

CETUS

τ < You are here

Festival Of The Star

A short story by **STEPH BENNION**

ERIDANUS

LEPUS

ORION

CANIS MAJOR

WyrdStar

Festival Of The Star

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

A short story by
Steph Bennion

WYRDSTAR BOOKS
www.wyrdstar.co.uk

Copyright © Steph Bennion 2020
All rights reserved.

WyrStar edition, license notes

This ebook is distributed free of charge. Please feel free to pass this story on to anyone you think may enjoy reading it. In this instance WyrStar requires that you neither modify it in any way nor remove the copyright notices at the bottom of the pages.

WyrStar publishing history

First published December 2020

Set in 14pt Baskerville by WyrStar Books.

The right of Steph Bennion to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1998.

This short story is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

This WyrStar ebook is suitable for science-fiction readers of all ages.

FESTIVAL OF THE STAR

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

Fifteen-year-old Tréphine finds herself betrothed against her will to the feared Bishop Malebête at a Dhusarian enclave on Aram. What is the horrid secret he is hiding in the château's basement?

THE PLANET OF ARAM should have been heaven. The blue-green world in the Tau Ceti system was a second Earth, a peaceful lush oasis where ancient meteorites had thwarted the rise of monstrous beasts, where even the weird alien bugs declined to irritate humans. Arab settlers, who in the middle of the twenty-third century had established the first permanent presence in Tau Ceti, had named Aram in good faith. Thirty years on, it was those who arrived on later ships who had turned the town of Saguenay into hell.

Tréphine pulled her tattered cloak tighter and watched Bishop Malebête move closer. Beneath his long silver cloak and purple robes he lumbered like a bear, his features hidden behind an inverted triangular mask, silver with large eyes of gold. A chill breeze blew from the forest plains, tangling her long blond hair. It was a rare year where winter in Saguenay aligned with that of the townsfolk's European homeland; Aram rotated once every twenty hours and did so two hundred and sixty times each orbit of Tau Ceti. More precisely it was Advent, the fourth Sunday before Christmas, though Saguenay no longer had the comforting rituals of Christianity. The Festival of the Star was when Malebête took his new wife.

Tall wooden shops and houses lined the square, crammed together like the walls of a prison, an illusion not softened by their decorations of forlorn garlands and coloured lights. On nearby Constitution Hill, Malebête's white-walled château cast a malignant shadow in the noon-day sun. As was tradition, feasts had been prepared and laid out on tables around the town square. Later there would be singing and dancing competitions, the drink would flow and people would try to forget what was about to happen right now.

Tréphine turned fifteen last month. Now she stood in the square, shoulder-to-shoulder with the other young unmarried women of

FESTIVAL OF THE STAR

Saguenay, watched by the gathered townsfolk to await her fate. The masked Malebête approached, flanked by two guards. The song of his choir of disciples walking behind him grew stronger on the breeze:

*“Onward Sagueney’s faithful,
“Praise the greys, our lords,
“Hail the truth of Malebête,
“He who speaks the law!”*

Malebête stopped before Tréphine. Defiant, she glared into the blank gaze of his mask. He had seized power by recruiting men of the town, loyal minions who embraced the bishop’s tyrannical view that women and foreigners should know their place. Saguenay had been stripped of its technology and wealth to feed his lavish lifestyle, but that was not all. Adrastea, Tréphine’s best friend and soulmate, had been taken by Malebête a year ago today.

The bishop’s beady stare behind the mask’s eyeholes looked her up and down as if he were examining a prized horse. Behind him, an empty plinth marked the spot where someone had torn down his statue, the stone still stained from where the perpetrator had been executed on the spot. Malebête’s bouffant blond hair quivered in the cool breeze.

“You’re cute,” he remarked. “Your name?”

“Tréphine,” she hissed.

“You will address me as Bishop!” he snapped. “Don’t you know who I am?”

“Yes, bishop,” she said calmly. “You’re a monster. An ugly, despicable beast.”

Malebête’s hand moved in a blur. His slap cracked loudly across her cheek, then she felt the burn, a stinging ache followed by a trickle of blood. The black stone of his silver finger ring had caught her skin. She resisted the urge to touch her face.

“Everybody loves me,” he retorted, sounding disappointed. “I’m making Aram great again. Anyone who says otherwise is a loser!”

“You lost the vote for mayor,” Tréphine said defiantly. That was three years ago but the reminder was a sure way of riling him. “They say

you had a tantrum, said you'd been cheated, then you seized power anyway. You've brought nothing but misery and death!"

"That election was rigged against me," declared Malebête.

"And the thirteen recounts?" she suggested slyly.

Behind the bishop, a group of girls shuffled uneasily, their hands clutched around the numbered placards used in the dancing competition. It was only voting Malebête allowed in Saguenay. Tréphine spied her mother frantically pushing her way through the crowd. Malebête turned towards the commotion. Tréphine was the youngster of three sisters and they were all in the square today. Their father was dead, executed by guards after being caught stealing a potato. It was a miracle their family had not lost a daughter before now.

"Tréphine!" her mother cried, sounding distraught. "No!"

"This one," Malebête told his guards. "Take her to the château."

Tréphine felt hands upon her arms, dragging her away. She pretended not to see the anguish on her mother's face, nor the look of horror yet relief on those of her sisters. Their time would come. None of Malebête's wives lasted more than a year.

* * *

The château was built of stone and secure as any castle. When French settlers founded the town, the imposing white-washed building was the Mairie de Saguenay, a place for public debates and offices for the mayor and elected council. Then Malebête arrived, a businessman who had got rich in Epsilon Eridani selling arms to both the Indian royalist rebels on the moon of Yuanshi and the ruling Que Qiao Corporation. He found salvation in the words of the infamous Priest Taranis, founder of Dhusarianism, a religion which sprang from tales of the legendary alien greys of Epsilon Eridani. Proclaiming himself a Bishop of the Dhusarian Church, Malebête got rid of Saguenay's mayor and council, banned public debates and made the town hall his château. Beliefs were a tool for forging new rules.

Tréphine gazed fearfully at her surroundings as the guards led her into the château's grand entrance hall. Ornate tapestries hung from the

walls, machine-woven but still horrendously expensive on a frontier world like Aram. The sight that unnerved her more than anything were the statues, twelve in all, which stood in two rows either side of the hall. They were larger-than-life effigies of Yuanshi's legendary greys, the squat alien humanoids of Epsilon Eridani, here depicted with six fingers on each hand and wearing long flowing robes. Each stared blankly across the central walkway with huge carved eyes in their odd inverted-triangular heads, the same alien features that shaped the mask worn by Malebête. A huge crystal chandelier lit the hall in green-tinged light. The effect was disconcerting.

Bishop Malebête stopped at the foot of the hall's enormous staircase, flanked by his guards. Those escorting Tréphine brought her to within a metre of his masked features and halted. Malebête slowly removed his mask. Few saw his corpulent features and infamous beard of blue, a colour that looked odd against his habitual fake tan. Tréphine trembled in fear. It was an effort not to squirm before the bishop's smarmy, arrogant sneer.

"Why is she not smiling?" demanded Malebête, addressing the guards at her side. "This is a beautiful day! Those townsfolk out there, they looked sad."

The guards shuffled uneasily but did not reply. Malebête looked at Tréphine.

"You are to be married and live in this château," he remarked. "Truly wonderful, here on Constitution Hill. You'll have servants, too. Why look so glum?"

"Constipation hill, more like," she retorted. Resigned to her fate, she did not care what happened anymore. "You're full of crap. What happened to Adrastea?"

"She gave what she could," he remarked, looking distracted. "You must be devout, you see. Maybe it is you, not her, who shall be truly honoured."

Turning away, Malebête led his retinue away. The guards escorting Tréphine pulled her towards the staircase. She was bundled upstairs into an magnificent suite of rooms, a fairytale of expensive furniture and exquisite fabrics, then left all alone.

FESTIVAL OF THE STAR

This was her home from now until the end of days, however short that may be. Tréphine collapsed onto the huge bed and wept.

* * *

Tréphine was given a robot maid, more fine clothes than she could possibly want, sumptuous food and plenty of drink. Doctor Falacer, the dour and sleazy Frenchman who acted as the bishop's private secretary, introduced himself on the second day. To her dismay, it quickly became clear that she was not allowed any contact with her family and friends in town, nor could she wander the château at will. Tréphine took to Falacer as much as she admired Malebête himself, which to say was not at all.

“Bishop Malebête would keep you locked in your suite, my petit poussin,” said Falacer, licking his lips in a way that made her shudder. He had insisted on taking her on a brisk tour of the château. “I’m sure we can permit visits to the walled garden for exercise. You may send requests via my office regarding wedding preparations.”

“I am not your petit poussin!” she snapped. “What sort of Doctor are you anyway?”

Falacer looked surprised at her query. “Why do you ask?”

“My suite overlooks the rear gardens,” she said. “I saw you at dawn, scurrying like a thief with a bag like those carried by medics in town. Was that blood on your coat?”

“You should not pry,” he said haughtily. “Nor should you be awake at that hour.”

A foreboding presence loomed in the corridor behind them. Tréphine bit back a yelp as she saw Malebête, again wearing his ceremonial robes. They were near the entrance to the kitchen on the ground floor, a vast stone-tiled room humming with activity and noise. The bishop disapproved of food molecularisor technology and the château reared pigs and chickens for slaughter. As he approached, Malebête removed his mask. His beady-eyed glare glanced to Falacer with a look of irritation.

“Showing her my château?” asked Malebête. His gaze settled uneasily on Tréphine. “Lovely place, very beautiful. All furnishings were

chosen by me, you know. The old mayor had dreadful taste, truly dreadful. Are you devout?"

Tréphine blinked at the sudden question. "Devout?"

"A test, maybe. What is the first lesson in the Book of Numbers?"

"That all votes should be counted?" she quipped.

Malebête scowled and raised his hand. Tréphine flinched, remembering how he struck her in the town square. His view of democracy was that scripture had all the answers.

"Numbers of purity are zero and one," she said quietly, dropping her gaze. Enforced religious study in Saguenay had taught her more than she wished about the Dhusarian Book of the Greys. "Numbers that are holy count the fingers of the wise grey."

Malebête solemnly stroked his beard. The *Isa-Sastra*, the holy texts reportedly given to an unsuspecting American called Betty Hill over three centuries before, were seen by Dhusarian scholars as a guidebook for understanding alien learning and culture; in this case, mathematical principles in binary and base twelve. The town tutors known as 'organisers' cared little for analysis and just liked the teachings they believed put men in charge.

"You are indeed devout," Malebête remarked, satisfied. "I chose well! I trust Doctor Falacer made it clear what is expected of you. Did you tell her the basement is off limits?" he added unexpectedly. "Very important. Very important indeed."

"She knows where she is allowed to venture," replied Falacer.

"And where she is not!" snapped Malebête. "Under no circumstances must anyone be allowed down there. Other than you, doctor. And myself. Make it clear, very clear!"

"I believe you have just done so yourself," Falacer said smoothly.

Tréphine looked at the doctor, then the bishop. The warning carried a threat she did not like at all. Now all she could think about what was in the mysterious basement.

* * *

FESTIVAL OF THE STAR

The days of December saw her life oscillate between a nightmare and a surreal dream. Staff got to work decorating the château, draping strings of tinsel and ornaments in every corridor and room. An unsuspecting tree, a native species with bright green needles, met a woodsman's axe in the forest and was erected in the lobby. Like many religions seeking dominance, the Dhusarian Church had sucked in older customs and made them its own: in the Festival of the Star, the tree supposedly symbolised the Yuanshi forest home of the elusive greys. The Star of Bethlehem had entered doctrine as a starship of the greys, arriving twenty-three centuries ago to guide the wise men of Earth.

Bishop Malebête himself remained an enigma, with the disconcerting habit of appearing in corridors without warning wearing his alien mask and ceremonial robes. On two separate occasions, as Tréphine was being escorted back from taking exercise in the walled garden, she saw the masked figure walking stiffed-legged across the ground floor lobby into the château's chapel, only to go upstairs to find the bishop in full regalia outside his private suite. She had no idea how he could be in two places at once.

Doctor Falacer came to Tréphine each day with his master's messages and orders regarding wedding preparations. She was to be married on Christmas Day.

"Why is blue beardie keeping me prisoner?" Tréphine demanded during one of Falacer's visits. Her robot maid, an archaic metal android of polished brass, had found her a terrible yellow dress to wear. "It's not right to take me from my family like this!"

"Bishop Malebête aims to keep you safe, ma petite coccinelle," he replied smoothly, with a cringe-inducing salacious wink. "To keep you pure."

"Pure and safe? You make me sound like a hand lotion! Safe from whom?"

"From temptation. He chooses his brides with care."

Doctor Falacer would not be drawn further. As the days drew on, the air of mystery thickened. The staff of the château were dutiful and would not answer her questions. The guardsmen were proud, devoted Dhusarians who scared Tréphine with the zeal of their loyalty towards

Malebête. In contrast, the women who worked the kitchen, cleaned the rooms, tended the garden and undertook repairs moved nervously through the building, wearing expressions akin to a rabbit caught in headlights. In the eyes of the bishop, worship of the holy greys offered a wondrous nirvana to men alone.

Tréphine never stopped thinking of escape. During her second week of confinement, she was outside in the walled garden when she noticed a gardener had left a gate wide open. She cautiously approached and gazed longingly through the opening, past the front lawns and driveway to the buildings of Saguenay beyond. A small crowd had gathered in the nearby town square to watch a children's folk dancing competition, the girls engaged in a lively gavotte while the boys held up scorecards. The scene brought forth a sudden yearning desire to be there, though she had never liked how the competitions taught children to judge. Lost in the moment, Tréphine jumped as her young guard appeared and blocked her view.

"Mademoiselle," he growled. "I trust you are not thinking of leaving."

The man's scowl was far from friendly. Tréphine gulped and took a hasty step back.

"What put such notion in your head?" she said sweetly, grabbing her chance at mischief. "I merely wished to gaze upon the town and think of the bishop's loyal subjects, preparing for the Festival of the Star. It is a time to be thankful for what the holy greys have bestowed. You are grateful, I take it?"

"Grateful?" asked the man, confused. "Why..."

"Bishop Malebête does not tolerate those who show ingratitude. When was the last time you were in chapel?" she asked, adopting a scolding tone. The old council debating chamber inside the château had been remodelled into a Dhusarian chapel, where she was taken each morning to pray. "Do your duties not permit you time to be devout?"

"I am devout!" he protested. Flustered, he twitched nervously as the gardener came back through the gate and closed it with a clang. "A true Dhusarian!"

"He knows, you know," Tréphine said, eyeing him seriously. "Be careful."

“Mademoiselle, back to your quarters at once!” he snapped.

“As you wish,” she replied haughtily. “I shall find solace in the New Book of Prophecies and pray for your soul. In your head be it!”

“And be it in yours,” he mumbled.

Tréphine turned and walked away, hiding her smile. Baiting guards was only pleasure she had left, an act of defiance to keep her sane. Her tantalising glimpse of Saguenay weighed heavily on her thoughts as the guard escorted her back to her suite.

* * *

Another Sunday dawned. Tréphine had been at the château for two weeks now. She woke, donned the required dour grey dress and nervously awaited her chaperone. Sunday was when Bishop Malebête led the chapel service and everyone was expected to attend. Doctor Falacer was punctual, wearing a smug, arrogant grin she wanted to punch. She followed him to the ground floor lobby, past the creepy alien statues to a pair of large doors.

Tréphine felt intimidated inside the chapel. The wooden panelled walls and rows of seats inside the lofty debating chamber looked upon statues of alien greys and bright banners with proclamations such as: ‘TRUE WISDOM SHINES FROM ABOVE’, ‘IN THE BLACK SEEK ONLY THE GREY’ and the puzzling, ‘ALL THAT IS PART DOES BELONG’. At the end of the hall, on a central raised platform below the chamber’s decorative windows, an altar was draped in a grey sheet. A black banner hung on the wall behind, on which was a silver six-pointed star with a swirl at the centre. This was the holy mark of the Dhusarian Church, a symbol allegedly three-hundred years old.

The ornate chair formerly used by the town mayor, now draped in gold fabric, stood at one side of the platform. Bishop Malebête reclined in his throne like an emperor, beaming his arrogant smile. Above the seating for his congregation, ceiling telepathy transmitters glowed orange. As Falacer led Tréphine to the front pews, Malebête’s choir of disciples from Saguenay broke into a Dhusarian hymn, crudely adapted from an old Christmas carol:

FESTIVAL OF THE STAR

*“Mighty greys of Eridani are,
“Bearing gifts they travelled afar,
“Like a comet, past moon and planet,
“Their ship shines like a star.
“Oh, ship of wonder, star of night,
“Lords of alien beauty bright,
“Earthwards leading, still proceeding,
“Guide us to the grey’s new light!”*

Bishop Malebête rose from his chair. The choir spluttered to a halt.

“Please be seated,” he called. “Lovely pews. Very soft.”

Doctor Falacer pulled Tréphine down onto her seat. Everyone else had a cushion to sit on. The hard wooden pew was not comfortable at all.

“Praise the greys,” Malebête pronounced solemnly. “Today we give thanks to those who made the Festival of the Star great again. There is no better place to celebrate than this magnificent, incredible, majestic chapel built in honour of the greatest who ever lived. I speak of course of me, here leading my holy mission for Priest Taranis, our most holy guide of guides, very holy. I brought strength and unity where there was none. I brought the divine truth that all men are created equal, some more equal than others. The holy *Isa-Sastra* speaks of a glorious union between men and greys. Women and children, not so much.”

“Why is he a bishop when Taranis is just a priest?” Tréphine whispered to Falacer, who looked bored. “I thought Taranis was top honcho for you Dhusarians.”

“Priest Taranis kept the lesser title to show humility before the greys.”

“So Malebête isn’t showing humility by calling himself bishop?”

“Shush!” Falacer hissed irritably. “Pay attention!”

“Yet the blessings we fought hard for are threatened,” continued Malebête, suddenly looking cross. “Unbelievers tore down my statue in the town square, a most sacred image! They are heinous, very heinous indeed. They will not destroy our holy works!”

“Not on my watch!” called one of the guards.

FESTIVAL OF THE STAR

“True. That’s very true, actually. That is why I am giving you good people, those who carry my word, new powers to punish offenders without delay. These radicals speak of social justice and equal rights, votes for women and other dangerous plots. Their ideas threaten the freedom of men with repression, domination and exclusion!”

“We love you!” cried the same guard, beaming. Tréphine wondered if he was ill.

“Thank you. Thank you very much,” said Malebête. Pausing, he pushed back a fake tear. “I will not apologise for what I have done. Saguenay is the most just town ever, very exceptional. I rebuilt this society through my own blood, sweat and tears, bringing you all into the arms of Dhusarism. Or is it Dhusarianism? Man and his dominion are the bedrock of life. Men stand tall and proud. Women and children, not so much. Men kneel only before the wisdom of the mighty greys, should they ever choose to appear.”

Tréphine smiled wryly. The legendary greys were elusive even in Epsilon Eridani, with few reliable witnesses to be found. Many believed the humanoid aliens did not exist at all and were merely the invention of the Dhusarian Church. Not that it mattered: religions relied on belief, not proof, when it came to the existence of gods.

“Faithful subjects, our destiny is in sight,” Malebête went on. “Aram’s future is in our hands, a glorious future, very good. The best is yet to come. May the greys bless you, bless your families and our fine armed guardians. In your head be it.”

“And be it in yours,” chanted the congregation, all except Tréphine.

“Well, that was fun,” she said, as Falacer pulled her from the pew to leave. Bishop Malebête had replaced his mask and returned to his throne. “Can I go home now?”

“No,” he replied. “Treasure your misplaced arrogance. It will soon be gone.”

* * *

Two days later, everything changed. Dawn had just broken as Bishop Malebête swept into Tréphine’s suite, awakening her from another uneasy

night's sleep. She barely had time to slip her cloak over her nightwear as he entered, trailed by a simpering Doctor Falacer.

“Fiancée, I am leaving for Epsilon Eridani,” Malebête announced. “Priest Taranis has invited me to Yuanshi for a summit on expanding the Terran Federation of Worlds. Taranis is an important man, very important. He and the President are keen to discuss Aram's future.”

Tréphine rubbed her eyes. Priest Taranis of Yuanshi was back in the limelight after forging an uneasy pact with rebel leader Maharani Uma to rule a new Federation of Worlds, raising the power of the Dhusarian Church to new heights. Malebête had immediately pledged Saguenay's support for bringing Aram into the new Federation.

“Am I to accompany you?” she asked hopefully. A trip away from the château offered possibilities for escape.

“By the mighty greys!” exclaimed Falacer. “Women have no place in politics!”

“What about President Uma of the Federation?” Tréphine asked icily, then looked at Malebête. “Or the mayor of Saguenay, whom you executed for treason?”

“Uma is merely regent for her son Surya,” retorted Malebête. “Very bright boy. He will assume power once he is of age. Women in power, indeed! I shall be away for ten days and will return by Festival Eve. We shall be wed on Festival Day.”

Tréphine thought quickly. “It will be hard to make preparations in your absence.”

“You have robots! Lovely servants, lots of them. What more do you need?”

“Full access to the château,” she declared. “I must be able to speak to the cooks, the decorators, the gardener and other staff at all times. You want this wedding to be something special, do you not?” she added, fluttering her eyelashes.

“The best,” he said sincerely. “Big league! You shall be free to meet the staff while I am away. Do not enter the basement!” he added, narrowing his eyes. “I shall be most angry if you pry where pretty eyes should not.”

“The basement?” she asked nervously.

Malebête glanced to Falacer and frowned. “I must not keep the Federation spaceplane waiting at Port Neberu,” he said, studiously avoiding her gaze. “By tomorrow evening I shall be wining and dining with the best at Sumitra Palace in Ayodhya. Good day, fiancée.”

The bishop turned and left the room. Falacer gave her a mocking bow and followed. Tréphine sat back on her bed, her mind buzzing. Ten days without Malebête haunting her every move was more than she could have hoped for. For now, she needed another hour in bed. Constant nightmares were exhausting.

* * *

Malebête was true to his word. When Tréphine’s robot maid eventually arrived with breakfast, Falacer was not far behind, bringing Tréphine a silver ring set with a stone of what looked like black glass. Placing it upon her finger, she rubbed the glass. A holographic head the size of a large apple promptly appeared above her clenched fingers, the face of a suave Frenchman with oiled dark hair and pencil moustache. It was an artificial intelligence security pass, the like of which Tréphine had not seen in years.

“Bonjour mademoiselle,” grunted the hologram. “I am the Saguenay Environmental Node Envoy, Château And Lands. How may I assist mademoiselle today?”

The acronym ‘SENECAL’ scrolled around the base of the floating head. Tréphine glanced to Falacer, then gave the AI apparition a quizzical look.

“Senecal,” she said hesitantly. “I can use you to visit any part of the château?”

“Mademoiselle, you have been granted access to all living areas, staterooms and staff areas,” replied the hologram. “You are not however permitted to leave the château or grounds. Guard quarters and basement remain strictly out of bounds.”

“For your safety,” said Falacer, sneering. “My master insists.”

“So I remain a prisoner?” asked Tréphine. “And what’s in the basement?”

Falacer's smug smile slipped. "You must not pry!" he growled, suddenly angry. "Do not mention that place again! My master strictly forbids anyone to enter."

"Shouldn't you be getting ready to leave for Yuanshi?" she snapped irritably.

"My work here requires me to stay," he replied. "My master regrettably is too busy to bid you farewell but looks forward to his nuptial celebrations when he returns."

Falacer swept from the room and was gone. Tréphine made her own way through the suite to the main door just in time to hear the habitual click of a lock as he departed. The holographic head of the ring's AI still bobbed above her ring.

"Senecal?" she asked hesitantly. "Open this door."

"At once, mademoiselle," replied the apparition.

A sharp clunk rose from the doorway. Tréphine warily pulled it open, astonished that she was indeed no longer locked in. Leaving her suite, she crept along the hallway to the top of the staircase and looked down into the château's grand lobby. Malebête and his retinue of guards were walking briskly past the statues towards the foyer, trailed by an autoporter loaded with luggage. As they left, she heard a ground car turbine starting up outside, which soon became a fading roar as it departed the château. Suddenly, all was quiet.

"Good riddance," she muttered.

They would be back in ten days, after which her fate was sealed. She could not afford to waste a single minute. The huge doors into the grand lobby remained open to the morning sun, but she knew there would be guards patrolling the grounds. Tréphine wanted to know more about the château itself. It was time to plan her escape.

* * *

Tréphine spent days wandering from room to room, staring in wonderment and disgust at how Malebête had transformed Saguenay's town hall into his opulent mansion. The hologram Senecal unlocked doors previously barred to her, opening her way to magnificent

staterooms, a lavish banqueting hall and even the kitchens, though Doctor Falacer's quarters remained out of bounds, as did the guardrooms and armoury. The bishop was not stupid enough to let his fiancée near the château's formidable cache of weaponry.

The doors to Malebête's own suite however were not barred. Intrigued, she found his rooms were much like her own, with the addition of a study containing a single comfy chair facing a wall of holoivid screens, each silently showing a different five-systems news channel. Next to the chair was a drinks cabinet and food molecularisor with a menu consisting entirely of snacks. On the arm of the chair, a hairbrush clogged with wisps of Malebête's blond locks rested next to a small hand mirror. A cleaning robot, busy vacuuming food crumbs from the lush carpet, beeped merrily as she backed slowly from the room. The eyes of one of the many portraits of the bishop greeted her in the hallway outside. Her captor was a vain man.

Malebête was an avid collector of paintings, sculptures and other artistic treasures. He had looted Saguenay for anything of value and sent his agents across Aram seeking more. Tréphine was startled to find in one room a statue she recognised, a metre-high figurine of a water nymph fashioned from the trunk of a native jakob tree, lovingly carved by her own departed father years before. Trembling with anger, her fingers gently caressed the statue's familiar contours as she remembered Malebête's men ransacking their family home.

The day of the bishop's return edged closer. With still no escape plan in mind, Tréphine continued her exploration. One room she had not properly scrutinised was the chapel, despite attending every day. Slipping past the grey statues in the hall, she entered the old debating chamber. The lights were off, leaving just dregs of sunlight at the decorative windows and the orange glow of telepathy transmitters to cast eerie shadows in the gloom. To her right, a series of low glass cabinets lined the wall, which she had noticed on previous visits but never examined. Looking now, she discovered a display of holy relics: broken carved stones, ancient fragments of wood and chunks of dark glass. Printed labels spoke of an archaeological dig in the Arallu Wastes on Falsafah, a mysterious planet which shared the same orbit as Aram around Tau Ceti

but was always hidden on the far side of the sun. The aged curios seemed to feed off the deathly silence inside the room.

Beyond the cabinets, she spied a small doorway in the corner of the room, made of the same wooden panels as the walls and barely visible in the gloom. Tréphine crept to the door and pushed it open. Beyond was a narrow corridor, lit only by a rectangle of light at the far end, from which she heard the chink and clatter of activity from the kitchens at the rear of the château. She had read stories of castles with secret passages, but guessed this one had been built to allow staff to bring refreshments to the debating chamber without having to go through the main hall. Tréphine had not yet been able to face speaking to the head chef about the traditional wedding feast. It struck her that it was foolish not to see if the kitchen and storeroom areas offered an escape route back to her family in town.

Tréphine entered the passageway and pulled the door closed behind her. Moving quietly, she hurried towards the noises ahead. She was almost at the doorway when she came upon an alcove and a short flight of steps leading down. Curious, she slowly descended and found a single steel door. She remembered Doctor Falacer's warning.

"The forbidden cellar," she murmured. "So what's inside?"

What she had seen so far in the château painted Malebête as a bully and thief, a petty dictator and very vain man. Yet that did not fully explain why he was so feared. The door before her was locked. Tréphine rubbed the ring and the hologram head of Senecal appeared.

"Bonjour Mademoiselle," said the projection. "How may I help?"

"Unlock this door," she ordered. "I want to see what he's hiding."

"I'm afraid I cannot do that," the head replied. "Access is strictly forbidden."

"Why? What's he got inside?"

"That information is restricted."

"I'm to be Malebête's wife," she said, trying a new tack. "Does that give me rights?"

"Congratulations," said the AI. "Access remains strictly forbidden."

Tréphine scowled. She rubbed the glass to switch off the hologram and reluctantly retreated back up the steps. The doorway to the kitchen

was just a few paces away. Moving quietly, she approached the door and slowly pulled it open. The chef and her young helpers were busy preparing evening dinner and had their backs turned. A young girl stood in the doorway to the yard at the rear of the château, plucking feathers from a freshly slaughtered chicken. Tréphine wrinkled her nose in disgust. She had no idea why people killed animals to eat when food molecularisors could produce synthetic meat on demand. On a work surface near the door, she spied an electric shock stick of the sort used to stun livestock.

On a whim, Tréphine reached inside and snatched the shock stick from the worktop. Backing away from the door, she closed it quietly and slipped her prize into the back of her waistband. All this time, her mind had been whirring with the mystery of the basement below. If she was to continue prying, she felt better prepared with a weapon to hand.

Tréphine retraced her steps and was soon staring once again at the locked basement door. There was no biometric scanner nor any other visible lock. Security systems tended to use DNA scanners to identify one person from another and it was possible only Malebête himself could order the door to unlock. Tréphine irritably twisted the ring, then raised her hand to the still-visible scratch where the bishop had lashed out in the town square. It dawned on her that Malebête wore an AI security device similar to her own.

“DNA...” she murmured. The cellar door mocked her. “I wonder.”

Her mind flicked back to her visit to Malebête’s suite. Retreating up the steps and back to the chapel, she returned to her own rooms. A rummage through the clothes provided for her produced a pair of satin gloves, pale pink to match a fancy gown Malebête liked her to wear. Tréphine hurried to the bishop’s own quarters. Removing the AI ring, she put on the gloves and went to the bishop’s bathroom. Hand sanitiser and a cleansing blast from the dryer had the gloves and ring as clean as she could get them. Holding the AI ring carefully, she went to Malebête’s holoivid room and grabbed the hairbrush from his chair. She left his suite, scurried back to the chapel and retraced her steps to the mysterious cellar.

Tréphine descended to the door. Taking Malebête’s brush, she pulled free a clump of hair and rubbed it across her gloved left hand, working

the remnants of grease and dandruff into the silk. When she thought she had done enough, she placed the brush on the floor and slipped the ring over her gloved finger. She hoped the hair was smeared with enough of Malebête's DNA. Using her thumb on the same hand, she rubbed the glass.

"Bonjour, Bishop Malebête," greeted the AI. The familiar projection of Senecal wore a submissive expression she had not seen before. "How may I assist your holiness?"

Tréphine stifled a triumphant grin.

"Open this door," she said, attempting her best gruff voice. "At once!"

She heard a clunk as locking bolts withdrew. There was a hiss, then the door slowly swung back. Inside, lights were brightening. Tréphine took a deep breath and stepped inside.

* * *

The basement was the stuff of nightmares. Freezer chests stood near the door, their lids smeared by bloodied handprints. Further along, a workbench held an array of sharp tools, sharp blades polished and glinting, their handles stained crimson. On another bench, liquid-filled jars held a grotesque display of pickled flesh. Tréphine could not tell if it was human or beast. A coppery smell lingered, one she did not like at all.

Beyond the benches, three glass tanks rose from the floor, cylindrical vats some two metres high and half a metre wide. With a start, she saw the thick green liquid inside each held what looked like suspended fetuses, vaguely humanoid but grotesquely malformed with discoloured skin and twisted, spindly limbs. The vats were linked to a rack of laboratory equipment fed by heavy electrical cables running down the wall. A low hum filled the air, suggesting something was drawing power. Her fear rising, Tréphine paused, suddenly wary of entering any further. It was then she heard a voice. A curtain was drawn across the far end of the room, beyond which a faint sound could be heard. A woman was crying.

"Hello?" Tréphine called softly. "Is somebody there?"

The sobbing stopped, became a sniff, then silence. Tréphine approached the curtain and gingerly pulled it aside. Hidden from sight, a young woman lay curled on a mattress inside a large cage. The overalls she wore were tatty and stained, her blond hair was matted and her face was streaked with tears. Tréphine gasped in horror as her eyes met the anguished gaze of Adrastea, her beloved soulmate taken to be Malebête's wife the year before.

“Ma tigresse!” she cried. “Adrastea, I thought you surely dead!”

“Tréphine?” murmured the woman. Tréphine quivered at the sound of her name upon Adrastea's lips. “Ma moitié! But how can you be here? Wait... He took you too?”

“I am to be wed in days! What has that ogre done to you?”

“Horrid things!” she wailed. “Malebête and Falacer are harbouring something hideous! Tréphine, you must flee!”

“I'm not leaving without you. Merde! How does this door open?”

Tréphine desperately examined the hefty padlock on the cage door, an old-fashioned type that needed a metal key. She suddenly heard a noise behind her. Startled, she whirled around and gasped in fright. In the doorway, a tall figure in grey robes stared from behind a familiar silver and gold mask. Adrastea's cry of alarm was no match for her own.

“Malebête!” wailed Tréphine. “You should not be here!”

The intruder stalked closer, lifted a misshapen hand to the mask and pulled it away. Tréphine stared in horror. It was not the bishop they saw but the face of a dreadful beast, a creature with cruel angular features wrapped in grey lizard-like skin. The hand holding the mask had six spindly fingers, just like those of the statues in the lobby. Around the creature's robes hung a white sash embroidered with stylised human twins.

“zz-yyoouu-shoouuld-noot-bee-heeree-zz!” shrieked the monster, in a voice that spilled forth like sparks from a steel grinder. “zz-iit-iis-noot-yyeet-tiimee-zz!”

“What the hell is that!?” shrieked Tréphine.

“Falacer calls it Brother Mithuna,” hissed Adrastea. “It eats raw flesh!”

“A gift from Priest Taranis,” spoke a voice from the doorway. Tréphine’s heart sank as she saw Doctor Falacer enter the room. “Here to continue the Dhusarian mission in Tau Ceti. Taranis was a guest of Bishop Malebête’s the year before last while engaged in important work on Falsafah. He sent Brother Mithuna to us eight months ago.”

“Yes, but what in the name of the greys is it?” cried Tréphine.

“zz-uunbeeliieeveer-zz!” screeched Mithuna, making her and Adrastea jump. “zz-aall-thaat-iis-paart-dooees-beeloong-zz!”

Falacer gingerly pulled his finger from his ears. “A cyberclone,” he replied. “One of twelve disciples created by Taranis, using the DNA of our lord alien greys. Yet Mithuna is but one and we have all Aram to save. I persuaded Malebête that our mission demands true hybrids, shorn of cybernetics and born of pure flesh.”

“He stole my eggs,” Adrastea said bitterly, glaring fiercely through the bars of the cage. “Stuck a needle in me and sucked them out!”

“It is a waste of resources to create artificial ova when we have a ready supply to hand,” Falacer said irritably. “What else are women good for?”

Tréphine was aghast. “You’re using her to make more of those things?”

“Your friend has been lucky, ma poussin,” snapped Falacer, stepping closer. “The bishop has a cruel passion for pleasure. His past wives, his courtesans? You could say he loved them to death. Brother Mithuna solved the problem of what to do with the detritus,” he added lightly. “A servant of the greys who craves the taste of human flesh. This caged piece of trash would have met the same end had she not been gifted to me for my work!”

“zz-wee-wiill-bee-boorn-aaneew-zz!” screeched the clone.

“You will not eat me, lizard man!” growled Adrastea. “You are Satan’s spawn!”

Tréphine looked at her imprisoned friend, feeling sick. Her fear rising, she backed away from the doctor and the eerie cyberclone until she came up against a workbench. Something wedged in her waistband dug into her back.

“This is my fate?” asked Tréphine. “A laboratory rat to help you breed clones?”

“The vats have not produced the results we desire,” admitted Falacer. “I shall start afresh using surrogate wombs. You show a fire the others lacked, dear Tréphine. Maybe you are destined to become the holy mother, to bring our new gods into this world!”

“That’s insane!” cried Adrastea.

“I am not carrying those things inside me!” Tréphine said angrily. Her questing hand closed upon the object stuffed into the waistband. “You’re a sick man, Falacer!”

“Doctor Falacer, if you please. Now, put that down...”

Tréphine swung her hand forward and jabbed the shock stick into his chest. Cursing, Falacer hastily backed away before she had a chance to release the charge. Hands trembling, she turned the weapon towards the creepy cyberclone. Falacer stepped closer.

“My dear, this is unnecessary,” he said calmly. “You cannot escape your fate.”

“Maybe not,” declared Tréphine. “But you won’t get me without a fight.”

She lunged forward, jabbed the shock stick into Brother Mithuna’s chest and squeezed the trigger. The cyberclone released a strangled shriek and started to shake, then crumpled to the floor. Falacer rushed towards her. Hearing Adrastea’s warning yell, Tréphine turned and planted the live weapon into the doctor’s chest. Falacer’s staccato scream ended in a heavy crunch as he too fell. Tréphine released the trigger and stared down at the bodies lying unconscious at her feet. She heard a whimper from Adrastea behind her.

“Mon dieu, what have you done!” her friend whispered. “They will kill us both!”

“We’re going to get out of here,” Tréphine reassured her. “Or die trying.”

“I hope you have a plan, ma chérie. Preferably one that skips the dying part.”

Tréphine tentatively knelt by Falacer’s prone form and searched his pockets for a key to the cage door, but found nothing. The château

armoury would have equipment to break the lock, not to mention something a bit more potent than a shock stick. Trembling, she rubbed the ring on her gloved finger. A meek-looking Senecal appeared.

“Bonjour, Bishop Malebête,” said the AI. “How may I assist your holiness?”

“Give my fiancée full security access to all areas of the château,” Tréphine instructed. Impersonating the bishop’s gruff voice hurt her throat. “No areas are off limit!”

The apparition wavered. “Your holiness, you alone have that level of access.”

“Do as I say!” she hissed. “Instruct the guards that Tréphine is free to leave at will.”

“As you wish,” the hologram said curtly. “Security protocols have been updated.”

The hologram disappeared. Adrastea stared at Tréphine, her eyes wide.

“How...?” she tried to ask, her voice weak.

“A trick, ma moitié,” Tréphine said grimly. Her hand reached for Adrastea’s own through the bars of the cage. “It will be discovered soon enough. I will fetch tools to open your prison so we can flee. Townsfolk will protect us once they hear our tale.”

“They are cowards. Malebête should have been run out of Saguenay years ago.”

“Then it is us, ma tigresse, who must end this nightmare,” said Tréphine. She handed her the shock stick. “You may need this when he awakes. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Adrastea nodded, her eyes shining. “Good luck, ma chérie.”

Tréphine managed a wry smile. Moments later, she was scurrying back through the château, her heart thumping like a drum. She hoped the bishop’s expectation of a Christmas wedding would be enough to stop Falacer ordering the guards to shoot on sight.

* * *

Tréphine removed her gloves, dumped them and Malebête's hairbrush into a recycling chute and put the AI security pass back on her finger. Upon rubbing the ring, she was relieved to hear Senecal update her on changes to her permitted access rights. Nowhere in the château was now off limits. Nevertheless, she waited in hiding near the entrance to the guard quarters until she was satisfied that all men on duty had gone, hurrying in the direction of the chapel. She guessed Falacer had recovered enough to give the alarm.

The reinforced steel door of the armoury did not take long to find. Tréphine rubbed her ring. The AI's hologram head bobbed into life above her clenched fingers.

“Senecal?” she asked, before it could speak. “Open this door.”

“At once, mademoiselle,” replied the apparition. It did not sound pleased.

With a thud of locking bolts, the door swung open. Tréphine quickly stepped inside and closed the door. All around her, equipment racks groaned beneath the weight of more weaponry than she had even seen. In another part of the room she discovered the stash of burglary equipment used by Malebête's men for their raids in town. She selected a pair of bolt cutters, then pulled various weapons from the shelves and stuffed them into an equipment bag. Tréphine finished by slipping a pistol into her waistband, a sonic stun gun with a small mesh dish instead of a barrel, capable of delivering a non-deadly yet painful punch. The guards used them to torment anyone they did not like the look of in town. Hefting the bag to her shoulder, Tréphine left the armoury and hastened back to the chapel.

Peering inside, she spied a solitary guard near the open doorway to the passageway. Tréphine hesitated, waited until the guard looked away and scurried into the chapel. She could not see a way to get back to Adrastea unnoticed. Crouching low, she lowered the equipment bag to the floor and slid it beneath a pew.

She slipped from the chapel and hastened through the grand hall towards the staffing areas. The sound of tramping boots and barked orders drifted through the château, clawing at her nerves. Reaching the

kitchen, she peeked through the door. A man in uniform was guarding the other entrance to the passageway.

Tréphine backed away, then screamed. Heavy hands clamped down on her shoulders, pinning her to the spot. Another guard appeared from behind and frisked her, pulling the stun gun from her belt. Tréphine was roughly turned around to face her captor. Doctor Falacer, deathly pale and incandescent with rage, glowered before her.

“Heathen!” he roared. “This is an affront to Bishop Malebête himself!”

“You have poor Adrastea in a cage!” she cried. “Do the château guards know you are breeding monsters? What you are doing is against nature!”

She glanced to the young men, standing smirking either side of herself and the doctor. If she was expecting them to be shocked she was to be disappointed. The cook and her kitchen staff looked on with startled stares.

“I will have to inform my master,” snapped Falacer. “Attacking his loyal servant, meddling with the security system!? You are betrothed and his property to use as he or myself see fit. The bishop returns in three days and is expecting a marriage!”

Her heart sinking, Tréphine saw there was little she could do to escape his wrath.

“I have been foolish,” she said meekly. It took all her inner strength to rein in her urge to fight. “I let my curiosity get the better of me. It is not my place to question your work.”

The doctor paused, his anger subsiding. “You accept your transgression?”

“If I am to be punished, so be it,” Tréphine said, drooping her head in a melodramatic show of penitence. “All I ask is for one last prayer to absolve my sins. Allow me this and I will submit to whatever fate the bishop decrees.”

The guards watched with the reluctant admiration for a martyr. Falacer gave her a suspicious glare, but it was tinged with relief that she had submitted so easily.

“Spoken like a true acolyte,” he said at last. “Guards, take her to the chapel!”

* * *

Brother Mithuna was waiting in the chapel. The horrible scaly cyberclone stood on the raised platform before the altar, wearing the silver and gold mask. Falacer led Tréphine inside and gestured to a pew. More guards had arrived to make sure she did not escape. The chapel lights brightened, banishing the secretive shadows.

“zz-praaaiisee-thee-greeyys-zz!” screeched the cyberclone. “zz-thee-broood-mootheer-shaall-reepeent-zz. zz-iin-yyoouur-heeaad-bee-iit-zz!”

“And be it in yours,” said Falacer. “Tréphine, make your peace.”

Tréphine ignored where the doctor pointed and took a seat near the back. Lowering her head, she began whispering a Dhusarian prayer. Falacer snorted dismissively and moved away in disgust. Awkward shuffling noises rose from the guards around the room. Tréphine surreptitiously reached below the pew and found the bag from the armoury.

“Are you done, ma poussin?” Falacer asked sarcastically.

Her head still bowed, Tréphine squinted into the gloom beneath her seat. The weapon her questing hands had pulled from the bag looked reassuringly chunky. Her fingers slid around the trigger. She took a deep breath and stood up.

“I am not your little chicken,” Tréphine scolded, sneering at Falacer. She aimed the weapon above the heads of the startled guards. “Duck!”

She pulled the trigger. A searing arc of fire leapt from the barrel, sending the men scurrying for cover. Flickering flames rippled across the wooden panelled walls. Tréphine grinned with delight. It appeared she had stolen a flame-thrower. The guards recovered quickly and began to advance on her position. Falacer ran to the door.

“This is an outrage!” he shrieked. “Guards, kill her!”

“zz-oooutraagee-zz!” echoed the clone. “zz-deestrooyy-thee-blaaspheemeer-zz!”

The men raised their weapons to fire. Tréphine sent another spray of fire across the pews, creating a wall of flames between her attackers and herself. The man guarding the passage to the basement had fled. Tréphine grabbed the bag of weapons, dashed between the pews and slipped through the door. Hurrying down the narrow passageway, she turned and released another blast of fire, engulfing the doorway to the chapel.

Tréphine dumped the flame thrower, shouldered the bag and made her way down the steps to the basement. A rub of the ring brought the hologram head back to life.

“Senecal!” she hissed urgently. “Open this door!”

“Certainly mademoiselle,” the AI replied, looking bemused. To her relief, the security system had not yet undone her trickery and the door unlocked with a clunk. “I have received orders from Doctor Falacer that you are not to leave the château. How shall I respond?”

“The chapel is on fire,” she replied breathlessly, entering the basement. “Disable the sprinklers and let the whole place burn. Order all staff to evacuate immediately.”

“Your wish is my command,” replied the apparition. “It has been a pleasure.”

Tréphine frowned, wondering what the AI meant by that. Ahead, Adrastea greeted her with a shriek of joy, her eyes widening as she saw the bolt cutters pulled from the bag. Within moments, she was free. Tréphine handed her a stun gun from the armoury bag. Adrastea’s glow of relief gave way to a flicker of disappointment when she realised the weapon was no more lethal than the shock stick she still held.

“I’m not out to kill,” said Tréphine, palming the remaining stun gun from the bag. “Though I should mention that the château is about to go up in flames.”

Adrastea’s eyes brightened. “Now you’re talking, ma grande. We should go.”

She was still weak from her cramped incarceration. Tréphine had to help her across the room and up the steps, coughing in the smoke of the corridor. From there, they made their way to the kitchen, finding it deserted. Alarms wailed throughout the château. The fire in the chapel had taken hold and was slowly consuming the building. Senecal had done

FESTIVAL OF THE STAR

as ordered and the ceiling sprinklers had not come on. Malebête's lair would soon be ash.

Tréphine insisted on grabbing her father's wood carving as they left. Racing from the burning château, she and a reinvigorated Adrastea reached the driveway and joined the rush of fleeing staff. People were hurrying through the streets of Saguenay to meet them, eager to see what was happening. All around Constitution Hill, the bustling townscape was the sweetest sight Tréphine ever hoped to see.

* * *

Tréphine's mother welcomed her home with fear in her eyes. Over the next few days, townsfolk spoke of little else than Bishop Malebête's expected retribution. Doctor Falacer had fled to Port Neberu with the guards who remained faithful, eager to distance himself from the smoking ruins of the château. Medics in town had confirmed to a relieved Adrastea that she carried no monstrous burden. Her mental scars would take longer to heal.

Festival Eve, the day of Bishop Malebête's return from Epsilon Eridani, arrived all too soon. That morning, town elders called a general assembly in the town square. Adrastea joined Tréphine to hear what their seniors had to say. It was not good news.

"The natural order of things has been disrupted!" bellowed an elderly merchant, a former councillor who had taken it upon himself to speak for the town. "This wanton destruction will not go unpunished. The girl's disobedience brings doom to us all!"

"Bishop Malebête is killing the women of Saguenay!" Tréphine cried furiously.

"We found no bodies," retorted another man. "Nor any sign of the creature you claim you saw. Bishop Malebête returns today and will punish every one of us for your lies!"

Tréphine seethed at their denial. The cyberclone's charred alloy bones had been found in the ruined chapel, but few had been persuaded that they belonged to anything more sinister than just another robot. No human remains had yet been unearthed, though she knew it was only a

matter of time. Doctor Falacer's freaky experiments might be a recent development but Malebête's wives and others had been disappearing for years.

"We cannot incur his wrath," declared another of the ageing ex-councillors, again one of the men. Some of the older wives stood meekly with their heads bowed, but the rest of the women and many of the younger men looked angry. "We must offer reparations!"

"No!" cried Adrastea. "You would compensate that ogre after what he's done?"

"He must be stopped!" exclaimed Tréphine. "How can you allow this to continue?!"

She knew why. The elders of Saguenay were not directly threatened and many secretly admired Malebête's old-fashioned views and authoritarian rule. Exasperated, Tréphine stomped away. Adrastea followed her to the edge of the town square and together they looked back at the distasteful scene of old men deciding their fate. Tréphine was surprised to see a dozen or so young women and men had followed them from the assembly. The young dancers she had seen in the square many days ago, again wearing their costumes and clutching scorecards ready for the afternoon's festivities, trailed their older brothers and sisters with wide-eyed expressions.

"Tréphine?" one woman began, her voice trembling. It was Lamia, the granddaughter of the self-proclaimed spokesman in the square. "Adrastea? What will happen to us?"

"I saw your father and grandfather at the burned-out château," Adrastea challenged her, fixing her with an angry glare. "Salvaging the guns left by the fleeing guards! They know trouble is coming and are looking out for themselves. We must do the same!"

Chastised, the woman backed away into the crowd. More townsfolk were gathering around them at the edge of the square, spilling across the streets where Place de la Mairie met Grande Rue. The latter was the main thoroughfare through Saguenay, which on leaving town became the road to Port Neberu. Tréphine turned and stared along its route towards the nearby hills. Dust rose in the distance, billowing from a rapidly moving shape that glinted in the morning sun. Bishop Malebête's ground

car was on its way. Old men huddled in nearby doorways, perturbed by the atmosphere of rebellion.

“Too few are willing to act,” said Tréphine, frowning. “Without help...”

Her words were interrupted by a sudden roar. A hovertruck was approaching from a side street, a delivery vehicle belonging to the business owned by the ex-councillor still spouting his weaselly words in the square. With a hiss of jets, the truck lurched to a halt. Tréphine’s eyes went wide as Lamia climbed from the cab.

“The weapons my father and grandfather stole are in the back,” Lamia declared defiantly. “Can you rid this town of that cursed bishop and his cronies?”

“Malebête must not be allowed to return!” cried another. A dark-haired woman wearing dungarees pushed her way through the crowd. “He killed my mother, whom you elected to be mayor! He has no right to treat us like cattle and rule over us like a king!”

A group of women and a couple of young men were already pulling weapons from the back of the hovertruck. Adrastea quickly took charge, handing stun guns to those eager but likely to shoot themselves in the foot, plasma rifles to the women she trusted to fire only as a last resort. More townsfolk came to join them as they realised the tide was turning. To Tréphine’s surprise, the would-be warriors suddenly broke into song:

*“Onward Sagueney’s soldiers,
Marching as to war,
With the guns of Malebête,
To see the bishop fall!”*

Looking fierce, Adrastea began barking orders and organising her troops into squads. Tréphine returned her stare to the road. The silver, lozenge-shaped ground car had reached the boundary stones marking the edge of town. As she watched, the vehicle slowed and slipped past the first houses of Grande Rue, moving cautiously towards where they waited.

“Watch out, Bishop Malebête,” Tréphine murmured, inwardly smiling. “You and your wicked doctor are no match for the women of Saguenay.”

Adrastea came to her side with a squad of fierce young women toting rifles. Bishop Malebête’s ground car slowed to a halt, its turbines still whirring. A pair of silver doors swung up. Two guards emerged and warily pointed their rifles at the gathered revolutionaries. Doctor Falacer clambered hesitantly from the vehicle.

“What is this?” he demanded. “A welcoming committee?”

“A rebellion,” Tréphine said calmly. “You and Malebête have no place here.”

“Let us through!” snapped Falacer. “We will discuss your punishment later. The bishop has had a long journey and we’re all tired and need to eat!”

“The kitchen is closed,” called one of the cooks, brandishing a stun gun.

“There’s plenty of fried chicken at the château!” Adrastea suggested wickedly.

Bishop Malebête eased himself from the ground car. He was wearing his official robes, the silver alien mask dangling from his pudgy hands. He stared incredulously at the crowd blocking the road, then looked up across the town square towards the charred walls of his beloved château. Malebête’s face became a picture of fury.

“You have defiled a sacred place, most sacred!” he cried. “Guards, seize her!”

“Don’t you dare!” countered Tréphine, as his men took a step forward. “This dictator no longer has authority in Saguenay. Put down your weapons and go home.”

“Little girl, do not play games!” sneered Falacer. “Who put you in charge?”

“No one,” admitted Tréphine. “Just like blue beardie before me.”

“We shall choose a new leader,” Adrastea said defiantly. “The democratic way!”

FESTIVAL OF THE STAR

“Then let us run new elections,” offered Malebête, sneering. “I shall run for mayor, your bishop and champion of truth. Saguenay loves me! The good people will vote for me.”

The young dancers shuffled forward, holding their square placards to their chest. With a nod from an older girl, they lifted their score cards above their heads. Tréphine glanced at the row of zeroes and smirked. Bishop Malebête’s face turned purple.

“Saguenay’s future has spoken,” Tréphine said solemnly. “You’ve lost their vote.”

“Rigged election!” Malebête said irritably. “Fake news! I demand a recount!”

The gathered youngsters shrugged, swapped their placards amongst themselves and raised a line of zeroes once more. The guards exchanged glances, placed their weapons on the floor and edged away. Doctor Falacer looked rattled.

“What of Brother Mithuna?” he asked warily.

“Burned to a crisp,” Tréphine told him. “Gone to meet the great alien god in the sky.”

“You too shall join the ranks of dead voters,” snarled Malebête, shaking his fist. Retreating to his car, he paused by the door. “The people love me. I shall return!”

“Not so fast, Malebête,” warned Adrastea. “That vehicle is for elected officials only.”

None of the rebels had raised their weapons, yet their fierce expressions gave the message as clear as any barrel of a gun. Falacer glanced to the road behind them. Bishop Malebête wordlessly joined him, then together they turned their backs and trudged away.

“Ma chérie, you cannot let them go!” cried Adrastea. “They are murderers!”

“Saguenay has no gendarmes, no courts,” Tréphine said bitterly. “Bishop Malebête’s word was law. But we will tell the authorities in Neberu of his crimes. Justice will be served.”

“I pray that you are right,” she said. There were tears of relief in her eyes. “You saved my life. He will regret for evermore choosing you for his bride.”

FESTIVAL OF THE STAR

“Ma moitié!” Tréphine said resolutely, wrapping her arm around her friend’s waist. “Weddings should be for love. All I want for Christmas is you.”

She watched the two figures retreating into the distance. It was a long walk back to Port Neberu. Peace and goodwill had a chance to thrive in Saguenay once more.

THE END

About the Author

Steph Bennion is a writer, musician and part-time Westminster civil servant, born and bred in the Black Country but now living in Hastings after finally escaping the black hole of London. Her stories are written as a reaction to the dearth of alternative heroes amidst bookshelves swamped by tales of the supernatural, not that there's nothing wrong with a bit of fantasy now and again. *Hollow Moon*, the first novel in her space-opera tales of mystery and adventure, was published in 2012. *The Avalon Job*, the fourth book in the series, was published in 2020.

As **Stephanie M Bennion**, she has written speculative fiction for older readers. *The Luck Of The Devil*, a tale of supernatural transgender angst in 1990s Ireland, was published in 2018. The time-travelling romp *The Battles Of Hastings*, a novella inspired by her adopted town and the 950th anniversary of the eponymous battle, was published in 2016.

THE AVALON JOB A novel by Steph Bennion

Ravana O'Brien is confronted by her past in more ways than one. Secret agent Kedesh is back on the scene, seeking help for a mission to Alpha Centauri. Artorius, the young boy taken by Que Qiao agents after fleeing the Dhusarian Church, has been traced to a shadowy American base on the moon of Avalon. A second alien portal has been found, a mysterious ancient machine that can twist space and time.

Avalon is no ordinary world. The moon hosts the vicious celebrity show *Gods of Avalon*, where players fight to survive against cyberclone beasts. Infiltrating the secret base means getting past the game arenas, but Ravana cannot trust the slippery Kedesh and has enemies old and new out to see her fail. The rejuvenated Priest Taranis has a new chosen one, a man called The Raven who seeks Ravana's doom. A rumour of hidden gold is sowing confusion. Artorius is the key to those who want the alien portal open. Watchers are playing the ultimate game.

Available from WyrdStar

HOLLOW MOON

Steph Bennion

Space Opera for young adults (and the young at heart)

HOLLOW MOON

PAW-PRINTS OF THE GODS

CITY OF DECEIT

THE AVALON JOB

Short Stories

TO DANCE AMONGST THE STARS

MERRY CHRISTMAS, MISTER WOLF

Short Stories available as free downloads

GENIE And The LAMP	Merry Christmas, Mister Wolf
To Dance Amongst The Stars	A Wizard, A Sword And A King
The Watcher And The Priest	Festival Of The Star
It's A Blunderful Life	The Clockwork Cat
The Narcissus Solution	Santa Claustrophobia
	Psyche's Seven

Stephanie M Bennion

THE BATTLES OF HASTINGS

THE LUCK OF THE DEVIL

WYRD WORLDS

Short Stories by Various Authors

WYRD WORLDS

WYRD WORLDS II

Poetry by LALLAFA JELTZ

DEMOCRACY: AN EPITAPH

BREXIT: A HAIKU DIARY

For news on forthcoming publications, please go to www.wyrdstar.co.uk.