

It's a Blunderful Life

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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It's A Blunderful Life

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

A short story by
Steph Bennion

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IT'S A BLUNDERFUL LIFE

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

Revolution is afoot on Yuanshi. Pursued by armed agents, Fenris contemplates his fate as he prepares to end it all with a midnight leap from a bridge. Then a mysterious stranger arrives to persuade him that life is worth living, but can she really hope to convince him by showing the greatest blunders of his life?

FENRIS RAN THROUGH THE NIGHT like the proverbial quick brown fox, desperate to flee the awakened dogs of war. Soon the palace gates were far behind and he was at the lake and halfway across the bridge before his wheezing gasps for air finally brought him to a staggering halt. The thin atmosphere of the terraformed moon of Yuanshi made maintaining a sprint difficult for even the hardiest of athletes, which he most definitely was not. The fear of capture aside, even the anticipated agony of the plasma rifle shot with his name on it proved no match for the very real pain of his poor pounding heart and aching lungs.

A weary glance over his shoulder was enough to confirm that the searchlights of the pursuing agents remained far too close for comfort, yet for the moment he could run no more. Exhausted, he leaned against the parapet railing, conscious of how loud his wheezing breaths sounded above the quiet waters below. Maharaja Kashyap was dead and the city of Ayodhya had fallen to the security forces of the Que Qiao Corporation. Fenris, who had worked hard to become a trusted figure in the Maharaja's court, now found himself counted amongst those labelled dangerous revolutionaries on the wrong side of martial law. This was one Christmas Eve he would not forget.

“Is this how it ends?” he murmured. “Hunted down like a common criminal?”

The slender suspension bridge that linked the lake's island park to the surrounding city was a foolish place to stop, for the exposed roadway offered no cover but the darkness to hide him from the armed agents

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swarming the Palace of Sumitra on the island behind. Much of the power had been cut across Ayodhya and all Fenris had to light his way was the pale blue glow of Yuanshi's neighbouring moon of Daode, low upon the western horizon. His shimmering reflection seemed to be inviting him to cast aside his worries for the cool calm of the watery depths. The pale bearded face that stared back made a mournful portrait. His torn tunic and unkempt hair framed a visage not unlike that of a ghostly tramp.

A sudden grey blur jolted him out of his reverie and Fenris scowled as a cat appeared from nowhere and darted past his feet. He turned to watch its leaping progress along the bridge and to his surprise saw instead a tall, slim woman standing just a few metres away. Her long dark tresses and floor-length silver and black fur coat twitched in the breeze, setting off smooth olive-skinned features singularly unruffled by the sound of distant gunfire from the palace. Her quizzical look and sly smile hinted of playful mischief, yet her eyes betrayed an awareness far greater than that suggested by her youthful demeanour.

Fenris took a step forward, then paused. The woman bore neither the attitude nor the attire of the Que Qiao agents currently securing the palace, yet he did not recognise her from Kashyap's court. When the stranger showed no signs of speaking, Fenris took an uneasy step towards her and offered a nervous cough.

"Are you here to arrest me?" he asked, eyeing her cautiously. "From Que Qiao?"

The woman smiled and shook her head.

"From the Church? Have the faithful taken up arms as the Maharaja hoped?"

Again, she responded merely with a slow shake of her head.

"There's a surprise," Fenris muttered. He decided the woman was not about to shoot him and tried a different tack. "Did you see the cat? That damn moggy scared the life out of me! I wish they would not jump out like that."

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“The Egyptians once worshipped cats,” the woman said sadly, breaking her silence. Her soft voice possessed a degree of idle menace that made Fenris think of a caged tiger, one bored of being pampered and quite ready to casually eat its keeper. “Long before your time, of course. They were happy days.”

“Their slaves may have disagreed,” he said warily.

“Slaves need gods most of all,” she murmured. “You should know that.”

Fenris frowned. He thought about his own commitment to the Dhusarian Church, which looked to the legendary greys of Epsilon Eridani for spiritual enlightenment. There the similarity ended; while domesticated cats were all too ready to make themselves at home in ancient Egypt, few outside of the Church truly believed that grey humanoid aliens existed for real on twenty-third century Yuanshi. He took a step back and returned his stare to the dark watery depths, momentarily lost in thought as he recalled his morbid contemplations prior to the strange woman's arrival. It occurred to him that holier-than-thou charity workers of all denominations would be mobilising throughout Ayodhya to help mop up the mess following the corporation's action, but the personal touch often gave way to the next best thing. Fenris had heard the rumour about why cameras and hologram projectors were installed on bridges, high buildings and other popular suicide spots but until now had not believed it.

“Are you from the Samaritans?” he asked. “One of their counsellor holograms?”

The woman shrugged. “Were you about to jump?”

“It's either that or spend the rest of my life in Feng Du,” he replied. The thought of a one-way ticket to the grim penal colony on Taotie was the reason Fenris knew he should be running from the Que Qiao agents right now, but there was something about the woman that held him to the spot. “Are you here to convince me otherwise?”

The woman gave a wry grin, but came no closer.

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Fenris gave her a quizzical frown. "Do you have a name?"

"A great many."

"Such as?"

"In the past I have gone by the name of Athene."

"So now even holograms are named after ancient gods?"

The woman smiled. "If you like."

"For a Samaritan counsellor, you are a projection of remarkably few words," Fenris said irritably. "Are you not here to persuade me that I have a wonderful life and whatever the trials and tribulations that may come my way, it's better to live to fight another day?"

Athene considered this. "A good Samaritan probably would do all that," she agreed. "On the whole, they were the nicest people in the world as long as the conversation stayed away from religion and the Jerusalem construction industry. No, I think you should jump."

"What?"

"I've been studying you for a while," she said and took a step closer. "Watching to see if you have been bad or good, just like that young upstart Saint Nicholas. In your case, it seems whatever you do ends badly. I've come to the conclusion that you should end it all now and save history from an even more tedious fate."

"That's horrible!" cried Fenris. "What sort of a counsellor are you?"

"The best," she declared. "I deal in the truth, not feeble reassurances."

Fenris gave her a hurt look, then went back to his frown.

"This must be a joke," he muttered. "Some spotty-faced urchin has hacked into the Samaritans' hologram network and is having a good laugh at my expense, no doubt from his safe and sound bedroom on the other side of town. Very droll."

"Wrong. Do you want to see your best blunders or not?" she asked. "You're never far from a camera, Fenris my dear. Your whole life is on record, as is everyone else's on this moon. Except for the Maharani's," she mused. "Unusually devious, that one."

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Fenris gave a hollow laugh, then caught the woman's look of impatience and warily began to edge away, conscious that he was supposed to be fleeing for his life. Just then a shaft of light shone down from the nearest bridge stanchion and he stared in amazement as the beam swiftly widened to reveal a holographic projection much sharper and clearer than any three-dimensional holoivid he had ever seen before. Shimmering before him was a scene he instantly recognised as a corridor within a space station, with a floor and ceiling that curved up and out of sight in a way only seen in the huge wheel-like constructions that served as orbital docks at many worlds. The grey-walled corridor was punctuated on either side by a series of oblong doors. As he watched, two young boys emerged from a doorway on the left and ran away down the corridor, laughing as they went. Fenris realised he was looking at himself from twenty years ago and was so surprised he forgot there was a battle raging half a kilometre away.

"That's *Armstrong Orbital*," he murmured. "We were stranded there for days, waiting for the crew to fix a problem on the ship bringing us to Yuanshi from Earth."

"A mere trick of the light," Athene said dismissively. "Shall I begin?"

"I really should be going," Fenris remarked nervously. "I'm sure you mean well, but there's agents with guns out there who most certainly do not."

"They can wait," said Athene, then clicked her fingers.

* * *

...They can wait she said and the space station is so bright like looking into a bubble and suddenly the picture is clear as day and it all comes back to me as I see myself so small but running fast as I chase the other boy down the corridor. He is my friend from the spaceship and we are playing hide and seek and it is Formungand my brother who is hiding but the curving passageway goes on forever and there are so many places he could be. The boy has stopped and is banging on a door and pointing through the round window

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and laughing. It is an airlock and my friend has pressed the buttons and is giggling but it is not funny because I can see Jormungand inside panicking and thumping the locked door as his face turns white then red as the airlock warning lights flash on and off and on again. My friend is still smiling as if it is a joke like the bullies do at school and Jormungand is shouting but the horrible siren is drowning out his words and his eyes are wide in terror. My nasty friend stops laughing and suddenly runs away because he is scared of what he has done and realises Jormungand is going to shoot into space and die but I stay behind and pull the lever to open the door yet nothing happens and my brother is thumping the window but also now clutching his throat and he is crying ever so much. I have seen the space-station crew work the airlock controls and think I know what to do and press the buttons again and again but get it wrong then have one last try and hear a clunk as I finally get it right. Suddenly there are no more flashing lights and I pull the lever again and this time the door opens and Jormungand falls through into the passageway and onto the floor. He is curled up tight and crying like a baby but it is okay because he is out and he not going to die...

* * *

Fenris blinked. The space station froze and then faded, but he had been so immersed in the illusion that several moments passed before he remembered his predicament. Slightly stunned, he shifted his gaze to that of the woman, who was regarding him with a particularly smug expression. It was then he noticed how quiet it had become. The marauding Que Qiao agents back at the palace appeared to be taking a break.

“That was incredible,” he murmured. “It felt like I was watching myself for real.”

“You rescued your brother from certain death! How marvellously heroic.”

“I got there just in time.” There was sadness in Fenris’ voice, for many of his memories of Jormungand were painful. “He was plagued by terrible headaches for the rest of his life and never quite the same again. Father

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often spoke sadly about how Jormungand that day went straight from a happy little boy to an angry young man.”

“Fascinating,” murmured Athene, faking a yawn. “This is about you, not your brother. I wanted to show you how useless your contribution to humankind has been.”

“I saved his life!” protested Fenris, confused.

“You know as well as I do how that panned out,” she retorted.

“What is my contribution supposed to be?” he demanded. “I have neither influence nor resources. What about someone like Maharani Uma, who has both at her disposal yet only cares for herself and her son? She will probably spend longer choosing what to wear for the funeral than in actual mourning for her dead husband.”

“That is harsh!” Athene looked shocked.

“Since when did automated holograms become so judgemental?” remarked Fenris, increasingly agitated. “Especially one supposedly programmed to stop me from hurling myself off this bridge?”

“You haven’t the courage,” she snapped. “Shall we see part two?”

Fenris jumped as a beam of light appeared from the stanchion as before and widened to unveil a remarkably-detailed view of a bustling hospital ward. Before he could protest, Athene gave him a wink and snapped her fingers once again.

* * *

...Shall we see part two she asked but I really should be running from the agents yet the vision in the bubble is so bright and I'm in Lanka hospital and there's wounded people everywhere and I remember now this is the night of the massacre at Aranya Pass. Volunteers broke the curfew to go with Que Qiao medical workers to bring supplies into Lanka but were ambushed by rebel fighters and Maharaja Kashyap is very angry as it was his own Captain Kartikeya who opened fire as he thought it was a troop convoy of armed Que Qiao agents. The tiny hospital is filling up with the dead and the wounded

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and the priest Taranis is here with the Maharaja and I'm trying to find them both but the screams and shouts and stench of blood and bile is making me feel ill. Nurse Jizo asks me to help her move one of the dead onto a trolley as she needs the bed to treat the survivors but there is a little Indian girl by the bed crying her eyes out and Jizo is quite cruel and pushes her away so we can get to the long cold shape beneath the sheet. The girl is no more than three or four Earth years old and was with the volunteers when they were attacked and her little brown arm and face are burned and covered in blood and she is crying so much but so brave when Jizo starts to pull at the pieces of metal in her arm. I start to push the trolley away but then Jizo asks the girl for her name and she replies Ravana O'Brien at which the nurse looks at her in horror and says Ravana is a Hindu demon and no one would call a little girl by such a terrible name. Then I remember Taranis once told me a Dhusarian prophecy about the future king of Lanka and a boy called Ravana who would grow up to drive Que Qiao from Yuanshi but that was just a silly story and this Ravana is not a boy but a little girl. I tell this to Jizo but part of me thinks I should have kept quiet for the little girl's sake yet another part is saying I should tell Taranis and the Maharaja when I find them but the priest tells many tales and no one these days really believes in prophecies and things like that. I push the trolley to the morgue and return to help another nurse and when I finally find Taranis I do not want to look foolish and so do not tell him about the poor little Indian girl called Ravana...

* * *

The vision faded, leaving Fenris reeling gently as reality reasserted itself and brought him back to the bridge with a bump. Athene had not moved from her spot near the railings. Her air of self-satisfaction came across as grossly inappropriate given the circumstances and Fenris turned away in disgust to contemplate his shimmering reflection once more.

“The battle of Aranya Pass,” she mused. “Not the rebellion’s finest hour.”

“A most unfortunate episode,” Fenris admitted. “Kartikeya thought he was firing upon a Que Qiao armoured security convoy. Taranis wanted

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him cashiered but the Maharaja had lost so many other officers he allowed the young idiot to stay in post. Believe it or not, he's Major Kartikeya now, but only because his more gifted contemporaries accepted the amnesty offered by Que Qiao and switched sides."

"What about you?" the woman asked. "Have you no ambition?"

"My loyalty was always to Taranis."

"Not to the Maharaja and his beloved wife?"

Fenris almost smiled as he thought of the Maharani being forced to flee her comfy palace. "Don't talk to me about that self-seeking, gold-digging, arrogant piece of..."

"Did the priest not abandon you all in your hour of need?" interrupted Athene.

Fenris paused. "The Church was there when I needed it," he said slowly.

He caught the bemused look Athene gave him and turned away. What he had said was true, for he had once before found himself fearful and in despair with nowhere else to go, only to be welcomed with open arms into the fledgling Dhusarian Church of Yuanshi. Since that fateful day, he had devoted all his energies to the Church and his star had quickly risen until he was rewarded with the trust of Taranis himself. By then the priest had ingratiated himself with the self-proclaimed Maharaja and for a while Fenris had walked with him along the increasingly-corrupted corridors of power.

"You don't strike me as a very spiritual person," Athene suggested. "I sense you felt uncomfortable with the fantasy of a prophecy in the context of a religion that to most people is more like science-fiction. What happened to the little girl? Did you change your mind, live up to your declaration of loyalty and tell Taranis you'd found his demon king?"

Fenris shook his head. "Nurse Jizo got there first. You are right to call it a fantasy. I later discovered Taranis had engineered the so-called prophecy from the start. He had found a young couple who were expecting

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their first child and persuaded the mother to let him be there at the birth, where he surprised them all by giving the baby the name of Ravana. Unfortunately, he was unaware his newborn demon king was actually a girl and the parents were too scared to tell him. It was too late by then anyway; Taranis had already ordered the child's name to be recorded on the Que Qiao citizen database."

"Ouch," muttered Athene. "So the poor kid is stuck with the name."

"Taranis did not find out until that fateful night years later, then was furious. Jizo was nevertheless rewarded with a special position within the Church," Fenris added moodily. "The body on the trolley was the girl's mother. It was not a good day all round."

"What about the father? Are he and the girl still on Yuanshi?"

"The last I heard was he had moved on from flying crop-dusting sky clippers and become a freelancer with an old interstellar freighter," Fenris told her. "They don't need to hide anymore, of course. Taranis seems to have disappeared for good this time."

"Which brings me back to my point. He abandoned you in your hour of need!"

Fenris frowned. He knew some did see it that way, for the rebellion floundered almost as soon as the priest left the scene. The Maharaja and his ambitions for self-rule had long been a thorn in the side of Que Qiao's operations on the moons of Shennong. The priest Taranis, the architect of the Maharaja's bid for an independent Yuanshi, had one day suddenly disappeared, leaving a void quickly filled by sycophantic officials who were only interested in lining their own pockets. The moon had riches both sides were willing to fight for and in hindsight it was clear that the years of bitter politics had been no more than a smokescreen whilst both parties prepared for civil war. Even so, Fenris had been shocked when the corporation had resorted to assassination. As he mused over this latest development, he became aware Athene was watching him eagerly.

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“Time for one more revelation?” she asked. “I’m finding this fascinating!”

“Are you mad? People are trying to kill me!”

Athene looked downcast. “I thought we had the making of a real relationship here.”

“Yes, but...”

“It is not your day to die,” she said crossly and snapped her fingers once more.

* * *

...Not my day to die she said and I really hope that is the case as Que Qiao agents carry plasma rifles like the ones the Chinese army have that can kill a neomammoth with a single shot. My brother had a thing for guns and weapons and in the bright bubble I can see Formungand at the farm with father’s hunting electro-lance and he is really happy as he has met a girl and quit agricultural college and decided on a career with the Que Qiao security forces instead. Father is really angry as he wants to retire to Moldova and hand the family farm to my brother and I am worried as Formungand does not have the right temperament to be a good security agent as when he gets angry he gets violent and is the last person to be given a gun. I was planning to travel the five systems but now father asks me to take my brother’s place and run the farm instead and father is so tired and needs to retire but I hate terraforming and farming and I am a little bit scared of all the weird native wildlife which is so different to what I am used to back in Ayodhya. Father tells me I have to take over otherwise his workers will be destitute and he wants the farm to stay in the family earning credits so that he and mother can have a happy retirement and I cannot say no. The bright bubble jumps and I am still at the farm only it is a year later and Formungand is dead and father and mother have gone back to Earth and I tried so hard to make it work but there was no money as my brother was in debt and mortgaged the farm without telling anyone. Que Qiao are confiscating everyone’s land in Anjayaneya and I have ended up homeless and without hope just like all the workers. I am so sorry

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father for losing everything you worked for and for not being there in Moldova at the end when mother and then you passed away...

* * *

The vision faded. Fenris quivered in muted anger as he faced Athene's cool stare, for she was scrutinising him keenly for any sign of a reaction, much like a scientist who had just given a laboratory rat a treat of botulism-flavoured cheese. She seemed to be taking sadistic pleasure inflicting his life's worse moments upon him.

"That was underhand," he said grimly. "I have no idea how you obtained that footage, but you really know how to twist the knife. Yes, I admit it. I am a failure. I gave up my one dream of travelling the worlds and for what? I lost the farm and all my family are dead."

"Now you're feeling sorry for yourself."

"Other people have it all!" Fenris retorted, speaking with a venom that caught Athene by surprise. "I'm sorry to go back to the Maharani, but Kashyap has been dead barely an hour and she has already disowned the court and the royalist supporters in the Dhusarian Church. She's happy to let Yuanshi suffer. I've played by the rules, tried to be loyal and look where it has got me! Halfway across this bridge with Que Qiao Corporation troops advancing on both sides! I should throw myself in the lake. I'd wish I'd never been born!"

"Finally!" cried Athene. Hand on hip, she wagged a finger of her other before his downcast gaze. "We get to the petulant cry of the hopeless! But do you really mean what you say? Do you want to know what the world would be like if you hadn't been born?"

Fenris thought about it, then nodded. "Yes!" he said defiantly. "I would!"

"You won't like it."

"How could the world possibly be any worse without me in it?"

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“That’s just the point,” she said. “It isn’t any worse. It’s better.”

“What?!”

“A lot better,” she added, with another annoying smile.

“You really know how to lift a man’s spirits,” Fenris grumbled.

He had never hit a woman before but was getting to the point where he could quite cheerfully strangle the mysterious stranger. Yet something was not quite right, for the once-raging sounds of battle remained suspiciously absent and as he glanced back in the direction of the palace he saw even the searchlight beams had stopped moving. Part of him was ready to believe he had already jumped or been shot from afar and that the conversation on the bridge was no more than a death’s-door hallucination. He was just about to ask if this was true when Athene offered a question of her own.

“What happened to Jormungand?”

“My brother?” Fenris gave her a suspicious look. “Why?”

“His fate was entwined with your own,” she reminded him. “You know where I’m going with this so you may as well play along.”

“He enlisted as a security agent within days of leaving college,” he told her, though he suspected Athene already knew the story. “On his first outing, his unit was sent to intercept a ship suspected of delivering weapons to the Maharaja. The operation did not go as planned and as the ship’s crew fled, Jormungand went berserk and gunned down dozens of innocent bystanders in the resulting chase before being shot dead by his own commanding officer, who in a panic did not know what else to do. The autopsy on my brother suggested a freak brain aneurysm was somehow to blame. We all knew Jormungand had not been right ever since that incident in the airlock.”

“You have a talent for understatement.”

“The corporation was dismissive of the whole affair,” Fenris said bitterly. “Taranis led the Maharaja’s campaign to compensate the families who had lost loved ones and to his credit extended that to my parents, who

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were quite distraught. Some say that was the beginning of the rift between Kashyap and Que Qjao.”

“It did little to improve the situation,” admitted Athene. “The woman who shot your brother was a good officer who in a different time-line was destined for a long but ultimately uneventful career on Yuanshi. Her life instead fell apart and she returned to Earth to become a campaigner for tighter gun controls, who ironically then got herself shot after sneaking into the White House with a petition to outlaw private armies. Your childhood heroics saved your brother’s worthless life, but destroyed those of many others.”

“You’re making this up. Different time-lines? What rubbish!”

“As I said, a world without Fenris is one much improved,” she said, taunting him. “What about the second vision? You had three choices; tell Taranis about the little girl, trust your own instincts and say nothing, or do something really indecisive and let Nurse Jizo take the credit instead. You took the one path that encouraged the nurse to leave her post. Shall I tell you what happened?”

“I have a feeling you are going to whether I like it or not.”

“As soon as the girl’s father heard you’d spilled the beans, he made sure they got out of that hospital as soon as they could. Nurse Jizo joined Taranis in the resulting unsuccessful search and was not on the ward when Minister Lingam was brought in with a serious head wound. His family had been out at the theatre but got caught up in the riots that erupted in Lanka when people heard what had happened to the medical convoy.”

“So what if Jizo was not there?” remarked Fenris. “Other medics were around. Jizo never struck me as much of a nurse anyway. She had some very peculiar habits.”

“You’re being too polite. Nurse Jizo was under investigation for certain irregularities at the time,” Athene told him. “Yet no one else was free to treat Lingam straight away and he died. He was the last of the

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Maharaja's cabinet with any true diplomatic talent. It's your fault the rebel forces today are in the hands of idiots like Commander Kartikeya."

"Commander?" Fenris asked. He was both annoyed and confused by her accusation. "It's Major Kartikeya, not Commander."

"Whoops! I'm looking too far ahead."

"Kartikeya becomes a Commander?!" he asked, incredulous.

"We're getting off the point!" she snapped. "What I'm saying is once again you only served to make matters worse. Nurse Jizo also never faced her medical standards board, for her reward for tipping off Taranis was to tour the five systems as a trusted missionary for his Church. I believe you always wanted to travel."

"You really know how to rub it in," muttered Fenris. "The girl and her father got away though. Is that a good thing or not?"

"That depends," Athene said, then gave him a cryptic smile. "It has presented an opportunity upon which you have yet to make a judgement."

"What about the third thing you showed me?" Fenris asked irritably. "Father's farm in Anjayaneya. In some other make-believe reality of yours, did Jormungand not walk out on it all and is instead now the best farmer in Epsilon Eridani?"

"And thus not end up killing all those people?" mused Athene. "I hadn't thought of that. Actually, it's far simpler. You should have refused to take it on yourself. The farm would have fallen into disrepair and returned to jungle by the time Que Qiao moved in."

"How is that so different?"

"You ran the business rather well," she said. "Your father's farm was in such good condition when Que Qiao confiscated it that the land now produces one of the best thunderworm egg crops for the corporation. You know what egg is, don't you?"

"The mood drug? Que Qiao aren't drug barons."

"Oh, how naive you are!"

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“But possession of egg is a serious crime!” protested Fenris. “Que Qiao come down really hard on anyone caught in possession of the stuff. Admittedly, I heard rumours that agents had planted egg on certain members of the Maharaja’s court to get them sent to Feng Du, but... oh. I see.”

Athene smiled. Fenris became aware he could once again hear distant gunshots and shouts from the agents ransacking Sumitra and as he looked towards the wavering searchlight beams back at the palace it was clear some were coming his way. He returned his wretched gaze to the mysterious stranger and sighed.

“A life of blunders,” he said. “I am incapable of doing good.”

“True,” Athene agreed. “By your own standards, you are a terrible person. But how do you define good or bad? They are mere philosophical viewpoints.”

Fenris frowned. “I don’t understand. Shall I jump?”

“Do you want to?”

“I thought you were here to enlighten me,” he said and turned to contemplate the dark lake once more. “To show me the way.”

Athene smiled. “It’s simply a matter of readjusting your moral compass.”

“What?” asked Fenris, turning back to face her. “But...”

The woman had gone, leaving nothing but a glimpse of a cat-like silver flash leaping into the shadows.

“Good riddance,” he muttered uneasily.

Athene’s impromptu counselling, if it could be described as such, had been an unsettling experience but weirdly effective, for as Fenris gave one last disconcerted glance across the cold waters of the lake he realised with renewed bitterness that he was in too much of a bad mood to jump. Athene’s cruel analysis of his life and her sudden disappearance had annoyed him no end and suddenly he was filled with the desire to live. It was the only way he could be sure to inflict his misery upon others.

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He spied a figure approaching from the Ayodhya end of the bridge, then quelled his panic as he recognised the young Indian man as a servant from the late Maharaja's court. The man was calling softly to Fenris and beckoning him to follow.

“Readjust my moral compass!” Fenris muttered. “The parable of the bad Samaritan!”

* * *

Fenris swiftly made his way to where the man awaited and together they slipped into the seclusion of the wooded parkland just as the pursuing black-clad agents came into view on the far side of the bridge. Fenris' new companion was gibbering incoherently and jumped in terror every time he heard gunshot, but did not pause once as he led the way up a tree-lined track to where a small six-wheeled transport was waiting. Fenris recognised the vehicle as an old lunar-class personnel carrier of a type used by early Yuanshi colonists. The barrel-shaped hull of this particular transport was adorned with polished wooden side panels and a highly-ostentatious roof pennant displaying the royal crest.

The man barely gave Fenris a chance to catch his breath as he hustled him through the hatch of the vehicle and into the darkened interior. As Fenris fumbled to orientate himself in the gloom, the hatch closed behind him and the transport's interior lights came on to reveal he had inadvertently been trying to sit down on someone's lap. He shuffled around to face the other occupants of the transport and locked gazes with a fierce yet petite and incredibly-beautiful young Indian woman, dressed in a traditional saree of red and gold, next to whom sat a sleepy young Indian boy aged no more than four Terran years old. Fenris gulped and nervously fell upon his knees before the woman.

“Maharani Uma!” he stammered. “Forgive me! I did not intend to sit on your royal presence!”

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“Who is this person?” the Maharani asked sternly, addressing her question to the man who had brought Fenris to the vehicle. Her measured tones cut through the sudden tension like a knife dipped in honey.

“Introduce yourself!” the man hissed to Fenris.

Fenris smiled nervously. “My name is Fenris, Maharani. I am employed by your esteemed court.”

“In what capacity?”

“Political Analyst,” he replied. “I probe the Que Qiao citizen database for information. However, I am willing and able to serve you in any capacity you see fit.”

“That remains to be seen,” she replied frostily. “My driver saw you on the bridge and believed you to be of higher standing than you so obviously are, but regrettably I am in no position to be choosy. We are leaving Yuanshi tonight and you are to arrange transport and a safe haven for myself and my son.”

“You need my help?”

“Driver!” snapped Maharani, ignoring Fenris’ question. “To the spaceport!”

The man nodded and slipped through a curtain to the control cabin at the front of the vehicle. Moments later, the transport gave a lurch and started back along the track towards the road. Fenris risked a peek through the blinds at the side window and smiled grimly as the transport was briefly serenaded by a volley of plasma fire from startled Que Qiao agents before speeding on its way, its electric engine moaning softly. Releasing the blind, Fenris settled into the luxurious velvet upholstery and regarded Maharani Uma carefully. The young Raja Surya, the little boy dozing next to her, was presumably heir to the Yuanshi throne now that his father was dead. Fenris was rankled by the effortless way his mother had taken charge, but while he had chided people like the Maharani for being selfish, his encounter with Athene had left him wondering whether that was the only way to survive now he was an enemy of the state.

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Maharani Uma gave him an expectant look and Fenris remembered he had been ordered to find a way off the moon. He had left his wristpad behind at the palace, fearing agents could track the signal, but right now being able to access the network would be helpful. Raja Surya awoke from his slumber with a yawn and rubbed his eyes, frowned and then fixed Fenris with a wary stare that made the older man squirm.

“What’s the matter?” the Maharani asked Fenris. “Do you always fidget like that?”

“Maharani, do you perchance have a wristpad, slate or anything of that ilk I may use?” Fenris asked. “If I am to secure you a ship, I need to make enquiries.”

“Enquiries?”

“I have a contact at space-traffic control,” Fenris lied, though he was sure he could find a royalist sympathiser at Ayodhya spaceport who would talk to him.

“Surya,” said the Maharani gently, turning to her son. “Would you lend your wristpad to this man so he can help us?”

Surya looked up at his mother, then unclasped the device from his tiny wrist and held it out to Fenris, who took it with a gracious nod. Fenris saw the touch-screen device was of the latest design able to link to cranium implants, the latter having been made mandatory some years ago by the Que Qiao administration for all children born in the Epsilon Eridani system. He wondered if the Raja had been included in the implantation programme.

“Well?” asked the Maharani.

Fenris caught her piercing stare and with a few deft taps upon the wristpad, found the contact details for the spaceport and got through to the enquiry desk. The woman who appeared on the tiny screen had no good news to impart, for it transpired Ayodhya spaceport was in the process of being shut down by Que Qiao agents. Fortunately, the woman was eager to do her bit for the rebellion.

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“Try Lanka,” she said hurriedly. “I overheard an agent say the spaceport is still in royalist hands. Space-traffic control shows a shuttle and a couple of freighters queuing for fuel and getting ready to leave.”

“Freighters?” asked Fenris, trying not to sound too hopeful. “Which ones?”

“The *Waukheon* and the *Platypus*,” she said. “No flight plans have been filed.”

Fenris gave a sly smile. “Try to persuade them not to fly off before we get there.”

The woman promised to do what she could and broke the connection. Fenris leaned back in his seat and reflected on his sudden change of luck, for he had recognised the name of one of ships. Athene had been right; fate had presented an opportunity that was now there for the taking. He looked at the Maharani and did his best to meet her cold questioning gaze.

“Driver!” he called, his eyes still on the Maharani. “We need to go instead to Lanka spaceport. Ayodhya is closed.”

The Maharani glared at him. “My man is not yours to command.”

“Is this really the time to argue about protocol?” Fenris asked coolly.

“Be careful with that attitude,” she growled. “Driver! Lanka spaceport, at once!”

* * *

Yuanshi's second city was on the other side of the moon's largest island continent and a four-hour drive from Ayodhya. The weather turned foul as soon as the road began to sweep down from the central highlands and the rain splattered ever heavier against the transport's windows as they neared the slumbering city. Terraforming had allowed the protective domes shielding early settlements to be removed some years before, but the buildings of Lanka still huddled together like rabbits suspicious of the open hutch door and the promise of freedom.

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“Are we there yet?” asked Surya, waking from yet another doze.

The Maharani pulled her son close. “Very nearly.”

Using the young Raja’s wristpad, Fenris had earlier managed to get a message to royalists in Lanka to inform them of the Maharani’s imminent arrival, but was still unsure of what to expect. The spaceport was on the outskirts of Lanka, thus saving them from having to travel into the city itself and it was not long before the transport was ploughing through a sea of mud towards the small terminal building at the head of the runway. Parked outside the neighbouring warehouse was a long purple and white Mars-class freighter with its cargo door open and biplane wings extended for take-off. As the transport approached, Fenris could see a man in the glare of the warehouse lights, supervising the serpentine pipes of the refuelling gantry linked to the ship’s hull. The only other ship in sight was a small orbital shuttle and Fenris guessed the other freighter had left. The rain was easing and the first rays of dawn were starting to break upon the moon’s eastern horizon.

“The *Platypus*,” remarked the Maharani. She was looking at the freighter.

“How do you know?” asked Fenris.

“An educated guess. Rather appropriate, do you not think?”

Fenris smiled. The purple and white spacecraft had a curious flat projection extending from the nose of its cylindrical hull, which together with its four sets of squat landing gear did make the ship look somewhat like the strange aquatic mammal of antipodean Earth.

“The pilot is Australian,” Fenris told her, as if that explained everything. “An old acquaintance of Taranis’, though I doubt you find that a reassurance.”

The Maharani raised a finely-manicured eyebrow but said nothing. The transport skirted the runway towards the terminal building and came to a halt outside the main doors. The terminal was in darkness, but as the sound of the transport’s engine faded into the night Fenris saw an elderly

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Indian man step from the shadows and come to meet them. The driver reappeared from the cockpit and opened the hatch to let in the cool night air.

“Take this,” murmured the Maharani to Fenris.

Fenris took the offered plasma pistol and suppressed a gleeful grin as he slipped the gun into his tunic pocket. He was eager to stretch his legs and did not hesitate when the Maharani indicated for him to exit first. A few spots of drizzle still fell but the sky was clearing to reveal an occasional glimpse of starlight. Fenris stepped forward to greet the approaching figure, then heard the soft tap of heels upon asphalt as the others followed from the transport and came to his side. The old man ignored him and instead reverentially bowed before the Maharani and Surya.

“Maharani Uma!” the man cried, his voice thin and wavering. “I am so relieved to find you and the young Raja safe! These are dreadful times, truly dreadful!”

“We are not safe yet,” she replied.

The old man bowed again and led the Maharani, Surya, Fenris and the driver towards the warehouse and the berthed freighter. The man at the refuelling gantry cut a distinctive figure with his hairless head and bushy beard, but his fierce stare of suspicion as he wiped his hands upon his dirty blue overalls was enough for Fenris to reach into his pocket for the reassuring lump of the gun. A shadow moved to the door of the ship's cargo bay and Fenris gave a sly smirk as he saw the figure of a young Indian girl.

“This is Quirinus,” the old man said. “Captain of freighter *Platypus*.”

The Maharani nodded and faced the pilot with a determined look.

“Captain Quirinus, I need safe passage from Yuanshi,” she said. “Your ship appears to be the only option left open to me. Rest assured I will pay you well for your trouble.”

Quirinus frowned. “And you are?” he asked, in a dismissive Australian drawl.

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“This is Maharani Uma and her son, Raja Surya, heir to the Yuanshi throne!” snapped Fenris. “How dare you adopt such an insolent tone!”

“So you’re Maharani Uma, eh?” Quirinus gave a mocking bow. “I’m deeply honoured by your majestic presence. The answer is no.”

“I’m afraid we cannot take no for an answer,” the Maharani said coolly.

“You may well be used to getting your own way, but things have changed,” the pilot retorted. He waved a hand towards the darkened terminal building. “Your loyal subjects have bravely abandoned the spaceport and if I don’t leave soon I’ll be running for orbit with a gunship on my tail. Taking outlaws onboard is not going to help my situation one bit!”

“Outlaws?” asked Fenris.

“Haven’t you heard?” Quirinus gave a wry smile. “Que Qiao has declared martial law on Yuanshi and issued arrest warrants for everyone connected with Kashyap’s court.”

“The news channels are portraying you all as terrorists!” the old man added, almost gleefully. “Terrible, terrible times!”

“Which makes it even more vital that we leave this moon far behind,” Fenris declared. Seeing Quirinus frown, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the gun. “Now!”

Quirinus looked down at the pistol aimed at his chest and rolled his eyes in disbelief. “There really is no need for that,” he said wearily.

“Daddy!” cried a voice. “What’s happening?”

The dark-haired girl had left the ship’s cargo bay and was coming towards them, clutching a wriggling ball of fur to her chest as if for reassurance. As she stared fearfully at the pistol aimed at her father, Fenris saw the ugly scars on the side of her face and on her right arm, just visible where she had rolled back the sleeves of the adult-sized flight suit she wore. He recalled the wounded little girl in Athene’s vision and gave a grim smile.

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“Ravana,” Fenris said. “Your daddy is going to fly us away from here.”

“You named your daughter after the Ramayana demon king?” asked the Maharani, eyeing Quirinus with surprise. “Or does it mean something else back in Sydney?”

“I’m from Perth,” Quirinus said coldly, as his daughter came to his side. “And it’s pronounced Ravana,” he added, elongating and softening the trailing vowels of her name to rebuke Fenris for his own harsh staccato pronunciation.

“Her name? It’s a long story,” Fenris said knowingly. The black bundle in the girl’s arms unexpectedly had resolved into a cat and he was once again reminded of his strange encounter with Athene, though the stiff-limbed posture of the creature in Ravana’s grip suggested it was no more than an electric pet. “One I am sure Captain Quirinus would not care to share at this juncture. Evidence of fraternisation with the deposed regime may well lead to himself and his daughter earning arrest warrants of their own.”

“It’s not nice to point guns at people,” remarked Ravana, staring wide-eyed at the pistol in Fenris’ hand. “Are you a policeman?”

“He is my security officer,” the Maharani said. Fenris blinked in surprise. “This heavy-handed approach is regretful, but it is imperative that you take myself and my son away from Yuanshi to somewhere safe. I am prepared to pay whatever it takes.”

“Security officer?” whispered Fenris.

“I am in need of one,” she murmured in reply. “Your predecessor revealed himself to be an undercover tax inspector so I had him shot.”

“This is no world for children,” hissed the old man. “Not safe! Not safe!”

“I agree,” said Quirinus and looked down to his daughter. “Ravana, go back to the ship and tell the computer to start pre-launch checks. Wait for me on the flight deck. Okay?”

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Ravana nodded and ran back to the cargo bay door. Quirinus faced the Maharani with a look of resignation in his eyes.

“Fifty thousand credits will buy you safe passage out of this system,” he said. “For all the luck I’ve had trying to make it as an independent trader I may as well be a taxi service for political exiles.”

“Fifty thousand!” exclaimed Fenris. “That’s daylight robbery!”

“As opposed to armed hijacking, you mean?” muttered Quirinus.

“Your terms are acceptable,” the Maharani replied. “You will take us four, plus my transport. That vehicle contains all I have left in the world and I am not prepared to leave it behind,” she added, seeing Quirinus about to protest.

“That old thing?” he exclaimed. “It won’t fit in the cargo bay!”

“I’m sure it will,” Fenris said coolly, wagging the gun.

“Take it back to the museum where it belongs!”

“The vehicle has retractable suspension,” the driver suggested, seeing the pilot look doubtful. “It is designed to be carried on ships such as yours.”

Quirinus sighed and looked towards the cargo bay door of the *Platypus*. Fenris followed his gaze and saw that unlike many other freighters, the ship had not yet succumbed to the common modification of a separate passenger cabin in the hold. He could almost see the pilot considering the transport as somewhere to accommodate them during the voyage. Quirinus did not strike Fenris as someone who would gladly allow strangers to roam his ship.

The Maharani was speaking in urgent hushed tones with the old man who had greeted them at the spaceport. As Fenris turned to listen, he saw her press a small cloth bag into the man’s hand, who with a curt nod then hurried away into the night.

“I have given him sufficient funds to convince local Que Qiao officials to delay any action on their part,” she informed Quirinus. “A detachment of my husband’s loyal militia will barricade the access road near a local

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temple and prepare for the arrival of security agents. The temple bell will be our cue to leave. Shall we board?"

"You seem to have thought of everything," Quirinus grumbled.

"Driver!" the Maharani called. "Load the transport."

The driver nodded and jogged briskly back to where the transport was parked. The rain began to fall in earnest once more, leading the Maharani and Surya to head for the shelter of the warehouse. Fenris directed Quirinus to follow and felt a thrill of pleasure as the pilot scowled at the point of the gun, then saw him glance towards the *Platypus* and the anxious face of Ravana at the flight-deck window. The refuelling gantry had disconnected and was now slowly retreating across the apron to leave the way clear for departure. No sooner had it clanged to a halt when they heard the distant peal of a bell drifting upon the dawn.

"That was quick," murmured Fenris.

"What's that noise?" asked Surya.

"That is the bell to tell us it is time we were on our way," said the Maharani, hugging the Raja close. "My little angel has found his wings to fly from here."

"My wings," muttered Quirinus glumly. "I thought Christmas was a time for giving, not taking. Of goodwill to all men and rubbish like that."

"Merry Christmas," Fenris said sarcastically.

"Maybe it is," said the Maharani and whispered something in his ear.

Fenris grinned. Just then, a beam of light shone down from the ceiling of the warehouse and he jumped as a hologram of a young man unexpectedly appeared before him. The monochrome image flickered badly but the youth's clean-cut features, cheerful smile and Samaritans-branded shirt were clearly discernable, as was the hologram's apparent focus upon himself. The young Raja Surya took one look at the apparition and shrieked.

"I am so sorry I'm late!" the hologram announced gaily. "Samaritans, at your service. We saw you on the bridge earlier, but it has been a very

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busy night and our systems have only just caught up with you. I am so glad to see you did not jump after all!”

“Jump?” enquired the Maharani. “Is that why you were on the bridge?”

“Samaritans?” asked Quirinus, smiling wryly.

“I don’t understand,” Fenris said weakly. “I’ve already met one of your...”

He paused. In a dark corner of the warehouse, out of sight of everyone but himself, he saw the familiar figure of Athene leaning casually against a wall. The woman caught his gaze, blew him a kiss and then in a blink of an eye was gone. Fenris watched as a silver cat-shaped blur leapt away across the runway and into the gloom, mildly surprised to find himself untroubled by the revelation that he had absolutely no idea who the mysterious stranger was. In a way, his bad Samaritan had become a guiding angel.

“No more blunders,” he murmured.

“I’m sorry?” asked the projection, puzzled.

“Go away,” said Fenris. “Life is wonderful. I don’t need you.”

“Fine,” snapped the hologram. “Merry Christmas to you, too!”

The protector beam faded, leaving Fenris trying his best to ignore the curious stares of the others. Nearby, the *Platypus* lurched upon its landing gear as the transport reached the top of the loading ramp and slipped through the cargo bay door.

“Christmas is a funny time of year,” the Maharani said cautiously. “Do Dhusarians celebrate such thing? I recall Taranis regaling the court with a rather wonderful story about three wise men and a spaceship that looked like a star.”

“Bearing gifts to travel afar,” murmured Fenris. He contemplated the pistol in his hand and wagged it towards Quirinus. “Where do you plan to take us?”

“I know a place,” Quirinus said warily. “An old asteroid colony ship in the Barnard’s Star system. It’s been taken over by independent settlers, so

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there's no Que Qiao or any other government to worry your highness. The locals call it the hollow moon."

"Running away to the Runaway Star," mused Fenris.

"Sounds wonderful," murmured the Maharani.

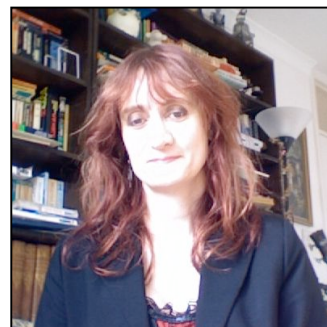
Fenris thought about the twist of fate that had brought him here, in the company of the surviving members of the Yuanshi royal family; and the Maharani's whispered revelation that they were fleeing into exile with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, a hijacked freighter and an old transport containing the entire gold reserves of Yuanshi.

"A new life," he said at last. "I have my Merry Christmas, after all."

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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