

A Wizard, A Sword And A King

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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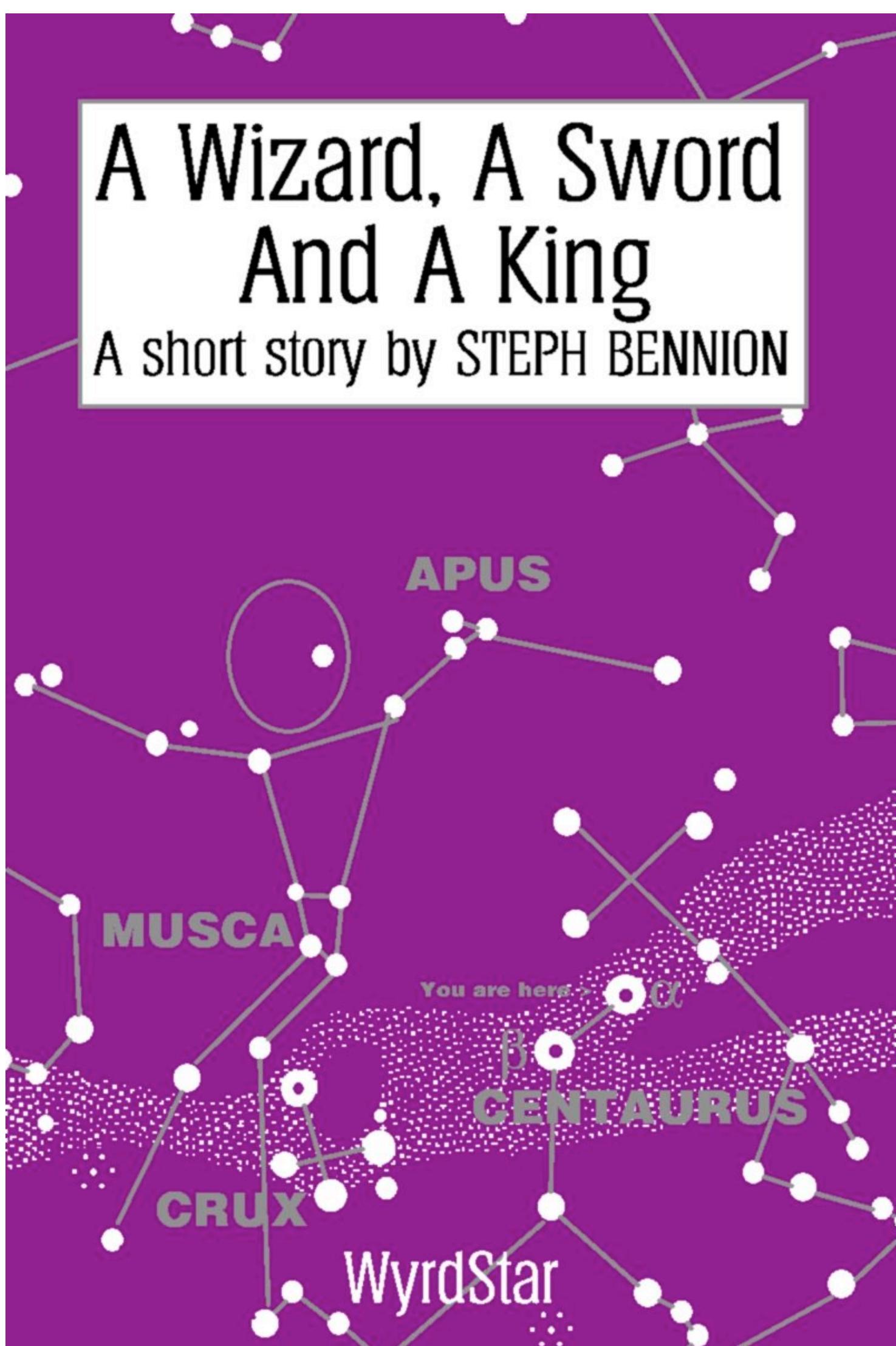
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A Wizard, A Sword And A King

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

A short story by
Steph Bennion

WYRDSTAR BOOKS

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WyrdStar publishing history

First published December 2013

Revised December 2016 (endpaper updates)

Set in 12/14pt Baskerville by WyrdStar Books.

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A WIZARD, A SWORD AND A KING

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

What was Artorius' story before he met Ravana O'Brien in PAW-PRINTS OF THE GODS? The young orphan finds himself spending Christmas in Londinium on the moon of Avalon, Alpha Centauri, where a new series of the holoivid show 'Gods Of Avalon' is about to start. As the medieval tournament gets under way, Artorius finds that the alien-worshipping nuns encamped in the fake Temple of Mithras are taking more notice of him than usual...

ARTORIUS STARED at the snow-capped statue at the entrance to Camelot spaceport, pulled his woollen cap tight over his blond locks and frowned. The monument portrayed a huge bearded man in a spacesuit, one outstretched hand branding a telescope like a staff of office, the other holding a helmet under an arm. This was Silenus Smith, the first human ever to set foot on a world in another star system. The weathered concrete edifice had long fascinated the eight-year-old, though the boy was sure that last time he was here the statue had not been wearing a ragged white tunic emblazoned with the words: 'THERE IS NO GOD BUT THE GREYS'. He was not even sure what that meant.

Dusk had fallen upon a bitterly-cold day. It was Christmas Eve, not that this meant much to him. Nor was the time of year an excuse for wintry weather. Camelot spaceport and the nearby holoivid set of Londinium were near the equator on Avalon, a moon of the gas giant Thule, which in turn orbited the twin suns of Alpha Centauri A and B on the outer edge of what scientists called the habitable zone. Yet the climate of the small world veered from one extreme to the next, for the machines that maintained a biosphere fit for humans were in the hands of people who had scant regard for those caught in the slipstream of their games.

A huge pyramid-shaped terraformer rose from the woodland beyond the spaceport, belching a plume of snow-bearing clouds into the air. Artorius shivered and pulled his coat tighter. He had come to watch the

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spaceplanes roaring in and out of the terminal, but the sudden influx of snow took him by surprise and he had got no further than the statue. He was still close enough to see the crowd outside the spaceport ahead, but a mobile *Gods of Avalon* broadcast transport blocked his view and it was difficult to see what was going on.

As he watched the distant commotion, a sudden movement from the nearby trees caught his attention. His eyes widened as a large brown bear ambled into the open and paused to sniff the air. The surrounding countryside was thick forest all the way to the distant rugged Black Mountains and alive with birds and beasts both real and robotic. Flora and fauna introduced from Earth had taken to the far-flung moon particularly well, but that had not stopped the Avalon Broadcasting Corporation from introducing a bizarre menagerie of cybernetic creatures to the mix. Contestants arriving on the moon for the holo-vid game show found themselves facing a huge variety of legendary beasts, from cave-dwelling stainless-steel serpents to fiery mechanical dragons, all controlled by the votes of a blood-thirsty audience back home.

Artorius saw the tell-tale blue glow in the bear's eyes and relaxed, for it meant this particular automaton was not in combat mode. The implant lodged in the boy's brain briefly flashed a green symbol in his mind's eye to let him know that the local network had the bear under control. Artorius waved a mitten-clad hand and beckoned to the newcomer.

“What's going on?” he asked, as the bear approached.

The creature paused a few paces away, then with a metallic creak reared up on its hind legs and turned its head towards the nearby terminal building. The sprawling neo-medieval architecture of Camelot spaceport, with its concrete crenulations, battlements and towers, looked faintly ridiculous alongside the sleek twenty-third century spaceplanes docked to passenger transfer tubes. After a few moments careful consideration, the bulky mechanoid dropped back onto all fours and regarded Artorius solemnly.

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“Legend tells of a gathering,” the bear intoned. Its creators had deemed it appropriate to give it a refined Shakespearean lilt, recorded by an English actor long dead. “Travellers from afar, summoned to Albion’s capital to choose a new king.”

Artorius considered the bear’s words. A chatty wardrobe assistant once told him that his own name was the Latin version of Arthur, the legendary King of the Britons. His dreams of glory had been quickly dashed upon her reminder that in *Gods of Avalon*, only the victorious contestant was allowed to kneel before cyberclone King Arthur and be anointed king or queen. The latest arrivals had ten months of games to survive before that.

“It’s Christmas,” the boy said irritably. “The new people never bring presents.”

“Legend tells of a gathering,” the bear replied promptly. “Travellers...”

“Stop!” Artorius interrupted, annoyed. “You’ve done that bit, stupid!”

The bear did not reply. Not all of Avalon’s mechanical beasts could talk; those that did often had a limited repertoire. Artorius frowned again and looked up at the nearby statue. Silenus Smith and his crew’s forty-year mission had been sponsored by a broadcast company and Silenus had won his legacy through the votes of the audience back on Earth. When the American government lost interest in Alpha Centauri, Avalon was left in the hands of the holoivid corporation. Silenus’ starship, the abandoned *Edward Everett Hale*, was reborn as a base for unfettered adventures in interstellar broadcasting; eighty years later, Avalon and its sister moon of Asgard remained the only worlds in the five systems free of government control. It was a destiny that had brought mixed fortunes to Thule’s moons.

“I should be king,” Artorius decided resolutely. The crowd outside the spaceport was starting to filter down the road towards them. “I’d get my own spaceship and go wherever I wanted and people would have to buy me things for Christmas.”

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“A king will be chosen,” the bear replied. “The Gods of Avalon shall speak.”

Artorius glanced back to the tunic upon the statue. “There are no gods but the greys,” he said. With a sniff, he wiped snot from his nose. “Aliens will make me king!”

* * *

Ex-special-agent Vali Malone, battle-scarred and terminally irritable, watched the latest batch of *Gods of Avalon* contestants disembark from the shuttle and scowled. His foul mood was not helped by his problematic relationship with alcohol, the main one being the lack of a good drinking establishment at the spaceport.

“Fools!” he muttered, to no one in particular. His coarse Irish brogue made the word sound like a curse. “Slaves to holovid, every one them.”

Vali knew all the shows on Avalon and hated every one of them. In his opinion, *Gods of Avalon*, with its macabre challenges and mythical mechanical beasts, was undoubtedly the most grotesque. The show thrived on a special breed of fame-hungry, egotistical third-rate celebrities, who took part in a series of Arthurian-themed quests in a land where the brutal viewing public controlled their journey, their foes, their friends and even the terraformed climate of Avalon itself. Contestants had eyes not on the pitiful prize money, but on the hope that a good run in the show would be noticed by those who decided the contracts for other productions. The fact that an appearance on *Gods of Avalon* effectively signalled the end of most people’s careers did not dissuade applicants in the slightest.

He switched his attention to the mind’s-eye display of his cranium implant and with a deft mental prod toggled the remote control software he had customised for the occasion. Now his eyes saw two different scenes, one superimposed over the other. He concentrated upon the swooping view of the spaceport canteen and guided his winged avatar onwards through the

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arrivals lounge, over the heads of bemused contestants and across to where he himself waited in a quiet corner of the entrance lobby. Vali relaxed his gaze just in time to see the electric eagle flutter from above and crash heavily into a nearby vending machine. The bag the bird carried dropped from its claws and slid across the floor to his feet.

Vali took one last look at himself through the eyes of the cybernetic bird, grimaced and disconnected the link. He found it disconcerting to see himself through strange eyes; even more so at the moment, for his pale face and coarse stubble made him look like a wild man of the woods. The robot camel he stole from the set of *Pyramids* succumbed to the cold a couple of days from Camelot, forcing him to finish his journey on foot. The wintry weather brought forth by the terraformers around Londinium was unexpected. Until a few days ago, the audience vote had been trending in favour of burying the Christmas episode beneath a plague of locusts followed by a monsoon.

The eagle gave an angry squawk and with a flap of plastic feathers took to the air and left. Vali reached for the dropped bag, which the bird had snatched from the spaceport's food outlet in a clumsy aerial attack that had scared some poor woman half to death. He was a little disappointed to find that the stolen meal was a vegetarian option.

For all its craziness, Avalon was Vali's home. He had come to the moon to escape his past, or rather certain former acquaintances who resented the fact he still breathed. Vali liked the delicious irony of lying low amidst a myriad of constantly-running holoivid shows, but his choice of refuge was not as stupid as it sounded. There were certain atrocities no one would ever risk showing up on camera. Besides, the synthetic additions to the moon's biosphere gave him an edge. Embedded in his brain was a legacy of his days as a Que Qiao agent, a special-forces cranium implant capable of interfacing with all manner of electric devices. The singular abilities that made him a security risk when he decided to abandon his post had proved a great asset in the artificial holoivid domains of Avalon.

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Vali had seen enough. Leaving Camelot spaceport, he slipped unnoticed through the crowds and followed the procession towards the stage for tomorrow's start-of-the-season special, wolfing down the stolen veggie burger and fries as he went.

Ahead lay the walled city of Londinium. A blanket of snow shrouded a crumbling confusion of fake medieval buildings that were authentically grey, grim, rather smelly and quite a shock to the system to anyone fresh off an air-conditioned shuttle. It was a town that never slept; apart from the contestants, their entourage and camera crews, the place was heaving with actors, backstage workers, ambulance teams and all manner of animal and human cyberclones, not to mention the occasional gatecrasher who thought nothing of making an illegal landing just to get their face on holovid. The Avalon Broadcasting Company secretly welcomed these so-called 'crazies'. Although unpredictable, they usually harmed no one but themselves or the contestants and often produced the best screen moments.

Vali Malone, self-proclaimed king of the crazies, was back in town and determined to put on a good show. He was here for a reason. He wanted revenge.

* * *

Dusk fell upon Londinium. One by one, imitation torches sprang into life on each street corner, the cold electric glow of their holographic flames corralling the lengthening shadows upon the snow-bound roads. The flurry of activity continued as backstage workers hurried to complete the finishing touches for tomorrow's show. Mobile camera crews were down by the riverside taverns, hoping to catch the heated bickering that inevitably erupted when the more arrogant contestants got carried away by their own self-importance. Those recently arrived from Earth would not yet be used to the lower gravity on Avalon and viewers found the resulting clumsy street fights hilarious to watch.

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Within the city walls at Cheapside stood the mock ruins of the Temple of Mithras, derided by archaeologists and historians alike as being nothing like a genuine Roman basilica. Several months ago, a delegation from the alien-worshipping Dhusarian Church of Yuanshi arrived unannounced in Londinium, moved into the building and much to the annoyance of everyone dedicated it to their beloved alien greys. Broadcast crews had several times removed religious posters and graffiti from the temple walls both inside and out, before finally coming to an arrangement with the stubborn occupiers that as long as the worshippers kept their activities to themselves they would make sure it was only cameras that did the shooting.

Two Indian women, clad in hooded grey habits and heavy cloaks, stood at the entrance, the more portly of the two transfixed by something concealed in her cupped palms. With a sudden movement, she raised it to her mouth and bit hard, then lowered her hands again to reveal a trickle of crimson upon her chin. Her thinner companion looked at the bloody headless remains of the rat in her colleague's grip and shuddered in disgust.

"I'm sure you play the hideous lunatic on purpose," she complained. "Who did you work for back in Lanka, my dear Jizo? Doctor Frankenstein?"

"You know whom I serve," Jizo replied tartly. "Are you not eating, Sister Lilith? It's Christmas! A celebration of the greys and the starship that led the wise men! That's worth a tasty rat head, surely. They're lovely and crunchy with a yummy soft centre."

Lilith winced. "We have a job to do, remember. The boy?"

"That rude little street urchin called me fat!"

"That doesn't make him rude. Just observant."

"Orphaned child of Sol," Jizo solemnly intoned. "King by the great game."

"He doesn't trust us," Lilith told her. "He has to come to us willingly."

"Oh, he will," said Jizo. With a sly smile, she lifted the rat carcass to her mouth and salaciously licked the blood oozing from the creature's

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severed neck. “We just need to present poor little Artorius with something too tempting to refuse.”

* * *

“There we have it; all forty-eight of the contestants have left Camelot spaceport and arrived in Londinium for their first night in a world where you, faithful viewers, call the shots,” the presenter declared. “Through your votes, the Gods of Avalon are you.”

“And if you’re anything like previous audiences, all forty-eight are in for a hell of a rough ride,” opined his colleague. “Here on Avalon, God is not love.”

* * *

Christmas Day dawned on Avalon. Artorius yawned, opened his eyes and after a moment’s hesitation extracted himself from the blanket-strewn sofa. The cramped room was decorated with bits of tinsel, brightly-coloured paper streamers and a tiny artificial tree in an attempt to make it look festive. The cabin’s owners, a kindly electrician and her carpenter boyfriend, were already at work down at the tournament ground. Even Londinium’s resident harem of cats were out and about, doing their best to keep the rodent population in check.

The people who had given him a bed for the night lived in one of a small cluster of habitation modules reserved for maintenance crews, tucked behind a reconstruction of a Roman bathhouse. Artorius pulled on his clothes, made himself breakfast and then wandered out into the bright wintry morning. Despite all that was going on around him, he was bored. *Gods of Avalon* was just one of no less than forty-three shows currently playing on the moon and over the years he had seen them all. He thought about the viewers, far away on other worlds, opening their Christmas presents ahead of a hearty meal and a snooze in front of the holoivid screen.

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Here, it was just another lonely day with nothing to do but get in the way. Everyone was too busy to pay him any attention.

Lost in thought, his gaze was drawn to the half-shadowed mighty planet of Thule, hanging almost directly overhead. He had long dreamed of travelling the five systems and walking upon different worlds. The dawning suns of Alpha Centauri A and B were low in the west, bathing the small world and the slim crescent of Asgard in a warm yellow glow. For reasons astrophysicists had not yet satisfactorily explained, Avalon was not tidally-locked to its gas giant parent but instead performed a single backwards rotation once every orbit. This meant that although it took the moon just over two Terran days to circle Thule, Londinium saw its twin blazing stars rise and fall every twenty-six hours.

Gods of Avalon itself was based on the Arthurian myths and legends of the British Isles. The producers had shunned a historically-correct Dark Ages setting and instead opted for what the audience expected: knights in shining armour, damsels in distress, jousting competitions, adventures to slay dragons and quests to locate mysterious grails, all of which offered plenty of opportunity for the audience to twist the story whichever way they desired. Every Christmas, the new season started with a grand tournament on the bank of the Thames river, where contestants would learn how to wield swords, maim with lances and fall off horses before being released into an artificial world of carefully-controlled violence. This twenty-third century version of a medieval gladiatorial arena had earned itself a place in many people's misplaced affection and made *Gods of Avalon* the longest-running holovid show in broadcasting history.

The one character Artorius had not yet seen was Merlin. The boy liked to watch the bumbling cyberclone wizard and with nothing better to do, he decided to seek him out. Reaching Cheapside, he scuttled through the crowds outside the Temple of Mithras. He could not see Lilith or Jizo, but somehow felt their eyes following him as he crossed the road. Jizo was usually good for a bizarre tale or two but today Artorius was not in the

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mood. He had tried to understand what they told him about the alien greys but believing in something he had never seen was confusing.

A narrow side street brought him to the busy riverside thoroughfare of Watling Street. Merlin's two-storey house was on the corner, opposite the noisy Olde Dowgate Tavern. The wizard himself was visible through the open doors of his workshop, pacing restlessly before a couple of armour-clad knights who were shouting and gesticulating angrily. An electric pig watched from the gutter with holovid camera eyes.

By the time Artorius arrived, the knights had finished their rants and left for the tavern. Stepping into the workshop, the boy shyly approached the wizard and regarded him carefully. Artorius saw straight away it was not the usual cyberclone dressed in Merlin's familiar fake beard, star-spangled cloak and pointy hat, but a man. As he stared, another figure approached from the direction of the Roman citadel, this time a scrawny dark-haired woman wearing overalls and a scuffed leather apron. Artorius smiled upon recognising the newcomer as Rhiannon, the town's feisty blacksmith, who was always ready to ply him with treats from her kitchen. The wizard did not seem pleased to see either of them.

"More visitors!" he complained gruffly. "Can't I get any peace?"

"You and I have unfinished business," the woman retorted. She caught the boy's puzzled gaze and flashed him a quick smile. "Hi, Artorius. Here to watch the show?"

Artorius nodded, then frowned. "You're not Merlin," he told the wizard.

The man glowered. "What's it to you?"

"No, he's not," confirmed Rhiannon. "He's a cheating, conniving, son of a bitch running some dodgy plot I want a piece of. What are you up to, Vali? The backstage betting circle isn't usually your scene. What's your game?"

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“Let’s just say I have an associated interest,” the man said carefully. “Where’s my magic swords? I’ve got orders for six already and punters are getting irate.”

The more clued-up contestants always sought out Merlin, hoping for something with which to give them an unfair advantage. Artorius wondered if this man Vali had taken the wizard’s place to make some money selling non-standard weapons, stamina potions and the like. Gossip was rife amongst crews that this sort of thing happened all the time.

He saw a flicker of movement above the workbench and spied Merlin’s pet owl, another of Londinium’s artificial creatures. The feathered robot was an audio interface for the artificial intelligence unit that controlled the workshop’s machinery. The bird shuffled upon its perch and looked down at the fake wizard.

“Magic swords!” it shrieked. The owl’s synthesized squawk sounded like a saxophone being put through a crusher during a complicated jazz solo.

“Go back to sleep!” Vali retorted irritably.

“As you command, mighty wizard!”

Vali glared at the feathered robot. Rhiannon stepped closer and stood defiantly before him, hands on hips.

“Is this about Kourete?” she asked him. “I see he’s one of the sacrificial offerings this year. Is that why you’re here, for revenge?”

“No comment,” Vali said darkly. “But *Gods of Avalon* is a dangerous game. Accidents happen. It’s mere coincidence that I have a large sum of credits and a bottle of whisky riding on whether Sir Hector will meet his end in the dragon-baiting contest.”

Artorius scratched his head. “Who’s Kourete?”

“Ex-Governor of Yuanshi, Epsilon Eridani,” Rhiannon told him. “I hear Jaggarneth’s head honcho there now. Warmongers, both of them.”

“Kourete was the one who ordered that massacre,” Vali said bitterly. “I couldn’t serve as an agent after that. Him and his Que Qiao pen-pushers

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in Ayodhya got away with the mass murder of civilians! You may call it revenge. I call it justice.”

“Revenge!” screeched the owl.

“Shut up!” Vali and Rhiannon shouted together.

“And now he’s playing Sir Hector?” asked Artorius. He thought it was odd to allow murderers onto *Gods of Avalon*, though the programme itself had featured a fair few deaths over the years. “I thought Sir Hector was one of the good knights.”

“It’ll be goodnight for Kourete when I catch up with him,” muttered the wizard.

“So what’s your plan?” Rhiannon asked. Her posture had relaxed somewhat. “What has it got to do with selling magic swords? You know they’re just bog-standard blades with runes and other mystical rubbish carved onto them.”

“I have Merlin’s sword,” Vali confided. “It’s the same as those carried by cyberclone knights, with gyroscopic guidance controls. If I can get it into Kourete’s hand, he’ll be at my mercy. The problem is he brought along five of his fellow contestants, who all want fancy blades and if I single out Sir Hector for special treatment it’ll look suspicious. There! I’ve confessed. Are you shocked? Ready to call security?”

The woman shrugged. “I heard nothing.”

Vali gave Artorius a hard stare.

“Neither did I,” the boy said meekly.

“So let’s talk swords,” said Rhiannon. “It’ll cost you. On the other hand, you have six annoyed customers who may decide that today’s challenge is to come up with new and painful ways to torture double-crossing wizards. What do you say?”

“Five credits apiece,” said Vali. “Cash on delivery.”

“Credits are no use on set! Ten food tokens each, in advance.”

“No credit allowed!” squawked the owl.

“Eights tokens,” Vali said firmly. “Plus one dented electric owl.”

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The blacksmith smiled. “Deal. You can keep the bird, though.”

“Are you sure? I was looking forward to using it for hammer practice.”

Artorius grinned. “Merlin’s owl is stupid,” he declared. “Can it fly?”

“It depends how hard you kick it,” replied Vali. “Are we done here?”

Rhiannon held out her hand. “Payment in advance.”

Vali muttered something under his breath, fumbled beneath his wizard’s robes and handed the blacksmith a pile of wrinkled plastic coupons retrieved from a concealed pocket. Satisfied, she shoved the tokens into the pouch of her apron, turned upon her heels and strode away with a cheery wave. Artorius went to follow, then on a whim decided to hang around a little longer to see what the fraudulent wizard would do next. The mind’s-eye time display of his implant told him he had another couple of hours to kill before the tournament started, which was the only excitement he had to look forward to on an otherwise dull Christmas Day.

“Still here, kid?” asked Vali, breaking Artorius’ train of thought.

Artorius shrugged and gave the wizard a half-hearted nod. A chill wind stole down the street and it was all he could do to keep his teeth from chattering. Vali gently pulled the boy away from the doorway, swung the double doors closed and then made his way to the workshop’s open hearth to toss a few more sticks onto the fire. Pulling Merlin’s robe closer about him, he turned and gave his young guest a thoughtful look.

“She called you Artorius,” the fake wizard said slowly. “Are you that Artorius? The boy who lost his parents to the T. rex?”

Artorius met his gaze with a sorrowful look and nodded again.

“Poor kid,” said Vali. “How old are you?”

“I’m eight,” the boy replied sullenly. “That’s in Earth years,” he added.

Everyone on Avalon seemed to know the story. Artorius had been barely five when a cybernetic dinosaur had malfunctioned and rampaged through the ground crew’s village on the set of *Quest for Fire*, a celebrity game show with a prehistoric theme. The incident that left him an orphan

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had never been explained. The technology was supposedly fool-proof and had been used for years to create the dragons that graced the sky in *Gods of Avalon* itself.

Vali gave a sympathetic smile. Artorius watched silently as the man went to Merlin's spell book, laid open upon a nearby table, which he knew hid a touch-screen monitor linked to Avalon's data network. The facial hairpiece stolen from cyberclone Merlin made Vali look like an old man, but the man moved with a young soldier's stealth.

"Require assistance?" asked the owl, opening an eye.

Vali glared at the automaton. "Shut your beak, feather-brain."

The workshop was equipped with a range of molecular assemblers, metaplastic forges and three-dimensional alloy printers, all of which could be operated remotely as if by magic. Artorius saw Vali's gaze move to an object standing on the floor at the end of the workbench. It was a large iron anvil, in the top of which was embedded a rusty sword, the hilt pointing at an angle towards the ceiling. The image seemed stupefying familiar to Artorius, but he could not remember where he had seen it before.

"Know anything about magic?" asked Vali.

Artorius realised the man was addressing him and shook his head.

"How about molecular assemblers?" Vali waved a hand towards the anvil and sighed. "The instructions for the damn thing must have passed through half a dozen languages before arriving at English and I can't make head nor tail of it. My previous attempt at guesswork had a rather unfortunate outcome, as you can see."

He strode over to the anvil, grabbed the hilt of the sword and pulled with all his might. It was enough to make the anvil wobble upon the floor, but the blade did not budge.

"How did that happen?" asked Artorius, wide-eyed. He sidled up to the anvil, took hold of the embedded sword and pulled. It was stuck fast in the iron block.

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“The sword err... fell in the river,” said Vali. “I was trying to clean it up using the assembler, dropped it and somehow the blade got stuck in the resonator pad. Why they thought of building a molecular resonator shaped like an anvil is beyond me.”

“People like to watch Merlin make magic weapons,” said Artorius.

He wondered how Vali had seized the weapon and costume from the cyberclone wizard. The part-mechanical, part-biological humanoid machines were notoriously strong. The jammed sword was a sorry-looking affair, for whatever it was that flowed in the murky Thames had badly corroded the blade. Vali scowled, slammed the spell book shut across the screen and grabbed the sword again, but as before it did not budge.

“Damnation!” he growled, releasing his grip. “I blame you, owl! They don’t make assemblers like they used to.”

“Molecular assembler software is latest download,” squawked the owl. “Version twenty-eight point nine point six.”

“Be careful I don’t decide to reassemble that smug beak of yours.”

“Revenge!” hooted the owl.

“Do you want me to pull the sword while you test it?” asked Artorius.

“What? No, that’s okay,” said Vali. He collapsed onto a nearby seat, overcome not so much by exertion than by fate having conspired against him yet again. After a moment, he turned to Artorius with a most odd expression upon his face.

“A test,” Vali remarked. “Now there’s an idea.”

* * *

“And so the game begins!” announced the presenter. “The players are taking their places as we speak. There’s quite a range of talent this year; faces old and new. I foresee a fair few surprises on the tournament ground today.”

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“Yes indeed,” his colleague drawled. “Some already sporting injuries, I see. We’ve not had a bear invade their lodgings on a first night for many a season. Legend tells of a gathering but this is no teddy-bear picnic in the park!”

* * *

The grand tournament gave the contestants their first taste of combat and the chance to judge just who or what they would be up against during the games. They had four weeks to make their mark ahead of the audience vote to place them under either King Arthur or his nemesis Mordred; and a whole ten months before the series finale on Badon Hill. Some thought the season was too long, not least the maintenance crews, who complained that the brief respite between runs was simply not long enough to repair the damage done before it all started again.

Back in town, a party of knights slowly trudged their way through deep snow drifts towards their lodgings for lunch, worn out by a morning of jousting and swordplay. Many bore livid bruises and fresh blood-spotted bandages, but they were the lucky ones. Two contestants had been carried out on stretchers.

A camera crew was outside the Temple of Mithras, eager to catch the unscripted action taking place in the snow-covered courtyard. A crowd of contestants, actors and cyberclones had gathered before Vali in his stolen star-patterned robes and pointed hat. The wizard lingered next to a large stone, on top of which stood an anvil pierced by a rapidly-rusting sword. A sign fastened to the anvil dramatically proclaimed: ‘WHOSO PULLETH OUT THIS SWORD OF THIS STONE AND ANVIL, IS RIGHTWISE KING BORN OF ALL ENGLAND’. Vali thought it was stupid turn of phrase, but trusted the owl’s assertion that it was historically correct.

As expected, the contestants took his charade to be a surprise part of the game and within minutes there was a queue of fresh-faced trainee warriors all wanting to try their luck. Vali was pleased to see that amongst

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them was ex-Governor Kourete, a corpulent pasty-faced man who made a smarmy Sir Hector.

One burly knight, a fading star of zero-gee baseball hoping to resurrect his career, heaved at the sword's hilt with bulging biceps until he was red in the face, but the sword remained as immobile as ever. Wearing a scowl, he stepped away from the stone and turned to where Vali stood observing the proceedings with a sly smile on his face.

“What’s your game, wizard?” demanded the knight.

“Where’s the magic sword you promised me?” snapped the woman behind him.

Vali winced at the anger in her voice but quickly recovered.

“Fate has prescribed this test!” he declared. The wavering whimsical tone he adopted was just like the one cyberclone Merlin had used before he pushed it in the river. “When I set about creating such sorcerous artefacts for yonder noblemen, it came to me that there should be but one true blade; and that for the king’s champion himself!”

“You took my money,” retorted another contestant. “I want my sword!”

Vali eyed his audience warily. His prepared speech sounded feeble even to him.

“Such cunning use of wizardry!” declared Kourete. He was too fat for Sir Hector’s armour but nevertheless had thoroughly immersed himself in the role. “For want of knowing, I feel I should try thy sword myself.”

Vali watched eagerly as his quarry gripped the hilt. He had not imagined it would be this easy to get the cyberclone’s sword into Kourete’s hand. In his mind’s eye, he opened the visual interface for the anvil-shaped resonator and gave it a mental prod. His special-services implant was just as capable of operating the workshop’s molecular assembler as cyberclone Merlin’s AI and after much experimentation he had come up with a short length of code that allowed the sword to slip free at his command. An earlier test run back at the workshop had gone without a hitch.

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Kourete still strained at the hilt. Vali scowled, for in his mind the assembler interface icon had turned into an hour glass, mocking him with its uselessness. Before he had chance to reset the controls, the would-be Sir Hector stepped away from the anvil, having been no more successful than the others.

“Well, I tried,” he said gallantly. “I bid you good day, wizard. If your test fails to chose a champion, we shall select one ourselves by more conventional means.”

With a final respectful nod to his fellow competitors, the ex-Governor of Yuanshi and hopeful future holoivid star trudged away, accompanied by two young boys scampering in his wake. Flakes of fresh snow started to fall from the grey noon sky.

“Cunning use of wizardry!” muttered Vali. “Pretentious twit.”

Leaving the anvil outside the temple, he pushed his way through the thinning crowds and stomped back to the workshop. He was cold, irritable and eager to sample the delights of the local alehouse. Uncooperative fake magic was a problem for after lunch.

He barely noticed Lilith and Jizo in the temple doorway. They seemed distinctly unimpressed by his antics and instead kept their eyes upon Kourete’s two young attendants. The sulky teenager playing Sir Hector’s son Kay had been coerced into the role by his father, a sound technician away checking microphones at the tournament site. With the youth was Artorius, who had tagged along to watch Vali’s performance, more eager than most to see the outcome of the challenge.

Jizo pulled a flask from her pocket, took a long sip and burped.

“The orphan and the false wizard,” muttered Lilith. “This fake holoivid mythology hides a truth far greater than their feeble minds could ever conceive!”

* * *

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Artorius was almost enjoying himself in the snowy streets of Londinium. He and the lanky youth trailing the pretend Sir Hector had been asked to dress as squires and mingle with the crowds. The other boy now refused to answer to any other name but that of his character Kay, which Artorius thought was taking things a bit too seriously.

The artificial snowfall had ceased and the twin suns, now high overhead, quickly turned the drifts into grey slush. The narrow streets were alive with activity. Ground cars were banned on set and instead the road heaved with robot oxen hauling heavily-laden wagons, alongside which hurried camera crews and technicians disguised as merchants and serfs. Jugglers, stilt walkers, acrobats and other street entertainers in odd and colourful garb did their best to enliven proceedings for the benefit of the watching audience.

Within the commotion, the apprehensive faces of the contestants were easy to spot. News had come in from Barnard's Star that a couple of ex-*Gods of Avalon* mechanical wolves, used by a private security company to patrol a ski resort on Ascension, had just yesterday malfunctioned and almost eaten four teenagers and a park ranger. The sight of a maintenance crew at Londinium Bridge, trying to pry a cyberclone knight's leg from the jaws of a huge tiger cyborg, did little to settle the contestants' nerves.

On the other side of the Thames, the brightly-coloured tents and heraldic banners of the tournament ground beckoned amidst a sea of contestants and entourage, audience and crew. Ex-Governor Kourete and his two young followers, having crossed the bridge, were almost at the gates to the riverside arena when the boy pretending to be Kay called a halt.

"I need to go back!" he cried, looking sheepish. "I've forgotten my sword!"

"Such folly!" tut-tutted Kourete, clearly enjoying his role. "If you turn back now you will surely miss the opening ceremony."

Artorius smirked. He had been quite jealous of the sword the other boy had found in the prop department, a particularly impressive item he

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knew would look good on camera. Ahead, exasperated handlers were yelling at a small mechanical dragon causing a disturbance at the entrance to the tournament grounds. The serpent-like winged automaton, its metallic scales shimmering rainbow hues in the sunlight, was presumably the star of one of the afternoon's challenges but did not seem so sold on the idea.

The boy playing Kay tapped his shoulder. "I've forgotten my sword," he repeated.

"That was stupid," said Artorius, not in the least sympathetic.

"If I go back for it, I'll miss the start," the boy told Kourete, as if his presence was vital to the success of the tournament. "He can run so much faster than me."

Artorius pulled a face, but his brief time watching Vali had taught him more than he ever learned from cyberclone Merlin. Sullenly kicking snow for a few moments gave him time to mull it over before replying.

"I want a Christmas present," he said, holding out his hand. "Five food tokens."

"Your reward will be the glory of the games!" said Kourete. It was not the answer Artorius wanted. "Make haste, my boy! Fetch your troublesome brother's sword!"

"He's not my bro..." objected Artorius, but the fake Sir Hector and Kay had already walked on. With a sigh, he turned and started back towards town.

* * *

Vali sighed. The problem of the sword in the anvil was proving tricky to resolve. He had half-hoped that one of the ex-sportsmen amongst the contestants might withdraw it purely through brute strength; if anyone managed that, he would not be one to argue against whatever claim to greatness they subsequently made. Unfortunately, the sword remained as

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fast as ever, puzzling those who believed Vali's performance was a genuine part of the *Gods of Avalon* storyline. His antics had been witnessed with great glee by the camera crew, who afterwards warned him that the broadcasting team on the orbiting *Edward Everett Hale* were keeping a close eye on proceedings.

He realised it had been a mistake to take the anvil to the temple. The AI control unit was too big to remove from Merlin's workshop and he had been forced to run data cables through the snow to link the two. However, Vali suspected that when it came to his own implant, the temple was too far from the workshop to maintain a stable link back to the AI. Londinium was so saturated with broadcast equipment that private communication devices struggled to find a clear bit of bandwidth to work with.

"Fake magic is one big joke," grumbled Vali. "The trick is in the timing."

His first thought was to drag the anvil back to the workshop, but he was tired and cold and not in the mood for anything strenuous. Instead, he settled for modifying the assembler's programming further to add a one-minute delay, which was hopefully enough time to get from the workshop's AI console to the temple in time for when the program released the sword. Most people were now at the tournament ground and the area was relatively deserted, though the weird Dhusarian nuns still hovered by the entrance to the temple.

Vali paused by the workshop door and fixed his gaze upon the Temple of Mithras at the top of the narrow side street. A small boy in costume ran past, but otherwise there was no one in sight. In his mind, Vali selected the implant's symbol for the assembler control and gave it a mental prod. Tiny numerical figures appeared in the corner of his mind's eye, counting down the seconds. The program was running.

"Ready or not, magic sword," muttered Vali. "Here I come."

* * *

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Artorius was barely half-way back to where Kay had left his sword when he staggered to a halt, totally out of breath. His oversized costume was heavy and his boots felt like they were wrapped in concrete rather than compacted snow. Finding a convenient ledge upon which to sit, he decided to rest for a few moments.

A couple of stray dogs were fighting over the frozen remains of a mangled human cyberclone they had seemingly dragged from the river. As Artorius turned to follow their antics, he cracked his head on something cold and hard behind him. It was then he realised that he was sitting on the stone upon which Vali had placed his sword-and-anvil challenge. Lilith and Jizo stood in their habitual spot at the temple door, watching him.

“Reborn beneath twin suns,” he heard Lilith whisper. She pushed her portly colleague aside to get a better look. “Our little orphan boy!”

“I liked the bit where his parents were eaten by a dinosaur,” said Jizo.

Artorius glanced towards them and frowned, perturbed by the fat nurse’s gleeful grin. Jizo gave him a friendly wave, then with a sudden shriek began to stomp up and down with her arms scrunched high, in a passable imitation of a stalking Tyrannosaurus.

“Take the sword, boy!” Lilith called, catching Artorius’ eye. “You shall be king!”

Artorius stood and looked at the sword in the anvil. He vaguely recalled that he was meant to be fetching something similar for a sulky teenager pretending to be Kay, but innumerable fame-hungry contestants had shown him that opportunities had to be seized by whoever got there first. A secondary consideration was that his chances of receiving any sort of gift this Christmas were diminishing fast. Intrigued by Lilith’s words, he grasped the sword’s hilt firmly in both hands and pulled. The blade remained stuck.

“You!” yelled an angry voice. “Get away from there!”

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His hands still clutching the sword, Artorius turned his head and saw Vali running through the snow towards him, his stolen robe billowing as a hand held the pointy hat to his head. The other gesticulated wildly in his direction.

“If you can be Merlin, I can be king!” the boy said defiantly.

There was a loud clunk from the anvil. Artorius shrieked, toppled from the stone and suddenly found himself lying on his back in the snow. Several dizzy moments passed before he realised that the blade, no longer stuck, had remained in his grasp as he fell.

“Drop the sword!” demanded Vali, skidding to a halt before him. His false beard had worked loose and hung at an angle from his stubby chin. “It is not for you!”

“How dare you speak to a king in such manner!” exclaimed Lilith, stepping from the shadows of the temple. Jizo brought her Cretaceous pantomime to a close and followed.

“King?” retorted Vali, looking down at the fallen boy. “Him?”

“The sword is mine!” Artorius declared.

He wriggled out of reach as Vali made a grab for the sword, scrambled to his feet and ran to hide behind Jizo, who despite the smell of alcohol on her breath seemed the least unfriendly of the adults present. She wrapped an arm around Artorius’ shoulders and gave him a comforting squeeze that left him breathless.

“The boy fulfilled your prophecy,” said Lilith, pointing to the sign.

“That’s right!” agreed Jizo. “We both saw him, plain as day!”

“The winning contestant takes the throne,” retorted Vali. “You know the rules.”

“We’re not talking about ruling this tedious holovid show,” snapped Lilith, giving Vali a withering look. “Your feeble game has brought forth something far greater.”

“He’s just a homeless orphan. And that’s my sword!” cried Vali, glaring back. Frightened, Artorius retreated behind Jizo’s considerable bulk

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and peered out at the red-faced wizard. “Anyway, what do you want with him?”

“His fate lies upon different worlds,” said Jizo. She looked down at Artorius. “Great things are in store for you. Would you like to learn more about the ways of the greys?”

Artorius looked from Vali’s angry gaze to Jizo, then back again.

“Can I keep the sword?” he asked.

“Certainly not!” retorted Vali.

“That rusty thing?” remarked Jizo. “A mere trifle compared to the rewards that await you. Come with us in our spaceship! Soon you will have whatever you like.”

Artorius thought about this. “I do like trifle,” he admitted. “With chocolate sprinkles.”

“The Church will look after him,” Lilith reassured Vali. “An orphan needs a family.”

“He’s to leave Avalon? I can’t say I disapprove,” said Vali. “This is a terrible place for a young mind. Putting aside the fact you grey-lovers have some very odd ideas, let’s assume Artorius is for some reason important to you. If he’s happy to go, can I have my sword? I have a fate to fulfil of my own, you see.”

“The boy is all that matters,” said Lilith. “A sword is merely a tool. A man such as yourself equally so. One day you will believe.”

“Did you just call him a tool?” asked Jizo.

“I’m not sure how to take that,” muttered Vali.

“Artorius, give this fraudulent magician his sword,” said Lilith. “But in return, there is something he must do for us.”

* * *

“Away from the tournament field, a bit of excitement at the Temple of Mithras,” said the presenter. “An eight-year-old called Artorius, the very same boy who some viewers may

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recall lost his parents in a rather nasty incident on Avalon some years back, has come from nowhere and been proclaimed king by wizard Merlin!”

“A surprise indeed. Did you know Artorius is the Latin version of Arthur? Or so I’ve just been told,” his colleague added. “Who says this show has no educational value? Here we are, once again showing how art imitates life. Or is it that the same old stories come round again and again, even here on everyone’s favourite game show?”

* * *

Artorius was becoming irritable. He had missed most of the tournament and instead Lilith and Jizo had filled his head with all sorts of promises and a load of stuff about aliens he did not understand. It had not yet sunk in that his dream to travel the stars was coming true and even now a ship was on its way to Camelot to collect them. That did not change the fact that it was Christmas Day and still no one had given him any presents.

A few hours later he was with Vali, Lilith and Jizo back outside the temple, standing before a crowd of weary and wounded contestants along with the obligatory camera crew. The ill-fitting suit of armour Vali had found for him evidently was not designed for an eight-year-old. The fake wizard was coming to the end of his speech.

“And that is how it happened!” Vali concluded triumphantly. “Young Artorius drew yonder sword from its grip of enchantment. In accordance with Merlin’s, err... my prophecy, he is the chosen one! Albion’s glorious king!”

The gathered contestants stood and stared at Artorius. Finally, one spoke.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course!” Vali retorted. “Do you doubt the wisdom of the greys?”

“What have aliens got to do with it?” asked another.

“Our interstellar guides, in their infinite wisdom, chose the mirror of *Gods of Avalon* to reveal the true path to salvation,” said Vali, reciting the

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words given to him earlier by Lilith. She and Jizo were standing away to his right, watching his performance carefully. The camera operator nearest to him was frowning. “An orphaned child of Sol, pawn to watchers and masters, king by the great game...” Vali paused, aware of the blank stares in his direction. “Err... Does any of this make sense?”

“So no special swords for the rest of us?” asked another contestant.

“Do I get a proper Christmas present?” piped up Artorius.

“Maybe later,” Vali said hurriedly. Lilith gave him a glare and made a sign for him to wrap up his performance. “In short, Artorius has duties beyond this world. In the meantime, he will anoint a champion to defend the name of King Arthur.”

Artorius looked up at the wizard. “Will I?”

“The sword?”

Artorius frowned and reluctantly presented the rusty sword to the contestant playing Sir Hector. Subdued angry mutterings flitted through the crowd, but the camera operator had lost his scowl and now gave Vali a nod of approval. The mini drama at the temple was a welcome distraction from the lacklustre efforts of the contestants back at the tournament ground; despite three hours of games, no one as yet had managed to lose any limbs.

Vali smiled as Kourete took the sword and Artorius remembered the man’s plans for revenge. The ex-Governor of Yuanshi raised the sword high, then brought it before him and held it against his chest. He bowed deferentially to the young boy.

“Long live King Arthur,” he said. “May your future be fruitful.”

“The Church looks after their own,” said Lilith. “We will guide his way.”

“We’ll take good care of him,” added Jizo. “This is no place for an orphan! The poor boy obviously hasn’t been eating properly. I’ll soon put some meat on his bones.”

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“You are the expert,” murmured Lilith, giving the portly Jizo a sideways glance.

“We have to open presents before dinner,” Artorius said sulkily. Now he had handed over the sword, he felt cheated. “I want a talking owl, a train set, an army gun, an electric dragon, a birdsuit and lots and lots of sweets.”

“I shall bid you all farewell,” said Kourete. “Just one question, wizard.”

Vali sighed. “Yes?”

“This is a trifle rusty,” the would-be knight said cautiously, holding up the sword. “Do you not think a king’s champion deserves better than this?”

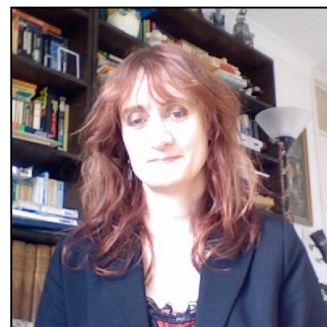
Vali sighed. Behind him, Lilith and Jizo were leading the protesting Artorius away.

“Go and jump in a lake,” he told Kourete.

THE END

About the Author

Steph Bennion is a writer, occasional musician and part-time civil servant, born in the Black Country, who after spending too many years in the big bad city of London now lives in Hastings. Her science-fiction stories are written as a reaction to the dearth of alternative heroes within bookshelves swamped by tales of the supernatural. For every aspiring vampire or wizard, the world needs an astrophysicist, an engineer or at the very least someone who can make the trains run on time.



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