionately. He could not have asked for a better friend. "So! What did you get for a present this time from your parents? Not another set of books, I hope!" Chandru fervently prayed that she had not got a toy UFO for a present. He was beginning to hope that he could fix the model and give it to her before the day was over.

"Oh no, silly! What would I want a set of books for when I have something much more useful and fascinating? You guess what it could be!"

For a moment Chandru's heart sank. "A toy of some spacecraft?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"Wrong! A telescope!"

Chandru heaved a sigh of relief. He still had a chance. He focussed his attention to what Sandhya was saying.

"Oh, Chandru! It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. It is so new and shiny. It stands on a tripod and its range is unbelievable. I just cannot wait for nightfall. I really cannot."

Chandru smiled at his friend's enthusiasm. He understood how she felt. "Okay, Sandhya. Do not go flying away among the stars. For the moment just get on your bike and let us go to school before it is late."

Sandhya laughed and got on her bike. They spoke
of other things on the way to school and planned for the upcoming holidays. They had no idea what the holidays had in store for them.

The pet shop

The lunch bell rang. Chandru and Sandhya rushed out of their classes. Sandhya was holding an armful of gaily-wrapped presents. They met at their usual meeting spot—the steps of the front porch.

"You must be a very popular girl in your class. Wow! Look at all those presents!"

Sandhya grinned from ear to ear. She would have fun opening them with Chandru.

"Hi, kids!"

Both of them turned around in unison to find their parents waving frantically to them. Chandru slapped his forehead. He had totally forgotten about his Dad's offer to pick them up at lunch. They promptly ran to their parents.

"Wow! That is a load! Guess we need to hire a taxi to carry these home," joked Sandhya's father.

"Oh! come on, Daddy! This is not much," said Sandhya, though secretly pleased that she had so many friends who had wished her on her birthday.

"All right, where shall we go for lunch? I think it should be the birthday girl's choice today," said Mrs. Leela.

"Okay, Aunty, as long as I do not have to foot the bill," laughed Sandhya.

"Do not worry, Sandhya. If we run short of money,
we can always settle the bill with those," remarked Mr. Sivam, pointing to her presents.

"Ha! You will have to fight the mighty Sandhya in a deadly duel before you can lay your hands on these," said Sandhya and threw up her head, presenting a picture of a defiant knight defending the honour of his king.

Everybody burst out laughing at this and piled into the two cars. Sandhya chose to go to her favourite restaurant 'The Cuisine'.

Having seen all the presents that Sandhya had received, Chandru's depression returned. He felt miserable that he, Sandhya's best friend, had not got her anything. He had to get her something, now. He could fix his model and give it to her later.

Chandru looked out of the window as the car stopped at a signal. A poster proclaiming:**STOP ANIMAL CRUELTY! DO NOT USE ANIMALS FOR EXPERIMENTS!** caught his eye. Chandru's face lit up suddenly. That is it! This is what I will get Sandhya,' he thought, excitedly. All that had looked dull and gloomy moments ago, looked bright and cheerful now.

Chandru could not wait for lunch to be over. He kept hurrying everyone over lunch and was the first one to be out of the restaurant's door. He pulled his father away from the group and whispered into his ear. Mr. Sivam nodded his approval and patted his son. They rejoined the group.

"Sandhya, Chandru wants to take you somewhere. So, be ready after school. We will pick up both of you and then he can take you wherever he wants to."

"Oh, Uncle! We totally forgot to tell you in all
this excitement that we do not have school in the afternoon. Our vacation has started. So we go now."

She turned to Chandru. "Where, Chandru? Where are you taking me?" she asked, excitedly.

"Oh, no! I am not going to tell you. You will find out soon enough. So do not ask me. My lips are sealed," he said with mock seriousness.

"Well, if you will not tell me, fine. I will find out somehow, you wait and see," said Sandhya.

As they drove towards their destination, Sandhya tried to get someone to tell her where they were going. When she could not get a word out of anyone, mainly because no one except Chandru and his father knew about it, she tried saying aloud the names of places to evoke a reaction from Chandru to confirm her guess. When she was about to run out of further places to guess, the cars came to a halt in front of a shop.

Sandhya got down and read the name board. It said: THE PET SHOP—SHARE YOUR HOME AND HEART. For a moment Sandhya was speechless with astonishment.

"Go in, Sandhya. Go and find someone to enter your New Year with," said Chandru’s mother, gently.

Hesitantly, they entered the store. An extraordinary atmosphere greeted them. It was as if they had come to a zoo. A number of cages and racks lined the walls, leaving only a small passage to the interior. At its end there was a small doorway covered by a curtain. The store was brightly lit. Balloons, festoons and buntings hung from the ceiling. Music, soft and lilting, was heard from an unseen source. However, the most extraordinary sight was the variety of creatures found
in the cages. Animals and birds of every imaginable variety from monkeys, squirrels, rabbits, puppies, turtles to parrots, pigeons, ducks, eagles, kites, and many, many more filled the cages. What stunned them into an astonished silence was the total absence of any noise in the store. There was not a peek, not a squeak, not a whisper from any of the creatures in the cages.

Sandhya and Chandru stood open-eyed and dropped jaws. Even the adults were too stunned by the sight to say anything.

The curtain on the doorway parted and an elderly man walked out. As he came closer, they could sense a feeling of mystery radiating from him. He came and stood directly in front of Sandhya. He had a head full of snow white hair that hung down to his shoulders. His eyes crinkled behind the round glasses that perched on a hawk-like nose. The mouth was stretched into a wide smile. His shoulders were slightly stooped and he walked with a peculiar gait, as if the earth might roll away from under his feet at any moment.

He looked into Sandhya’s eyes and she felt the inner excitement she had been feeling from morning, rise to a crescendo. He turned and looked at Chandru. The moment their eyes met, Chandru felt caught in a mysterious web that enclosed the man, Sandhya and himself. He gave an involuntary shudder.

The man turned back to Sandhya. "Welcome, my child. I have what you want. Come with me."

"But...but...how do you know?" asked an astonished Sandhya. "I myself do not know what I want."
"Ah! You don’t have to, my child. It is enough that I do," said the man. "Just follow me. Don’t be afraid."

"Who are you? How do you know me?" Sandhya persisted.

The man did not answer. He put his fingers to his lips as if to suggest she should not ask any more questions. He motioned to her to follow him.

The adults, who had been silently watching this unbelievable exchange, stood as if mesmerized by the sight of the man. They could not take their eyes off him. Sandhya turned to look at her parents to ask if it would be all right to go with him, but one look at them made her realize that they would not be able to answer her. She looked at Chandru. He slowly nodded his head. He took her hand and marched behind the man.

The doorway led into a small room that was totally empty. There was another door on the farthest wall. The man opened that door with a key and beckoned to Sandhya and Chandru. They followed him silently. This room too was empty, save for a small wicker basket in the corner of the room. The man led them to the basket and stood looking down at it.

Chandru and Sandhya peered inside. A small scrawny cat was lying on a blanket. It was a dull, dirty grey in colour. Its fur was matted with dirt. It looked as if it had never been washed in its life. What scared Chandru a little was that it was totally still. He began to doubt if it was alive. Sandhya had the same doubt and stood looking down at it thoughtfully.

"Go on, pick her up," the man whispered softly in her ear.
'So it is a "she",' thought Sandhya. She knelt down beside the basket and picked up the cat. At her touch, the cat opened her eyes. They were the colour of the Mediterranean on a perfect summer day. The eyes were looking directly at her and in that instant Sandhya decided not to look at any other creature in the store. She held the cat close to her who seemed to come alive at the warmth of her touch. She snuggled closely against Sandhya. She lay there in her arms and looked across at Chandru, who was watching her curiously. Chandru too felt drawn by her eyes and was sure that he would not want any other creature either.

The trio trooped back to the store front.

Their parents were waiting impatiently for them. They could not understand what was happening. Sandhya held up the cat proudly for her parents to see. Their hearts sank at the sight of the creature. 'Surely Sandhya does not want that,' thought her parents desperately.

"I am going to name her Connie," she said in a triumphant voice.

The storekeeper stood behind Sandhya grinning as if he was enjoying a private joke.

"How much do we owe you Mr. ...eh!" asked a hesitant Mr. Moorthy, not knowing the man's name.

"Just call me Benjie," interrupted the storekeeper.

"Okay, Mr. Benjie, how much do we owe you?"

"Oh! nothing really, sir. It is a present for the birthday girl. Connie is her's anyway," Benjie said with the same unfading grin.

"What? How do you know it is Sandhya's birthday today?" Mr. Moorthy asked incredulously. When he
got the same grin for an answer, he said, "Oh! well, never mind. Strange things have been happening in this store from the moment we stepped in."

"Speaking of strange things, how come all these animals and birds are so quiet? And why is a pet shop decorated like a party hall?" asked Mrs. Nalini.

"The music, ma’am. It is the music. These guys love to listen to music. Don’t you, guys?" Mr. Benjie asked his wards. A chorus of animal and bird voices greeted them enthusiastically. "And as for the decorations... we had got the store ready for the arrival of a special guest—Connie, didn’t we, guys?"

Another chorus greeted them. They watched this strange scene in utter disbelief.

"Mr. Benjie, how did you know you were going to have Connie in your shop?" asked Mrs. Leela.

"Oh! I just knew," said Benjie with a mysterious sparkle in his eyes. Mrs. Leela had the feeling that she had expected that answer.

"Run along, child. If you need anything, you know where to come, don’t you?" Benjie asked Sandhya. Sandhya could only nod her head in amazement, though she did not have a clue in the world about what Benjie was telling her.

The party trooped out of the store. Nobody could make sense of all that had happened. So nobody said a word. The sooner they got away from the strange store and its strange storekeeper the better, they thought.

Sandhya looked out of the car’s window as it pulled away from the store. Connie had stuck her head and forepaws out of the window, just like a dog would.
Benjie was standing at the doorway looking at her. Sandhya stuck her hand out and waved. She saw Benjie raise his hand in a farewell gesture, but somehow she had the feeling that it was not meant for her but for Connie. She looked at Connie who was licking her paw contentedly.

A mysterious encounter

"Thank you, Chandru. This is the best present I have ever had!" said Sandhya excitedly. Everybody burst out laughing. They had been rather quiet and thoughtful on the way back not quite sure about what to make of all the things that had happened in the past few hours.

"Sandhya, you are incurable!" said a laughing Chandru. He had got off at their school as he had suddenly remembered that their bikes were there. He had told Sandhya to go home with Connie and he rolled their bikes home. He had been very quiet, thinking about the unexpected gift for Sandhya. He was not even sure if it had been his present or Mr. Benjie’s. Sandhya’s remark helped him to relax. ‘Oh! what does it matter?’ he thought. He had got his friend a gift for her birthday. It did not really matter if it came from him or through him.

Connie had been asleep all the way home. As they entered the house, she opened her eyes. She got restless in Sandhya’s arms and so Sandhya gently put her down. Connie immediately sauntered around the room surveying everything. It was only then they
saw that she walked with a limp. Her right hind leg dragged a little behind her. Sandhya and Chandru felt sorry for her. She seemed so pathetic. They could feel some mysterious connection with her. Similar thoughts occurred to Mr. Moorthy and Mr. Sivam. Mrs. Leela and Mrs. Nalini felt sorry for Connie and decided to take good care of her.

Connie was not aware of all the feelings and reactions she had evoked. She walked, rather limped around the room. She hardly left any corner unexplored. When she was satisfied, she went inside to explore the whole house.

As she left, Mrs. Nalini said, "Boy! Does she need a good bath!"

"Mom, can I have Connie with me in my room?" asked Sandhya.

"Mmm...let us see. First, she needs a good bath. Then she needs to be fed. Then she needs a place to sleep in. Maybe if someone gets her all these things..."

Sandhya did not let her mother finish. "I shall get her all these. Chandru and I will go to the store and get her some cat food. I will give her a thorough bath and I will fix up a nice fluffy bed for her. If I do all these things, would you allow her to sleep in my room, Mom?"

"All right, Sandhya," laughed her mother, softly. "Remember, you must take good care of her. She needs all the love and care she can get."

"Yes, Mom, I know and I promise to take good care of her. Thank you. Come on, Chandru. Let us get Connie something to eat."

By night Connie was clean and fed. She was a very
cooperative cat with a sweet disposition. Chandru having said goodnight had left for his home. He had his experiment to think of. Sandhya also took Connie upstairs to her room after wishing her parents goodnight. She plumped up a soft pillow inside a wicker basket just like the one in the pet shop and gently lowered Connie on it. She then locked her door, switched off the light and went to bed having taken a final peek at Connie who was already fast asleep.

The transformation

Sandhya woke up suddenly in the middle of the night. She sat up in bed and blinked her eyes. She could sense a change in the atmosphere. There was a mysterious electric feeling in the air. Sandhya got off the bed and looked through the window. It was a clear and calm night outside. The stars were twinkling and the moon was bright. She could see across their garden to Chandru’s house.

She looked around the darkened room. Her eyes fell on Connie’s basket and she gasped. It was bathed in a warm, phosphorescent glow! It looked as if someone had lit a bulb inside Connie’s basket. The light was not bright enough to have come from a bulb but she could see very clearly in the light from the basket. Her table, her bookshelf, her wardrobe, her music system, were all visible by the light. The basket looked as if it was floating in the air surrounded by the light. It appeared as though the light had lifted the basket and left it gently suspended in the air.
Sandhya impulsively looked around the room to see if she had left any lights on. All the lights were switched off. Sandhya pinched herself to make sure she was awake. The twinge of the pain told her she was not in the land of dreams. Sandhya looked out through the window once again to see if any light was coming from outside. None was. Only then she approached the basket and looked inside.

The cat was sitting inside the basket. Its coat looked as if it was woven with filaments of golden copper. The tail was long, bushy and curved. The eyes were like emeralds, with slits of ebony in them. The light was coming from the cat.

Sandhya staggered back at the sight. Her eyes were wide with disbelief and her mouth hung open. Her brain refused to function. She fell on her bed and sat staring at the basket.

The cat jumped out of the basket and walked towards her with slow, graceful, almost gliding steps. Sandhya watched it come near. The cat leapt on to her bed and sat beside her.

"Hello, Sandhya! It is me, Connie."

Sandhya was startled. She could not believe what was happening.

"Do not worry, Sandhya. It is really me, Connie."

Sandhya saw that the cat’s lips had not moved. Yet she could hear her speak.

That is right, Sandhya. I am speaking to you through your thought," said the cat.

'Oh! It can read my mind!' Sandhya was alarmed.

"Do not worry, Sandhya. I can read only such thoughts that are related to or are in any way regarding me."
'Thank God!' thought Sandhya with a sigh of relief. "May I speak to you or do I have to think all my questions to you?" asked Sandhya.

"No, Sandhya, you can speak to me, but remember, you can use your thoughts when you need to."

"Fine. Let us get things straightened out. Who are you, really?" Sandhya enquired.

"I am Connie."

Sandhya did not know what to make of the answer. She thought of the creature she had brought from Mr. Benjie's store and she looked at the creature in front of her now. 'Oh, no!' she thought, 'whatever this creature is, it is definitely not Connie.'

"Yes, Sandhya. I am Connie," Sandhya heard. "Only I am not known by that name where I come from."

"Where do you come from?" asked Sandhya.

"A planet in a solar system many light years away from your planet."

"What?" screamed Sandhya.

"Is that surprise or disbelief?"

Sandhya was too stunned to react. "Where? Where are you from?" she asked in a whisper.

"Do you have any book on the universe?" asked Connie. Sandhya could only nod. She went to her bookshelf and picked out a large hardbound volume. She brought it to Connie, placed it in front of her and opened it. She waited to see what would happen next.

Connie glanced at the book. The pages started to turn by themselves.

Sandhya watched open mouthed. 'Oh, my God! This is just like ET,' she thought. The turning stopped and the book now lay open at a page where there
was a map of the universe, with the positions of about seven thousand stars marked on it. Even some very distant formations like the Ursa Major and the Andromeda Galaxy were indicated.

Connie pointed to a spot marked 'Barnard's Star'. "Our solar system belongs to this star. Like your solar system, we too have a number of planets—twelve, in fact. Our planet is the fifth one," said Connie.

"Our? You said 'our'. Does that mean..?" Sandhya's voice trailed into silence.

"Yes, Sandhya, it does mean that there are others besides me. And no, they are not all cats, but people," Connie answered Sandhya's thoughts.

"You mean there are people there, just like us?" asked Sandhya, incredulously.

"Yes, Sandhya there are people there just like you." Connie's answer came to her thoughts.

Sandhya sat engrossed, absorbing the news. She was right after all. Now she could prove to the world that she was right. She had proof of the existence of living beings in another solar system. Then it struck her. 'Proof?' she thought, 'What proof do I have? The unspoken words of a cat who claims to be from another solar system? A cat which is almost lifeless during the day and who turns into a shiny apparition at night? A cat who can turn the pages of a book without actually touching it and points to a star in a constellation map and claims to belong to that star's solar system?" Sandhya almost laughed out loud.

"Oh, Sandhya! Do you need to prove to the world that we exist? Is it not enough that you know?"

Sandhya had forgotten that Connie could read her
thoughts. She turned to look at Connie and almost dropped out of her bed. Sitting on the bed was not the Connie she had been talking to all this while but the Connie she had brought from Mr. Benjie's store. Sandhya looked around the room and at the basket. Everything was as she had left before going to bed. There was no glow surrounding the basket. She could see the whole room as the sky was beginning to be tinged with the rosy streaks of dawn. She kept looking at the cat to see if something, anything, would happen. When it became clear that there would be no more adventures for the night, day, in fact, she placed the cat in her basket and came back to her bed. She lay down looking at the basket and thinking about the night, and drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

Sandhya woke up as the warm rays of the morning sun fell across her face. She stretched slowly and looked out of the window. The day was bright and clear. 'Oh, no! I have not slept this late, have I?' thought Sandhya. Her eyes fell on Connie's basket and she suddenly remembered all that had happened in the night. She sat up with a start and stared at the basket. She got out of her bed and slowly walked up to it. It was empty. She looked around to see if Connie was anywhere. She was not in the room. Sandhya stood looking at the basket. All the happenings of the night seemed impossible in the bright glare of daylight. Yet she could not dismiss them as the stuff of her dreams. She knew she was awake. Whatever it was, she would get to the bottom of it, but first she had to tell Chandru about it. She hurried to get ready. Though she had overslept, she was not late for
breakfast. Her parents were just sitting down at the table when Sandhya joined them.

Mystery deepens

"Good morning, Mom and Daddy!"
"Good morning, Sandhya. Did you wake up late? We did not see you go for your usual morning jog," asked her mother.
"Yes, Mom. I guess I must have been tired."
"Well, dear, have you made any plans for your vacation?" asked her father.
"No, Dad. I have to discuss with Chandru about it."
"I am sorry to tell you, dear, but I do not think I can get away from the office this time. So we will have to miss our summer trip this year."
"That is okay, Dad. I am sure Chandru and I will come up with something." Sandhya's voice trailed into silence.
"You seem preoccupied, Sandhya. Is something bothering you?" asked her mother, a little worried.
"It is nothing, Mom. I was just wondering where Connie was. I have not seen her since morning."
"Oh, Connie!" said her mother, in a relieved voice.
"She was down early in the morning. I fed her and let her out in the garden. She has to get to know her surroundings. Do not worry. She will be all right."
"Thank you, Mom. I am sure she is okay."
Sandhya did not look relieved. Her parents looked at her and wondered what was wrong. "So, how is the new telescope? Did you find anything
interesting?" asked her father to divert her attention.

"I do not know, Daddy. I have not used it yet," answered Sandhya. This got her parents really worried. Sandhya could never keep her hands off a telescope, and a brand new one at that. If she had not used it yet, then something was really wrong. The table fell silent. Sandhya’s parents did not know what to make of it.

"May I be excused, Daddy and Mom? I have to go and see Chandru," said Sandhya.

"Sure, Sandhya," said her father.

"You do not look well, Sandhya. Are you feeling sick?" asked her mother, unable to keep the concern out of her voice. Sandhya sensed her mother’s anxiety. She felt guilty for making her parents worry. Yet she could not tell them what was bothering her, either. She decided to talk to Chandru. Maybe they could together find some explanation for the things that had happened.

"No, Mom. I am perfectly all right. I was just thinking about the vacation. That is all. Please do not be worried. I am really all right." She threw her arms round her mother and gave her a peck on the cheek. Her mother relaxed a little and gave a smile.

"Bye, Mom. Bye, Daddy, I am off to see Chandru. I will be back for lunch," said Sandhya and went to the living room. She picked up the rucksack from the shelf and wheeled out her bike which was exactly like that of Chandru’s. In fact, they had bought the bikes together. The only thing that differentiated hers from Chandru’s was the basket attached to the handlebars of her bike.
Sandhya closed the door behind her and looked up at the sky. It was a perfect summer blue, with a few wispy clouds floating by lazily. She took a deep breath. The air carried the fresh smell of green grass and wild flowers. She closed her eyes and turned her face towards the sun. The warmth of the rays pricked her cheeks. A few beads of sweat broke out on her brow. Sandhya gradually became conscious of something against her leg. She opened her eyes and looked down. She could not see anything for a few moments as bright, colourful spots swam in front of her eyes. She blinked her eyes a few times and slowly focussed on Connie rubbing against her leg. Sandhya stood looking at her. The turquoise blue eyes were staring innocently at her. Sandhya sighed. She did not know if Chandru would believe her. She had to convince him somehow. With silent determination, she picked up Connie and placed her in the basket. She threw her rucksack over her shoulder and rode towards Chandru's home.

Mrs. Leela was in the kitchen putting away the breakfast dishes.

"Good Morning, Aunty. Where is Chandru?"

"Hello, Sandhya, Good Morning. Chandru is in his den. I think he is starting on his experiment."

"Oh, no! I better catch him before he begins. Once he starts, nothing can prise him away. See you, Aunty," said Sandhya and raced to the den.

Mrs. Leela smiled. 'They are such good friends that it is a joy just to watch them,' she thought.

"Chandru! Chandru! Do not start, do not start," yelled Sandhya as she entered his den. Chandru
looked up from the book he was referring, startled by the unexpected voice of Sandhya.

"Have you started?" asked Sandhya, breathlessly.
"Started what?" asked Chandru, not knowing what Sandhya was talking about.
"Your experiment, Chandru."
"No, not yet. I am about to. Why? What is the matter?" asked Chandru. He was a little surprised. Sandhya never asked him not to start an experiment. In fact, she always encouraged him. So now, her request and the urgency in her voice surprised him.
"I have to talk to you, Chandru. And I have to talk to you now. It cannot wait."
"All right. Come on. Sit down. Let us talk."
"No, not here. Let us go to our spot."
Chandru was becoming more and more surprised by Sandhya’s behaviour. He decided to go and listen to what she had to say.
"Okay, let us go. I will just inform Mom." He told his mother that they were going into the woods for a ride. She did not know about their spot. Nobody did. It was their secret.
"Be home for lunch, Chandru," said his mother.
"Yes, Mom, I will," answered Chandru and went to his den. He wheeled out his bike and joined Sandhya who was all ready to go.
"Hey! You brought Connie with you. Why did you not bring her in? We could have given her some milk," said Chandru with some disappointment.
He looked at Connie and scratched her under her chin. "Hi, Connie! How are you this morning? Did you sleep well last night? I bet your mistress spoiled
you thoroughly yesterday. Mmm... you certainly seem very content.” Connie looked at him as he spoke and purred contentedly as he scratched her. Sandhya watched the scene silently. Her doubts increased as to whether Chandru would believe her.

They rode silently into the woods. Chandru kept looking at Sandhya with perplexity. Her silence was unusual to him. He decided to wait till they reached their spot, which was a huge tree on the bank of a small brook running through the woods. They liked to sit beneath the branches of the tree, listening to the water bubbling over pebbles. The sunlight was perfect any time during the day and the wind had a special tone when whispering through the leaves. They had loved the place from the moment they had discovered it accidentally on one of their rambles through the woods. From that moment onwards it had become their spot.

Sandhya set Connie’s basket down as they sat leaning on the tree.

“What is the matter, Sandhya?” asked Chandru.

Sandhya sat silent for a moment watching Connie limp through the fallen leaves. “Do you promise not to laugh at me?” she asked.

“Hey, come on! You know I have never done that,” exclaimed Chandru. He could not believe that Sandhya was asking him such a question. They had shared their dreams and their secret desires. They had discussed their wild theories and fancy conjectures. They were closer to each other than they were to anybody else. In fact, they had long since forgotten that they were of a different gender from each other.
"I know," said Sandhya in a dull voice. Still..." her voice sank into a hesitant silence. For a few moments she sat watching Connie limping around, trying to chase butterflies. Her experience of the night seemed more like a dream than reality in the harsh glare of daylight. Yet, Sandhya knew that she had to tell Chandru so there was no point in delaying the matter.

"All right, Chandru. I better get it over with," she said and told him everything. Chandru sat listening keenly at first and as she progressed through her story, he listened with an increasing mixture of astonishment and disbelief. "Do you believe me, Chandru?" asked Sandhya eagerly when she finished. Now that she had told him, she felt hugely relieved.

"Of course, I believe you, Sandhya. Did you think I would doubt your words?" Chandru was caught in a wave of excitement. As strange and as out-of-the-world as Sandhya’s story seemed, he believed every word to be true. It was not just because Sandhya had told him; something inside him clicked and he knew that it was nothing but the truth.

Sandhya’s doubts vanished at Chandru’s words. Now she could really believe and think about what to do further. She could sense Chandru’s excitement and it caught on to her too.

"Connie!" Chandru called out to Connie who was playing around with a pebble held in her forepaws. She looked up from her play. "Come here, Connie," called Chandru. She cocked her head to one side and slowly limped towards him. She stopped in front of Chandru and looked at him. Chandru looked into the blue eyes and felt a surge of excitement.
"Who are you?" he asked, still looking into her eyes.
"I am what I told Sandhya." A flash of an answer raced across Chandru's thoughts. Connie's eyes blazed like blue flames for an instant and then the moment passed. Chandru bolted upright and inhaled sharply.
"What? What happened?" asked Sandhya, shaking Chandru's shoulder.
"I got an answer, Sandhya," said Chandru, still looking at Connie. Connie in the meanwhile, turned around and walked away, looking for a new pebble to play with.
Chandru exhaled slowly and leaned against the tree. He stretched his legs and looked up at the sky. It looked like bits of blue marble through the leaves. The rays of the sun were pouring down through the leafy canopy above them, illuminating everything in the woods, like a fairy's magic wand.
'They would find nymphs and forest fairies and pygmies dancing in the flowers, if they bothered to get up and look for them,' thought Chandru.
"So what are we supposed to do now, Chandru?" Sandhya's voice brought him out of his reverie.
"I do not know, Sandhya. What can we do? I do not even know if we are supposed to do anything," said Chandru.
"I think we are to, Chandru, otherwise why should Connie choose to visit us? Maybe she has something for us or maybe she wants something from us. Oh, how I wish she had stayed a bit longer last night. Now, how are we to find out what she wants?"
"Or even if she visits us again," Chandru picked up
from Sandhya. "How I wish I knew how she came here!"

A thought flashed in their mind at the same instant and they looked at each other and grinned. They knew where to begin. "Come on, Sandhya. We have work to do," said Chandru and got up.

"Come on, Connie, let us go," called Sandhya. She put Connie in her basket and wheeled their bikes out of the woods.

A meeting with Mr. Benjie

Chandru picked up Sandhya from her house after lunch and they rode towards Mr. Benjie's store. Sandhya carried Connie in her basket. They pushed open the door and entered the shop. They were greeted by a cacophony of animal and bird voices. Loud screeches and squawks assaulted their ears. Chandru and Sandhya stood watching the creatures with amazement. The sight and the sound were unlike the one that had greeted them on their first visit. All the creatures seemed excited about something. The monkeys were jumping up and down. The squirrels were scampering around in their cages. The parakeets were swinging on the metal bars and squawking loudly, as if to greet someone.

The noise began to fade and came to an abrupt end. The place was filled with silence and all eyes were fixed on Sandhya and Chandru. As they began to squirm under the collective inspection, they realized that the object of their interest was not them, but Connie. Sandhya tightened her grip on Connie's basket.
"Do we have a visitor, my darlings?" asked Mr. Benjie as he walked into the room. "Ah!" he said when he saw Chandru and Sandhya, as if he had been expecting them to drop by. He stood in front of Connie, looking at her.

Chandru and Sandhya watched him with quiet fascination. His white hair seemed longer and hung around his shoulders. The glasses looked ready to slide down the nose. He was wearing a dull, off-white shirt. His loose trousers were held up by suspenders. His feet were covered by comfortable slip-ons. He stood with his thumbs hooked on to his suspenders. A small smile played on his lips and the eyes crinkled and shone behind his glasses. He kept smiling and shaking his head as he stood looking at Connie. They had the impression that both of them were engaged in an unspoken conversation.

Looking at Sandhya and Chandru he said, "Well, let us see what we can do now. Come with me, children." He led them to the interior of the store. He held open a door and beckoned them to enter. It was a small, cozy room that looked like his living quarters. There was a cot against one wall. A small table stood at the centre of the room. There was only one chair and a small stove was on another table. A wooden shelf hung above the stove. A few utensils lay neatly stacked near the stove. A small wash basin was fixed in a corner alongside it. The room was clean and smelt of pine-wood. There were no other furnishings.

"Sit down, children," beamed Mr. Benjie. "Make yourselves comfortable."

Chandru and Sandhya looked at each other and
then at the single chair at the table. Chandru took the chair. Sandhya placed Connie's basket on the table and sat on the cot. She could feel the board beneath the thin mattress. She tucked her leg under her and looked around for a pillow. There was none. 'How strange!' she thought, 'a cot with no pillow.'

Mr. Benjie handed them a cup each. The hot chocolate tasted delicious. He sat opposite Sandhya and said, "Now, what can I do for you, children?"

Chandru and Sandhya looked at each other. They had decided on their way there that they would not tell him Sandhya's experience of the night and would ask general questions about Connie.

"Ahem..." Chandru cleared his throat. "It is nothing really, Mr. Benjie. We just wanted to ask a few questions about Connie."

When he did not answer and kept looking at him with his mysterious smile, Chandru began to feel uncomfortable. "You see, sir, we just wanted to know how to take care of Connie. We have never had a cat before and we were just wondering if you would give us some tips."

"Oh, I see! Is that what you want?" asked Mr. Benjie. Chandru began to feel more and more uncomfortable under his gaze.

Sandhya observed Chandru's discomfiture and jumped to his rescue. "Oh! we would also like to know if we should take Connie to a doctor. She limps pretty badly, you know. By the way, how did she get this limp, Mr. Benjie?" Sandhya congratulated herself for coming up with an inspired question. 'He cannot wriggle out of this one,' she thought.
"Why do you not ask her, child?"

Mr. Benjie’s answer stunned them both. They did not know what to make of the answer; question in fact. Did he or did he not know? Chandru recovered first. "Oh, Mr. Benjie! How can we ask her? She does not speak," he said, unsure of what to expect next.

"Are you sure, son?" Mr. Benjie looked at him. Chandru felt Mr. Benjie’s eyes reading his thoughts. He could think of nothing else to say.

Sandhya was still determined to extract an answer, a clue or even a hint about Connie from him. "Where did you find Connie, Mr. Benjie? Did someone abandon her on your doorstep?" Sandhya was sure he would not answer this with a cryptic question.

"No, child, I found her wandering on the streets one day and brought her here with me," he answered. His smile allowed her the satisfaction of eliciting an answer from him.

"How long ago, Mr. Benjie?" Chandru asked, eagerly. He was excited that they had made a beginning. They could hold this end of the thread and follow its course.

"I am sure I do not remember, son. My memory is not what it used to be. I am getting old, you see." Mr. Benjie beamed at him. His smile was anything but old. Chandru was crestfallen. He got the feeling that Mr. Benjie was enjoying this mysterious game he was playing with them. Sandhya felt close to tears.

Mr. Benjie looked at the disappointed faces. "Oh! come on, children. Do not be so disappointed. I am sure you will get your answers soon." He patted them.

"How soon? Like soon as in tonight?" asked Chandru,
"Maybe, son, maybe. I do not know."

Connie had been rambling around the room during their conversation. She looked as if she knew every nook and corner of the room intimately. She had picked a spot near the stove, curled herself into a furry ball and closed her eyes. She would half-open her eyes lazily, look at them and twitch her whiskers at the mention of her name. She would then lapse back into her secret world.

Mr. Benjie picked up Connie who purred contentedly at his touch and snuggled closer into his arms. "You are going back, honey," he whispered to her and placed her gently in the basket. Connie blinked her eyes and lay silently. Mr. Benjie led them to the front door and opened it for them.

As they got on their bikes, Chandru turned to Sandhya and said, "Wait a minute, Sandhya, I have one more question to put to him."

He went back to Mr. Benjie who stood holding the door ajar, as if he knew that Chandru would be coming back.

"Mr. Benjie, did you know that I had a different present for Sandhya?" he asked.

Mr. Benjie only smiled for an answer and that was enough for Chandru.

"Did you know that it was working perfectly well on the eve of Sandhya's birthday and it did not work the next morning?" he asked again.

Mr. Benjie's smile only widened.

Chandru stared at him. Thoughts raced across his mind. 'If Mr. Benjie had known about his present and its breakdown, could he know something more too?
Did his involvement stop just with knowing or did he have something to do with the breakdown? He could not believe that Mr. Benjie could have had anything to do with the breakdown of his present.

Suddenly another thought flashed in his mind. "If I had not seen the poster against animal cruelty, we would not have come here for a present. We would not have got Connie. Were you not depending on a coincidence to get Connie to us?" Chandru now firmly believed that Connie had come to them for a purpose.

"No, son! It was not me who wanted to get Connie to you," he paused, his eyes twinkling, "you see, coincidences are not always coincidences."

Chandru did not know what to make of that cryptic remark. He walked back and silently got onto his bike.

Sandhya had been watching them though she could not hear what they were saying. She called out to Mr. Benjie, "Can you not help us at all, Mr. Benjie?"

"Oh! but I have, my child, I have," answered Mr. Benjie and waved them goodbye.

Chandru recounted his conversation with Mr. Benjie to Sandhya. They stopped for an ice-cream at a parlour and sat at the table immersed in their thoughts. They watched the sun turn into an orange globe as it began its descent into night. The sky was tinged with crimson and pink.

Chandru snapped his fingers suddenly. "I know what we will do, Sandhya. I will spend the night at your place today. We can sit up together and see if anything happens. Mr. Benjie said that maybe something will happen tonight. So, let us see if it does."

Sandhya liked the idea and they rode home,
Chandru promising to come as soon as he got his parents' permission.

The Cat Spirit

Chandru left home around seven in the evening after having his dinner. His parents did not mind his staying with Sandhya. In fact, they stayed at each other's place during their vacation. Both the families enjoyed these visits as they proved to be a welcome diversion from their daily routine. So Chandru packed an overnight bag and rode to Sandhya's place. Sandhya had a spare bedroom ready with the permission of her parents. Sensing Chandru's nervousness and eagerness to get away and talk to Sandhya, Mrs. Nalini bid them goodnight. She could not conceal her smile when the children raced off to their rooms. 'Obviously, they, have something planned,' she thought.

Chandru decided that Connie would sleep in Sandhya's room. He wanted everything to be as it had been the night before. Sandhya went around inspecting the room, replacing and arranging things like they were the night before. She even fed Connie the same food. She then placed her in the basket and put it on the exact spot as the previous night.

They decided to take turns watching the basket. The watch hours were divided into two-hour slots and Chandru took his turn first. He glanced at his watch; it was exactly nine o'clock. He sat on a chair by Sandhya's bed as she lay down and tried to sleep.
She lay on her side, watching the basket, wondering if anything would happen and the next thing she knew, she was being shaken awake by Chandru. She sat up with a start and looked at the basket. Everything was as they had left it. They changed places silently and in an instant Chandru was asleep.

Sandhya sat watching the basket for a while. She felt herself becoming sleepy. She got up and walked up to the basket and looked in. Connie was fast asleep. She padded back softly to her chair and sat down. Though she felt that she should stay awake at all costs, she felt her eyes close and was soon asleep. Sandhya could feel the change even in sleep. She slowly opened her eyes and saw the room transformed. She sat up in her chair and nudged Chandru awake.

Connie had transformed into her shimmering self and was sitting in the basket watching them with what looked like a grin. Sandhya saw her grin and thought, 'Oh, my God! She grins like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland!'

"Yes, Sandhya, it is quite alike, is it not?"

Chandru gave a start as the question fell on his thoughts. "What is quite alike?" he asked, bewildered. "Nothing, Chandru, I was just thinking that Connie's grin was like that of the cat in Alice in Wonderland. Connie has just responded to that."

Chandru, who looked surprised, then remembered what Sandhya had said about Connie reading thoughts. "I would like to look at you a little more closely. May I?" he asked.

"Why not?" came the answer. Connie lithely jumped out of the suspended basket and walked up
to the cot. She jumped on the bed and sat facing them. Sandhya saw that Connie's paw-prints shimmered on the carpet as if painted with gold dust. They slowly faded away after a few moments.

Chandru was looking at Connie closely. He saw the effervescent glow surrounding her and suddenly felt a desire to touch her.

"You may, Chandru," came the permission in his thoughts. Sandhya too understood what Chandru had thought. Chandru was stunned by the speed of the response. He had not even thought of touching her. He had only felt the desire. He was beginning to understand Connie's power. He looked at Sandhya and she nodded. His hand began to glow as it touched the aura around Connie. Sandhya watched with fascination. As Chandru’s palm touched Connie, he felt his fingers dissolve into silvery mist. He withdrew his hand and it glowed like her paw-prints. He rubbed his fingers and sat watching Connie.

"Who are you, really?" asked Chandru.

"I am the Cat Spirit," came the reply in their minds. They did not know how to react to that and so they sat watching her with a blank look. Connie smiled at them. "I guess I better explain. Sandhya, please get the book you got yesterday"

Sandhya obeyed and opened the book to the map. Chandru edged closer.

Connie pointed to Barnard's Star. "I told Sandhya that I come from this star's solar system." They understood that she was talking to Chandru. "Our solar system has twelve planets and ours is the fifth one," she repeated. "We call our planet Favia. Only
Favia is suitable to live among the twelve planets. Favia is very much like your planet Earth, only a lot younger. You see, our star is younger but heavier than your Sun. You have been around for a few million more years than we have been. Now we have to look for a new home..." Connie paused. "Our Sun is dying." The thought came to them in a whisper, tinged with sadness. They were too astounded to react.

Connie continued. "Our Sun has begun to expand. The first two planets are already gone and the atmospheric temperature of Favia has increased. When the third planet is gone, we can not live on Favia. It would not be long before we are engulfed too."

'Helium flash,' thought Sandhya.

"Yes, Sandhya, helium flash."

"What? What helium flash?" asked Chandru.

"It happens when all the hydrogen in a star has been burned up and only helium remains. This too will become hot enough to burn and when that happens, the star will explode. This is a helium flash," Sandhya explained to Chandru.

"We cannot wait that long. We have to leave now. That is why I came here."

"Why?" asked Sandhya, who had a better grasp of the matters of the universe than Chandru. "You should have searched for some other solar system with a suitable planet. Why did you come here?" asked Sandhya. She was beginning to feel uneasy about Connie's explanations.

"Do not get me wrong, Sandhya. As I said, I am the Cat Spirit of the planet Favia, somewhat like a guardian angel. I am here to help my people."
Connie began a lengthy and detailed explanation of her planet. Favia was inhabited by people, just like the people on earth. Some mysterious force of the universe had evolved *Homo sapiens* in Favia later than it had on earth. Favians were exactly like humans in appearance, even in their intellectual capacity. They had discovered the death of their sun only a few decades earlier when they had witnessed their sun changing colour.

The idea of space exploration was alien to them at that time. When they realized the severity of their plight, they had pooled in the best brains and had formed a committee to decide the course of action. The committee had come up with the idea of building a space vehicle and exploring the universe for an alternate home. It had taken them a few more years of intense research to construct a space vehicle. However, their sun had started to change colour more rapidly when they began to test-fly their spacecraft. It was then, they had found, that the fuel they had made did not quite measure up to their expectations. It just did not give them enough thrust to pull away from Favia’s gravity. The first planet was gone when they exhausted their ideas about making an alternate fuel that would fulfil their needs. They knew they did not have time to go on experimenting. They needed a ready-made fuel and that was when she had offered to help them find such a fuel.

"For this reason I came to your planet," Connie finished, stating her purpose of the visit.

Sandhya and Chandru sat dumbfounded as Connie’s story unfolded in their minds.
"Did you come here to find a fuel?" asked Chandru.
"Yes, Chandru," said Connie.
"Why did you come to us?" asked Sandhya.
"Because you can give me what I want."
"You mean, we can give you the fuel for your spacecraft?" asked Chandru, with a bewildered look.
"Yes!" said Connie.

Chandru did not understand how they could give her the kind of fuel that she wanted. Suddenly it struck him, "Oh, no!" he said, shaking his head vehemently. "You are not going to ask us to steal some formula for a fuel from our fathers."

Sandhya too compressed her lips tightly, folded her arms across her chest and shook her head defiantly when she understood.

"Oh, Chandru! You did not think I would ask you to steal, did you? How could I? I am an angel! No, that is not what I want. It is you who can help us."
"Me? How?"
"You are experimenting on a new fuel, are you not?"
"Yes," he said hesitantly, wondering how she knew. Then he remembered that she was an angel and angels were supposed to know everything.

"Well, we need that fuel," said Connie, very simply.
"Oh! I have not got any."

"You will, Chandru, you will. Just continue your experiment and follow it to its completion. Maybe you figured the components and the proportion right but need to increase the temperature a few hundred centigrades more and you may have it."

'So I was right after all,' thought Chandru with jubilation.
"I do not have much time left, children. I cannot remain in this form when dawn breaks in your side of the planet. I have to change my form and revert to the old Connie. My powers are potent only when I am in this form. I will see you again tonight."

"Just one more question, Connie," said Chandru hastily.

"I know. About Mr. Benjie, is it not? I am afraid I cannot tell you who he is, Chandru. I am not allowed to reveal his identity without his permission, which I do not have."

As she muttered the last words, Sandhya and Chandru felt their eyes close for a moment and when they opened them again the Cat Spirit was gone and Connie was licking her paw meticulously. They looked at each other.

"Wow!" said Chandru.

Sandhya sat silent digesting the events of the night.

"At least we know why she left abruptly last night," said Chandru eager to break the silence.

Sandhya gave a thoughtful smile and said, "We better get some sleep, Chandru. You have to do your experiment tomorrow and we better be fresh for that."

"Yes, Sandhya. Let us set our alarms for seven, shall we?"

"Okay, Chandru. Goodnight. Well, good morning, I guess!" Sandhya gave a slight smile.

The events of the night had unsettled both of them. Though they were excited by the strange adventure that had come to them unexpectedly, the extent of responsibility they now carried, worried them. Questions kept coming to their minds. They knew
that they had a great task ahead, assuming that Connie and her story were true. They both fell into an uneasy sleep and dreamt about Favia and her inhabitants.

The fuel

Chandru had already started his experiment in his den when Sandhya joined him. He had left early from her house, thanking her parents. He had hurriedly got ready, gulped down his breakfast and gone straight to his den. Though his parents were surprised, they did not mind this activity. They were actually glad that Chandru had found something to keep himself busy.

"So, have you got it?" asked Sandhya, as she entered his den.

"I wish I had, Sandhya. I am just starting," answered Chandru.

"Is this how you do your experiments, sitting at the table and staring at your test tubes?" teased Sandhya. He had been doing just that when Sandhya entered his room.

"I am worried, Sandhya. Remember what Connie said? I may have to raise the temperature by a few hundred degrees. I do not know how I am going to do that," he said and buried his face in his hands.

"Is that all? My God! I thought it was something much more serious. What will you give me if I tell you a way to do that?" asked Sandhya, laughing.

"What? Do you know a way? Come on, Sandhya,
tell me. I will give you anything you want if you tell me/' said Chandru, eagerly.

"Wait here," Sandhya said with a mischievous smile and ran out of the room.

Chandru was pacing up and down nervously when Sandhya returned carrying his mother's baking oven and an ovenproof dish. Chandru slapped his forehead. "Why did I not think of that?" he said.

"That is why you need me!" said a grinning Sandhya.

"Thank you, Sandhya. What would I do without you?" he said.

"Yes, what indeed?" agreed Sandhya.

They set up the oven on the table and plugged it in. "I have to do some calculations, Sandhya. I should know the range of the temperature. Could you please set up the ingredients in the meantime?" asked Chandru, handing Sandhya a notebook with a list of chemicals. Sandhya took the notebook and went to his chemical cabinet and started finding and arranging them on the table. By the time Chandru finished, the ingredients were ready, waiting for him. He went to work immediately as Sandhya sat and watched him. He took the various ingredients, measured them exactly and placed them in the oven-proof dish. When he had finished, he looked up and smiled nervously at her.

"Okay, this is it! We will know in a while whether Favia's people are going to live or die."

He placed the dish in the oven, closed the door, set the temperature and timer and sat down. They watched the oven in silence, half-expecting the door to blow out.
How will you know if it is ready, Chandru?” asked Sandhya curiously. The question had been nagging her for a while.

"Oh! if everything is all right, the mixture should become colourless and clear."

Sandhya nodded. There was another thing she had to know. "How will we know if it works, Chandru?"

"I do not know," he said, without taking his eyes off the oven. There was palpable tension in the room. Sandhya fell silent, too immersed in thoughts.

"I guess we could test it in Dad’s car."

Sandhya almost did not hear it. Chandru’s voice was no louder than a whisper. She did not answer. She had a feeling that Chandru was speaking more to himself than to her. Silence engulfed them again.

The timer, when it went off, startled them. They sat up with a jerk staring at the oven and then looked at each other. Chandru got up slowly and went to the oven. He stood at the table hesitating for an instant. He put his hand inside and withdrew it instantly. He had forgotten about the heat inside the oven. He left the door open and looked around for a piece of cloth. Sandhya left the room and came back with Chandru’s mother’s kitchen gloves. Chandru slipped them on gratefully and took out the dish. He carefully placed it on the table and removed the lid. Sandhya peered over his shoulder. A clear, colourless liquid was sloshing around gently in the dish!

For a moment neither of them spoke anything. Chandru closed the dish, pulled up the chair and sat down. Sandhya leaned on the edge of the table, folded her arms across her chest and watched Chandru.
"Now what?" she asked, softly.
"I guess we ought to see if it works," he said. Sandhya nodded. She was not going to say anything that would disturb Chandru’s thoughts and ideas.

After a few thoughtful moments Chandru said, "Well, if we are going to test it, we will need at least a litre of it. Sandhya nodded again. Chandru looked at his watch. It was nearing his father’s lunch time. They would just have enough time to prepare a litre of the fuel. "Okay, Sandhya, let us start. We will prepare it in batches until we have enough. I think we can make it by lunchtime."

Sandhya went to get a few more ovenproof dishes. Chandru wrote down a list of the ingredients and their measure. Sandhya had brought his mother’s kitchen weighing scales to make their measuring easier and faster. Chandru rejected it saying that he could not trust it for accuracy. So it fell upon Chandru to do the weighing while Sandhya handed him the ingredients one by one. As they finished measuring ingredients enough for a batch, they placed them in a dish and made the next batch as it heated in the oven. After a while, they got into a rhythm and worked silently and quickly. Before they knew it, they had enough fuel for a test run. They closed the jar with the fuel tightly and immersed themselves in cleaning up the lab. They heard Mr. Moorthy’s car come up the driveway as they were washing their hands.

Chandru looked at Sandhya and said, "Well, I guess this is it!"
"Yes, Chandru, this is it. Now, how are you going to get this in your Dad’s car?"
"I do not know. I did not think about that," he said, a little dejectedly.

"We have to first decide whether we tell our parents about this fuel, Chandru. If we do, then I am sure there will be a lot of questions. I do not know if that will help Connie. If we do not tell them and yet somehow find a way to test it..." she paused, thinking about what she had just said. "I think we should not tell them, Chandru. At least not yet."

Chandru nodded. He felt drained and was happy to let Sandhya do the thinking and planning. Sandhya thought for a few more moments, refining and finalizing her plan. She then explained to Chandru that he was to keep his father busy in the house while she siphoned out the petrol from his father's car and substituted their fuel for it. They were to then invent some reason to go somewhere and thus get a ride in the car when his father went back to office after lunch.

The plan was very simple. Chandru agreed.

"I guess we can explain everything later and apologize for what we are about to do," said Sandhya. "Come on, Chandru. There is no time to lose."

They went to the dining room where Mrs. Leela was setting the table. "Hi, Sandhya! Stay for lunch. It is your favourite rice today."

"No thanks, Aunty. I promised Mom I will be home for lunch. Maybe tomorrow. By the way, when will Uncle leave for office?" she asked, innocently.

"In an hour, Sandhya," answered Mr. Moorthy, coming from the bedroom.

"If you do not mind, could you please drop Chandru and me at the bazaar, Uncle? I am out of cat food."
"Sure, Sandhya. At the rate your Connie is finishing off her food, I am beginning to wonder if her appetite is out-of-this world!" said a smiling Mr. Moorthy.

Chandru and Sandhya gasped in shock. They were glad that Mr. Moorthy did not realize how close he was to the truth. They looked at each other and sighed. Sandhya gave a thumbs-up sign and ran out of the door closing it behind her. She did not want anyone accidentally looking out at the car. She went around to the window in Chandru’s den and took out the jar through the window. She had picked up the car keys from the table in the drawing room on her way out. Chandru had thoughtfully placed a long, thin tube with the jar. The matter of siphoning out the petrol and pouring in their fuel was a simple one, once she had all these things. Sandhya consoled her conscience by saying that it was all for a very good cause. She locked the tank and noiselessly replaced the car keys on the table. She heaved a big sigh of relief as she closed the door behind her and ran home, impatient to finish her lunch.

The car ride

"You seem to be very tense, children. Is something bothering you?" asked Mr. Moorthy, as they drove along. Chandru and Sandhya had piled up in the front seat and had left Connie in the back. They were both silent and were nervously watching the speedometer. It was an unusual scene, as they had been excited and talkative in all their previous rides. Besides, he
could see the tension and a mild fear on their faces.

"Oh, it is nothing, Uncle. I am just worried about Connie. She has not been very cheerful since morning. I guess she is just bored." Sandhya was quick to react. She knew that Chandru's thoughts were totally on the fuel. She gently prodded his ribs with her elbow, prompting him to say something.

"I am just thinking about the car, Dad. Somehow, it feels different today. Don't you think so?" he asked, unable to hide his excitement.

"I was thinking about that, son. It sure feels different now. It was not so when I drove it home for lunch. It feels as if it is straining at a leash. I wonder what it will do if I open her up a little!" answered Mr. Moorthy. The last sentence was more of a musing than a question.

"Why do you not try it, Dad?" asked Chandru, eagerly.

"Mmm...let us see." He looked at his watch. "Maybe I can take another fifteen minutes."

They were in the middle of the town. Mr. Moorthy turned the car around and headed back to the outskirts of the town. When he reached an open stretch of road, he pushed down the accelerator gently. The car shot forward like a bullet. Mr. Moorthy was taken aback with surprise. He eased the pedal a little but the car did not slow down. He settled down in his seat and started experimenting a little more. He started increasing the speed little by little and before long, the car was flying! Miles whizzed past and they had a heady sensation that the car was actually suspended a few inches above the ground.
Mr. Moorthy slowly brought the car to a halt. It took longer for the vehicle to slow down and stop.

"Whew!" whistled Mr. Moorthy and caught his breath. He turned and looked at Chandru and Sandhya. Both of them were grinning from ear to ear. Even Connie had sat up in her basket and was straining to peer over the front seat.

"Some ride, eh?" asked Mr. Moorthy. Chandru and Sandhya nodded in unison. "What's up with this car today? Is it running on petrol or on rocket fuel?" asked a bewildered Mr. Moorthy. His scientist's mind had got over the initial wonder and surprise and was trying to look for answers for his car's strange behaviour.

Chandru and Sandhya became instantly alert. They had to stop Mr. Moorthy from investigating further about the car and its fuel. They were thankful he did not know how close his teasing remark was to the truth.

"Oh! come on, Dad! Rocket fuel? In our car? You must be joking!" said Chandru, desperately trying to divert his father's attention from the fuel.

"Maybe she just felt like doing full speed today, Uncle. Did you not, dear?" asked Sandhya patting the dashboard. She understood what Chandru was trying to do and she did her bit by talking to the car. Connie purred. "See, Uncle, even Connie agrees. Don't you, Connie?" asked Sandhya, lifting her out of the basket. Connie jumped out of Sandhya's hands, onto the dashboard and rubbed herself on the windshield, purring all the while.

Mr. Moorthy looked at the children and at the purring cat and smiled wanly. He was beginning to
feel uneasy about the whole thing. Somehow he got the feeling that the children did not want to speak about what had happened. He decided to turn around and head for his office. He was already late. As he switched on the ignition, Chandru looked at the fuel indicator. It was almost touching empty. He knew that it would be empty by the time his father reached his office, if not earlier. He sighed. They would have to fill petrol in the car's fuel tank before they reached his father's office. So even if his father decided to check the fuel, he would find nothing. His father did not try anything on the way back. As Chandru had expected, the car stopped suddenly.

"The tank's empty, Dad. Shall I see if there is any petrol in the boot?" volunteered Chandru. Sandhya looked at Chandru and gave a smile. She had kept the siphoned petrol in a can and had put it in the boot. Chandru got the can and proceeded to fill the tank. "I think we can get to the nearest petrol station, Dad. Or maybe we can even get to town," said Chandru as he came back.

Mr. Moorthy nodded silently and drove back. His thoughts were already at the office. He had dismissed the behaviour of his car as a freak incident.

Chandru gave a thumbs-up sign to Sandhya who winked back at him. Connie had gone to her basket and was busy cleaning herself. The return ride was silent as each one was immersed in thought. They, got off at the departmental store and waved off Mr. Moorthy to his office. They bought a few tins of cat food, a lollipop each, and started walking home-wards in silence. They did not want to discuss the
happenings of the afternoon. Neither of them were sure about being awake and participating in the extraordinary events of the past few hours.

Sandhya looked at Connie who was asleep in her basket. She kept wondering if they were all on a fantasy journey in their dreams. Even if she were, she had Chandru with her, and if he was involved, then things could not be wrong. She felt comforted by these thoughts. She looked at Chandru who was immersed in a deep, thoughtful silence. She knew he was undergoing a mixture of emotions ranging from exultation to grave doubts.

"Do not worry, Chandru, things will be all right. You will see," she tried to comfort him. They had been through a lot of adventure, but none like this one.

Chandru looked at her and understood what she was trying to do. He was grateful for having her as a friend. He nodded. "Let me carry Connie for a while," he offered. Sandhya handed the basket to him. He looked at the sleeping cat for some time and shook his head in wonder.

"It is hard to believe. Is it not?" asked Sandhya. Chandru smiled in agreement.

"Well, I guess we will know tonight for sure whether we are going crazy or not," she said.

"Oh, Sandhya! Do not have any doubts about that. Nobody is saner than us. Isn’t the ride a proof of that?"

"Yeah, I know," Sandhya paused. "I think we better get some sleep now, Chandru. We have a long night ahead of us."

"Long nights, in fact," said Chandru.

They hurried home and informed their mothers
that they were going to have a nap and did not want to be disturbed. The excitement of the day caught up with them and they fell into a tired, deep sleep.

**Journey to Favia**

When Chandru woke up, it was well past eight o'clock. He was ravenously hungry. When he went down to the dining room, his parents were already having their dinner.

"Oh! I was just going to wake you, Chandru," said his Mom when she saw him.

"Thanks, Mom. I did not realize it was this late," said Chandru and sat down at the table. The hot dosas looked tempting.

"Were you too tired, son?" asked Mr. Moorthy.

"More tired than I realized, Dad," answered Chandru. He knew that he had to ask the next question. "So, did you find any rocket fuel in the car, Dad?" he asked, in a casual and teasing voice.

His father laughed. "No, son. It was petrol. I guess it was only a freak incident. I wish I had more of these incidents whenever I am late for work."

Mrs. Leela looked at them with bewilderment. "What are you talking about?" she enquired.

"Did you not tell Mom, Dad?" asked Chandru.

"It completely slipped my mind till you asked me, Chandru," answered his father and proceeded to explain the events of the afternoon to his wife. Sandhya came in as he was finishing.

"No wonder you were tired," said his mother when
she heard the whole thing. She smiled at Sandhya and asked, "Did you have a good sleep, Sandhya?"

"Oh!" she gasped, "how did you know, Aunty?"

"You look quite refreshed, dear. In fact, you look ready for an adventure or two."

Sandhya's smile slipped for an instant. She recovered quickly and said, "Come on, Aunty, do not pull my leg. I came to ask if I could stay here tonight. May I, Aunty?"

"You are most welcome."

"Chandru and I have decided to stay at each other's place and to treat it as our vacation spot. I hope you do not mind, Uncle and Aunty?" asked Sandhya, coming up with an excuse in an instant. Chandru was secretly amused at her ploy.

"That is quite a cost-free vacation you have, Sandhya. I wish I had thought of such an arrangement," said Chandru's father.

"You are welcome, Sandhya, provided your parents accept your vacation idea," said Chandru's mother.

"I have told them, Aunty. They said that if it was okay with you, it was okay with them," said Sandhya.

"So the matter is settled then," said Chandru.

"Will Connie be with you?" asked Mrs. Leela.

"Yes, Aunty. I cannot leave her at home. She is my responsibility, isn't she?"

"Quite right. How is she doing?" she asked, looking into Connie's basket. "She is such a quiet little creature. I have never seen cats so quiet and content. She does not play around much, does she?"

Sandhya shook her head.

"She does not seem to be doing anything at all. Are
you happy with her, Sandhya? If you are not then we will go back to the pet shop and get some other pet for you," said Mrs. Leela.

"I would not give up Connie for anything in the world. Oh, no! Not at all," said Sandhya and held the basket tightly.

Chandru's mother smiled at her possessiveness. 'The cat must have something special to elicit such affection,' she thought. "It is okay, dear. If you are happy, then it is fine with us. Well, it is getting late. We better clear up," she said and began putting away the dishes. Mr. Moorthy said goodnight to them and retired to his room.

The children helped Chandru's mother with the dishes and when they were done, went to Chandru's den. They had to keep the sample of the fuel ready for Connie.

It was quite late when they settled down to wait for Connie's transformation. They knew that they had to wait and so they made themselves comfortable. Though both of them had had a good sleep in the afternoon, they felt their eyes closing very soon. Suddenly, they were wide awake and Connie was with them.

"Congratulations, Chandru! I see that you have made the fuel!" came the thought to them.

"Thank you, Connie. I could not have done it without your help," said Chandru.

"You could have and you would have, Chandru. Only it would have taken you a longer time," came Connie's answer.

"Let us not waste any more time. What is to be
done now?" asked Sandhya. "We have a sample for you, Connie, and the formula for the fuel. I guess you know that it worked on a car but we do not know about your spaceships."

"That is okay, Sandhya. It will work. Do not worry about that. Show me the formula."

Chandru held up the paper so that she could see.

"All these things can be obtained in Favia. And the process is very simple, too..." There was a pause in their thoughts.

"What happened, Connie?" asked Sandhya.

"There is one problem," she continued, "I cannot take this formula with me. You see, I cannot remember any scientific names or formulae." The thought came to them very matter-of-factly. The impact of these words did not sink in immediately and when it hit them, they mentally staggered. Both of them started speaking simultaneously.

"Then what are you going to do?" asked Chandru.

"How are you going to save your people?" asked Sandhya next.

"Quite simple. You will have to come with me."

There was no reaction from either of them. They turned and looked at each other, not quite believing the thought that had come to them.

"Are you sure?" Sandhya was the first to recover her voice. She could not think of anything else to say.

"Yes," came the answer.

Their doubts gave way to a series of questions and answers which tumbled in their minds.

How will they get there? How long will it take? What will they tell their parents? How will they get back?
Finally, they understood that Connie would take them to Favía and bring them back. Their journey would be short and they would be replaced by their virtual images, who would do everything they would do. Nobody needed to know about their absence. They were to carry the formula and the sample with them. They would feel neither hunger nor thirst during their journey and back.

Chandru and Sandhya found themselves in a dizzy and caught up in an unknown adventure. If they went with Connie (and they would, as there was no doubt about that), could they be entrusting their lives to a cat who promised to take them many light years away and bring them back without a spaceship?

"When do we leave?" asked Chandru.
"Right now," came the answer.
They gasped. They did not expect to leave so soon.
"Yes, Sandhya, now. We have wasted enough time already. Are you going to let my people down?"

They knew they could not do that. Whatever happened, they had to take the fuel to the Favians. Chandru and Sandhya looked at each other. They could almost read each other's thoughts. Sandhya too could feel Chandru's doubts about Connie. She looked at Connie and Chandru could decipher the question on her face. 'Hard to trust this shimmering creature?' They made up their minds simultaneously.

"Let me get my rucksack, Sandhya. We need it to transport the fuel safely," said Chandru and went to his den.

Meanwhile, Sandhya rummaged around his room
and threw in the things she thought they might require into her rucksack. She then put on her jogging shoes and a jacket from Chandru’s wardrobe and waited for his return.

He came carrying an unbreakable jar full of the fuel. He pocketed the paper with the formula and slipped on his shoes and jacket. The jar went into his rucksack which he heaved on his back. They were ready to go.

Connie had been watching their preparations with a smile on her face and when they finally stood ready, her grin widened further. She could feel their tension and apprehension in trusting their lives to her. At the same time, she could also sense their unbounded excitement for the journey.

"So, how do we go?" asked Chandru.

"Just touch me," came the instruction.

Chandru put out his hand and touched Connie through the silvery mist surrounding her. He felt his hand dissolve into her golden fur and began to feel a strange sensation creeping over his hand and spreading through his body. Sandhya, who was watching him, gasped aloud. He was enveloped by the same silvery haze that glowed around Connie. Chandru nodded to Sandhya. She too touched Connie and was soon enveloped in the same haze. The careful and serious voice of Connie then came to their thoughts.

"Do not ever take your hands off me, children. This is the connection that will take you to Fa via and bring you back."

They understood. As they looked around the room
for a final time, they saw, to their astonishment, themselves sleeping on the bed! For a moment they wondered if they were dreaming. As they were wondering, they felt themselves rising up in the air and going through the roof of the house as if it did not exist at all. They looked down and could see the lights of their hometown floating by peacefully. They looked around and saw the stars twinkling so close that they felt that if they extended their hands, they would be able to touch them.

The feeling was a little frightening at first. They were neither flying nor swimming in the air. In fact, they felt they were not moving at all. They had the strange feeling that they were actually suspended in the air while the universe moved around them. They felt the changes in the atmosphere as they went through its various layers and then suddenly, there was nothing. A black expanse, studded with stars, planets, meteors and space debris stretched all around them. Colourful, starry dots beckoned to them from all sides. The sun slowly receded until it too was just a star in the vastness of space.

Chandru and Sandhya were speechless. They could not take their eyes off the spectacle spread all around them. They twisted and turned, careful not to break their connection and drank in the sight. A comet with a fiery tail flashed past their eyes and vanished into the expanse. Wonder and joy filled their being as they journeyed ahead.

The Milky Way slowly receded and a bright red star became visible. They seemed to be moving towards that star. They guessed that it must be the
Barnard's Star. They felt an intense curiosity and excitement at the sight of Favia's sun. As they got closer, they could see the star in more detail. It appeared almost alive. The corona of the star was shimmering, giving the impression of expanding and contracting. Sandhya and Chandru felt a strange sense of sadness. The star looked as if it was in agony and writhing in pain. 'Perhaps, it was,' thought Sandhya. They knew that it would not last very long.

"This is Favia," Connie's voice interrupted their thoughts. She had been quiet through the journey, letting them drink in the grandeur of the universe. Now it was time to get to work.

**Landing at Favia**

"You can take your hands off now, children," came Connie's voice. They slowly withdrew their hands from Connie and saw the silvery mist disappear. Immediately they were blasted by a wave of heat so intense that they felt that they were being fried alive. It was so intense that it took their breath away and they almost lost consciousness. Their heads swam and they felt themselves falling. Cool hands caught them as they fell and carried them somewhere. They were dimly aware of something being slipped on them.

Suddenly, they could breathe and the air was cool and refreshing. Their heads cleared and they slowly opened their eyes and looked around. Concerned faces were peering down at them. Chandru and Sandhya scrambled hurriedly to an upright position,
embarrassed at having caused such a scene. They looked at the group around them.

"I am sorry that our welcome turned out to be quite so warm," Connie’s voice came from behind them. Chandru and Sandhya recognized Connie’s voice in their thoughts and turned, expecting to see the reassuring form of Connie. Instead, their eyes fell on a form so resplendent that they had to blink their eyes rapidly to see clearly.

A woman stood there smiling at them. Her hair was more fluffy than Connie’s fur and flowed around her shoulders like waves lapping at the shore. Her eyes were the same Mediterranean blue and she glowed like a silkworm on a dark night. She was covered in a suit of silvery mist which gave them an impression of her not actually standing on the ground but floating gently above it. The Cheshire cat grin smoothed her face.

"Connie!" screamed Chandru and Sandhya.
"Yes, children, it is me," she replied.
"You are beautiful!" gasped Sandhya.
She gave them a twinkling smile, saying teasingly, "Are not angels supposed to be?"

Sandhya wanted to ask her a thousand questions that flooded her mind. Why did Connie not take this form on earth? Did she have any other forms? Was this her real form? Answers did not come from Connie. Sandhya felt a little angry with herself. 'It was not good manners to go questioning the ways of angels,' she told herself.

Connie patted her on the shoulder and said, "Come, I will introduce you to my people."
It was only then that they noticed the suits they were wearing. One was a deep red colour for Chandru and the other a dark purple for Sandhya. They were covered from head to toe. A transparent face shield enabled them to see each other's faces. Even their shoes were inside the suits.

As they glanced around, they noticed everybody in the group wearing the same suits. "It is these suits that keep my people and you cool. You both fainted from the heat. If we had not put these on you, you would have been fried alive," Connie explained. She guided them both to the group of figures who had been watching them silently all the while. There were seven of them. Four of them were wearing red suits and the rest purple ones. She must have said something to one of them in the group because he came forward. He was quite young and a warm smile stretched across his face.

"This is Mikia, the chief of our committees. He designed and built our spaceship."

He touched the top of his visor with the fingertips of his right hand and then tilted his palm upwards. "This is our greeting," came Connie's voice, when they watched him perplexed. Chandru and Sandhya repeated the gesture a little awkwardly.

The next person was wearing a purple suit. "This is Sonja, our physicist. She discovered the shortcoming of our fuel," introduced Connie. Sonja put her left hand to her visor and greeted them. Chandru and Sandhya did the same. She gave them a nervous smile, as if feeling guilty for not having come up with the right fuel for their spaceship.
The next person was introduced as Reuben, the biologist. He did not smile though he greeted them. Chandru and Sandhya came to the conclusion that all the men were dressed in red suits and greeted them with their right hands while the women were dressed in purple and greeted with their left hands.

They moved on to Balee who was an astronomer. She greeted them with a grim and worried face. Cin Chin was introduced next as the chemist and she too was very grim. Koya and Reesid were the last ones to be introduced. Koya was an expert star navigator and Reesid was a doctor. Chandru and Sandhya could see that they were brothers. They were quite alike. Though they did not seem worried, they were not looking pleased either.

"I hope your journey was pleasant," said Mikia.

"Oh, yes! It was the best trip ever taken," said Sandhya, enthusiastically. She was surprised that he could speak their language.

"I am sorry we had to bring you here at such short notice," said Sonja.

"Oh! do not be sorry, we are glad to be here," said Chandru, eager not to be left out of the conversation. He too was surprised at the fluency and correctness of their language. He did not want to ask how they managed to do so. He assumed and quite rightly, that Connie must have been the reason.

They looked around the place to find they were in a huge dome-shaped structure built of some unknown substance. It appeared to be a laboratory and a test site of some kind. There were strange-looking apparatus and instruments everywhere.
Sandhya spotted an instrument that looked like a telescope though it was unlike any telescope she had known. Chandru thought he recognized what looked like a large-scale chemical laboratory though he too could not be sure.

Nobody spoke anything till Chandru and Sandhya finished their observations. Then Connie said, "Would you like to see our planet?"

They nodded.

"There is just one warning I would like to give you. Do not look up at our sun under any circumstance."

They nodded again, understanding the seriousness of her words. They walked out into bright, very bright light. Their hands automatically went up to shield the eyes only to realize that their visors had turned dark, like sunglasses. The sight that greeted them made them gasp. Huge dome-shaped structures dotted the landscape all around them as far as the eye could see. Only then, they realized that the structure they were standing on was situated on a higher platform that was held up by huge pillars all around the base. Steep steps led down to the ground from two sides. There were enormous balloons that lay between the structures like a giant child's abandoned marbles. Strangely, by coincidence or by design, the domes and the balloons were white in colour. The heat was so intense that they could feel it under their suits.

"Where is everybody?" asked Sandhya.
"In those domes," said Cin Chin.
"What are those balloons?" asked Chandru.
"Our water," said Balee.
"Is your whole planet like this?" asked Sandhya.

"Now, yes. But it was not always so," said Connie and started explaining. "Favia was a green planet with over ninety per cent of her land covered in forests. Our oceans and seas provided us with drinking water as they were not as salty as yours. A few decades back everything started changing. Our oceans started drying up faster. We had to do something. So, we have endeavoured to fill these giant balloons with the water from our seas to protect our water supply. Our whole planet has these balloons scattered all over it. Now our people too have to live in these domes. This is the best structure we could come up with to keep the heat out."

Connie paused. Chandru and Sandhya looked around once more. They felt an immense sadness for the people of Favia and for the planet itself as they imagined what it must have been a few decades back. Their eyes fell upon a huge, square structure near the base of the platform.

"What is that?" asked Sandhya, pointing to it.

"That is where our spaceship is," said Sonja.

Their conversation was interrupted by a figure, dressed in red, running towards them from the lab they had just vacated. He ran straight to Mikia and spoke in short, terse sentences. Chandru and Sandhya could feel the immediate tension in the group. They edged closer to Mikia and listened intently as he said something to the man. Chandru and Sandhya looked at each other, worried. Though they could not understand what was being said, they could sense that something had gone wrong. The man spoke
again, this time a little slowly and in some detail. When he stopped, everybody started running towards a shed-like structure that lay nearby.

**An explosion**

Connie turned to Chandru and Sandhya saying, "Come on, children, let us go. One of our domes has exploded."

Chandru and Sandhya started running before the implication of Connie’s words struck them like a blow. They stopped dead in their tracks and looked alarmingly at each other.

"Which dome, Chandru? The one with water or the one with people?" asked Sandhya.

"It must have been the one with people. Connie called it a dome, not a balloon," Chandru replied in a whisper. He knew the temperature outside. They had a taste of it when they had arrived in Favia. He wondered if he was right and winced at the thought.

By the time they reached the shed, everybody was inside. It took them a few seconds to adjust to the dim interior after the harsh glare outside. When they could see well, they saw that Mikia, Reesid and Reuben were already inside a vehicle of some sort. The others were boarding one and Cin Chin was waiting impatiently for them near another vehicle. She beckoned to them to hurry up. They hastened into the bubble-like vehicle and sat in the two vacant seats behind Cin Chin. She started pushing a few buttons and the bubble started to move smoothly.
Chandru and Sandhya looked around the bubble. It was divided into two semi-circular halves, with the top half made of some transparent material. Chandru put out his hand to touch the material and almost knocked himself over his head when his suit prevented him from feeling it. He had totally forgotten about the suit. He edged nearer to the side of the bubble and observed it closely. From what he could see, he suspected that the transparent half was made of the same material as that of the visor they were wearing. He looked at Cin Chin who was seated in what appeared to be the driver’s seat.

As Chandru watched Cin Chin, he was surprised to see that the bubble had no steering wheel. There were no gears either. A console of buttons stood beneath a small screen that was displaying what appeared to be a map. A small moving blip was blinking on and off the screen. Chandru guessed it must be moving them towards their destination. As he thought about that, he felt worried. He wondered where Connie was. He did not see her anywhere in the shed. He looked at Sandhya who was eagerly looking at the landscape outside. He wondered if she was having the same apprehension as he was.

Sandhya was experiencing much more than a feeling of apprehension. She felt excited, thrilled, worried and sad, all at the same time. The parched, dry and harsh landscape outside, wrenched at her heart. 'How wonderful this planet must have been,' she thought. 'Would earth one day encounter the same fate?' The question tore through her thoughts like searing metal. Everywhere she looked, there was
only dry land, bleached white by the intense heat. The glare hurt her eyes though the transparent dome of the bubble had darkened as soon as it touched light, as had their visors. White domes and balloons dotted the flat landscape as far as the eye could see.

Sandhya turned away from the desolate sight outside, wondering what would happen if she or Chandru got lost there. 'We probably would not survive a minute,' she thought. She glanced at Cin Chin who was totally lost in thought. She did not appear to be driving the vehicle, yet it kept moving smoothly and speedily towards their unseen destination. 'What makes this thing move?' she wondered. She, too, noticed the absence of a steering mechanism. She turned to ask Chandru if it was some sort of electromagnetism, when the bubble stopped.

They stared at the scene that stretched in front of them. Devastation greeted them wherever they turned. Debris lay scattered all over the place. The sight of the bodies lying all around, made them sick. People were moving among the bodies, touching and feeling, seeking the ones who could be saved. The whole scene played out silently, adding to the eeriness, giving them the impression of watching a silent horror movie.

Cin Chin had not moved as she sat stunned by the sight all around them. She now turned to them and said, "Please stay inside. We do not know if it is safe for you outside."

Chandru and Sandhya nodded silently.

Cin Chin pressed a button and a door opened, like a petal peeling upwards. Chandru noted the button
she had pressed. The door closed automatically as Cin Chin stepped outside. Chandru waited till she had moved away and pressed the button Cin Chin had pressed. The door opened.

"What are you doing, Chandru?" asked Sandhya.

"You do not think we should sit here and watch that, Sandhya?" said Chandru pointing to the scene outside. "People are dying. Maybe we can help someone! Come on," he said and climbed outside.

It was only then they became aware of the collective moaning. They realized that the bubble had been soundproof. They walked gingerly among the fallen bodies, careful not to step on anyone, looking to see if there was anything they could do to help. The smell of scorched flesh assaulted their noses even though they had the protection of their visors. The scene reminded them of the pictures they had seen in books of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The sudden exposure to the intense heat had fried the people inside the dome. None of them seemed to be wearing protective suits. Chandru assumed that since they were inside the dome, they did not need the suits. The dome protected them and now something had happened to make it explode. 'Was it the intense heat or was it some structural deficiency? If it was one or both, then none of the domes was safe,' the thought raced across Chandru's mind. He turned to Sandhya.

"Come on, Sandhya. We have to find Connie or Mikia."

"What is it, Chandru? Did you think of something?" asked Sandhya.
"Yes, I will tell you later. First we have to find someone. Anyone. Come on," said Chandru and started looking for someone from the committee. They looked around, careful to keep their eyes away from the charred bodies. They approached a figure in red, bending over a moaning form. As they approached, the figure turned and they saw that it was Mikia.

"Mikia, we need to talk to you. Could you come aside for a moment?" asked Chandru, in an urgent voice.

Mikia stepped aside silently and they found a place a little away from the fallen figures.

"Did you find out what caused the dome to explode?" he asked Mikia.

"No, Chandru. Our engineers are looking at the debris to find out what happened. Why do you ask?"

"With reason, Mikia. Could it be due to the heat or some structural fault?"

"Could be either or both or something else. I do not understand what you are getting at, Chandru."

"Mikia, if it was the heat or some structural deficiency, then none of the domes are safe. If the heat aggravated a structural fault, then all the other domes are under the same pressure, are they not?"

A look of comprehension dawned on Mikia's face. "Oh, my God! How did I not think of this before? How could I miss such a simple thing?" he said, his face crumpling with pain.

"It is okay, Mikia. Anybody can miss it. You are under great pressure. Please do not blame yourself. Just see what can be done now," Chandru said in a gentle voice. He understood what Mikia must be
going through. He wondered if anybody could put up with such pressure and not buckle under it.

"Thank you, Chandru. You two get back to the bubble. We shall have to leave any moment. I shall be back," said Mikia and hurried away.

Chandru and Sandhya retraced their steps back to the bubble. The door was closed and they could not find out how to open it from the outside. So they waited near the bubble, watching the painful scene, wondering what other mishaps would befall the people of Favia.

Mikia came back and they got in the bubble. As they started back towards the laboratory, Sandhya voiced a thought that had been nagging her for a while. "May I ask you a personal question, Mikia?"

"Please do," he said, without taking his eyes off the screen.

"Those people who died they must have relatives and friends but nobody seemed to cry for them. Do you not feel sad about their deaths?"

Mikia turned slowly and they saw that the whole chair swivelled. He looked at Sandhya with such intensity that Sandhya wondered if she had gone too far. "How many rooms do you have in your house?" he asked Sandhya.

Sandhya was taken aback by the question. She did not understand what connection the number of rooms in her house had with Favians feeling sad about the death of friends and relatives. "There must be something to it/ she thought, 'or Mikia would not have asked me this question.' She decided to answer the question and see where it would lead her.
"Six/' she said, "including the kitchen."

"Is there a room in your house from where you can neither see your parents nor hear them?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Sandhya. "I cannot see or hear my parents from my room. It is upstairs and they sleep downstairs."

"Would you cry if your parents were in their room and you in yours and you cannot see or hear them?"

Sandhya sat stunned. She could not comprehend what Mikia was trying to say.

"You see, Sandhya, death for us is not a total loss of a person or being. Death for us is just a transferring of the person to another location in which we cannot see or hear them, like your parents being in one room and you being in another."

"But...I know that my parents are in the other room. So I do not have to feel sad," said Sandhya, slowly beginning to grasp what Mikia was saying.

"So do we, Sandhya, so do we," said Mikia and turned back, as if unwilling to explain further.

Chandru and Sandhya looked at each other, mystified. They felt they understood what Mikia had just said, yet they could not completely comprehend or experience the tranquility of the people of Favia in the face of death. They were slowly beginning to understand the enormous intellectual strength of the people of Favia when they reached the shed from where they had started.

They got out of the bubble and went to the laboratory. Connie came forward to talk to them. The rest of the committee, along with a few new faces, had assembled. None of them noticed their entrance
as they were bent over a table looking at something. Chandru and Sandhya felt a surge of relief when they saw Connie. Their experience had shaken them.

"Oh, Connie! We are so glad to see you. Where have you been? We did not see you at the dome," asked Chandru.

"I was there, Chandru. Only, you did not see me," Connie replied.

"Oh, Connie! Could you not have done something to prevent the explosion? You are an angel. You could have done something, could you not?" asked an agitated Sandhya.

The sight of Connie had prised out the thought that had been nagging at the back of her mind for a while. The moment she spoke the words, Sandhya realized that she should not have spoken them. However, the gentle look on Connie's face reassured her.

"You have answered your question, Sandhya. I am an angel. Angels are supposed to only assist. They cannot interfere with nature's course of events," she replied, gently and soothingly.

"I am sorry, Connie. I went over the limit this time," Sandhya apologized.

"It is all right, Sandhya. You said nothing wrong. Come, let us join them," she said, indicating to the team around the table.

They went over and looked at what appeared to be a blueprint of some structure. Chandru guessed that it must be the blueprint of the domed structure. He and Sandhya listened to the quiet discussion flowing back and forth in an alien language. They were content to watch the mixture of emotions and
expressions playing across the various faces. Connie too was a silent spectator and slowly the discussion petered out and all eyes came to rest on Mikia.

Mikia kept staring intently at the blueprint for a while. When he raised his head, he had a look of intense determination on his face. He started giving rapid instructions to the team. As soon as he finished everyone, except Koya and Cin Chin, raced out of the laboratory. He then turned to Cin Chin and spoke to her. She nodded in reply.

Mikia came up to Chandru and Sandhya and said, "I am sorry, children, I have to go. Connie will explain everything to you. Please do not mind my absence."

Chandru nodded.

"We understand," said Sandhya.

He looked at both of them deeply for a moment, turned around and left without another word.

"Something has gone terribly wrong, has it not?" asked Sandhya in a whisper, looking at Mikia's receding back.

"Not one, but many things, Sandhya. We are not sure about what caused the dome to explode. Chandru's observation has been taken seriously. So we have decided to evacuate the domes. The laboratory and the structure housing the spaceship are to serve the double purpose of being our living quarters as well. These two are constructed differently and we hope they will withstand whatever it is that caused the dome to explode. Secondly, the temperature has suddenly increased. Our calculations have been wrong and because of this sudden jump in temperature, our food stocks are beginning to rot.
Our plans to leave Favia have been advanced. We do not know by how many days..." Connie paused. "It is time to get to work, children," she said.

Chandru and Sandhya nodded silently. They had been so caught up in the excitement of the happenings that they had almost forgotten the purpose of their visit. As Connie reminded them, they both felt a twinge of apprehension.

Chandru began to feel nervous as he thought about what Connie had just said. He began to wonder if his fuel could meet the requirements of the Favian spaceship and if he could produce enough of it in the time specified. He looked at Sandhya and whispered to her, "Maybe it was not such a good idea to have come here."

Sandhya said nothing. She took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly. She could not let him know that she too was having the same doubt.

The missing sample

Chandru looked around for his rucksack. His sample was inside it. Connie read his thoughts and spoke to Koya in their language. He turned around silently and left the laboratory. He was back a few minutes later with both their rucksacks covered by the same material which made the suits. He handed the bags to Chandru, silently. Chandru smiled his thanks but found no acknowledgment from Koya. He and Reesid had remained silent all through their tour.

Chandru felt a little uneasy as he looked at Koya.
There was something about him that did not feel right. Chandru decided not to worry and get on with the job at hand. Sandhya watched him as he opened his and took out the jar that contained the sample. They stared at it in horror. It was empty!

CWtdru and Sandhya stood speechless. A horrified silence filled the dome. Everyone looked at one another, then all eyes finally came to rest on Connie.

Connie's eyes had turned to an inky midnight blue. The very haze surrounding her transformed into a flaming orange, matching the colour of her hair. She gave the impression of being on fire. She blazed up so fiercely that Chandru and Sandhya had to shield their eyes from her brilliance.

"Oh, no! She is angry!" whispered Cin Chin in dismay.

Sandhya wondered if angels got angry. Just as quickly as she had flared up, she was back to her old self. "I am sorry that you had to receive such treatment from us. I am ashamed of my people. However, I would like to drop this matter here. Could you please prepare another batch of the fuel, Chandru?" asked Connie. They could feel a restraint in her as she held something back from them, something she did not want them to know.

CMndru nodded silently. He felt that Connie knew something about the empty jar that she did not want to reveal just yet. "I can, Connie. I have the formula with trie. What I do not know is if all the chemicals and Compounds are readily available here."

"Let me see the list. Maybe I can help," said Cin Chin. Cndru took the formula from inside his jacket
and was about to hand it to Cin Chin when Sandhya snatched it from him. As Chandru watched, astonished, she shook her head and took out a paper and pen from her rucksack and began to write down the names of the chemicals without their proportion or the formula for the procedure.

Sandhya handed over the new list to Cin Chin and said, "I am sorry, but I would like to take all precautions after what happened to our sample."

"I understand, Sandhya, I agree with you. You are right in being cautious," said Cin Chin taking the list and examining it. She kept nodding until she came to the last item when her expression changed. "It will take me time to get the last item," she said. "All the others are readily available. We had not thought that you would require this. It has to be obtained from a place far away from here. Can you not start your preparations with the rest of the items?" she asked.

"I am afraid we cannot. It is the most essential component of all. I just cannot proceed without it."

"All right, if that is the way it is, then we will have to get your ingredients as soon as we can. Now, if you will excuse me, I shall see what I can do," said Cin Chin.

Koya spoke to her in their language. Cin Chin nodded and they left together. Mikia had returned unnoticed and had watched everything silently all the while. He now stepped over to Connie. They spoke briefly and he came over to Sandhya and Chandru.

"I am sorry. You have had unpleasant experiences on our planet. Perhaps now that night is upon us,
you can take rest and be ready to start work early tomorrow morning," Mikia addressed them in a lilting voice. He spoke as if he was reciting poetry.

Chandru and Sandhya looked at Connie. "Go with him, children. You can trust him. In any case I will not be far from you," she assured them.

"Connie, should we not start the work right away? You said we did not have enough time," asked Chandru.

"No, Chandru. We need to make new calculations about our sun. We cannot set a date for evacuation without that. This will take most of our time. We have to then make room for you and Sandhya to work. We have to take stock of our food and ration it, if necessary. We do not know if our water balloons will hold on. Above all, you must have the components to make the fuel. I suggest you two rest since you cannot help us with any of the things I have just mentioned. Moreover, you will need all your energy tomorrow. So go with him." Connie nodded to Mikia.

Chandru and Sandhya followed Mikia, who led them to a door that was almost hidden in the domed construction. He led them through the dimly-lit hallway to a spacious structure which too was dome-shaped. Little cubicles lined the circular walls with each of the doorways opening into the centre. A circular table was placed with chairs around it. The structure was illuminated though neither of them could see how. There were no lights or bulbs visible anywhere.

As they followed him, Chandru wondered if the place was safe. "Is this like the other domes, Mikia?"
he asked, trying to hide the apprehension he was beginning to feel.

"No, Chandru. This is our laboratory’s living quarters. It has not been constructed the same way as the other domes. This dome will not explode, if that is what you want to know. You are quite safe here."

Chandru smiled, trying to hide his embarrassment. He did not think his concern for safety was that transparent. Mikia led them to two adjacent cubicles and showed them in. They were to sleep in their cubicles and these would be their abode for the rest of their stay in Favia. Chandru and Sandhya looked in. There were no doors and no provisions for locks. Sandhya noticed this and looked enquiringly at Mikia.

"We have never felt any need for doors or locks," he said. "You need not worry. You shall be quite safe. I give you my word," he assured them. "And yes! Please do not remove your suits," he warned, "We do not know if there will be another jump in the temperature. If there is nothing else, may I take your leave?"

"How are we to get to Connie if we need her?" asked Chandru, a little anxious.

"That is very simple. All you have to do is call to her in your thoughts. She will be watching over you anyway. If there is nothing else..." paused Mikia. He seemed anxious to leave.

"No, thank you and goodnight," chorused Chandru and Sandhya.

Mikia seemed to be taken aback by this greeting. After a momentary pause, he wished them the same, turned and strode out.

Chandru and Sandhya entered a cubicle and
looked around. It was a simple space with a cot against the curving wall and a squat, box-like structure next to it. They assumed that it was to serve as a table. The partition of the cubicle was just a little high over their heads. As there was only one cot in the cubicle, Chandru decided to sleep in the adjacent one. They decided to have their rucksacks by their sides while they slept. They also agreed to wake each other up if anything happened during the night.

Chandru stayed with Sandhya for a while, talking about their adventures. They both felt very uneasy about their empty jar. Chandru expressed his opinion about Connie knowing more than she revealed.

"Oh! did you get that feeling too, Chandru? I am sure she knows something. I wonder why she did not let us know what it is," mused Sandhya.

"Maybe she did not want to worry us, Sandhya. Whatever it is, I am sure she had a good reason for not telling us. Do you think we spilt it on the way here?" asked Chandru.

"No way, Chandru. The jar was certainly emptied by someone. The sooner we accept this the more careful we would be," said Sandhya.

Chandru remained silent. He understood the ramifications of her words. If she was right, then it meant that someone did not want their fuel. This meant that their attempts to produce it could be met with foul play and also they could be in danger. Chandru became more and more worried as his thoughts progressed. He did not want to worry Sandhya by telling her his fears. He decided to keep his thoughts to himself and be very careful in the night.
"I agree, Sandhya," said Chandru, trying to sound reassuring. "Anyway, let us sleep light tonight. We have Connie with us. Mikia said she would be watching over us. I am sure she would not let any harm come to us," said Chandru, trying to draw comfort from his own words.

"Oh, Chandru! Do you think something might happen to us?" asked Sandhya, in a shocked voice. This possibility had not occurred to her till Chandru suggested it.

Chandru kicked himself for upsetting Sandhya. He tried to set right his mistake. "Of course not, Sandhya. It was just a manner of speaking. I do not think anything is going to happen to us. Not till we give their fuel anyway," he added, almost speaking to himself. "Do not worry and try to get some sleep. We may have a busy day tomorrow. If there is anything that disturbs you, do not hesitate to wake me," he finished. Then he patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

Chandru went to his cubicle. He took the paper with the formula and sat looking at it. Though he knew the contents of the paper by heart, he kept committing them to memory, imprinting each word and symbol on his mind.

Chandru then took out a roll of cellotape from his rucksack, turned up the left sleeve of his suit and stuck the formula to its underside. Then he turned down the sleeve, made sure the slip of the paper was not showing and lay down on the cot, thinking about who would want to spoil the Favians’ chance of finding a new home.
A feeble half-dream tore open Chandru's eyes from the sleep he had slipped into. Chandru did not move but tried to adjust his eyes to the darkness. His eyes slowly focussed on a figure leaving his cubicle. Chandru snapped to alertness. He instinctively checked to see if his formula was safe. It was missing from his sleeve. 'He must have watched me,' he thought, spontaneously.

The figure was leaving the place stealthily. He could not see if it was a man or a woman. Chandru got out of his cot and stood up. He waited to see if the figure turned around. It did not. He slowly moved out of his cubicle, keeping his eyes glued to the figure which was approaching the door silently. He woke up Sandhya, covering her mouth and signalling her to keep quiet. He pointed towards the figure. Sandhya understood. She slipped on her rucksack and they both raced out of her cubicle. The figure had entered the laboratory and was heading for the doorway leading outside. Chandru and Sandhya followed, keeping a safe distance. As the figure headed out, they rushed to the doorway, waited for a few seconds to see if it was coming back, and then plunged outside. The night was warm. They looked around and saw the figure heading down the steps of the platform and going towards a dome.

"Watch where he is going," he whispered in Sandhya's ear and raced down the steps of the platform.

Sandhya waited at the top of the steps and caught
a glimpse of the figure heading around a dome. She then went down the steps and joined him. "He went around that one," she pointed.

They ran towards the dome around which the figure had disappeared. It was quite large though it had looked smaller to them at a distance. They stood in front of it.

"There must be an entrance somewhere," whispered Chandru.

"You take the right side and I will take the left. If you find anything, whistle. If you do not, we will meet half-way," said Sandhya.

Chandru nodded and started running towards the right side of the dome, close to its wall, looking for an opening or an entrance. He kept running until he realized that he had reached the half-way mark and Sandhya was not there to meet him. He ran faster, his heart thudding in his chest. As he rounded a curve, he saw two figures and realized that one of them was Sandhya. She was trying to hold on to the figure but it had pushed her against the wall of the dome. Chandru could not make out clearly what else was happening, as suddenly there was a flurry of arms and legs and one of the figures went down with a thud. The other figure bent down over the prone figure. Hearing Chandru's footsteps, it looked up and started running away from him. It was then that Chandru realized that the fallen figure was Sandhya.

He rushed to her and bent down. Sandhya lay motionless on the warm, barren ground. Chandru placed his hand over her nostrils. When he felt her hot breath, he was relieved. He sat down near her
and cradled her head in his arms. He patted her cheeks, trying to revive her. When she did not open her eyes, he began to feel worried. The events of the night had stunned him and he looked up at the star-studded unfamiliar expanse above him. He could not comprehend why or who would want to harm them. They were there to help the people of Favia. They were their guests and yet they had met with this unfortunate incident.

He sighed and remembered Connie's words. "Connie, we need your help," he called to her in his thoughts.

In a flash Connie's misty form was beside him. She looked at the two figures on the ground. She turned to Chandru and said, "Hold Sandhya and touch me, Chandru." The next thing he knew they were back in Sandhya's cubicle. "Wait here," she said and left the cubicle. Chandru lay Sandhya down on the cot, covered her with his jacket and tried to make her comfortable.

Connie came back, leading Reesid and Mikia behind her. Chandru got up so that the doctor could examine Sandhya. Reesid took out a pen-like implement from his pocket and ran it over Sandhya. He then read something from it and turned to Chandru. "Nothing to worry. It is just a concussion. A very mild one in fact. She will be all right tomorrow. She might have a slight headache, though. Please let her rest. How did this happen?"

"She fell off her cot," Chandru replied hastily. Reesid and Mikia looked surprised. Chandru decided not to tell them anything. He was relieved that Sandhya would be all right.

"Do you need anything else?" asked Reesid.
"No, thank you. We would like to rest, please. By the way, how long is your night?" he asked.

"By your time-scale, you have a few more hours," replied Mikia.

"If you do not mind, I would like to be near my friend. Could you make some arrangements for that?"

"With pleasure," they said. Reesid slid the partition between Sandhya's and Chandru's cubicle along the wall so that there was enough space to accommodate Chandru's cot. They then moved Chandru's cot from his cubicle and placed it next to Sandhya's.

"Thank you," said Chandru.

"Please, rest well," he wished both of them and left Chandru alone with Connie.

"Tell me what happened?" she asked, sitting beside him on the cot.

"Why? Don't you know?" asked Chandru.

"I do know, Chandru, but I want to hear it from you. Please tell me what happened."

Chandru narrated the events of the night.

"So the formula is missing," said Connie.

Chandru nodded. "But I remember it well, Connie. I am confident of making the fuel. Do not worry. I will not let you down," said Chandru.

"I know, Chandru. I know you will not. It is not you I am worried about."

"May I ask you something, Connie?"

"Yes."

"Why did you not help us earlier?"

"I could not. You did not call me earlier. I cannot help when I am not asked, Chandru."

Chandru accepted that. Connie lapsed into
thoughts silent to him. She then touched Sandhya gently on the forehead, repeated the same to her and got up to leave. "Sleep well, Chandru, I shall come for you in the morning." She glided out softly. Chandru felt his eyes close and he fell into a welcome sleep.

**The big preparation**

The next thing Chandru knew, he was being nudged awake. Connie stood next to his cot, gently shaking him to wakefulness. Chandru became instantly alert. He looked at Sandhya who was still asleep. He went over to her cot to wake her up. She turned over, mumbling something. Chandru shook her more vigorously and she slowly opened her eyes.

"Hi, Chandru! Good morning!" she greeted.

"Come on, Sandhya. It is getting late. We have work to do," said Chandru, a little impatiently.

As the memories came flooding back, Sandhya sat up with a jolt and clutched her head. In her sleep, she had forgotten where she was. "Oh! my head!" she moaned. Connie touched the crown of her head with her fingertips and immediately the pain vanished. She felt refreshed and ready, raring to go. She threw Connie a bright smile and thanked her.

"Did you find out who it was?" asked Chandru.

"No, I could not. I am sure it was a man."


"Well, I took off on the left side of the dome and came upon him very unexpectedly. I did not have the chance to whistle, Chandru. He was coming out
of an entrance or a doorway, I could not be sure whether he was coming in or going out. Anyway, I literally ran into him. I think he was more startled than I was. I tried to hold on to him, but he pushed me against the wall. Then I do not know what happened. Maybe I slipped and hit my head on the ground. The next thing I know, you were shaking me awake." Sandhya paused for breath. The recollection had excited her.

"What happened? How did I come here?" Sandhya asked Chandru, inquisitively.

Chandru told her.

"So the formula is missing," said Sandhya.
"Yes, Sandhya. This is the least of our worries because I remember it exactly," said Chandru.

Connie, who had kept silent all along, now said, "Let us go, children, and keep this to yourselves. Do not let anybody know your adventures of the night. You did well with Reesid last night, Chandru." Chandru felt very proud.

They trooped out of the cubicle and went to the laboratory. It was transformed overnight. The structure was divided into two semi-circles by a partition that did not touch the ceiling and left some space for air flow. Chandru and Sandhya guessed that the other half must have been converted into living quarters for the people evacuated from the domes. Sandhya wondered if there were only so few people on Favia that they could be fitted in half of the laboratory. The laboratory now looked cramped.

The committee had already assembled and were obviously waiting for them. They greeted one
another and Cin Chin stepped forward. She looked
tired. "All your ingredients are right here, Chandru,"
she said and walked over to a large circular table.
Several jars, each containing a chemical or a
compound, were placed on the table. A big box stood
at the centre. Chandru guessed that it must be his
last item. "What sort of apparatus do you require,
Chandru?" she asked.

"Would you know our terms for apparatus?"
Chandru asked.

"I do not think I will, Chandru. Why don't you
walk around and choose the things you need. I can
explain each apparatus and its function to you and if
you think you can use it, just tell me and I shall keep
it aside. If you still think you need something,
describe it to us and we will get it for you."

Chandru nodded. He and Sandhya started to walk
around the laboratory accompanied by Cin Chin. He
pointed to the various implements and Cin Chin
explained their use to him. When he found some-
thing that suited his purpose, he told Cin Chin. She
and Reuben then moved that apparatus to a separate
table and lined them up on it. When he finished, he
did not have an accurate balance to weigh the
chemicals. He explained his requirement to Cin Chin
who nodded and left the place. She came back with a
weird-looking apparatus.

"May I help you with this, Chandru? It is a little
too complicated for you to use," she said.

Chandru thought about it for a moment. He knew
he had to trust someone to be able to finish making
the fuel. He knew that there would be no sabotage in
the presence of Connie. He decided to involve a committee in the preparation. They would need a huge amount of fuel and it would be impossible to do it alone. If one of them did not want the fuel, it was not his problem, he decided. However, he wanted to know one thing before he could start.

He turned to Mikia. "What provisions do you have for a test flight?" he asked.

"Come with me," said Mikia and took him to a safe-like structure standing alone. Sandhya followed. He opened the safe with a tube-like key and wheeled out something that stood on a platform. It was nearly the same height as Mikia and saucer-shaped. It looked like the model he had made for Sandhya for her birthday. It was squat and was perched on four legs. Cup-like structures attached to the ends of the legs enabled them to rest smoothly on the ground. He did not know how this could have happened. Do all great minds think alike? Or was it a coincidence? He remembered Mr. Benjie’s words about coincidences. He decided to drop the matter as he knew that he could never find an explanation for what he had seen.

Meanwhile, Sandhya went around looking at it with excitement racing in her heart. She had known all along that the saucer-shaped space vehicle was the best way to space travel, unlike the rockets and satellites the scientists on earth had developed.

"This is a working model of our spaceship. Connie told me to make it, though at that time I did not understand its purpose. Now I do. It is remote controlled. Our faulty fuel was tested on this."

Chandru looked at the model with a sudden sense
of awe. Chandru and Sandhya found a new and deep respect for Favia and her people as they examined the model.

"How much fuel would you need to test fly this model?" asked Sandhya.

"In your measurement terms, exactly 5.36 gallons," replied Mikia.

Chandru nodded, satisfied. Mikia locked the model in its safe. Chandru then took out his calculator from his rucksack and did some rapid calculations.

"What is the capacity of your spaceship?" Chandru asked Mikia.

"It is 5,863 gallons," replied Mikia.

Chandru and Sandhya gasped. They could never hope to make that much fuel.

"We need more fuel, Chandru. Let me explain. We have finished calculations about our sun. At this rate we have six more days to evacuate Favia. We did not expect this deadline for another year. Our year has nine months, with twenty-four days in a month. Each month has three weeks with eight days in a week. Our day has twenty-hours in it. So you see, we were under the impression that we had time to evacuate. Our sun seems to have other plans. We have been building another spaceship with a capacity to carry three thousand four hundred and seventy-two people. Our plan was to get your help to make the first batch of fuel, test fly it, refine it, get the formula from you and produce it at a later time. We did not want to extend your stay more than was necessary." Mikia paused, to see if Chandru and Sandhya understood what he was saying.
"We are building two more smaller spaceships/" continued Mikia. "They will have a capacity to carry only a hundred people and the fuel required for these two ships will be one thousand nine hundred and thirty-eight gallons." Mikia stopped after furnishing all the details.

A tense silence enveloped the group as nobody spoke. All eyes were on Chandru. He had listened to Mikia with a faraway look on his face. Chandru snapped out of his thoughts and said to Mikia, "There are a number of questions I would like to ask you. Some of them can wait, except two. First, do you have equipment large enough to make such huge quantities of fuel? Second, do you have enough components to make the fuel?" he asked.

"Yes, Chandru we do. Cin Chin has been awake the whole night transporting the chemicals in your list to the spaceship base. A part of the base has the equipment you need. This laboratory is to make the test fuel," replied Mikia.

The division of work

"All right, let us now hurry up and get to work. I would like everybody to help so that we can get the job done soon," Chandru said with determination.

The committee gathered around him. He assigned work to everybody. Cin Chin was to weigh the chemicals which would be handed over to her by Balee and Reuben. Sonja and Reesid were to make a careful mixture. Mikia would be the one to heat it
and Chandru would supervise and oversee the operation, giving instructions, correcting errors and making adjustments. He smiled inwardly when he uttered the last instruction. Fancy him, a teenager overseeing a crucial scientific endeavour by a group of aliens! How he wished he had his father to witness that sight.

Everybody got down to work. Connie had taken Sandhya aside and they had been talking all the while Chandru issued his instructions. Once he was sure that he was thoroughly understood, he went over to them. He had noted, out of the corner of his eye, Sandhya shaking her head throughout their conversation. He now asked her what the matter was.

"Can you believe it, Chandru? They have not yet found a planet to go to!" burst out Sandhya.

"I do not believe it! How could you let this happen, Connie? Your people have nowhere to go and neither can they stay here. Did your committee not try to find out some alternate home?"

Connie patiently explained to them that they neither had the means nor the chance to do the things Sandhya had suggested. She herself could help her people only to a certain extent. "Even angels have limitations, Sandhya," she said, gently.

Sandhya felt instantly ashamed of her outburst.

"I am sorry, Connie. I really am," she said. "What do you want me to do?" Sandhya asked.

"Find us a new home, Sandhya," said Connie.

Sandhya gasped. It was the last thing she had expected. "Do you really mean it?" she asked in a whisper.
Connie simply nodded. Sandhya fell silent. Thoughts, doubts and fears raced across her mind. Could she do it? She was an amateur who studied the space and the planets out of a passionate curiosity, not as a discipline. More importantly, could she do it in time? She thought about Favia and the courage of the Favians. She had to do it. Sandhya squared her shoulders. "I will do my best, Connie. That is a promise," she said.

Connie gave her a brilliant smile. She asked Koya to team up with Sandhya. She then left them alone to get to work. Chandru had been a silent spectator, as he was too stunned by the enormity of the task that confronted Sandhya. He felt that handling concrete substances like chemicals and compounds and trying out their various combinations was one thing, but finding a habitable planet in the vast expanse of the universe was quite something. He saw Sandhya readying for the task at hand and felt a jab of pride.

Sandhya came over and looked at him. She felt Chandru’s confidence through his silence. She took his arm, squeezed it once and turned away silently. Chandru stood watching her join Koya and he felt a renewed strength. He went back to his team.

Chandru’s team worked furiously. He kept a close watch over the process and soon he was satisfied that everybody was working well. The first batch would be ready soon. Each batch gave him half a gallon and that left him with many more gallons to go. As he thought of the small laboratory at his home, he was grateful to have the opportunity to work with such sophisticated equipment. He watched each apparatus
closely, trying to figure out how they were made and how each functioned.

He was disturbed by a light touch on his shoulder. Cin Chin stood by his side. "Is it ready?" he asked her eagerly. She nodded. He hurried over to the kiln-like structure and opened the door gingerly. Cin Chin removed the dish from it and everybody crowded around her and peered at it. A clear, colourless liquid lay steaming in it.

Chandru kept looking at the steaming liquid with the gut feeling that something was wrong. He knew that something was not the way it should be but could not immediately put a finger on it. He kept looking at it for a few more moments, trying hard to force his tired brain to find out what was wrong. He asked Cin Chin to measure the liquid to make sure they were making half a gallon. When she measured the fuel, they found it to be a few centilitres short of the half gallon mark.

Chandru was puzzled. He decided not to waste anymore time wondering what had gone wrong. He decided to go ahead and keep making the fuel, postponing the problem for a while. He knew that he would get the answer eventually and he could not afford to stop the production of the fuel while he pondered over the problem.

The exploration

Meanwhile, Sandhya and Koya had got together with a team of astronomers. Koya had not introduced
his team and neither did Sandhya ask for any introductions. She understood that they had no time for formalities. A smile had served as their mutual introduction and now they were working alongside, with Koya acting as the interpreter.

Koya had taken awhile to familiarize Sandhya with the charts and maps of the stellar picture as seen from Favia. Once she had fixed the constellations and their positions firmly in her mind, she had made rapid strides in understanding the celestial picture. Earlier, when she had formulated and tested theories about the existence of extraterrestrial life, she had had a strong view that the formation of Ursa Minor might have a habitable planet. She now told Koya about her conjecture. He gave instructions to his team, some of whom were seated in front of what appeared to be computer screens and the rest with huge maps spread on tables.

The team went to work. When they were trying to either confirm or reject Sandhya’s theory, she and Koya set about finding two other habitable planets. As she sat there working, she could not push away a thought that kept cropping up in her mind. "What will happen if the planets we are targeting turn out to be uninhabitable?" she finally asked Koya.

Koya looked up at her. He made no attempt to answer and just kept looking at her. His look said, 'You know the answer to that one, Sandhya.' Sandhya bit her lip and lowered her eyes. She did not want Koya to see the tears glistening in her eyes.

The silence that enveloped the group was broken only by the occasional whispering of Sandhya and
Koya as they tried to identify planets and the instructions Koya gave to the team as they tried to test the feasibility of their identifications. Planets were hopefully identified, tested and either discarded or grouped under 'probables'. The probables were further tested, not only regarding their suitability for habitation but for their distance from Favia. The capacity of the spaceships to travel the distance was taken as the second testing stone once a planet was identified as a probable. Many choices stumbled at this hurdle. A few that came through, called for further and much more complicated requirements.

Sandhya left the in-depth analysis of planets to Koya's team as they both concentrated only on identifying the planets. They could not come up with many since they were curbed by the distance factor.

Nobody had any idea how much time had elapsed when one team member turned to Koya and said something. He looked at Sandhya silently. "We have a confirmed probable," Koya said, in a whisper.

Even as a wave of excitement swept through Sandhya, she could not help smile inwardly at the paradox of the phrase 'confirmed probable'. Koya beckoned to her and she joined him in front of a screen. Koya pointed out the planet and said something. The man at the screen touched a few buttons and a map appeared showing Favia and the planet they had identified. A line started to stretch from Favia to the planet. As it did, some characters started to appear over the map. Koya translated and read out the distance, the time taken to travel, the probable gravity, the atmospheric pressure and temperature, oxygen
level, water presence and the possibility of other living organisms already existing on it.

Sandhya watched silently and a knot began to form in her stomach. They could never hope to live in that planet,' she thought. She turned away, afraid of being sick. She walked over to Chandru. Koya watched her go. He understood what she must have been feeling. He was having exactly the same feelings.

Sandhya stood behind Chandru, looking over his shoulder at his team working silently and efficiently. Chandru was not aware of her presence. She did not want to disturb him. She walked around aimlessly glancing at things, her thoughts many light years away. Her eyes fell on the jar with the fuel. The inside of the jar was all misty and steamy. She stood looking at it vaguely for a while until her eyes automatically focussed on the jar. Her eyes narrowed as her thoughts concentrated and she recognized the fuel.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped. 'Does Chandru know what is happening to his fuel?' she thought. 'No, he does not,' she decided, 'otherwise he would not be standing there doing nothing about it.' She raced back to Chandru and pulled him aside, away from his team.

"Chandru, do you even realize that the fuel is evaporating?" she asked.

Then it struck Chandru. He slapped his forehead. 'So that is what is happening to my fuel,' he realized. "Thank you, Sandhya," he said. Then he gave her an impulsive hug and dashed off.

Sandhya was taken aback by Chandru's reaction. She smiled and walked back to her team, her mind already worrying about the new planet.
Chandru tapped Cin Chin and she looked up. He beckoned her to follow him and took her out of earshot of his team. In his excitement, he forgot that even if anybody heard what he was about to tell her, they would not understand a word. "Cin Chin, the fuel is evaporating," he came straight to the point. He had no time to waste. "I think it is probably due to this heat." He stopped.

Error rectified

Cin Chin frowned. She said nothing as she turned and walked away. Chandru saw her say something to Sonja which either startled or annoyed her. Chandru could not make out correctly from that distance. Cin Chin along with Sonja came back to Chandru.

"What do you suggest we do, Chandru?" asked Sonja.

"We have to do something to keep the fuel cool. We cannot mix any cooling agent with it since it would change the composition of the fuel," Chandru paused.

"Could we arrange for it to be cooled externally?" asked Sonja.

"Yes, that would be best," replied Chandru.

"Come with me," she said and led them to a table. She pulled up a paper and drew something on it. As Chandru and Cin Chin watched, she drew the figure of the fuel tank and proceeded to draw something else around it. When she finished, she tapped the diagram and said, "This is the fuel tank."
We have to have another layer surrounding the tank. This layer should prevent external heat from touching the surface of the fuel tank. Once the heat is cut off, the fuel would not evaporate," she stopped, looking at Chandru and Cin Chin.

Cin Chin nodded but Chandru remained silent. An idea had begun to form in his mind as he watched Sonja draw the diagram. Now it was taking shape and he needed only a few more details before he put it into action. He turned to Sonja.

"Are you familiar with the concept of pressurizing gases?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Do you have the necessary equipment to do that?" he asked again.

"Yes, we do," replied Sonja.

"Can you put together a team that can do it without your supervision?" he asked.

"Yes, definitely," she said.

Chandru nodded satisfactorily and pulled the sheet of drawing towards him. He made a few alterations and turned it towards Sonja and Cin Chin. He explained the concept to them. He had applied the principle of the vacuum flask to the fuel tank. He explained that they used liquid nitrogen as a cooling agent on earth and also explained the working of the vacuum flask.

Once Sonja understood what was needed, she nodded confidently. She and Cin Chin fell into a deep discussion as Chandru walked away. He knew he had nothing more to do. As he sauntered over to Sandhya, he felt weightless, as if a great burden had been lifted.
off him. He wondered if Sandhya had had any success in her efforts. When he looked at Sandhya, she appeared to be deep in thought.

"Can I be of any help, Sandhya?" he asked, softly. She looked up at him, not quite seeing him. Chandru repeated his question, gently tapping her shoulder.

"Oh! I do not know, Chandru. Koya wants me to name the new planet. I am just not able to come up with anything," she sighed.

"How about 'Galileo'?'" Chandru asked.

Sandhya's eyes brightened and she flashed him a smile. "Oh! thank you, Chandru!" She turned to Koya and said, "Would you like to name the planet 'Galileo'?"

"Of course, yes, Sandhya. It is fine with me. May I know the meaning of the word?" he asked.

"It is a name, Koya," answered Sandhya.

"Oh! a name... Do you know this person?" he asked.

Chandru and Sandhya looked at each other. How could they explain who Galileo was! What all do they tell him? That he was the father of astronomy and invented the telescope or he was the one who said earth was round and not flat as early humans believed and was killed for saying so.

Sandhya looked at Koya and said, "Yes, Koya, we know him."

"Oh! is he a friend?" he asked again.

Sandhya once more turned to Chandru who had returned to his team. "Yes, he is," she replied.

"He must mean a great deal to you," said Koya.

"Yes, he does," said Sandhya and bent her head. How could anyone know what Galileo meant to her or even to the Favians! She decided that Chandru had
given a most fitting name to the Favians' new home. 'Henceforth they shall be known as Galieons/' she thought.

Suddenly, she felt exhausted. Though Connie had promised them that they would neither feel hungry nor tired, Sandhya felt exhausted. 'Connie must not have taken mental tiredness into account,' thought Sandhya, with a smile. She looked around to find Chandru in conversation with Cin Chin. After Cin Chin left, Chandru came up to her.

"The fuel is ready, Sandhya. We are going to test fly it. Would you like to come and watch?" he asked.

"Would I like to? Oh! I would not miss it for anything, Chandru. Do you not need Koya?" she asked.

"I do not know who is needed and who is not, Sandhya, but do inform him. He will know what to do," said Chandru.

Sandhya informed Koya about the readiness of the test fuel. He gave instructions to his team and the three of them left to join the rest of the committee.

The test flight

The committee had gathered around the safe. Connie was there and Sandhya wondered where she had been all the while. Mikia opened it and wheeled out the model. Everyone gathered around it. Sandhya looked at the tense faces. She saw Reesid and Reuben missing from the group. She wondered what could be more important for them so as not to be present for the test flight.
A cylinder was wheeled in by a group of Favians. Sonja was accompanied by another man whom Chandru and Sandhya had not seen before. They got busy fitting the cylinder to the model. Though Sandhya was curious to know who he was, she did not interrupt. They stood back. After a few minutes Mikia and Balee left the group and went to a numbered panel embedded on the wall. Balee punched in a code and a portion of the wall slid to one side, revealing an array of screens and monitors. She went to the largest screen and switched it on. All the screens blinked alive.

Sandhya and Chandru watched fascinated. 'This must be their version of computers,' thought Chandru. Sandhya was astonished at the sight of the screens. They had developed monitoring and navigating systems for the model spaceship, to be controlled remotely by its Favian crew on the ground. 'What a people!' she thought admiringly.

Koya now joined Mikia and Balee in front of the screens. They started speaking in their language and started punching in various codes and commands. 'Koya must have plotted a course for the model,' thought Sandhya. She wondered why he did not tell her about it when they worked. A small knot formed in her stomach as she continued to watch them.

Suddenly and noiselessly, they were drenched in harsh light. Sandhya and Chandru gasped automatically and looked up. The top of the dome was opening like the peels of an orange and the fierce light of Favia’s sun was pouring in through the opening. Chandru and Sandhya instantly closed their
eyes and groped their way to the shadows. They remembered Connie's warning from the previous day. Willing hands helped them to safety.

Sonja wheeled out the model directly beneath the opening. Lights switched on in the model and also on the underside of the dome beneath the opening. Sonja left the model standing alone and returned to the group. As Chandru and Sandhya watched fascinated, the model moved around a little, unaided and then it stood still. Some of the lights went out. Chandru guessed that it must have locked itself into position, guided by the panel on the underside of the dome. He looked up and saw that some of the lights on the panel had also gone out.

Sandhya edged up to Connie and asked, "What is that, Connie?" pointing to something that seemed to be painted on the spaceship.

"It is the name of the spaceship, Sandhya. Loosely translated, it means 'Goodbye, Favia'," said Connie.

Sandhya thought she detected a hint of sadness in Connie's voice. She was surprised. 'Did angels feel sad?' She got no answer to that and she turned back to watch the proceedings.

Everyone was silent except the voices of Mikia, Balee and Koya, talking in their language tersely, checking and rechecking a thousand procedures before the lift-off. Later, only Mikia's voice was heard in what sounded like a countdown. The model lifted off noiselessly. It hovered just at the edge of the opening for a few moments, and then it was gone. All eyes, except those of Chandru and Sandhya, turned to the screen in front of Koya.
Sandhya could not believe what she had seen. It was nothing like any lift-off she had seen on television on earth. She had been expecting to see a huge ball of fire as the fuel ignited and hear a thunderous roar as the spaceship took off. Instead, the saucer-shaped space vehicle seemed to be yanked off from above by an invisible string. She could not believe that the Favians had perfected such a technology within a few decades. She was shaken from her reverie as she felt someone touching her shoulder. She turned around to see the smiling face of Connie. She pointed to the screen in front of Koya and guided Chandru and Sandhya towards it. They stood looking at a blip on the screen that was steadily ascending. 'At least this looks familiar,' thought Sandhya. A horizontal line ran across the screen. The blip crossed the line and continued to ascend. A collective sigh escaped from the group.

"That was the final layer of our atmosphere. Our model is now safely in space," explained Balee to a perplexed Chandru and Sandhya.

"All we can do now is wait," said Sonja.

"Why?" asked Sandhya.

"It will take our model sometime to return, Sandhya. It has to go through several tests before it can come back to Favia. All that will take time," she explained further.

Sandhya looked around and her eyes fell on the man who had accompanied Sonja. Sonja noticed this and smiled. "Come, let me introduce you to the man who built the model and the spaceship," she said.

Chandru and Sandhya followed eagerly. They had
both wondered many times about the creator of the spaceship and now they were going to meet him in person. Sonja spoke something to the man bending over what appeared to be a blueprint of the spaceship. He looked up with a warm smile and came forward.

"Chandru, Sandhya, this is Imaldo," introduced Sonja. Chandru and Sandhya greeted him.

"I am so glad to meet you both," he said. "I am sorry I could not meet you earlier. I had been modifying the fuel tank of the spaceship," he paused.

"Do you think the fuel will do well?" asked Chandru, a little anxiously. He was worried about disappointing everyone.

"It is as much a test for your fuel as it is for our spaceship, Chandru," said Imaldo.

Chandru fell silent. He fervently hoped that both would pass the tests. He wanted them to succeed, for Favia’s sake and for himself.

"Where is Reesid? I do not see Reuben anywhere either," said Sandhya.

"They are busy, Sandhya," Connie answered.

They turned around to see Connie standing near them. They had not noticed her presence till then. 'Maybe angels have that quality,' thought Sandhya.

"They are preparing the Favians for their space voyage. All precautions as regarding the health of the Favians are being taken care of," Connie said.

Chandru had a different question to ask Connie. "Where have you been all this while?"

"Angels do not require to be always present, Chandru. We know when to appear and when not to," came the answer.
Meanwhile, Sandhya turned to Connie and said, "I am afraid I have failed you, Connie."
"Failed me? How?" asked Connie.
"I have not been able to find you three planets, only one," Sandhya replied, a little sadly.
"Oh! that is all right, Sandhya. You have not failed me or Favia. In fact, you have both done wonderfully well. More than we had expected. So, please stop worrying," she assured Sandhya. Though Sandhya cheered up a little by her words, she still felt as if a great weight was bearing upon her.
"You look exhausted, Sandhya. I promised you freshness only for your body, not your mind. Would you like to rest for sometime," asked Connie.
"Oh! would that be possible, Connie?" asked Sandhya, thankfully.
"Very much so," said Connie. "Let me take you to your room. You can rest there for a while."
Sandhya looked at Chandru as if to ask if he was coming. When he shook his head, she went alone with Connie to her cubicle. "You will wake me when the model returns, would you not?" she asked Connie.
"Of course! Do not worry about that," she replied and left her.
Sandhya lay on the bed, tossing and turning for a few moments and then drifted off into a deep sleep.

The revelation

When she awoke, it was already dark. She could feel the change in the air temperature. For a moment,
she felt disoriented. As things came into focus, she got up and left the cubicle. She went to the laboratory and looked in. A lone figure was sitting in front of the screens, watching them keenly. She stood in the doorway watching the figure and wondering where everybody was. The figure appeared to drop something and bent down to pick it up. The fluorescent glow of the screens reflected dully from the face. And the recognition came to her in a sudden flash. She walked noiselessly up to the figure and said, "It was you, was it not?" Her voice was soft, yet unaccusing.

The figure straightened at her voice but did not turn. She sat in the vacant seat next to him and looked into his face. It was Koya!

"Why?" she asked but got no answer. "So that you can leave Favia early?" she asked again.

Koya turned and looked into her eyes. "No, Sandhya, so that we could stay," he replied, softly.

Sandhya blinked. She did not understand. "I do not understand," she said, after a pause.

Koya sighed in answer. He turned away, looking at the screens. She could feel the struggle within him as he battled to come to a decision. He turned to face her. "I am sorry, Sandhya. I did not mean to hurt you. You came up quite unexpected. I could not let you see me. I was on my way to replace the formula. You came in my way, slipped and hit your head. I was worried and was checking on you when Chandru came. I had to get away I am sorry," he paused.

Sandhya nodded. She believed him.

Koya continued. "You see, there are some of us who believe it is not right to abandon Favia."
"Favia is going to explode! You know that," she said in an astonished voice.

"Yes, Sandhya. I know...Favia is our home," he said, softly. His voice was almost a whisper and yet she could feel the intensity of his feeling.

"She is our home, Sandhya. We were born and evolved here. She has given us everything. We cannot leave her and look for a new home. It is not that easy."

words poured out of Koya. He was talking to himself.

'Maybe I do not exist for him this moment,' she thought.

"It is not just me. There are many of us who feel this way. We do not want to leave Favia. We think we ought to stay here and that is why we are giving half of our food rations to those who want to leave," he paused. "We do not have much long to live anyway," he said, softly. The enormity of his words struck Sandhya like a blow. She staggered. Koya and many others with him had chosen to sink with their ship.

"You know something, Sandhya? You made me realize something last night. You made me realize it is not right for me to make a choice for others. I took the formula because I wanted to prevent anyone from leaving Favia. It was why I emptied your fuel sample too. I now realize my mistake. I would not accept a decision made for me by someone else. So how can I force my decision on others by not allowing them to leave? That is why I have done my best to identify a habitable planet and chart a course for those who want to leave. Do you think I did the right thing?"

"Yes, Koya, you certainly did," came a voice from behind them.
Koya turned around with shock. Reesid stood there behind him. He had thought he had been alone with Sandhya. "What are you doing here?" he asked Reesid in an angry voice.

"I came to find Sandhya. I looked in her room and she was not there. I thought that she might be here and so I came. I was right. You are right too, Koya," he answered, in a light voice.

An uneasy silence fell upon them. Sandhya did not know what to say. She felt caught up in something that she sensed to be a personal duel between the brothers.

"We have been over this many times, Reesid. You are not staying with me," Koya said, angrily.

"Do not make a decision for me, Koya. If you are staying, so am I," Reesid replied in an adamant voice.

"Do not be foolish, Reesid. You will die if you choose to stay here."

"I know. So will you. I am not leaving you to die while I fly away to live."

Sandhya watched them, admiration welling up inside her. She could not think of anything to say to either of them. She just watched them, fascinated to see who would prevail over the other.

"Try to make him understand, Sandhya. Please ask him to leave." Koya turned to her for support to strengthen his argument.

"I do not think it is right for me to say this, but I think Reesid should leave," said Sandhya.

Koya smiled. "I shall be more than happy if everybody would leave Favia and go and live in a safe place. It is an individual choice and I do not think
anybody should influence it. I still think Reesid should leave because he is a doctor. Your people will need you, Reesid, both on the journey and beyond," Sandhya finished softly.

Reesid buried his face in his hands. He knew the justice of her words and that he would have to go. Sandhya got up from her chair and went to Reesid. She touched him on the shoulder and extended her right hand. When he looked enquiringly at her, she took his right hand and shook it firmly. "This is what we earthlings do when we want to show our respect and admiration for someone," she explained in a soft voice filled with pride and warmth. She then went over to Koya and did the same with him.

Koya turned away silently. She saw a drop of tear glistening on his cheek. A few silent moments passed. Reesid sat in a chair next to Sandhya and watched the screens with a blank stare. He was immersed in agonizing thoughts.

Koya watched the screens and Sandhya watched Koya. He turned to her and asked, "Will you do me a favour, Sandhya?"

"Anything," she said.

"Will you give me..." he paused, looking for the appropriate expression and then said haltingly, "...it is 'word of honour' I think," and continued when she nodded, "will you give me your word of honour that this remains a secret between us?"

"Yes, I do," she promised.

"Thank you," he said, looking deeply into her eyes and turned to his screen. He took something from his pocket and handed it to Sandhya. She recognized
the paper. It was the formula. She pocketed it silently and went back to watching the screen which had been empty except for the horizontal line running across it.

Suddenly, Koya stiffened and Sandhya asked softly, "What is it?"

Koya pointed to a very faint blip on the screen. Reesid walked over and stood watching the screen over Koya's shoulder. The blip was getting brighter and descending. "She is descending," said Koya.

Sandhya stood close to him, watching it. "What about re-entry?" she asked.

"Just watch," he said and pointed to the blip. It was fast approaching the horizontal line that marked the first layer of Favia's atmosphere. Koya then promptly touched a few buttons and some more horizontal lines appeared on the screen at irregular intervals. Sandhya discerned them to represent the various other layers of the atmosphere. The blip touched the first line and seemed to stop. Then it began to move, floating diagonally from side to side, much like a leaf floating down to earth on a still day. She understood the manoeuvre. It would require less energy and it would ensure that friction was kept to a minimum. The saucer shape of the ship would see to it that the heat was reduced to the barest minimum.

The blip continued to float through the various lines until there was only a single line left to cross. Koya activated the mechanism which opened the dome and was ready to receive the returning model. The various lights blinked on and a yellow light glowed persistently on the panel in front of Koya. He watched the various screens and made some final
adjustments. The yellow light turned to orange when Koya told Sandhya to go and wait near the receiving pad that had been laid out under the opening. Sandhya obeyed instantly. She stood looking up at the sky through the opening, straining to catch a glimpse of the floating model. She felt Koya's presence near her.

A shadow seemed to fall into the opening. Sandhya perceived that it must be the model. It floated straight down to the receiving pad and locked on to it guided by the beacons on the underside of the dome. She became aware of the presence of the others in the dome. She realized that Koya must have informed them.

Everybody stood looking at the dark shape in silence. It lasted only for a moment. Then everybody, except Chandru and Sandhya, lunged towards the spaceship. A babble of excited voices broke out as Mikia started directing the process of the returning spaceship, analysing the data from it and examining it for any damages or faults.

Chandru and Sandhya moved away from the group. Sandhya looked around for Connie, she was nowhere to be seen.

"Where have you been, Chandru?" asked Sandhya.

"I was just talking with the committee, Sandhya. They have had quite a history. It was absolutely wonderful. What have you been doing? I thought you were fast asleep," he asked her.

"I was, Chandru. I woke up and came looking for you. I thought you might be here. I just got in time to see the return of the model," said Sandhya. "Oh! I found this on the floor," she said, trying to sound casual and gave him a paper.
Chandru took it excitedly and opened it. It was the formula. He checked, there were no corrections or alterations. This confused him. He did not understand why someone would take his formula and discard it later. He turned to Sandhya. "Are you sure you found it on the floor, Sandhya?" he asked her.

Sandhya watched him through the corner of her eye while he examined the contents of the paper. "Would I lie to you, Chandru?" she asked.

"It is not that, Sandhya. Why would someone take the paper if he or she did not want the formula?" he asked, still perplexed.

"I could give you a thousand answers for that, Chandru. How do you know they did not want the formula? Maybe they took it for the formula but did not know how to proceed with it. Or, maybe they lost it before they could study the formula. I could not have found it if I had not literally stepped on it." Sandhya felt amazed at how convincing she sounded. She watched Chandru to see if he accepted her explanation. He did not appear satisfied. However, Sandhya decided to drop the matter. She was afraid to give too much importance to the incident. "Anyway, the formula is safe, Chandru. It did not fall into the wrong hands. So let us leave it at that," she said. 'It fell into the right hands,' she felt tempted to add.

The return to earth

Sandhya and Chandru watched the team work with a growing feeling of being cut off from the team. They
began to feel that their work was over and that their help would not be needed anymore.

The initial noise level from the activity around them died down and everybody fell into their chairs, exhausted. A quiet smile of satisfaction spread across Mikia's face. He had to tell their guardian angel the good news. He called to her in his thoughts and she was there in an instant, as radiant as ever. They spoke in tired yet excited and satisfied tones.

When they finished, Connie came over to where Chandru and Sandhya were seated. "I have a very good news. The test flight is a phenomenal success. Your fuel and our ship stood up to everything we put them through. They have come out with flying colours."

"Does it mean..." Chandru could not finish.

"Yes, it does," Connie answered his half-spoken question.

They were silent for a moment. "When do we start the big preparation?" asked Chandru. Sandhya had fallen silent and it appeared she was going to remain that way for quite some time.

"You do not, Chandru," said Connie.

"What? Why?" stammered Chandru.

"You are going back," she said, gently. Chandru was stunned. He saw the committee watching him. When he found his voice, all he could say was, "Is it not...kind of...sudden?"

"I am sorry, Chandru. It is sudden. I cannot let you stay here any longer. It is not safe anymore. The data from our model shows that the third planet will be gone in a few hours. It is my duty to see that no harm
comes to you both. So, I request, it is time for you to return."

Connie's words sunk in slowly. He understood that she was right. They had done their job and there was nothing more they could do to help. They would only be coming in the way, he realized. He looked at Sandhya to know her reaction.

"Let us go home, Chandru," she said. She looked really tired.

Chandru nodded. He turned to Connie, "Okay, Connie, we are ready to leave," he said and heaved his rucksack over his shoulders. Sandhya did the same.

"Before you go, I have a final favour to ask you," said Connie. Chandru was puzzled. He did not think they had anything else to offer her. "I want to ask you not to give the formula for this fuel to your father nor to anyone else. What I am asking you, in essence, is for you to forget that you ever made this fuel. Please, do not ask me why," she added.

Chandru thought for a moment and nodded.

"Thank you," said Connie. "I would like to return the favour, Chandru. Open this when you reach home," she said and nodded to Imaldo. He came up to Chandru and handed him a roll of thick paper. Chandru took it enquiringly. He wanted to open it immediately. Instead, he placed it carefully in his rucksack. 'I shall have enough time for it later,' he thought with a smile.

Connie turned and addressed her committee. They all came towards Sandhya and Chandru. Mikia shook hands with both of them and said, "I believe this is your form of greeting and saying goodbye. I wish
we had met under more pleasant circumstances. I am extremely grateful to you both. We could not have accomplished it without you. Thank you! I say so for all our people."

Chandru and Sandhya could say nothing in reply. They felt mute in front of such effusive praise. They smiled and shook hands with others. Everybody thanked them. When it was Reesid's turn, he told Sandhya to be careful and to look after herself. He held her hand longer than the others and his thank you had a special warmth for her. Sandhya smiled, looking into his eyes.

Koya was the last in line and he stood watching her with Reesid, having bid goodbye to Chandru. He extended his hand, but Sandhya brushed it aside and threw her arms around him in a warm hug. She then left him, standing and grinning. She looked at him and smiled. 'The smile suits him after all,' she thought and turned to Connie.

"Let us go, Connie. Could you make our trip back very fast?" she asked. She wanted to get out of Favia quickly. She knew that if she stayed any longer, she would cry.

Connie nodded. "Just hold my hand and close your eyes," she said.

They obeyed, taking a final look at their friends. 'They were that, were they not?' was their last thought when everything went black.
Epilogue

Sandhya and Chandru got back home. They had been gone only for three earth days and had smoothly replaced their virtual images. The image of Connie had vanished and Sandhya explained to her parents that Connie had run away. Chandru told his parents that he was going to convert his chemical laboratory into an automobile engineering workshop. They had opened the roll of paper to find a blueprint of what appeared to be an engine that would run on vegetable oil! He offered no explanation to his father.

When they went to the pet shop to thank Mr. Benjie for a wonderful adventure, they were told by a thin, morose looking young man that no one by that name or description had ever worked there. They would never know who Mr. Benjie was, though they had a slight suspicion that he belonged to the same species as Connie.

When the school reopened after the summer vacation, Chandru and Sandhya went together. Neither of them referred to their adventure to anybody. Yet they half expected to receive a postcard informing them of something. Anything. They passed their days in a state of suspended animation.

One fine winter morning, six months after they had got home, Sandhya woke up to see the words 'We Are Home' written in the dew on the glass of her window. She smiled and wondered if Chandru had got a similar message. He had!
Sandhya's passion for mysteries of the universe matches Chandru's passion for science and research. The deadly combination finds the two friends in the grip of an extraterrestrial adventure. A guest from outer space holds some clues. The Cat Spirit urges them to discover and explore...