

# Merry Christmas Mister Wolf

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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# **Merry Christmas, Mister Wolf**

## **From the Worlds of Hollow Moon**

A short story by  
Steph Bennion

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### **WyrStar publishing history**

First published December 2012  
Revised December 2016 (layout and endpaper update)  
Second edition published November 2017  
Revised November 2020 (layout and endpaper update)

Set in 14pt Baskerville by WyrStar Books.

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# **MERRY CHRISTMAS, MISTER WOLF**

## **From the Worlds of Hollow Moon**

*Christmas at the exclusive ski resort of Kirchel was a tedious affair. But the robot security wolves that patrolled the dome at night were rejects from the brutal Gods of Avalon game show...*

HESTIA PEERED THROUGH THE CRACK in the curtains and watched as three sets of parents walked briskly down the path and away into the night. The glow of the street lamp tenderly embraced the softened outlines of the neighbouring log cabins nestling amongst the trees, slumbering sweetly beneath a soft coating of artificial snow. It was a picture-perfect view, a scene that at night was as exquisite as any secluded ski resort in the Swiss Alps. In reality it was as fake as a politician's smile.

The landscape of Kirchel, on the planet of Ascension in the Barnard's Star system, was an attempt to recreate a slice of Earth on a planet where nature had long ago settled for something a lot less fussy. At the moment however the illusion was sublime, for from Hestia's vantage point at the upstairs window the darkness had all but masked the steel and glass dome shielding the small outpost from the harsh environment outside.

Hearing a noise behind her, she turned and saw the door to her room swing open, heralding the arrival of someone intent on disturbing her solitude. For some reason Hestia had yet to fathom, her parents had this year invited family friends to join them for Christmas at the cabin. Hestia and her brother Lodus had found themselves in the company of Xuthus and Maia, a boy and girl they knew from the academy. When Hestia was younger she had hated the tedious routine of spending every winter break at her family's cabin, but this Christmas had been more than willing to leave behind what had been a particularly horrible year of exams, social angst and endless bad hair days. It had therefore come as an unwelcome surprise to find she would be sharing her holiday with classmates she did not know very well and was not sure she would ever get to like, especially after listening to Maia's moaning during the thousand-kilometre skybus ride to the resort. She watched as Maia now shuffled moodily into the room, crossed the floor and collapsed into a sofa,

blocking Hestia's view of the flickering holographic flames in the fireplace.

"They've gone," Hestia informed her. "We have the cabin to ourselves!"

"Whoopee," muttered Maia. She had tied back her voluminous blond hair and changed her clothes for the third time since their arrival that day. Her latest ensemble in green and silver made her fake tan look more orange than ever. "I wish..."

The rest of her sentence was lost as Xuthus, a tall handsome youth who annoyingly excelled at just about everything at school, shoved his way through the doorway like a grizzly bear with a headache. His bronzed youthful features were creased in annoyance.

"Who's been in my room?" he complained.

Hestia blushed, as she always did in his presence. Like most fifteen-year-old girls at school, Hestia had a secret crush on Xuthus and had done ever since she had started at the academy in their home city of Bradbury Heights. Despite them both being in the same class, she knew Xuthus would never have acknowledged her presence if their parents had not been good friends. Their respective fathers had known each other since college in Berkeley, California and now both worked at the same pharmaceutical laboratory on Ascension, alongside all the other bronzed, happy and extremely wealthy people of Bradbury Heights. Hestia herself was a pale, stocky girl who for years was resigned to fading into the background whenever she was with people like Xuthus and pretty blond Maia, but her confidence was growing. Her parents had finally allowed her to have bioelectric fibre-optic extensions woven into her hair and her own mousy tresses were currently streaked with red, not that anyone noticed.

"Well?" demanded Xuthus. "Has someone been sleeping in my room?"

"Your room?" asked Maia. "What about my room? It looks like an elephant has been jumping up and down on the bed."

"And who's been sleeping in my room?" exclaimed a voice from the door.

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The newcomer was Lodus, Hestia's portly younger brother, who had a better friendship claim with Xuthus and Maia by virtue that all three played in the Bradbury Heights academy orchestra. Much to the chagrin of their parents, Hestia had no musical talent at all. She herself was envious only of the orchestra's occasional trips away from Ascension, such as the one a couple of months ago to play at the Epsilon Eridani peace conference.

"I thought you were downstairs, getting us doughnuts," said Xuthus. Lodus had come through the door empty-handed. Hestia saw the sugar around her brother's mouth and the guilty look upon his face and guessed the rest.

"I said they've gone," repeated Hestia.

"The doughnuts?" asked Maia. "Lodus, you pig!"

"Our parents."

"Leaving us stuck here," Maia complained. "I'm old enough to go to the clubhouse!"

"No, you're not," Xuthus told her, with a smugness that suggested he could have gone if he wanted, even though he was no older than Maia.

"So who has been sleeping in all the beds?" asked Lodus, confused.

"No one," Hestia said defiantly. "It wasn't very nice the way you kept throwing out my stuff no matter which room I picked! This is our family's cabin and you've grabbed all the best rooms. You three are horrible and I'll jump on your beds if I want to!"

\* \* \*

Ascension was on few tourist trails in the late twenty-third century. The planet was a bleak, hostile place with a largely poisonous atmosphere that had little going for it other than the weird native flora and fauna that flourished in the Tatrill Sea and deep canyons of the Eden Ravines. The small scientific-research station at Kirchel, high in the New Malverns, had been established by the Que Qiao Corporation to examine the strange bacteria that thrived in the cracked rocks of the snow-capped peaks.

Findings at Kirchel and elsewhere on Ascension had led to several lucrative medical applications, which in turn had made many of those at the Que Qiao planetary headquarters at Bradbury Heights extremely

rich. With wealth came arrogance and when a scheme was mooted to recreate an Alpine ski resort at Kirchel, ecological considerations were swiftly forgotten as the idea gained favour with all those who had money to burn.

The original research station, a relic of early missions to Barnard's Star, was a small concrete dome barely a hundred metres wide with few concessions to comfort. The ski resort next door, in a stark contrast of ambition, lay beneath a new dome of steel and glass that at a kilometre wide was as large as that of Ascension's capital city and spaceport of Newbrum. Inside the new dome the terrain had been landscaped in the manner of a picturesque mountain valley, complete with cascading streams fed by melt-water from the snow-capped slopes outside. Hardy fast-growing conifers had been imported from Earth at great expense, though not in sufficient numbers to create the desired forest ambience and so holographic trees had been used to fill the gaps until new saplings could be grown from seed.

The older dwellings within the resort were made of concrete, sculpted and coloured to look like log cabins, but wealthier residents had recently started importing the genuine article from Scandinavia, making Kirchel's simple wooden houses some of the most expensive real estate in the five systems. The actual ski slopes lay outside the dome and were regarded as the ultimate thrill for winter sports fanatics, for they were notoriously treacherous even before the need to wear a pressure suit and oxygen mask was taken into consideration. Kirchel was for the rich; its ski slopes were for the insane.

Officer Janus, a bored middle-aged security guard patrolling the deserted lanes of the sleepy resort, was nearing the end of his evening shift. Nothing much ever happened in Kirchel and it had long been the practice to leave the night watch in the hands of sentry robots. He paused near the small stone footbridge at the foot of the valley and looked back at the darkened cabins nestling amongst the trees. Other than the gurgle of the stream below the bridge, the gentle rustle of trees in the breeze from the life-support air vents and the murmur of music from the nearby clubhouse, all was quiet. The hush was promptly shattered as a group of raucous young men emerged from the club, singing at the top of their

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voices. The song was *Forever Christmas*, which was currently being played to death on many a youth-orientated music holovid show due to its sarcastic lyrics and disparaging view of festivities. Janus cringed as he heard their discordant harmonies:

*“Fingers bleed from decking halls with holly,  
Sleigh-bell tinnitus leaves me melancholy,  
You see joy, but all I see is folly,  
I thought this was the season to be jolly!”*

Janus scowled and continued over the bridge to the security cabin near the entrance to the resort. The song fitted his mood, for what he hated even more than his job was seeing or hearing other people having a much better time than himself. Nine years ago almost to this very night he had been involved in some proper fun and action, hunting royalist rebels on the Epsilon Eridani moon of Yuanshi sixteen light-years away.

His colleague, the burly ex-policeman Officer Alberich, was waiting for him outside the open doors of the robot maintenance shed at the rear of the cabin. Inside the shed, the two mechanical wolves were already on their feet, their heads lowered as they patiently awaited their orders. The robots, each standing over two metres high, had originally been built for *Gods of Avalon* holovid broadcasts, then sold off when an audience vote dismissed them as far too tame for the blood-thirsty and sadistic fantasy game show. The wolves were of an old design that featured a cramped cockpit in the robot’s torso for an operator, but had since been modified to run autonomously with the help of artificial intelligence circuits. With the right programming they were as docile as a pet rabbit, but there was no denying that the huge mechanical creatures, with glowing red eyes and a coat of rusty steel needles in place of fur, had an appearance that was not far short of terrifying.

Janus gave Alberich a nod as he trod wearily towards the shed. His hand slipped into his jacket pocket and felt for one of two data rods he had been holding onto all day.

“Why the glum face?” asked Alberich. Janus had slipped back into a scowl. “You’re not still mad over losing the Santa Clause gig, are you?”

“I needed that job,” grumbled Janus. “What’s wrong with having me in a fat suit and beard? I can dish out tacky rubbish to screaming kids as good as anyone. Who decided it would better to get one of those new fandangle robot Santas?”

“All the resorts and malls have them now,” Alberich pointed out. “Christmas is a time of peace, joy and frantic shopping. Stores have their shareholders profits to think about and an android in a fat suit works non-stop for no pay.”

“It’s not right,” mumbled Janus. “I should be Santa!”

“Never mind,” said Alberich. “Anything to report?”

Janus did not expect any sympathy, for he knew Alberich had heard the rumours regarding his portrayal of the seasonal jolly fat man. He could not deny that he was rather fond of having young mothers sit on his lap and cared little that his smutty innuendos had warped many a child’s notion of Father Christmas.

“It’s as quiet as the grave,” Janus replied. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the data rod, a thin plastic tube a few centimetres long that nonetheless was able to store six months’ worth of holovid broadcasts. “Grimm’s Fairytales, as promised. My little one is more into dinosaurs now.”

“Much appreciated,” said Alberich, taking the rod. He glanced up to the light glowing at the first floor window of the security cabin. “My daughter has a new electric elf that acts out whatever story you plug in. Do you think there was ever a time when parents read proper story books to their kids?”

Janus gave him a withering look. “No one asked you to buy that robot.”

“Fair point. Have you got the one for the wolves? It’s not in the safe.”

Janus nodded. He put his hand into his pocket once more and extracted a second data rod, near identical to the first. As per procedure, he held it up before Alberich so that his colleague could verify the large ‘G’ for ‘guard’ written upon in marker pen, then stepped over to the nearest robot, lifted the wolf’s right ear and slipped the rod into the aperture beneath. The angular snout of this wolf was white, signifying it was the master control unit, which meant that after digesting the orders

on the rod it would broadcast appropriate commands to the slave second wolf, using the short-range transceivers in the robots' spiky metal tails. The eyes of the first wolf flashed twice, then it lurched into motion and trotted out to begin its nightly patrol. Moments later, the second wolf received its orders and followed.

"All done," Janus said.

Alberich smiled. "See you tomorrow."

Janus gave a half-hearted wave, turned his back on his colleague and slowly trudged towards the entrance of the tunnel that linked the resort dome with its less salubrious concrete neighbour. It was there he had his own quarters, every squalid square centimetre of which he hated almost as much as his job.

\* \* \*

Officer Alberich watched the wolves as they trotted calmly into the night. Satisfied all was well, he made his way to the nearby cabin, which as the higher-ranking security officer was his to call home whilst on duty in Kirchel. As he stepped through the door, he never noticed the distant shadow that was Janus, who had chosen that moment to double back into the gloom to run after the departing wolves.

Alberich entered the warm embrace of his home. His wife was busy in the kitchen, loading nutrient cartridges into the food molecularisor. He went upstairs to where his six-year-old daughter was waiting for her father to put her to bed.

"I have some fairytales for your elf," he said, showing her the data rod. "Would you like to hear a story before you go to sleep?"

His daughter nodded, leaned over and plucked the tiny gnome-like automaton from where it sat on the edge of a toy box. Alberich removed the figure's pointy hat, dropped the data rod into the hole beneath, then replaced the hat and moved the elf to the bed. Almost immediately the tiny humanoid robot came to life and started marching up and down on top of the bed covers, a performance that made his little girl laugh.

"Patrol! Patrol!" squeaked the elf. "Check the perimeter! Report all intruders!"

“This is a funny story, daddy,” his daughter remarked. She frowned as the elf marched off the end of the bed and crashed to the floor. “I don’t like it very much.”

“Hmm...” murmured Alberich. The elf’s hat had fallen off as it fell. He retrieved the twitching figure and withdrew the data rod.

His blood ran cold as he caught sight of a faint and almost-obliterated letter ‘G’ on the side of the rod. He slotted the data rod into his wristpad, tapped the screen to read the file summary and with a sinking heart realised what had happened. Janus had marked his own rod with a ‘G’, possibly for ‘Grimm’, but the same legend somehow had been scrubbed from the sentry robot’s rod. The question of whether it had been a genuine accident or not would have to wait. His immediate concern was that there were two giant mechanical wolves roaming the resort with their artificial brains filled with fairytales.

“Janus!” he murmured. “The fool!”

His daughter, her eyes wide, frowned at his muttered outburst. After reassuring her with a hug and a promise to return with a proper story, Alberich slipped from her room, brought up Janus’ contact details on his wristpad and opened the communicator channel. Moments later, the worried expression of his colleague appeared on the wristpad’s tiny screen. It was difficult to tell where Janus was, but by the way the picture lurched he guessed the man was in some sort of vehicle.

“Get back here now!” Alberich snapped. “Christmas has been cancelled!”

\* \* \*

Hestia was halfway down the stairs, wondering if she could get rid of the others by suggesting a game of hide and seek where she would do little of the latter, when the stairwell was suddenly plunged into darkness. Her first thought was that the others were playing a trick on her, but no sound of giggling reached her ears. Trying not to panic, she waited for her eyes to adjust to the green glow of her hair extensions. After a few moments, she felt for the wall and cautiously descended to the bottom step.

“House?” she called. “Lights, please.”

There was no response from the building's AI unit. Shuffling onwards, Hestia saw the lights had gone out throughout the lower floor. When she reached the open door to the kitchen, she realised the touch-screen display on the food molecularisor had also gone dark. The worse part was the eerie silence, for the familiar hum of the ventilation system no longer broke the hush. Hestia twitched nervously as she heard a squeak of floorboards, then shrieked as a hand appeared out of the gloom and grabbed her shoulder. Moments later, the beam of a torch appeared to reveal Xuthus' leering grin.

"You scared the life out of me!" Hestia protested.

"What's happened to the lights?" Maia asked fearfully, as she loomed into view behind Xuthus. Hestia saw her reaching to clutch the boy's arm. "Why did we come to this horrid place? It's cold and dark and creepy and light-years from anywhere!"

"Thanks," muttered Hestia. She was not too fond of the cabin herself, but it belonged to her family and she would not take criticism from others. "I didn't ask you to come!"

"Perhaps the fuse has gone," suggested Xuthus.

"You don't even know what that means!" Maia retorted.

Hestia jumped again as a bulky shadow appeared in the nearby doorway. Lodus stepped into the torch beam and wiped a smear of pizza topping from his face.

"What's happened?" he asked. "It's gone dark."

"You don't say," muttered Hestia, then saw her brother's worried frown. "I'll call father. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

Xuthus refused to give up his torch, so upon leaving the others at the kitchen door Hestia had to make do with the glow of her fibre-optic hair extensions, now bright blue, to light the way as she returned upstairs to search for her wristpad. The cloying darkness was unlike anything she had experienced before and again she was forced into using her hands to feel the way. Upon reaching her bedroom, she gingerly crossed to the window and pulled back the curtains. The street lamp outside was no longer lit, but what she had not expected to see was darkness throughout the resort. Her wristpad was on her bed and she slipped it on, selected the

communicator application, then saw the message on the screen and sighed.

“There’s no network,” she revealed, upon rejoining the others. “I can’t see any lights outside, either. It looks like the whole dome has lost power.”

Xuthus looked thoughtful. “If life support has failed as well...”

“What?!” Maia screeched, interrupting. “I’m too young and pretty to die!”

“Modest too,” observed Xuthus. “The air in the dome will last hours, days even. I was going to say that we should head for the clubhouse or the research station. I don’t really want to sit here in this boring black hole until our parents get back.”

“I don’t like the dark,” muttered Lodus.

“I’m sure the feeling is mutual,” Hestia reassured him. “Granny Skadi’s cabin is not far away; she’ll know what to do. She’s the park warden,” she added, secretly pleased that her suggestion had left both Xuthus and Maia looking somewhat confused. “She looks after the plants and trees, feeds the animals, that sort of thing.”

“There’s animals out there?” Maia cried, looking fearful. “Big ones?”

“Hopefully,” Hestia murmured, her fingers having instinctively leapt to her ears. Maia’s loud exclamations at close quarters were becoming painful.

“If they’re hungry they’ll want something bigger to chew,” Xuthus reassured Maia. He punctuated his observation with a slap to Lodus’ belly, earning a hurt stare in return.

With the help of Xuthus’ torch, they found their winter coats and were soon ready to venture outside. Hestia retrieved an emergency lantern from a cupboard beneath the stairs, which was a lot brighter than Xuthus’ torch but barely had enough gas left in its fuel cell for half an hour’s use. As they gathered at the front door of the cabin, Hestia noticed Maia was giving her a strange stare. The other three had chosen to wear their academy flight suits and matching thermal jackets. Hestia herself had grabbed her favourite red coat, which reached to her knees and had a large hood that kept her head nice and warm.

“That’s your coat?” Maia asked. “How quaint.”

Hestia gave her a withering look, pushed open the door and stepped into the cold night air. As she paused to take in the fake wintry vista of the resort, her eyes were drawn to the steel and glass dome above. Free from the glare of artificial light, the stars blazed brighter than she had ever seen before. It was an awe-inspiring sight.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured.

“Come on, little red riding hood,” said Xuthus. “Let’s go and find granny.”

“What?” Hestia shook herself from her reverie. “Yes. It’s this way.”

Lantern in hand, she led her friends down the path, past the dark neighbouring cabins and onto the narrow gravel lane that ran the length of the valley. She hesitated beside a metre-high green box, perturbed by the sight of the crumpled metal doors that lay forlorn on the ground. A mass of broken cables spilled from the opening. The box itself was scarred by a myriad of fresh scratches and dents.

“That explains the power loss,” remarked Xuthus.

“Are those teeth marks?” asked Maia warily.

“Left by a huge bear,” Xuthus told her. “Or a girl-eating tiger!”

His grin faltered as a sudden metallic howl broke the silence of the surrounding forest. The dreadful sound echoed across the dome, bringing with it the unmistakable noise of something large crashing through the undergrowth. Holding the lantern high, Hestia peered into the shadows beneath the trees, then felt Lodus sidle closer and take her other hand in his own. Beside her, Xuthus whimpered in pain as Maia clutched him for reassurance, digging her fingernails into his arm.

“I’m scared,” Lodus said. His voice trembled.

“It’s just one of the sentry wolves,” Hestia reassured him, but after seeing the ravaged junction box she was not so sure. “They won’t hurt you.”

“Wolves?” Maia’s eyes went wide. “No one said anything about wolves!”

The crashing noise came nearer and stopped. All of a sudden, a huge dark shape with glowing red eyes leapt out of the woods ahead and skidded to a halt on the lane. Maia shrieked as the robot wolf slowly stepped closer and fixed them with a steely glare. Moments later, a second

wolf erupted from the trees and fell into line behind the first. Hestia cried out in shock and drew Lodus close. She had never seen the sentry robots act this way before. The first wolf opened its jaws wide to reveal an astonishing array of dagger-like teeth. The awful sound that emerged was not the dreadful howl they were expecting.

“Who’s afraid?” rasped the robot. “Of the big bad wolf?”

“I am!” yelled Maia.

As quick as a flash, she spun on her heels and ran up the lane, pulling a startled Xuthus in her wake. In his panic to follow, Lodus broke free of Hestia and accidentally shoved her into the wrecked junction box, leaving his sister shouting obscenities as she fought to untangle herself from the wiring. Finally scrambling free, Hestia leapt to her feet and tried to run after Lodus, only to be abruptly yanked to a stop from behind. She glanced back in terror and saw her coat was impaled on a jagged piece of twisted metal, then screamed and dived for cover as the first wolf leapt past in pursuit of her fleeing friends. The second wolf, having halted a few metres away, regarded her with a cold electronic stare.

“Good doggy,” whispered Hestia. Her fingers feverishly worked to unhook her coat from where it was snagged. “Not a big bad wolf at all, are you?”

The wolf did not move. Hestia wondered if she had addled its AI brain. The concept of being a good doggy was probably quite alien to what had been designed as a huge automated terror machine. As she slowly lifted herself from the floor for the second time, her fingers closed on a short length of branch that had fallen from a nearby tree. It was too small to use as a weapon, but then she had an idea.

“Nice doggy want to chase the stick?” she asked and waved it tentatively.

The wolf gave her a quizzical look.

“Catch!” yelled Hestia.

She threw the stick as hard as she could over the wolf’s shoulder. When the robot turned to look, Hestia burst into a frantic sprint and ran as fast as she could into the woods, not daring to look behind her. As she ran, her red hood flapping wildly at her back, the sound of her pounding

footsteps were joined by an ominous galloping clatter that grew louder by the second. The wolf was behind and gaining fast.

\* \* \*

Officer Alberich grimaced and decided he could wait no more. Almost twenty minutes had passed since he had ordered Janus back to the security cabin, but his colleague had not returned. His wife stood behind him in the doorway, looking perturbed. Her husband had accessorised his usual officer's uniform with a very large axe.

"You look like a lumberjack," she remarked.

"On Avalon, lumberjacks do sterling work as Emergency Deactivation Operatives," Alberich retorted, then hefted the axe. "Have you never seen *Gods of Avalon*? When those AIs run amok, something sharp and heavy is the best tool a security officer can have!"

\* \* \*

Hestia dashed through the trees as fast as her feet would carry her, conscious of the wolf hard on her heels. Somewhat bizarrely, the robot's corrupted programming seemingly had led it to forget how to tell the difference between holographic trees and the real thing. The wolf was far faster than she was, but its current predilection for lunging into real trees and crashing to a halt meant that the furious pounding of her own little legs was enough to keep her one step ahead of the robot's snapping jaws.

Park warden 'Granny' Esmeralda Skadi lived on the other side of the miniature forest in a small chalet near the dome wall, which for reasons best kept to herself was as far away as possible from the main cluster of cabins along the lane. As Hestia approached, she saw the light of a lantern shining through the cracks of the curtains. She jumped as a crunch and a howl behind her signalled that the pursuing wolf had once again run into a tree.

"Granny!" Hestia yelled. "Help me! The wolves have gone mad!"

A curtain flickered, then to Hestia's relief the front door swung open to reveal a tiny old woman in a nightgown, her face creased with

annoyance as she stepped onto the porch with a lantern held high. In her other hand was a large frying pan.

“Stop right there!” she snapped. “I’m talking to you, mister wolf!”

Both the robot and a panic-stricken Hestia had slid to a halt. The warden’s voice was surprisingly strong. Her eyes burned bright beneath her shock of grey hair.

“Granny Skadi!” shouted Hestia. “Be careful!”

The robot wolf lowered its head and started pawing the ground, as if suddenly unsure of what to do. The bizarre tableau of a huge wolf, herself in a red hood, an old woman and a cottage in the dark woods made Hestia think of the scary fairytales told to her when she was little, which would have frightened her a lot more had she been aware of the Grimm-inspired algorithms building up inside the robot’s brain. Granny stepped forward and gave a threatening wave of the frying pan.

“My word,” she exclaimed, addressing the wolf. “What big ears you have!”

“What?” cried Hestia, as she scrambled onto the porch. Her first instinct had been to hide behind the warden but the diminutive woman only came up to the girl’s chin.

The wolf paused. Hestia could almost see it running through possible scenarios, in the manner of a chess computer coming in for the kill. When the robot finally spoke, its voice was a raspy high-pitched burr.

“All the better to hear you with!” declared the wolf.

“This is madness,” muttered Hestia.

“That’s the slave unit,” Granny whispered. “It’s having to communicate back to the master unit before replying, which may give us a bit of time. What has happened to it?”

“It’s gone mad!” the girl hissed back.

“I was hoping for a bit more information than that,” the woman retorted crossly.

The robot wolf stepped forward and thrashed its metal tail, decapitating one of Granny’s prize rose bushes in the process. She waved the frying pan again.

“What big eyes you have!” she said.

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“All the better to see you with!” the wolf replied, after a moment’s thought.

“And what big teeth you have, mister wolf!”

This time, the automaton was even quicker. “All the better to eat you with!”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” murmured Hestia. She glanced to the warden. As a way of bringing down a savage sentry robot, she wondered if there was anything more to Granny’s strategy than trying to talk it to death.

“And what bad breath you have, mister wolf!” cried the old woman.

The wolf paused for what seemed an age, then cocked its head.

“Bad breath does not compute,” it declared. “All the better to hear what you eat. All the better to eat what you see. Wolf sees Granny and Red Riding Hood. Wolf eats Granny and Red Riding Hood!”

The robot opened its jaws and leapt towards the figures in the doorway.

“Run!” yelled Granny, grabbing Hestia’s hand.

Hestia yelped as the woman dragged her from the porch, then felt a gust of air across the back of her neck as the wolf’s outstretched metal claws whistled close to her luminous locks. The robot could not turn in time and crashed into the porch, just as Hestia and Granny dashed to safety along the path to the rear of the cabin. Before Hestia had time to draw breath, the old woman yanked her around the corner and out of the wolf’s sight.

The mechanical wolf thrashed itself free from the shattered remains of the porch and circled the cabin, howling as it went. Moments later the forest rang with a couple of screams, another howl, then a loud metallic clang as a frying pan bounced off something hard. A cloud of artificial snow fluttered up from behind the cabin and all was still.

\* \* \*

Xuthus realised he could no longer hear the thudding footsteps of the wolf above his own heavy heartbeat. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw Maia and Lodus several paces behind, both looking ready to

drop. The wolf was nowhere to be seen, but he could hear something crashing through the trees further down the hill. He shivered as a mournful metallic howl drifted across the night air.

“I can’t run anymore!” Maia wailed.

“Me neither!” wheezed Lodus.

Xuthus slowed to a halt and waited for them to catch up. As he scanned the woodland for signs of their pursuer, he spied a small cabin tucked away not far up the hill.

“This way,” he urged. “Follow me!”

He ran ahead to the cabin and rapped loudly on the door. When there was no reply, he went to a window and peered inside, but saw no signs of life. As Maia and Lodus staggered wearily up to the porch, Xuthus returned to the door and tried the handle, fully expecting it to be locked. To his surprise, the door yielded to his touch and swung open with an eerie screech. He beckoned his friends inside, then froze as he saw the robot wolf emerge from the trees and bound towards them.

“Get inside!” he yelled. “It’s behind you!”

Lodus gave a cry of alarm, drowning out the loud crunch as the wolf ran into a non-holographic tree and fell to the ground. Xuthus saw him exchange a look of fear with Maia and as one they spun around to face their pursuer. The robot was nowhere in sight.

“Oh no, it isn’t!” Lodus protested.

“Oh yes, it is!” cried Maia.

Xuthus stared in horror as the huge wolf rose from the undergrowth and clambered back to its feet. Its white snout was now severely dented, which if anything made the robot look even more insane. Maia shrieked and pushed past Lodus in her mad scramble for the door. The younger boy stood rigid with fear before the approaching wolf.

Xuthus shoved them both into the cabin, slammed shut the door and slid the locking bolt across. Maia and Lodus were trying their best to hide behind both him and each other. Xuthus quickly herded them away from the door and into the main room.

He swept the beam of his torch across the room. Their impromptu refuge had evidently not seen any other sort of sweeping in a while, the light revealing a ramshackle interior that contained just a few sticks of

furniture and a ragged floor rug barely visible beneath years of accumulated dirt and dust.

Outside, the wolf thudded against the door and gave another metallic howl. Xuthus hurried to a doorway at the back of the room. He had barely turned the handle when he was pushed aside by a frantic Maia and Lodus, the door smacking him in the nose as they yanked it open in their rush to get into the room beyond. Xuthus cursed, rubbed his throbbing nose and stomped angrily after them.

Beyond the door was a rickety veranda, which looked out across a garden that even though was piled high with artificial snow still looked unkempt and overgrown. Maia cast a dubious eye at their surroundings and frowned. There was no glass at the veranda windows and the walls were insubstantial wicker panels made of thin strips of bamboo.

“Why is that thing chasing us?” whined Lodus, sounding fearful.

“Santa sent it check up on you,” Xuthus said irritably. The younger boy’s wailing was getting on his nerves. “He obviously thinks you’ve been way too naughty this year.”

“A house made of sticks,” Maia muttered and gave the bamboo a disparaging kick. “I’m sure that will save us from the big bad wolf.”

As if to confirm her doubts, the nearby fence suddenly exploded into kindling as the sentry robot smashed its way into the garden. The wolf crunched to a halt and lifted its glowing red stare to the three nervous faces at the window. Patches of its spiny metallic fur had been hammered flat where it had run headlong into far too many trees.

“Little pigs, little pigs, let me in,” the wolf snarled. There was an odd human-like quality to its synthesised voice Xuthus had not noticed before. He could have sworn the machine sounded out of breath. “Or I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down!”

“I am not a pig!” complained Lodus.

Maia rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Oh, yes you are.”

“Oh, no I’m not!”

“This is getting surreal,” murmured Xuthus. “Robots can’t blow!”

“This one sucks,” moaned Maia. “Big time.”

She shrieked as the robot jumped forward, rose upon its hind legs and calmly dug the claws of its huge forepaws into the bamboo walls

either side of the window. The sound of splintering wicker was drowned by Lodus' scream as he fled back into the main cabin, then it was Xuthus' and Maia's turn to run as the veranda wall shuddered and slowly gave way under the hefty weight of the wolf.

"It's coming to get us!" shrieked Maia.

Xuthus pulled her into the other room, slammed the door shut and threw the locking bolt. The shack shuddered as the robot crashed heavily into the veranda beyond. Xuthus and Maia ran to join Lodus huddled in fright in the corner of the room. Outside, the clatter of claws abruptly gave way to a loud bang as something big, angry and wolf-shaped rammed the door. Xuthus turned the beam of his torch towards the sound, wondering fearfully whether the heat quivering from their bodies could be detected by sensors inside the robot's metal skull. Just then, another metallic howl drifted upon the air, this time from further away.

"The other wolf!" exclaimed Maia, her eyes wide.

"It's eaten Hestia and now it's coming for me!" wailed Lodus.

"Nothing has that big an appetite," snapped Xuthus, but they all knew it was long past the time for jokes. "Besides, these cabins are made of concrete."

He jumped as a fresh bang from outside shattered the brief nervous hush within the cabin. Seconds later there was another thud and the ominous cracking of splintering wood. Xuthus gasped and swung the torch beam towards a faint glimmer of red to the right of the door. There was a large crack in the wall he was sure had not been there before. His suspicions were confirmed at the sound of a further thump. The crack widened, revealing the glint of a robot eye.

"Most cabins are concrete," he murmured wearily. His face was a picture of dismay. "Trust us to pick one made of crappy chipboard."

A fourth thump dislodged a worryingly-large chunk of fake log cladding. Not only were the logs made of reconstituted wood chips, they were also suffering from a bad case of rot. Another thud quickly followed. Xuthus, Maia and Lodus watched in horror as the cabin wall disintegrated before their eyes. The wolf paused in its destruction and shoved its steel snout through the hole.

“I’ll huff and I’ll puff,” rasped the robot. “And blow your house down!”

“Blow it down?” cried Maia. “Come at us like a tornado, more like.”

“I want my mummy,” murmured Lodus, close to tears.

“I’d settle for a plasma cannon,” muttered Xuthus.

He swung the torch beam towards the front door. He was just about to suggest another bout of running away when the light fell upon what looked like a trap door in the floor, its outline barely visible through the dirt and dust. As the battering of the wall continued anew, Xuthus scuttled across the grubby rug and grabbed hold of the handle of the trap. The door lifted easily, revealing a dark and dingy brick-lined cellar below.

“Quickly!” he hissed. “Down here!”

Maia and Lodus hurriedly scrambled to follow Xuthus down the ladder into the cellar. There was a sudden loud crunch as several metres of fake log wall finally yielded to the robot’s attack and collapsed in a heap, sending a cloud of dust billowing across the room. Lodus was last to reach the trap door, just as the red glare of the robot emerged from the haze. He was barely through the opening when the wolf lunged forward and smashed the trap from its hinges. In a moment of panic Lodus let go of the ladder and fell onto Maia, adding his own voice to her shrieks as they both tumbled down the steps and crashed into Xuthus. In the room above, the wolf poked its head through the opening, bared its teeth and assaulted their ears once more with its horrible metallic howl.

“Little pigs, little pigs, let me in!” the robot growled. “Or I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down!”

“We’re trapped!” wailed Maia. “It is most definitely going to eat us!”

“It’s okay,” said Xuthus, despite all evidence to the contrary. “It’s too big to get through the hatch.”

“It’s chewing the floor!” cried Lodus, pointing.

Xuthus and Maia recoiled in terror as chunks of floorboards began to rain down into the cellar, torn away by the wolf from the edge of the trap door opening. As they watched, the robot opened its jaws and attacked the floor again, seemingly intent on making a hole big enough for it to get through. Xuthus ran the beam of the torch around the walls,

desperately seeking another way out, but saw nothing but bare brick and an astonishing array of spider webs. As Maia had keenly observed, they were trapped. He hoped the rest of what she said would not prove so prophetic.

A different howl shook the air. To their dismay, the head of the other wolf suddenly appeared over the shoulder of the first. The second wolf opened its jaws to join the attack, then unexpectedly lunged sideways and grabbed the first wolf by the throat. A chorus of metallic shrieks erupted from above and both robots fell back out of sight, with a deafening bang that dislodged a shower of grime from the cellar ceiling. Xuthus, Maia and Lodus covered in terror, staring up towards the dreadful rumbles and nerve-jangling grind of steel in the room above. Their screams echoed in unison as the two wolves crashed past the opening, locked in fierce combat.

A split second later, the cabin filled with a piercing flash of light and an almighty bang, as if lightning had struck the shack. There was a pause, a heavy thud, followed by a muffled yet all-too human groan. An unexpected hush settled upon the cabin. A strong smell of ozone and burning insulation drifted down into the cellar.

“What happened?” whispered Maia, shaking. “Have they eaten each other?”

Xuthus went to the ladder, then hesitated. “Why is it always me who goes first?”

“I’ve already made a mess of my hair tonight and going near metal wolves with big teeth won’t help matters,” Maia told him. “And Lodus is a coward.”

Lodus nodded in agreement. “I’m scared of everything.”

Xuthus pulled a face. Torch in hand, he slowly climbed the ladder and poked his head through the torn opening. One of the wolves lay on its side, its once-piercing eyes now dark. He swung the torch beam to find the second robot and nearly fell off the ladder in fright. The other wolf was by the front door, sitting calmly like a house-trained hound from hell. Its eyes still glowed red, but it did not appear to be in any rush to move, though curious grunting sounds came from within. He heard a noise from the veranda, then stifled a shout as a shape carrying a lantern stepped

through the shattered remains of the wall. The voice that followed was the most welcome sound he had heard in his life.

“Would you like a hand, my dear?” asked the woman with the lamp.

“Granny Skadi?” he asked. The newcomer was dressed in not much more than a nightgown but somehow Xuthus knew it was the warden. “Be careful of the wolves!”

“What’s going on?” asked Maia, who was at the foot of the ladder.

“It’s quite safe!” called Granny. “Your friend saved you all!”

“Friend?” asked Xuthus. He could not take his eyes off the seated wolf. “You mean that thing was trying to be friendly?”

Taking Granny’s offered hand, Xuthus climbed through the shattered hatchway and into the room. Behind him, Maia and Lodus cautiously began to follow. A new sound from the second wolf made him jump. Granny swung her lantern towards the seated robot.

Xuthus stared nervously at the hatch that had opened in the creature’s back. Two hands appeared from within to pull their owner out of the robot’s cramped cabin. Xuthus’ eyes went wide as the iridescent locks and then the face of the wolf’s operator came into view. Behind him, Maia gasped in surprise.

“Hestia!” cried Xuthus. “What are you doing in there?”

“Saving your necks,” Hestia declared. She clambered wearily from the wolf’s back and down to the floor. “No need to thank me all at once,” she added, finding her revelation had been met by a stunned silence.

A sudden loud knocking came from the front door. Granny drew back the bolt and pulled it open. In the doorway stood Officer Alberich, looking frantic and blinking furiously amidst a cascade of fake snow dislodged from the cabin roof. In his hands was a large axe.

“It’s taken me an age to find you!” he cried. “Are you all okay?”

“My hair is ruined!” complained Maia. “What sort of a resort is this?”

“Everyone is fine,” Granny Skadi reassured him, then frowned as a low groan issued from the defeated fallen wolf. “Well, nearly everyone. The young girl here may have got a bit carried away in wolf-to-wolf combat.”

“You fought the wolf?” exclaimed Xuthus.

Hestia nodded. "And the wolf nearly won."

Alberich was astounded. "How did you manage to control that thing?"

"Granny whacked it with a frying pan and broke its transceiver," Hestia explained, pointing to the twisted stump at the rear of the second wolf that had once been its tail. "We switched off the AI circuits and I volunteered to sit inside and control it. Granny said the only thing strong enough to stop the first wolf was another one."

"Granny knows best," mused Alberich.

"A nasty case of bad programming," declared Granny, as the officer stepped towards the first wolf. "Never trusted those things."

"Others think just the same," Alberich replied. "But no. They have so many inbuilt safety systems it should be impossible for one to run amok, unless..."

Leaving his sentence unfinished, Alberich knelt beside the back of the fallen robot and released the hatch. A chorus of gasps rose from the gathered watchers as the light from Granny's lantern fell upon the face of Janus, lying scrunched inside the wolf's cramped cockpit. Janus raised a hand to shield his eyes from the glare, then reluctantly began to pull himself from the wolf's torso. He could not have looked more guilty than if he had ran out of the Louvre with a crowbar in one hand and the Mona Lisa under an arm.

"You swapped those data rods on purpose!" Alberich shook his head in disbelief. "Is this some sort of petty revenge for having your Santa costume confiscated?"

"I wanted to show everyone that robots are bad!" growled Janus. He was battered and bruised, yet nevertheless defiant. "This one reacted badly to the Grimm data rod. Once it saw the children in the woods, there was little I could do to stop it acting out some crazy fairytale! All I planned was to take the wolf to the clubhouse and scare a few folks as they headed home. And I would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling kids!"

"No, you wouldn't," said Granny. "You're an idiot."

"Santa?" asked Hestia. "Is it really you who dresses up in a fat suit and beard every Christmas to scare the little ones?"

## MERRY CHRISTMAS, MISTER WOLF

“Not this year,” muttered Janus. “I’ve been given the sack.”

“Santa’s sack?” suggested Maia and giggled.

“I thought Father Christmas had reindeer,” said Lodus, looking at the wolves.

“They’ve replaced him with a robot,” Alberich explained. “One that doesn’t leer at young women or threaten to confiscate presents from naughty children.”

Maia gave Janus a wary look. “You’re the one my mother warned me of.”

“A robot Santa?” mused Xuthus. “Very Christmassy.”

“Almost as festive as the synthetic roast turkey they serve in Newbrum’s police cells,” Alberich told Janus severely. He retrieved a pair of handcuffs from his jacket pocket as he spoke. “I hear you get loads and loads of sprouts.”

Janus shuddered. “Yuck.”

“Nothing wrong with sprouts,” Granny retorted.

“All in all, quite a shaggy dog story,” remarked Alberich. “My daughter will appreciate a good tale like this from her old man.”

“Glad to be of service,” Janus muttered sarcastically.

“Your last good deed as Santa,” said Xuthus.

Hestia grinned. “Merry Christmas, Mister Wolf!”

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.

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