

PSYCHE'S 7

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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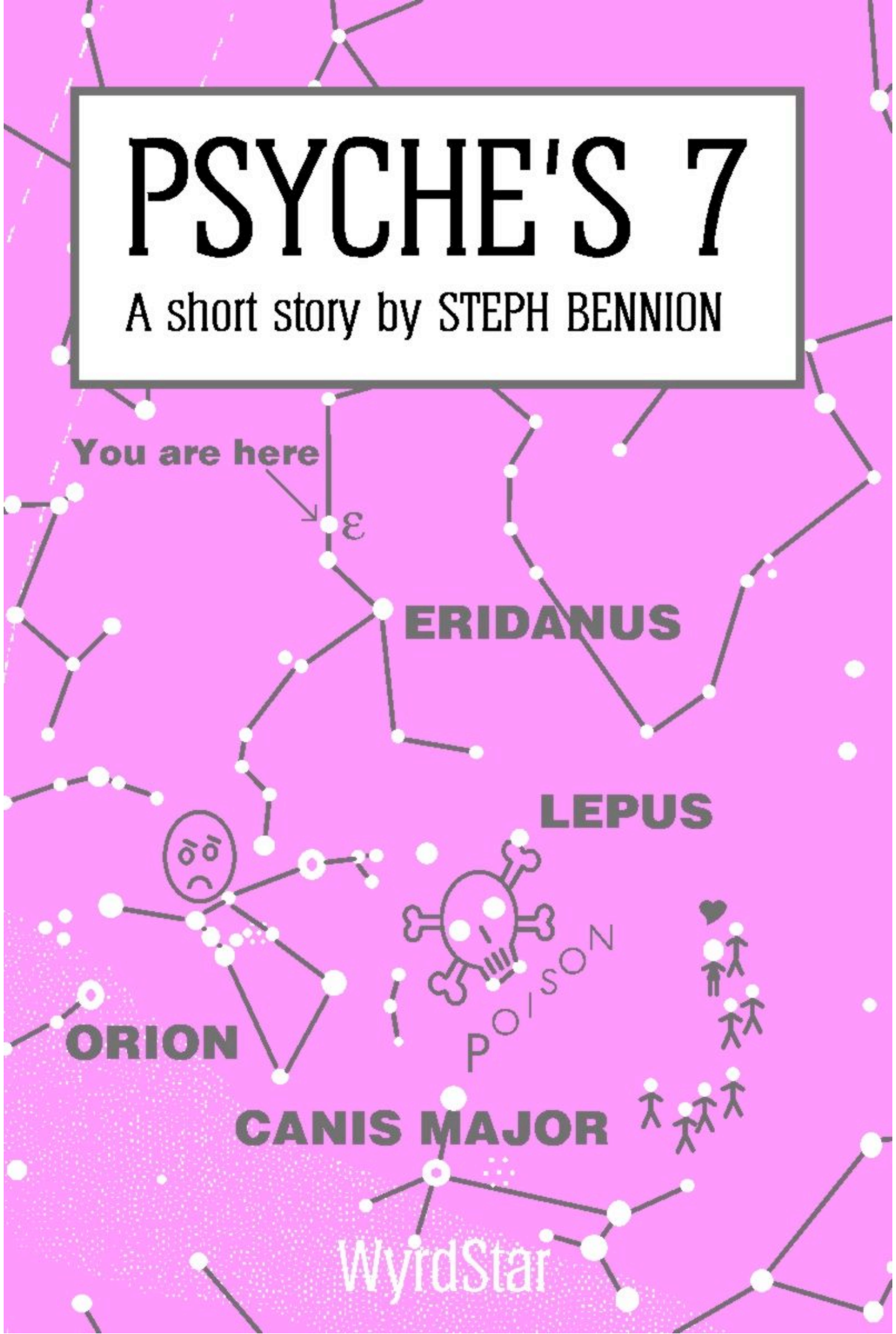
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Psyche's Seven

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

A short story by
Steph Bennion

WYRDSTAR BOOKS

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WyrdStar publishing history

First published December 2016

Set in 12/14pt Baskerville by WyrdStar Books.

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PSYCHE'S SEVEN

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

The notorious prison was no place for Psyche to spend the first fourteen years of her life. Grabbing a chance to escape, she finds sanctuary with a group of young miners. Meanwhile, Governor Malingee of Taotie has ambitions to be number one in Epsilon Eridani and nothing will stand in her way...

PART ONE: ONCE UPON A FUTURE TIME...

THE ISLAND OF FENG DU was no fairy-tale land from her books. The craggy crescent remains of the ancient volcano squatted off the coast like a slumbering ogre, its arms outstretched as if ready to tear the lush tropical mainland in two. The island, neighbouring continent of Peng Lai and Matsu Sea were on a world humans had named Taotie; the sun blazing overhead was Epsilon Eridani, ten light years from Earth. It was the twenty-third century and the volcanic fires that forged the island were gone. Those who built the fortress carried a different flame. Feng Du was a prison; and not a very nice one at that.

Psyche put down her book. Her mother sat slumped in her chair by the window, staring past the rough bricks that framed the bars and glass. Psyche was fourteen years old by the calendar of Earth, a place that to her was as mythical as the fearsome knights, lovelorn maidens, clever detectives, fiendish villains and alien monsters of her books. The one thing the ancient tatty volumes the guards brought to their cell had not prepared her for was that people wore out and grew old themselves. Those she read about were never gone forever, no matter how many times the words passed her eyes. But her mother was growing frail, her hobbling walks around the cell a little shorter each day, her dark locks now grey. In books, time meant nothing when a flick of the wrist could take you back to page one.

“Mama, what’s wrong?” Psyche asked. “You seem so sad today.”

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Her mother turned from the window and attempted a smile that fell away in a fit of coughing. Her worn prison overalls hung loosely from her wasting frame. Dabbing a rag to her lips, she beckoned for the girl to come closer.

Psyche went to her side. From the window she could see across the water to the mangrove forests of the mainland, a vibrant carpet of green that taunted the rocky gullies and concrete bunkers of their island home. Any plants or trees that dared to take root upon Feng Du's grey shores were quickly destroyed by the robot sentries on patrol. Their abode was just as dreary inside, though her mother's status as a political prisoner meant they had some basic comforts and a cell with a window. Other prisoners were not so lucky. Psyche was not even sure what being a political prisoner meant. She had never known another home.

"My dear Psyche," her mother said softly. She tucked away the rag and gently ran her gnarled hands down Psyche's dark locks. "My little angel! The daughter I long dreamed of, with skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood and hair as black as ebony. When did the fairy tale become a nightmare?"

"Mama, you make me sound like a nasty vampire!" Psyche protested. *Dracula* was one of the books she had in the cell. "You said I was pretty."

"The prettiest girl in the five systems," her mother reassured her. "You are nature's rose, pure and true. It is not right you were born in captivity, unable to bloom. I fear for what will happen to you when I am gone."

Psyche's face fell. She had not missed the specks of blood upon the rag, coughed up by her ailing mother. "You cannot leave me, mama!"

"It is not for me to decide. People grow old and die," she said. "You remember Jean Valjean, do you not? I failed to escape those who sought to put me away. If you get a chance, my dear Psyche, you must run from here and not look back."

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Psyche frowned. *Les Misérables* was almost one of her favourites, but the story seemed to have more nasty people in it than nice ones. The first time she read it, the death of ex-convict Valjean had left her in tears. But he had escaped when all hope was lost and spent his life doing good. Psyche thought she could do that.

“We will run away together,” she declared with a defiant pout. “Steal from the rich and give to the poor, living in the forest like Robin Hood and his Merry Men.”

Her mother smiled. She began to cough and quickly raised a hand to her mouth. This time, her desperate hacking retorts dragged on for an age. Psyche watched with a sinking heart as her mother calmly wiped her bloodied fingers upon her prison overalls.

“I think they’ve poisoned me,” she said weakly, smiling. “It took them long enough. Make me proud, my little Psyche. Make your old mother proud.”

She took her daughter’s hand and pulled her close for one last loving kiss. Psyche’s tears fell thick and fast, not stopping even as her mother’s hand grew cold. A guard finally found her curled upon her dead mother’s lap, sobbing a lament for the end of her world.

* * *

Governor Malingee’s wry smile grew upon seeing Agent Kedesh, her nervous young security advisor, crossing the courtyard below. The Que Qiao Corporation’s freighter launch ramps of Yao Chi spaceport loomed defiantly above the sprawling government complex, a constant reminder of the importance of Taotie’s capital city. Malingee’s thoughts however were on Feng Du, far away to the south. Kedesh was undoubtedly coming to report the death of the prisoner, unaware that the governor already knew.

Moving from the window, Malingee turned to the large holoivid screen on the wall. A three-dimensional ballet of muted news reports drifted above

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the ghostly reflection in the backing glass of her own blond features. Malingee was young to be a governor, barely thirty in Terran years. Yet life on Taotie was harsh; gravity alone, one and half times that of Earth, had added years to her appearance. Five years ago, she had left Brisbane as a headstrong, golden-tanned new recruit to Que Qiao's business school. She had worked hard to keep trim, harder still to ingratiate herself with whoever could boost her up the greasy pole of management. Ten months ago, a food poisoning outbreak in Yao Chi's top restaurant had decimated the corporation's managerial team on Taotie. Her promotion to acting-governor had quickly followed.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall," she murmured. "Who is the fairest of them all?"

It was a stupid pass-phrase but it appealed to her vanity. Minutes from the Que Qiao Board's last meeting instantly appeared on screen, showing the approval ratings for herself and her fellow governors in Epsilon Eridani. Governor Kourete, who ran the terraformed moon of Yuanshi orbiting the gas giant Shennong, topped the list following his firm action in the face of civil unrest. Maharaja Kashyap, the self-proclaimed leader of Indian settlements on Yuanshi, had been assassinated and his widow and young son were on the run. On Taotie, successes were rather less dramatic, but Malingee was pleased to see she had crept above Governor Atman of Daode, another moon of Shennong. She was now second on the list.

A knock at her door told her that Kedesh had arrived. Malingee reset the holoivid to the latest five-system news feeds, went to her desk and sat down.

"Come in," she called.

Her assistant, an arrogant Chinese woman from downtown Yao Chi, showed the agent into the office and left the room. Kedesh was a tall English woman, barely twenty with pale skin and rather square features, who upon recently joining Que Qiao had been unlucky to be posted straight to Taotie. Malingee had taken an instant disliking to the woman.

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Her spies had uncovered a rumour that Kedesh had been contacted by a secret organisation called the Grand Priory whilst at university. Regrettably, this was not enough for Malingee to fire her.

“Governor Malingee,” Kedesh greeted. “I have a report from Feng Du.”

“The hero of the workers is dead,” Malingee told her, with some satisfaction. “Not that many remembered her. It’s been fourteen years since the corporation crushed her troublesome trade union.”

“Short innings on Taotie,” mused Kedesh. “Though legends can linger.”

Malingee scowled. “Is that what she was? A legend?”

“She had links to the Dhusarian Church. I heard that your predecessor thought incarceration was preferable to pulling stumps on her and risk creating a martyr,” said Kedesh, then paused. “What will become of the daughter? Psyche, is it?”

“Deal with her,” said Malingee. “I want no reminders of the past. Is that clear?”

“Yes ma’am.” Kedesh frowned. “The report says the coffin is to be brought to the mainland for disposal. Young Psyche will want to pay her last respects. I dare say it’s easy to get caught out down there in the jungle.”

“I’m sure it is,” said Malingee. “Go to Feng Du and see to it personally.”

Kedesh nodded. “At once, ma’am.”

Malingee scowled as she watched Kedesh leave. She wondered if any of her staff were really up to the job. The previous governor and his team too had been weak. Malingee thought back to how she had bribed a down-trodden kitchen assistant to add a little something to the food molecularisor at their favourite restaurant. Taotie needed a firm hand.

* * *

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Days on Taotie were short, lasting just over sixteen Terran hours. For young Psyche, those that followed the passing of her mother dragged into eternity. Her mother was gone, her body taken away by silent medics in white coats. Psyche was left alone in the cell for two days and two nights, sobbing silently on her bed with no one to talk to and no visitors other than the sour-faced guard who brought her food. When she could cry no more she went to her mother's chair by the window and stared across the water, her own blank future mirrored in the endless forest of Peng Lai. At night she saw the bright flares of rockets rise into the sky, freighters taking the riches of Taotie to other worlds. Psyche had nowhere to go.

Others thought differently. On the morning of the third day, Psyche was awoken by two guards at her cell door, who brought her a clean pair of blue prison overalls and a bag for whatever belongings she wished to take. Psyche could fit just two books inside, choosing *The Hobbit* and *Red Mars*, both of which she loved for different reasons. Ten minutes later, she was led through the door and out of her cell, never to return.

The prison was a gloomy confusing labyrinth of concrete tunnels, narrow stairways and stern doorways, a warren of stale odours and faint disturbing cries. Winding steps took them down from one level to the next until they finally emerged into a huge open courtyard amidst the towering prison walls. Psyche wanted to run away and hide, feeling suddenly vulnerable beneath the bright morning sun. A guard grabbed her hand and pulled her across the gravel yard. Ahead, the huge gatehouse of Feng Du was open.

More guards stood at the gate, this time wearing armour and carrying guns. Beyond, a road twisted down the rocky shoreline to a large rusty barge moored at a wooden jetty. A young woman, dressed androgynously in black, watched their approach from the bow. On the deck behind lay a long wooden box. Psyche stared at the coffin and burst into tears.

The guard pulled her onwards through the gate and down to the jetty. Releasing her hand, he gestured wordlessly to the barge and nudged her

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forward. Psyche blinked away her tears and looked back at the towering prison on the rocks behind, then warily stepped across the gangplank onto the boat. The woman in black awaited her on deck. She looked very out of place alongside the scruffy Chinese crew manning the boat.

“Psyche?” the woman asked.

Psyche wiped her nose with the back of her hand and nodded.

“I am Agent Kedesh,” she said gently. Her cap did a poor job of hiding the long brown hair bundled beneath. “I’m to take you and your mother to the mainland.”

“Mama is dead,” Psyche told her sullenly.

“I know,” she said. “Fate bowled googly. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Psyche scrutinised the young agent. Her voice was soft but deep and she moved with an odd clumsy grace. Psyche looked into the young woman’s mournful gaze.

“Are you a boy or a girl?” she asked.

Kedesh froze, then smiled. “You’re very astute,” she said reluctantly. “I was once labelled a boy. Stepped up to the crease as a girl. You can call me Marion.”

Psyche thought about this. “Marion is a nice name,” she decided. “Maid Marian in *Robin Hood* had red hair,” she added, glancing to the woman’s hidden locks.

“I was thinking of changing the colour,” Kedesh admitted. She offered a sympathetic smile and held out her hand. “You’re a good girl, Psyche.”

Psyche took Kedesh’s hand and allowed herself to be led to a bench in the ship’s bow. The deck shuddered as the engines of the barge came to life. Black smoke belched from the rusty funnel above their heads.

The barge heaved itself out to sea. Psyche’s gaze lingered briefly upon the concrete towers of Feng Du as the island slipped away, then looked back at the coffin on the deck. The world had become very big and scary. It took a great deal of will to turn her head towards the mainland and her thoughts to whatever lay ahead.

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“What will happen to me?” she asked Kedesh, who had sat down next to her.

She saw the woman stiffen, then frown. Psyche had seen enough interactions between her mother and the prison guards to know that meant bad news.

“Everything will be fine,” Kedesh reassured her, not entirely convincingly. “Would you like a drink? There must be something other than foul coffee aboard this rusty heap.”

Psyche shrugged. Kedesh sighed, stood up and started up the deck towards the wheelhouse at the stern. Psyche found herself alone in her gloom once more.

The strait between Feng Du and the mainland was not wide. The barge picked up speed and surged onwards, bringing the mangrove forests ever closer until she could make out individual trees at the water's edge. Psyche remembered her mother's warning that she must run if given the chance and thought of *Les Misérables* and Jean Valjean's escape from the dock. No one would follow if they thought she was dead. She glanced across the deck to see if any of the crew were watching. Psyche looked at her mother's coffin one last time.

“Goodbye mama,” she whispered, the tears welling once more. “I love you.”

She hoped the bag containing her books was waterproof. Pulling the shoulder strap tight, Psyche shuffled to the gunwale and silently heaved herself overboard into the warm tropical waters of the Matsu Sea.

* * *

The barge surged on and did not stop. Had the sea been too cold, or not so rich in salts that even her heavy bag could float, Psyche suspected she would have drowned. After all, learning to swim was not something people usually did by reading books. Nevertheless, how she pictured Jean Valjean

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swimming to freedom after dropping from the slave galley was close to how she ended up doing it for real. Jumping off a boat hundreds of metres from dry land was all the encouragement she needed.

It took a long time to swim to shore, but it helped that she was able to rest by floating on her back, also that a soft breeze was blowing the right way. When Psyche finally crawled out onto the slimy roots of the mangroves she was exhausted, her muscles aching like they never had before. It took all her remaining strength to clamber through the swamp into the humid forest. Worn out, she wriggled into the dry hollow of a tree and fell asleep.

When she awoke she was hungry and thirsty. Through the trees, the huge orange sun of Epsilon Eridani was rising; she had slept all afternoon and night and a new day was dawning. The forest murmured with the chatter of strange creatures and rustle of trees. Psyche was alone like she had never been before.

“I’m free,” she told herself, feeling uncharacteristically confident. “Now what?”

Her prison overalls had dried in the tropical heat, leaving them streaked with salt and dirt. The sound of trickling water reached her ears. After some exploration she found a stream running through the trees to the swamp, which she followed deeper into the forest to where the water tasted sweet and clean. Refreshed but still hungry, she decided to continue upstream. In *The Hobbit*, towns were nearly always found by rivers and streams.

Taotie’s biosphere was several million years behind life on Earth. The forest was of towering palms with huge drooping leaves intermingled with tall spiky fir trees, beneath which flourished a carpet of weird and wonderful ferns. Psyche walked all day, getting ever more hungry as the green-tinged gloom became increasingly humid, but the forest seemed to go on forever. Soon night was falling, bringing the eerie screeches of unseen creatures. For the first time since leaving Feng Du, Psyche was afraid. Now

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very hungry indeed, she built herself a crude nest from fallen branches, curled up and fell into an uneasy sleep.

A smell of smoke drifted through the forest, rousing her from her slumber. The first light of dawn was creeping through the forest, though Psyche could barely make out the shapes of the trees around her. She sat up and cautiously sniffed the air. It smelt like burning wood, with more pleasing odours mingled within. Someone was cooking over an open fire.

Psyche had never been more hungry in her life. Picking up her bag, she went to the stream for a few handfuls of water and then slowly picked her way through the trees towards the source of the smoke. The sun rose quickly on Taotie, bringing with it a watery grey light that filled the forest with mournful shadows. Ahead, the trees were thinning. All of a sudden she heard voices. A group of young men were singing:

*Oh no! Oh no!
It's underground we go,
Digging ore because we're poor,
We'll drop dead down below!*

The song broke off with a cackle of laughter, though there was no real humour behind it. Psyche thought the singers sounded tired. She knew how that felt.

The voices faded beneath the rustling forest and tinkle of water from the stream. In the growing light of dawn, she suddenly spied the squat outlines of buildings beyond the trees. She eagerly stumbled forward once more, tripping over tree roots and tearing her prison overalls, before wearily breaking from the last of the trees onto a rough gravel track. Before her, the stream had become a shallow pond, next to which was a small steel footbridge. On the far side were three tiny cottages, barely more than shacks. It was the most wondrous, joyous sight Psyche had ever seen.

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She headed for the bridge and quickly crossed to the other side. The first shack was a sturdy metal storage shed, with shutters across the only window and a shiny lock on the door. The second shack had once been a small house, but the roof had collapsed and the walls were overgrown with vines from the forest.

The third looked more promising. This was a rambling single-storey cottage, with painted wooden walls and a neat vegetable garden beside the pathway to the door. Tatty grey curtains hung at the windows and faint wisps of smoke rose from the stone chimney. Now moving more cautiously, Psyche slowly approached the door. She had no idea what people were like outside of Feng Du. Although scared, Psyche was so hungry she felt faint. She raised her hand and tapped the wood with her knuckles.

There was no response. Psyche knocked again, this time louder, but there was still no reply. She reached for the iron handle and lifted it from the latch, then took a deep breath and pushed. The door swung open with a creak, revealing a gloomy and rather untidy hallway. Yet it looked reasonably clean and the clothes hanging on hooks by the door suggested people lived here. Psyche stepped into the hall and paused.

“Hello?” she called. “Is there anybody in there?”

She was met by silence. It was pleasantly cool inside the cottage and a tantalising aroma of fresh bread tickled her nostrils. Psyche’s stomach rumbled. A sudden impulse took her and she crept into the hall, following her nose to an open doorway at the end. She found herself in the kitchen, her eyes darting across the iron stove, metal sink and piles of unwashed crockery before falling on the table and laid-out food. Someone had recently eaten a meal, leaving the ragged remains of a loaf, pots of strong-smelling paste and a large teapot.

Psyche dropped her bag and eagerly fell upon the bread, tearing off chunks and stuffing them into her mouth. The paste was some kind of meat and she finished the lot, smearing it on the bread and wolfing it down.

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Her hunger satisfied, she sat down on a chair to get her breath back. On the wall above the table hung a huge black mirror, which looked like a large version of the touch-screen holoivid slates the guards had occasionally brought to their cell to get her mother to sign statements, not that she ever did. Psyche licked her fingers clean of paste and cautiously pressed the glass, then jumped from her chair as sudden loud screams and a terrible roar filled the room. She stared in disbelief at the screen. On holoivid, a terrified group of people were being chased across a field by a low-flying dragon, a huge green monster that shot fire from its jaws as it furiously beat its wings. Scrolling across the bottom of the display were the words: 'GODS OF AVALON BETTING CHANNELS NOW OPEN. CHOOSE YOUR TRIBE!'. Psyche regarded the holoivid solemnly. It all seemed rather silly.

"Stupid game," she declared. Psyche had never seen the show before, but her mother had often gone on long rants about how *Gods of Avalon* was used to deliberately divert the attention of viewers away from the real-life problems people were facing. She looked more closely at the display. "Anyone can see that's a robot dragon!"

Picking up her bag, she left the kitchen and returned to the hall. Other doors led to rooms on either side. One opened into a washroom and toilet, which she made good use of to freshen up and wash away the forest dirt. Back in the hallway, a door to the right was slightly ajar. Psyche pushed it open and peered inside. It was a bedroom, with eight short beds in four sets of wooden double bunks. The curtains were open and sunlight poured into the room, illuminating scattered clothing, dirty drinking mugs and a single lonely hairbrush. A battered guitar leaned against one of the bunks. Seven of the beds were strewn with discarded sheets. The mattress of the eighth was bare.

Now she had eaten, Psyche felt tired. She had not slept well during her nights in the forest and the beds looked very comfortable. Climbing onto the bare mattress, she curled herself up, closed her eyes and instantly fell asleep.

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* * *

The sound of voices mingled with her dreams. Confused, then startled, Psyche slowly emerged from the depths of sleep. Prison had taught her to pretend to be still asleep when guards disturbed them at night. She kept her eyes closed and listened.

“Who is she?” asked a first voice. It was that of a young man.

“An angel,” another said dreamily. “Praise the greys!”

“An alien angel? She’s no grey,” grumbled a third. Like the others, his English had a curious gruff accent. “I don’t like strangers. They only bring trouble.”

“Nurori, shut up!” said someone else. “She’s just a little girl!”

“Maybe she’s lost,” suggested another. Psyche was losing count of the different voices she heard. “Or perhaps her shuttle crashed? She’s a long way from the city.”

“Those are prison overalls,” remarked yet another, punctuating his words with a sniff. He sounded like he had a cold. “Who would dare lock up a sweet girl like that?”

“Why don’t we ask her?” This time it was the voice of a young woman. Psyche felt a tap upon her shoulder. “It’s okay. You can stop pretending now.”

Psyche stiffened and cautiously opened her eyes. Seven figures stood crowded around her bed. They all seemed unusually short compared to the bunk beds behind them. Each was dressed in grubby overalls and wore or carried a scuffed yellow hard hat. Six of the seven sported beards and every one of their faces was smeared in dirt.

The young pale-faced woman who spoke last gave Psyche a friendly smile and held out a hand. Her bearded colleagues wore a mixture of nervous grins and frowns.

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"I'm Surori," she said gaily. "Don't worry, we won't bite. What's your name?"

Psyche slowly uncurled into a sitting position and gingerly shook the offered hand.

"Psyche," she said cautiously. "I didn't mean to..."

She hesitated and looked nervously at the six young men at Surori's side. To her right, a dark-skinned man with a groomed dark beard removed his hat to reveal a shiny bald scalp. He bore a thoughtful yet not unkind expression. He too offered his hand.

"Hello Psyche," he said. "My name is Hreidmar. I'm the foreman of this rabble of scoundrels," he added, with a twinkle in his eye. "Welcome to our humble abode."

Psyche gently shook the offered palm. Like Surori's own, Hreidmar's hand was calloused and marked by a myriad of scars. Psyche relaxed her defensive posture and smiled, reassured by his calm authoritative tones.

"Hey, Doc!" complained one of the others, a scrawny dark-haired youth with pallid blotchy skin and a straggly beard. "Are you going to introduce the rest of us?"

Hreidmar shook his head in mock annoyance. "That's Nurori, our driver," he told Psyche. "Moans a lot, but he's harmless enough."

Psyche waved to Nurori, who responded with a wry grin. Next to him, a nice-looking young man with an olive complexion stepped forward, then wrinkled his nose and sneezed. He sported a short dark beard and wore his long black hair tied back.

"Hi Psyche," he said. She recognised his nasal-sounding voice from earlier. "I'm Fafnir, explosives expert. Sorry for sneezing. It's the dust from the mines."

"I'm Galar," a third man said lazily. The blond beard sprouting from his tanned face was clipped into an unruly goatee and golden curls sprung from beneath his hat. "Poet and musician, dear mademoiselle. I drill rocks for this bunch of cultural philistines."

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“Litr,” the next said hesitantly. Psyche smiled at the sight of the coloured strips of fabric woven into his tied-back mousy dreadlocks and bushy beard. He looked slightly baffled, not to mention worryingly pale. “I dig rocks and stuff.”

“Brokkr,” the last young man said shyly. His dark skin glistened with sweat. His own beard and neat moustache were trimmed short, as was his jet-black hair. “Team mechanic.”

“He’s chief engineer,” Surori corrected. “And far too modest! I’m the mechanic.”

Psyche looked at each of them in turn. She noticed the cheery Surori bore a strong resemblance to grumpy Nurori and wondered if they were brother and sister.

Hreidmar gave his beard a thoughtful stroke. “Well, this is nice,” he said. “My dear Psyche, you look in dire need of a bath, clean clothes and some rest. I suggest we leave the big question mark over your arrival until later. Unless there’s anything you’d like to ask us?”

“Thank you, Mister Hreidmar,” Psyche said hesitantly. She was sure he and the others were grown-ups, but all stood much shorter than herself. “Are you, err... hobbits?”

Nurori snorted. “Hark at her, dainty little Snow White.”

Surori gave him a shove. “Shut up, Nurori! At least she didn’t use the ‘D’ word.”

“High gravity and crap food,” Galar said solemnly. “It’s a long story.”

* * *

They ran a hot bath, gave her towels and left her to soak away the grime of the forest in the cottage’s stone-tiled bathroom. With clean clothes and fresh sheets awaiting, Psyche settled down for the night, her mind whirling. When her new friends tip-toed one-by-one into the room to claim their own bunk for the night she never stopped feeling safe and secure.

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When she awoke the next morning, the rest of the household were already up and eating breakfast at the kitchen table. It was a riotous affair, their banter and merry arguments over who ate all the hash browns greeting her as she hesitantly poked her head through the doorway. Seeing all seven washed and in clean clothes made them look younger than ever. Wearing a wide smile, Hreidmar saw her first and beckoned for her to enter.

“Psyche!” he greeted. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you,” Psyche replied shyly.

“Good morning!” said Surori. She pointed to where a place had been set for Psyche at the table. “Please, help yourself to breakfast.”

Psyche took her seat and gazed in awe at the food piled up before her. Not only was there a whole loaf of fresh buttered toast, but pots of jam, a plate of sausages, a dish of scrambled egg and another of fried mushrooms, plus various other delights she could only guess at. Psyche eyed the food hungrily and cautiously took a slice of toast and spoonful of scrambled egg. Her stomach grumbled in anticipation.

“Hey, don’t be shy,” said Litr. He did not seem to mind that his dreadlocks with their coloured scraps of cloth dangled in his mug, nor that Brokkr opposite watched with dreamy stares. “There’s plenty to go around. And lots of coffee,” he added with a yawn, pointing to a large silver pot. “You look like you need some decent food and drink inside you.”

“Shame we haven’t got any,” complained Nurori. “That ’risor is on its last legs.”

“Shut up Nurori,” said Fafnir. Seeing Psyche’s confusion, he dabbed his nose with a tissue and pointed to a battered metal wall unit with a glass door, which she had assumed was some sort of oven. “Food molecularisor? You must know what one is.”

Her mouth full of toast and egg, Psyche shook her head, feeling foolish.

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“Do you not have ’risors where you come from?” asked Galar, twirling the sausage impaled on his fork. “What a wonderful backward fantasy land that must be.”

“Galar!” hissed Surori. “Don’t be rude!”

“Where are you from?” Brokkr shyly asked Psyche. “You never said.”

Psyche swallowed the mouthful of toast she had been chewing. “I was on an island,” she said. “I jumped off a boat and walked through the forest. My books!” she exclaimed. “Where did I leave my bag? It was all they let me keep when mama...”

She fell silent. Her seven companions exchanged glances. Fafnir left the table and slipped away through the door, returning moments later with the bag Psyche had brought with her. He withdrew one of the books and sneezed.

“*Red Mars*, dusty and a bit damp,” he remarked, handing it to Hreidmar, who examined it with interest. “I’ve not seen proper paper books for years! And *The Hobbit*,” he added wryly, peering into the bag. “An island, eh? I heard Feng Du keeps an old-fashioned library to stop prisoners using slates.”

“This is the edition given to the first Mars colonists,” Hreidmar said, sounding impressed. His gaze shifted from the book to Psyche. “You were in Feng Du?”

Psyche nodded. “I lived there with mama. She’s gone now,” she said sadly.

“That prisoner who died,” remarked Nurori. “They brought her coffin back yesterday. There was a rumour she had a young daughter.”

“Oh my,” murmured Surori. “Poor thing. Fancy growing up in that place!”

“Do you have any friends or family you could go to?” asked Hreidmar.

Psyche shook her head. That question had never occurred to her before.

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“You’re welcome to stay with us,” Surori reassured her. “You’ll be safe here until you decide what to do. We’re the last mining team in this sector and don’t get many visitors. Nurori can take you on a delivery if you ever need to get to Yao Chi.”

“We’re orphans too,” Galar said dreamily. “Lured from Earth by false dreams of adventure in a faraway land. Que Qiao have this thing called the holoverse,” he explained. “It sprinkles digital fairy dust over reality to create your own living fantasy. Next thing you know, you’re aboard a real spaceship and heading into a life of back-breaking toil. I struggle to recall anything of my old life in London.”

“We lived on boats,” Brokkr said. “I remember that much.”

“It wasn’t much of a life,” grumbled Nurori. “Outcasts in the bits of the city left to rot in the floods. May the greys preserve us! This ain’t much of a life either.”

“Que Qiao only took boys,” Litr said. “They thought girls weren’t strong enough.”

Psyche tried to make sense of what they were saying. London for her was the city of Charles Dickens, whose tales often went badly for the poor. Litr’s comment puzzled her.

“They only took the boys?” she asked. “But Surori is a girl.”

“Nurori refused to leave me behind,” Surori told her. She reached over and patted him on the arm. “I suppose one grubby boat urchin looks pretty much like another. He’s my twin brother,” she explained. “Underneath that grumpy façade is a heart of gold, honest.”

“And now we’re miners,” said Hreidmar, who had been quietly contemplating the worn pages of *The Hobbit*, having removed it from Psyche’s bag. “Three years of high gravity, back-breaking work and cheap ’risor cartridges. None of us has reached twenty, did you know? Now we look like a bunch of wizened dwarfs from this book of yours. Hacking big holes in Taotie just to feed the corporation’s lust for bauxite.”

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“Aluminium comes from bauxite,” said Fafnir. “You probably knew that.”

Psyche, her eyes wide, slowly shook her head. “Will they send me down a mine?”

Hreidmar lowered her book, looking thoughtful. The others at the table fell silent. Psyche jumped at the loud crash as Litr accidentally dropped a fork onto his plate.

“I was your age when I came here,” Hreidmar said sadly. “If your mother was the one I’m thinking of, the old-timers speak highly of how she tried to stop Que Qiao exploiting us. If you stay, all we ask is that you help out at home when we need an extra pair of hands. Keep out of sight when you’re alone and watch out for strangers. Do we have a deal?”

Psyche nodded. “Thank you, Hreidmar. All of you.”

“Welcome to the family!” said Surori. She raised her mug of tea. “To Psyche, whom I shall treasure like a sister. And down with Que Qiao!”

The others responded with a cheer. Psyche smiled properly for the first time in years.

* * *

Psyche’s new family were as good as their word and kept her safe. She in turn worked hard to thank her seven new friends and the tiny woodland cottage became her home. None were old enough to remember Psyche’s mother before she was jailed, but over time the tales gathered from other mining outposts drew a picture of a fearless union leader, fighting the Que Qiao Corporation to win better rights for the miners. Her mother’s imprisonment in Feng Du had been illegal, but Taotie was too far from Earth for justice to be done.

Psyche loved her new friends. They in turn had great affection for her. As they grew older, the sheepish gaze of Fafnir began to suggest something more; he was the youngest of the seven and it had been a shock to learn he

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was just two years older than herself. Meanwhile, a bashful Brokkr had secretly told her of his own feelings towards Galar.

To her delight, the others often brought her books as gifts, electronic texts for the touch-screen slate Hreidmar found for her. Nurori drove the regular ore convoy to Yao Chi and sometimes brought back proper paper books, though for years refused to say where he got them. He eventually confessed that he was a member of the outlawed Dhusarian Church of Taotie; the treasured books were gifts from long-standing church activists who remembered Psyche's mother well.

Psyche learned to use the food molecularisor, holovids and all the other gadgets kept from her in Feng Du and soon had her favourite shows amongst the thousands of broadcasts on the five-systems network. She had a voracious appetite for learning and learn she did.

The weeks turned to months, then years. She never forgot her dear departed mama and often found herself relating stories of her childhood in Feng Du. Friends from other mines were invited to the cottage to hear her speak and they always arrived with the gift of a book or two. By now, Psyche was devouring works by political thinkers of all persuasions, but it was one about the Yuanshi civil war, *People versus Profit: Corporate Colonisation and the New Frontier*, that finally convinced her the only way Que Qiao would listen to suffering workers was if the corporation's shareholders were made to suffer in turn. Psyche and others became saboteurs, vowing to continue her mother's work by hitting Que Qiao where it hurt. Her new followers in turn swore an oath to protect Psyche from her mother's fate.

Ten years passed before word got back to Taotie's authorities that Psyche still lived. By then, the daughter of a legend had become a legend in her own right.

* * *

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PART TWO: THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL...

GOVERNOR MALINGEE SCOWLED, turned from the window and sneezed. Her new office furniture was made from cheap local timber, bringing with it the disgusting odour of Peng Lai's primordial forests. The Christmas decorations put up by her bemused assistant tried their best to brighten the room but looked forlorn. Malingee reflected she should have ordered him to give the trinkets a good dusting before putting them up.

The wall-mounted holoivid, draped with sad strings of decorative tinsel, was in mirror mode and caught her stern reflection in a most unflattering light. After ten years as governor, her suntan remained but her puffy face sagged, her muscles were flabby and her blond locks were limp. The last few months had been difficult. Malingee had selfishly joined a plot to split Que Qiao and wrestle Epsilon Eridani operations free from Shanghai control, only for them to be out-manoeuvred by the royalist rebels of Yuanshi and their friends in the United Nations. Taotie was now part of the new Terran Federation of Worlds, which in turn was far too cosy with the Dhusarian Church. While notionally still governor, Malingee now reported to the scary lizard-like Brother Tula. She was under pressure and fighting for survival.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall," she declared. The office Christmas tree loomed behind her in the screen's dark reflection. "Who is the fairest of them all?"

Her stupid pass-phrase had become an office joke, not that she cared. The holoivid instantly brought up the latest report on herself and her fellow governors across the new Federation. She had won a permanent promotion eight years ago.

"Damnation!" she hissed as her eyes found her name. "Down to second."

The escalating worker rebellions at the mines had blackened her record. It was not her fault that the heavy-handed policing used by Que

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Qiao for years was frowned upon by the Federation. Malingee saw she had lost first-place ranking to Commander Kartikeya, Maharani Uma's number one on Yuanshi, who had replaced the disgraced Governor Jaggarneth. After facing Jaggarneth at last year's peace conference, Kartikeya now revelled in a smug 'told you so' sense of superiority.

Malingee growled and swiped the report from the screen, then went to her desk and sat down. She was expecting a visit from the latest in a long line of security officers. Staff turnover within her team was phenomenal. Sometimes she wondered if there was anyone left in the five systems with the necessary lack of morals to get the job done.

She heard a knock at the door. Malingee leaned back in her chair.

"Enter," she snapped.

Her assistant, a nervous young Indian man from Daode, showed the security officer into the room and hastily slipped away. Malingee stared in distaste at her visitor, whose dark glasses and wide-brimmed hat did little to mask a pasty complexion and a terrible ginger beard, not to mention a calm confidence she found quite annoying. She glanced to the screen on her desk for a reminder of the officer's name and realised she did not care.

"Governor Malingee," her guest greeted softly. "You wanted to see me?"

"There's more trouble at the mines," she growled. "Workers are revolting!"

"Sanitation services leave much to be desired, ma'am," the officer replied, smiling wryly. Malingee met the attempted joke with a scowl. "The miners feel they've been betrayed. Many hoped the new Federation would bring changes."

Malingee's stare narrowed. "My spies say it's the same person behind each attack."

The security officer's surprise did not seem genuine. "Is that so?"

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“A young woman named Psyche. Daughter of a union leader who died in Feng Du.” Malingee leaned back in her chair. “Disappeared ten years ago, presumed drowned.”

“So what’s with all these decorations?” the officer asked in a sudden change of subject, waving a dainty hand at the tatty bauble-strewn tree. “If this is meant to knock visitors for six it’s doing a damn fine job.”

“Heathen,” she retorted. “Christmas is one tradition I expect my staff to keep.”

The officer smiled. “I wasn’t aware you were the sentimental type.”

“I’m not,” Malingee replied sternly. She rapped a hand upon the desk. “This pesky woman Psyche. Deal with her. I want her lungs and liver on a plate.”

“Boiled with her own pudding, buried with a stake of holly through her heart,” the officer said, bemused. “*A Christmas Carol*, you know? There’s wisdom in old books.”

* * *

The officer walked briskly from Malingee’s office, through the bustling corridors of the government building and out to the parking area. The ground car allocated to the security team was a huge six-wheeled beast built for ploughing through the often non-existent forest roads. Climbing inside, the officer quickly activated the dark screens to mask the windows. Only then did Kedesh carefully pull the false ginger beard from her face.

“Just not cricket,” she muttered. She rubbed the sticky residue of glue from her chin, removed the stupid hat and shook her long red locks back into shape. “That’s the last time I go undercover as a man.”

She frowned as she considered Malingee’s orders. Ten years ago, Psyche’s apparent drowning had shaken her more than she dared admit. Back then Kedesh had been just another Que Qiao new recruit, yet those first months on Taotie had shown her enough to realise that a corporation

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with hazy morals was not for her. A contact from her university days had led her instead to the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem, an old Commonwealth institution set up to do the best for humankind. She was now Commander Kedesh, Grand Priory field agent, back on Taotie to put things right.

She programmed the truck's autopilot to take her to the trans-continental highway and settled into her seat. Kedesh had been sent to Taotie to investigate reports of under-aged workers lured to the planet by false promises of adventure. Yet she remembered clearly the fateful day ten years before when the young girl under her care had disappeared into the sea. The last thing Kedesh expected was to be reunited with the orphan of Feng Du, who was not only still alive but continuing the fight started by her mother years before.

Psyche was no union leader, nor a Dhusarian believer like her dear departed mama. She and her followers had become freedom fighters, determined to destroy all that Que Qiao had built. It was no wonder Malingee was out for blood. As the truck sped past the concrete towers of Yao Chi, Kedesh was not sure there could be a happy ending.

* * *

Psyche passed the last stick of dynamite to Fafnir. It was becoming a little too warm for comfort inside the gloomy concrete access tunnel. Fafnir carefully inserted the detonator and connected the fuse wire. Satisfied, he gave her a nod.

“It's done,” he said. “Let's get the hell out of here.”

“Good job,” she murmured, squeezing his shoulder. “And you didn't sneeze once.”

“Handling this stuff is a good incentive not to,” he admitted wryly.

They hastily retreated along the tunnel, following the strands of fuse wire up a metal stairway into daylight on top of the huge hydroelectric

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dam. This was their biggest sabotage mission to date. The dam supplied power to the electro-magnetic launch ramps at Yao Chi spaceport. Blowing it to rubble would cripple freighter operations for months.

Psyche grabbed Fafnir's hand as they ran to the safety of the river bank. The forest grew thick either side of the artificial lake, the launch ramps of the spaceport just visible on the horizon to the north. In the forest, on the road that ran towards them before crossing the top of the dam, Psyche saw dust rising from an approaching vehicle.

She and Fafnir hurried to where Brokkr and Surori sat in a hollow, frantically wiring fuses to a control box. They had all aged beyond their years but a new fire burned in their eyes. Each wore camouflage suits made from mining overalls dyed brown and green.

“Quickly!” hissed Psyche. “There’s a truck coming!”

“Shall we wait until it’s on the dam?” asked Surori, with a sly smile.

Psyche glared at her. “Of course not! Blow the charges now before it gets too close!”

Brokkr nodded, his hands already connecting the last fuse to the output terminal. With a final glance to Psyche he turned a key, moved his hand across and thumbed a red switch.

A dull rumble was heard, followed by a tremor that shook the ground. Shrieks and frantic rustles filled the forest as unseen creatures bolted in fear. A faint staccato of cracking concrete drifted upon the breeze. With a sudden ear-deafening groan, the centre of the dam collapsed in an avalanche of rubble. The lake poured through the breach with an almighty roar, sending clouds of spray high into the air. Psyche smiled at the result of their sabotage. A rainbow shimmered above the shattered remains of the dam.

“That’s rather pretty,” she remarked. “Don’t you think?”

“I’m sure Malingee’s minions would have preferred a different gift this Christmas,” said Brokkr, grinning. “We should go before whoever was in that truck sees us.”

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The approaching vehicle had stopped. A tall figure stood by the open door, calmly taking in the scene of destruction. Psyche came to Fafnir's side and followed his gaze. There were not many women with red hair who made a habit of driving into the forest alone.

"It's Kedesh," said Psyche. "Did she know what we had planned?"

"She has her sources," Surori said, frowning. "I'm glad she's on our side."

Brokkr disconnected the fuses and stuffed the control box into his backpack. Psyche led them through the trees to where Kedesh waited, wondering if she had any news.

They embraced with friendly hugs. Kedesh smiled, extracted herself from Psyche's grip and nodded a greeting to the others. The Grand PRIORITY agent had been back on Taotie barely a month but Psyche already treated her like family, having never forgotten the kind stranger on the boat. In a way, Kedesh was Psyche's first and oldest friend.

"That'll knock them for six," Kedesh remarked, looking towards the shattered dam.

"What?" Fafnir scratched his head. "In English, please."

"Nothing more English than cricket," Kedesh said firmly.

"Any news?" asked Psyche. "The governor must be ready to listen!"

"Bit of a sticky wicket, I'm afraid," Kedesh replied. Psyche's face fell. "Malingee wants you dead. I still say we should pull stumps and get you off Taotie."

"Did you trace our families?" Surori asked hopefully.

Kedesh shook her head. "Still working on that," she said, sounding apologetic. "The London authorities are keeping us somewhat on the back foot. I heard an old colleague of mine is with the boat people south of the river, which may give me some leads."

"Our place is here," Psyche said defiantly. "The workers are still treated like slaves. Being part of the new Federation hasn't changed that

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one bit. Food is still rationed and the gravity grinds our bones. I will not abandon my people.”

“Your people?” Kedesh raised an eyebrow. “You’ve had a good innings and caused Que Qiao a lot of grief. Take my advice and take Fafnir far away from here. Settle down and have a go at living happily ever after. This isn’t your war.”

“Yes, but...” began Psyche, then paused. “Me and Fafnir?”

Kedesh smiled. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

Fafnir had gone bright red. Brokkr grinned and gave him a hearty slap on the back. Psyche caught Fafnir’s gaze and suddenly saw something in his eyes that took her breath away, a sheepish smile that reached deep inside her soul and sent her heart fluttering. She had been blind not to see it before. Surori was trying hard not to giggle.

“Fafnir,” Psyche murmured. “My prince!”

“You must do what you feel is right,” he said softly, taking her hand.

Psyche glanced back to the ruined dam. The lake was draining fast, turning the river beyond into a raging torrent that mirrored her own churning emotions.

“The governor has our demands,” she said slowly. “Maybe this time...?”

“Malingee doesn’t do diplomacy,” Kedesh reminded her. “If you stay on Taotie, she will come after you. Take the ticket out of here, Psyche. Please, for all your sakes.”

* * *

Governor Malingee was not happy. She lifted her glare from the message on her slate and fixed it on the nervous stare of her assistant, who fidgeted before her desk holding a small parcel in his hands. The message made it clear that blowing the dam was just a taste of what was to come if the new

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Federation refused to undo the ways of Que Qiao. Malingee did not take kindly to threats. Issuing demands with menaces was her job.

“I do not negotiate with terrorists,” she snapped. “Has that new security officer reported in? I want an end to this!”

“This is from him,” her assistant stammered, holding out the package.

Malingee frowned, grabbed the parcel and tore it open. Reaching inside, she flinched as her hand brushed against something hairy. She gingerly lifted a foil carton from within and opened the lid. A smell of spicy food wafted into her office. With it was a folded take-away menu with a cheap animated display.

“Lungs and liver,” she growled, looking at the crimson contents of the carton and then the menu. “Of a Matsu tiger sea-sloth! Fresh from Hunter’s Noodles Bar. Damnation!”

Malingee tossed the menu across the desk. Reaching back into the parcel, she grabbed the hairy bundle she felt earlier and held it up for her assistant to see.

“A false beard?” he asked hesitantly. “That security officer...”

“We’ve been tricked,” spat Malingee. She stood up and stomped to the wall holovid screen. “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who... Oh, screw it. You know the routine!”

The rolling news feed shrank into a corner and was replaced by the latest report card for herself and the other governors. Malingee quickly scanned the list.

“Bottom!” she shrieked. “How dare they!”

Her assistant squinted at the list and offered a sympathetic smile, which just made Malingee madder than ever. Things were really bad if her staff felt sorry for her.

“Get me some transport and armed agents,” she snapped. “I’m going out there to put an end to that dratted Psyche once and for all!”

* * *

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Psyche put down her slate, disturbed by a sudden knocking on the cottage door. Her seven housemates were keeping their heads down at the mines, pretending they had nothing to do with the attack on the dam. She was not expecting any visitors. Psyche wondered if Kedesh had returned with more bad news.

At first she did not recognise who was at the door. The stocky middle-aged woman with straggly blond hair was wearing a blue trouser suit that looked far too smart for trekking through primeval forest. Behind her stood two dark-haired Chinese men clad in the crisp black uniforms of security agents. Psyche was not sure if their anxious sideways glances into the surrounding trees was through fear of strange creatures or of being watched. A corporate ground car was parked on the track on the other side of the pond.

Psyche's smile of welcome faded as she realised who her visitor was. She resisted the urge to slam the door in the woman's face.

"Governor Malingee," she remarked coolly. "You look lost."

"I don't think so," Malingee replied, forcing a smile. "Psyche, is it? I understand you have been, err... campaigning for miners' rights. Better working conditions and so on."

She held out her hand in greeting. Despite the humid heat, she wore black gloves.

Psyche ignored the offered palm. "So you got our demands."

"Yes." Malingee paused. "I bring you a peace offering."

She beckoned to the man to her right, who moved to retrieve a covered basket left out of sight. With a dramatic flourish, Malingee plucked away the linen cover. The basket was loaded with fresh fruit, with expensive imported apples and pears sitting meekly alongside native purple sweetmarrows and pale spawnberries. The governor's forced smile was that of a wicked stepmother in a terrible fairy-tale cliché.

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“Fresh fruit?” Psyche frowned. “Makes a change from the tasteless crap you put in your ’risor cartridges. Lucky for us we have an alternative supplier in Yao Chi.”

“Shall we go inside and talk? We have issues to resolve.”

“What issues are those then?” asked Psyche, in a mocking tone. “Your falling ratings with the creepy lizard men of the Federation? I have my sources,” she said, as a red-faced Malingee opened to mouth to protest. “Say what you have to and leave.”

“I am willing to open talks on working conditions,” said Malingee. Everything in her manner suggested otherwise. “But you must end your foolish campaign of destruction and surrender all information you have on those responsible. That is non-negotiable,” she said firmly, before Psyche could object. “You have twenty-four hours to respond. If you do not agree, the next visitors out here will bring gunships. Do I make myself clear?”

“Do I get to keep your peace offering?” Psyche retorted sarcastically.

“But of course!” said Malingee, her voice dripping with a sickly false sweetness. “Quality fruit like that doesn’t just grow on trees, you know.”

Psyche gave her a curious look, wondering how anyone could say that with a straight face. The governor offered her hand once more, this time as a farewell. The agent holding the basket hovered uncertainly beside her.

“Leave it outside,” Psyche told him. Still confused, she took the governor’s hand. “They’re probably poisoned any... Ow!”

She flinched as she felt a sharp jab of pain. Psyche pulled back her hand and stared blankly at the tiny silver needles sticking from her palm. Malingee gave a sly grin, tugged the gloves from her hands and tossed them aside. Psyche suddenly felt light-headed.

“A poisoned apple?” Malingee said scornfully. “Taotie ain’t no fairy tale, my dear.”

“What...?” murmured Psyche.

Her legs gave way beneath her. She became aware of another vehicle coming down the track, then frantic shouts and angry voices. Everything

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was becoming blurry. The evil governor and her black-suited agents melted into the hazy green of the forest, making way for seven smaller blurs and one tall. The fading hallway twisted and everything went dark.

* * *

Kedesh forced the truck ever faster along the forest track, conscious of the gloomy stares from Hreidmar, Brokkr, Galar, Litr and Nurori crammed into the seats beside her. A distraught Fafnir and Surori sat squashed in the luggage area at the back, their hands tenderly resting upon the emergency medical pod that held the comatose Psyche.

It was almost an hour's drive to the trans-continental highway, then another to the medical facility in Yao Chi. The pagoda-styled health centre was in Shenzhou Square, sandwiched between the green biological scaffold of the Canadian Embassy and the glassed-walled monolith of Europa House. The clinic was for off-world government employees and the only one in Yao Chi not run by Que Qiao or the new Federation. No one trusted the Taotie administration after what the governor herself had just done to Psyche.

Kedesh had called ahead and a team of paramedics hurried out as her truck pulled into the ambulance bay. The medical pod holding Psyche was rushed through the reception lobby, past the bemused waiting patients and onwards down a brightly-lit corridor, a stifling wind of disinfectant billowing in its wake. Much to the chagrin of the others, only Fafnir and Kedesh were allowed to accompany Psyche into the treatment room.

The doctor who awaited them, a stern Indian woman in pristine green overalls, quietly questioned the paramedics as they moved Psyche from the pod onto the examination table and connected monitoring equipment. Fafnir and Kedesh watched silently, too anxious to speak. The doctor peered into her patient's unblinking gaze and checked her pulse, then retrieved a squat cylinder from a pocket and pressed it against Psyche's

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bare arm. Frowning, she reached for a touch-screen slate and slotted the cylinder into the top. She studied the screen for a few moments, then nodded and offered Fafnir an encouraging smile.

“Your friend has been poisoned,” she said. “You got her here just in time.”

She slipped her slate into her pocket, went to a wall cabinet and selected a small vial and a packaged syringe. Returning to her patient, she cleaned a patch of skin upon Psyche's arm, prepared the injection and gently pushed the needle home. Fafnir shuddered and turned away, making muted retching noises. Kedesh gave him a hug.

“Don't fret so!” the doctor reassured them. She withdrew the syringe and glanced again at the monitors. “She'll be sore for a while but should make a full recovery.”

Fafnir's expression softened with unspoken relief, his eyes wet with tears. Psyche's gentle breathing had settled into a steady rhythm and a blush of colour had returned to her pale features.

“Thank you,” said Fafnir. “When I saw her lying there, I... I thought I'd lost her.”

“A nasty business. What did she do to annoy Malingee so much?”

Kedesh frowned. “We never said it was the governor who did it,” she said cautiously.

“The same poison was used at a Yao Chi restaurant years ago to finish off the previous governor and his team,” the doctor said bitterly. “An official investigation decided there was no foul play, but that hasn't stopped other critics of Governor Malingee dropping dead since. We thought it wise to keep an antidote to hand.”

Fafnir shook his head and sighed. Moving closer, he gently brushed the hair from Psyche's face, leaned across and gently kissed her forehead. He took her hand in his own.

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“I love you Psyche,” he whispered. “My darling angel, the fairest of them all! My treasure of pearly skin, ruby lips and hair black as coal. I don’t ever want to let you go.”

Psyche’s eyes flickered open. “I heard that, my prince,” she whispered. She squeezed his fingers and smiled. “I love you too. Are you going to put a ring on that hand, or what?”

* * *

One week later, it was a humid Christmas Day. Psyche and Fafnir, seeing no reason to wait, were to get married that very day. On Christmas morning, Psyche welcomed Kedesh to the forest cottage where preparations were in full swing. She had recovered from Malingee’s poisoning but the psychological scars ran deep. Taotie had become a dark, sinister place.

Much to everyone’s surprise, an uncharacteristically-cheerful Nurori had not only confessed his membership of the Dhusarian Church, but also that he had been ordained as an assistant priest many years before and was happy to officiate. The service was to be held in the cottage garden, which Brokkr, Galar and Litr had transformed with garlands of flowers into what they called a fairy grotto. Brokkr had found some old Christmas tree lights to decorate the steel bridge across the brook, which Litr was currently fixing into place. A nervous Fafnir was in the kitchen with Hreidmar, pretending to help prepare the food. Friends from other mining outposts were coming to the celebration from across Peng Lai.

Psyche greeted Kedesh with a hug and invited into the bedroom, where Surori was helping her get dressed. Nurori had managed to get hold of a traditional ivory wedding gown on his last trip into Yao Chi, along with a smart suit for Fafnir. The sound of Galar practising ‘Here Comes the Bride’ on guitar wafted through the window from the garden.

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“Nice frock,” said Kedesh, as Psyche gave a playful twirl. Surori had just finished arranging red and white flowers in her raven locks. “Quite a crowd outside, I see.”

“They’ve come to say goodbye,” said Psyche. “I can’t believe we’re leaving Taotie! I wish we could take them all with us, like Harriet did in *Bound for the Promised Land*.”

“Your work is done,” Surori reassured her. “You heard the news. The Federation is finally bringing in their own people. Malingee is probably clearing her desk as we speak.”

“The governor has disappeared,” said Kedesh. “Forget her. Psyche, this is your big day! Though I’m not entirely comfortable with Dhusarian ceremonies. I’ve nothing against Nurori but I’ve fielded some deeply unpleasant innings against others from the church.”

“My mother was Dhusarian,” Psyche reminded her, sounding stern.

“Apologies,” said Kedesh, then sighed. “When we first met on that boat, I’d just joined Que Qiao and hadn’t yet found my place in the world. You were an innocent, caught in a web of hate.” She paused again, her voice faltering. “I thought you’d drowned! I knew then I’d picked the wrong team. You changed my life, Psyche. And my hair colour!”

“My dear Maid Marion!” said Psyche, smiling. “My first and longest friend.”

“Hair colour?” asked Surori, bemused.

“Long story,” said Kedesh. “Where’s Fafnir? I have some news for him.”

“In the kitchen with Hreidmar,” said Psyche. “Good news?”

Kedesh smiled and nodded. “I’m sure he’ll want to tell you himself.”

* * *

Sudden shouts and angry voices outside brought Psyche and Surori hurrying to the front door. Psyche shuddered in alarm. Malingee, clad in a

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dishevelled business suit and a scary vicious scowl, was stomping towards them across the bridge. Litr dropped the lamps he was wiring and ran. A black corporation ground car was parked crookedly on the track.

“Psyche!” yelled Malingee. “Where’s that damn bitch? It’s all her fault!”

“Oh my,” murmured Psyche. “Who invited her?”

The few guests milling by the pond made a hasty retreat. Psyche and Surori hesitantly stepped from the cottage, followed by Fafnir, Hreidmar and Kedesh from the kitchen. Fafnir, tugging at his unfamiliar shirt collar, looked at Malingee and gave an anguished yelp.

“Not her!” he cried. “This is our wedding day!”

Brokkr, Nurori and Galar came down the path from the back garden and joined the others at the front door, their faces stricken with fear. Litr ran towards them and tugged at Brokkr’s sleeve. The discarded Christmas lights flickered at Malingee’s feet.

“Brokkr,” Litr said urgently. “The bridge...”

“Yes, very pretty,” snapped Brokkr. “Can’t you see we have bigger problems?”

“Psyche!” Malingee yelled. She paused halfway across the bridge and shook her fist. “I lost my job thanks to you and your seven bloody dwarfs!”

“Good,” muttered Psyche.

“Psyche nearly lost her life!” Hreidmar roared back. “You poisoned her!”

“It’s what she deserved,” retorted Malingee. “And the blasted Federation still thinks I’m not loyal enough! I built this world on blood, sweat and tears! Not my own, admittedly,” she conceded. She stopped and stared at the gathered guests. “Why aren’t these people at work? Damn you, Psyche! Does your meddling never cease?”

“It’s Christmas Day,” Nurori replied weakly. “It’s the one day’s holiday you allow.”

PSYCHE'S SEVEN

Malingee responded with a scowl of contempt. Psyche stared in horror as the woman reached into her jacket and pulled out a gun. With a look of absolute fury, Malingee grabbed the rail with her other hand and lunged forward, tearing at the tangle of coloured lights.

Suddenly, she yelped and began dancing, a bizarre jolting jig that made her hair stand on end. A terrible banshee wail erupted from her lips, then with a final sickening lurch she froze and dropped to the decking of the bridge. Faint wisps of smoke rose from her hands and feet. An eerie silence descended upon the scene.

“The lights,” Litr said quietly. “I tried to tell you. I accidentally broke the wires. I twisted them together but couldn’t find any tape. Have you got any?”

“Bare electric wires,” Galar said slowly, “on a steel bridge?”

Nurori managed a rare grin. “That explains the dancing.”

“Is she dead?” Psyche asked nervously.

Hreidmar cautiously approached the bridge and unplugged the lights. The crumpled form of ex-Governor Malingee lay still. He knelt down next to her and felt for a pulse.

“She’s still breathing,” he called. He sounded disappointed.

Psyche sighed and beckoned to Nurori. “Help Doc put her in the car and send it back on autopilot,” she told him, then glanced to Kedesh. “Unless you have any other ideas?”

“It’s your wedding,” Kedesh said wryly.

Surori frowned. “I’m not happy with Malingee showing up like that.”

“Me neither,” said Fafnir. He looked at Kedesh. “What if she comes back? You asked me to take Psyche away from all this, but that madwoman could come for our friends!”

“Actually, I may have a solution,” said Kedesh, looking to Surori and the others. “I need a team for a job on Avalon. I know you’ve been bowled a googly before with promises of adventure, but the Grand Priory is bankrolling this one. What do you say?”

PSYCHE'S SEVEN

“An adventure on Avalon?” asked Galar, intrigued. “Sounds fun!”

Fafnir drew Psyche into an embrace. “We have a Christmas present of our own.”

Psyche smiled. “Which is?”

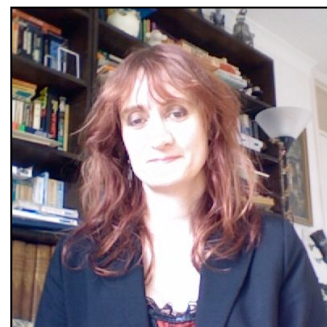
“Kedesh found my family,” he said with a broad smile. “It seems I have an aunt and uncle who keep sheep in Wales. They want us to join them at their farm. How about it?” he asked. “It sounds a bit like *Wuthering Heights*. You and me, happily ever after?”

“Cathy and Heathcliff? I prefer Cosette and Marius in *Les Misérables*,” said Psyche, her eyes shining. “Come on, let’s get married. Then we can dream of sheep.”

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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