

SNAKES ON A SPACESHIP

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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Snakes On A Spaceship

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

A short story by
Steph Bennion

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SNAKES ON A SPACESHIP

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

Deep within Epsilon Eridani's asteroid belt, smugglers Ganesa and Hanuman are taking a party of gangsters and cargo of exotic snakes to a secret Christmas shindig. Aboard a wrecked spacecraft they find a mysterious young woman, comatose within an overgrown biodome. And also a saboteur...

“I HATE CHRISTMAS PARTIES,” Ganesa said morosely, idly redoing the ragged ponytail keeping her dark hair in check. Three days into a tedious smuggling run, her flight suit smelt of stale sweat. “Doesn't he know we're Hindu? I go elsewhere for festive joy.”

“You love parties!” declared Hanuman, grinning. Despite the lack of gravity, he had contrived to slouch carelessly in the pilot's seat like the loveable stubble-jawed rogue he imagined himself to be. “Dancing, free food, lots of drink; what's not to like?”

They were aboard the *Sun Wukong*, an ex-military transport spacecraft that Hanuman had bought years before at auction. The late twenty-third century was an interesting time to be a trader. More and more of Earth's oligarchs were pouring money into childhood dreams and exploring neighbouring stars, hotly pursued by mighty corporations keen to capitalise on the gold rush and claim their own brave new worlds. Governments of Earth, burdened by more pressing issues on humankind's weary home planet, were still trying to catch up. Space was the perfect breeding ground for adventure, corruption and crime.

Hanuman and Ganesa were second-generation settlers from the Indian-run outpost of Yuanshi, a terraformed moon of the gas giant Shennong, fourth planet of Epsilon Eridani. Their interstellar flying-wing was in deep space, navigating the asteroid belt between the planets of Taotie and Shennong. The *Sun Wukong* was en route to Hundun, a rocky airless world orbiting within the belt that still had astronomers arguing whether it qualified as the system's official third planet or not. Hundun was supposed to be uninhabited, but everyone knew it was where a certain elderly crime lord had made his lair.

“Pigsy Chiyou doesn't do parties with dancing,” Ganesa pointed out. “He does 'lightly sautéed endangered species on gold plates served with

illegal intoxicants because I'm filthy rich' parties. Can't stand the man! He only holds his Christmas shindigs to impress the American gangsters running Ganymede. I'd much rather spend the holiday at home in front of the holovid with a takeaway and a few bottles of beer."

"Like last year?" remarked Hanuman, idly wedging his boots against the automatic pilot control. "And the year before? You need to get out more, my dear."

A sudden beeping rose from the communications console. Sighing, Hanuman tapped a query into a keypad. Ganesa leaned across to look and cringed as sudden raucous laughter broke from the crew compartment behind them. Turning, she peered through the open hatch at their passengers, two men and two women from the Chinese spaceport city of Yao Chi on Taotie. They were playing dominoes, noisily slapping magnetic pieces onto a table. Nervous hisses rose from the covered terrarium at the rear of the cabin. Ganesa would have preferred their cargo to be locked away, but this particular delivery would not have survived long in the ship's unpressurised hold. She could almost sense the creatures within, slithering into her consciousness from the communications chip implanted in her skull.

"Snakes," she said, sighing. "Why did it have to be snakes?"

"As you said, man's got a taste for the illegal," said Hanuman, still tapping. "Snake soup, snake wine; the fresher and more poisonous ingredients, the better."

"How macho of him. Snake wine! Another reason to skip the festivities."

The beeping was not going away. Frowning, Hanuman squinted at the display. One of the men in the passenger compartment looked their way. Wang Mulian, a middle-aged bruiser with a wispy white beard, cut a striking figure in his custom red flight suit with snowy fake-fur trim. Strapped in the seat beside him, his saxophone case was never far from his side. Mulian was the gangster Sheng dan Lao ren, the Chinese Father Christmas, famed cabaret artist to Epsilon Eridani's criminal elite. He was more important even than the snakes.

"Hey, Hanuman," called Mulian. "How much longer have we got in this heap?"

“Hours and hours,” Hanuman said grumpily, preoccupied by the console’s annoying beeping. “We’d be relaxing by the pool at Pigsy’s villa by now if you’d given us the right coordinates from the start.”

Mulian laughed hollowly. “Would’ve been quicker to walk!”

“Be my guest,” retorted Hanuman. “The airlock’s right behind you.”

“Hanuman!” Ganesa hissed warningly. Unbuckling her belt, she rose weightless from her seat and pulled herself to the hatchway. “Mister Wang, I apologise for the captain’s rudeness! We’re making good time and should be at Hundun by this evening.”

Annoyed, Hanuman banged his fist against the console. The beeping faltered and became a pattern of three short tones, three long and three short, which after a pause repeated. Startled, he glanced to the polarised flight-deck windows, not that there was anything to see other than the bright orange orb of Epsilon Eridani. Even in the asteroid belt, actual space rocks were few and far between. Nevertheless, something was out there. Ganesa caught his perturbed expression. Everyone knew what that signal meant.

“We may be delayed,” Hanuman said wryly. “We’re receiving a distress call.”

“Probably pirates laying a trap ,” said the other male passenger, a scrawny uninspiring individual by the name of Hengjiang. Unlike the ostentatious Mulian, he and the others had to make do with tatty green overalls. “Pigsy Chiyou will have our guts if we’re late.”

“We can’t ignore an SOS,” protested Ganesa. “Space mariners code!”

“Cool it, Heng,” said another, a young woman called Nugua, who Ganesa thought looked sweetly impish with her cropped dark hair. “They gotta check it out.”

“Yeah,” said the older woman with her, who wore her long black locks in a coiled braid. Leizu had undone the top of her flight suit, exposing the vivid knife scars at the base of her neck. “If you were stuck in the middle of nowhere, you’d want to be rescued.”

“It’s an automated signal,” Hanuman pointed out. “Ganesa, try raising them on holovid. There’s a good chance the crew already abandoned ship.”

“A ship?” asked Mulian, looking unexpectedly sly. “Anyone we know?”

“Yeah, Leizu’s last boyfriend,” joked Hengjiang, sniggering. “Thought he’d have better luck getting his rocks off on an asteroid.”

In a sudden blur, Leizu leapt across the cabin and grabbed him by the neck. Her other hand held a knife to his crotch. The man’s sneer crumpled into a look of terror.

“Hilarious,” growled Leizu. “You should be in show business. The eunuch comedian.”

Mulian rolled his eyes and sighed. Ganesa saw Hanuman was trying not to laugh.

“We’ll check with space-traffic control about known wrecks in the area,” she offered.

No!” snapped Mulian, scowling. “Do not talk to the authorities!”

Ganesa exchanged glances with Hanuman, who rolled his eyes. Doing business with crooks was profitable if you could get past the paranoia. Reaching for the communications console, she opened a voice channel. On the navigation scanner, ghostly radar traces shimmered at the edges of its endless circular sweep, the faint signatures of distant asteroids. Somewhere amongst the scattered rocks lurked the sender of the SOS.

* * *

The distress signal was coming from an irregular hunk of space rock several thousand kilometres away on the port bow. A burn from the *Sun Wukong*’s interplanetary drive brought them onto an intercept trajectory and the grey asteroid gradually came into view. Twenty kilometres wide from head to tail, it was what astronomers called a contact binary, where two rocks had come together into what looked like a giant shelled peanut. The asteroid spun slowly, rhythmically brightening and dimming in the glow of the distant sun.

By now, the *Sun Wukong* had detected the beacon of a ship named the *Aurora*. The vessel soon came into view, half-buried with its stern rising perpendicularly from the rubble of the smaller of the asteroid’s bulbous

masses. External cameras revealed a spindly interplanetary spacecraft around a hundred metres long, with sail-like solar panels, huge plasma engines and a large hemispherical green dome. The hull boasted portholes, suggesting a ship built for a human crew. A rear section of fuselage had been punctured as if by an explosion and several of the solar arrays were damaged. Despite several attempts to raise a response, the *Sun Wukong*'s holoivid calls had been met by silence.

"This is a waste of time," complained Hengjiang. "Ain't seen a ship like that in years! If there was anyone aboard when it hit that rock they'd have died of old age by now."

"Looks like a giant snowman," Nugua said dreamily, staring at the asteroid. "With a spaceship sticking from its face like a big carrot nose."

"Ignore her," said Mulian. Engrossed in the camera views, a sly smile had returned to his face. "Never seen a flake of snow in her life."

Ganesa turned from the communications console. "Still nothing," she conceded, looking at Hanuman. "Now we're here we may as well check it over. It is safe to dock?"

"Won't know until we try," he admitted. "If life support's failed, they're dead."

"You're going inside?" murmured Leizu, raising her eyebrows.

"There could be survivors," Ganesa pointed out.

"Or cool stuff to steal," Hengjiang said, grinning.

Hanuman smiled wryly. Ganesa slipped back into her co-pilot's seat, magnified the camera view of the *Aurora* and looked for the vessel's docking hatch. A change of scenery was welcome after being cooped up with Chinese Santa's gangsters for three days.

* * *

The *Aurora*, wedged deep in the asteroid, trembled ominously as the *Sun Wukong* latched to an airlock near the curious green dome. The crashed vessel had power; it seemed the damaged solar arrays were still generating enough to keep its fuel cells charged. Much to Ganesa's surprise, the slumbering artificial intelligence unit aboard the derelict came alive when

the *Sun Wukong*'s own AI connected umbilicals and gave it a poke. The data feed made for interesting reading.

“Main reactor is offline,” she told Hanuman, referring to the fusion power plant for the *Aurora*'s plasma drives. “The AI is maintaining heating and cooling to keep things stable but most of the other systems have been shut down. Environmental readings say the air inside is breathable. How, I don't know. Life support isn't running.”

Hanuman stroked his stubbly chin. “Huh. No survivors, then?”

“The ship's manifest says it had a crew of four,” she reported. “Three are listed as having abandoned ship. The fourth is a woman by the name of Chen Changmu.”

“Is that right?” piped up Mulian, listening keenly from the passenger cabin. He and the others crowded the hatch, peering at the *Aurora* through the flight-deck windows.

“Friend of yours?” quipped Hengjiang, giving him a quizzical look.

“If she's aboard, I doubt she's alive,” said Hanuman, frowning. “But we have to check. Anyway, we're mercenaries! Who knows what Christmas gifts await our sticky paws?”

Ganesa smiled, enjoying a guilty tingle of anticipation as she unbuckled her belt. Floating from her seat, she aimed a withering glare to shift those blocking the hatch and entered the passenger compartment. She went to the main airlock and readied the controls.

“We're taking breathing apparatus,” she insisted, looking back at the others. “I don't care what the AI says. No way is the air still okay after all this time!”

* * *

Beyond the airlock was a jungle, a riot of green rampaging through the once-pristine innards of the *Aurora*. Through the visor of her face mask, Ganesa stared in disbelief at the scene. Fronds of sword-like leaves filled the compartment, exploding at intervals from trailing roots hanging eerily in microgravity. Glistening vines burst from gaps between wall units, splaying pale green leaves reminiscent of ivy. Moss and lichen covered every panel and cabinet door, softening the harsh contours of technology

in hues of green and brown. Condensation coated every leaf and ferrous fixings were red with rust. A garden had exploded inside the *Aurora*. Where it had come from was a mystery.

“Well, this is interesting,” said Hanuman, poised in the airlock behind her. Despite his brave talk, he was staying behind to watch the *Sun Wukong*. “Anyone got a machete?”

“Yeah,” grunted Leizu, pulling a long knife from her belt. Ganesa stared wide-eyed at the blade, wondering how many weapons she had concealed. “Stand back.”

“Hey, shouldn’t we...?” Ganesa began as the woman pushed past.

Leizu was not listening. Grabbing a ceiling handrail, she began hacking through the greenery, carving a route through the compartment. Ahead, two hatches were visible: from what they saw outside of the *Aurora*, the one on the left led to the ship’s bow buried inside the asteroid; the other was open and clogged with thick vines. Leizu stoically slashed her way forward, wrapped in a microgravity cloud of shredded plant life, the air thick with spores. Ganesa twitched nervously as a loud creak reverberated through the hull, having not forgotten their perilous perch above the asteroid. She was glad she insisted on masks.

The butcher of the vegetarian abattoir reached the hatch on the right and began her assault on the growth blocking the doorway. Mulian came to Ganesa’s side, offered a shrug and pulled himself into the *Aurora*. Looking sullen behind his mask, Hengjiang followed. Ganesa watched as the red-suited man and his sidekick eased their way through the lacerated flora. Leizu and her machete were already disappearing into the next compartment. The last member of Mulian’s party looked in no rush to follow.

“I’ll stay here,” offered Nugua. “I have to look after the snakes.”

“You do that,” Hanuman murmured uneasily. “Ganesa, keep a voice channel open.”

“Aye aye, captain,” she replied, grinning. “I’ll let you know what we find.”

Mulian and Hengjiang had slipped from sight through the open hatch. Ganesa reached for a handrail, pulled herself into the *Aurora* and followed.

* * *

The rampant tangle of vegetation became thicker as Ganesa scrambled deeper into the bowels of the creaking ship. She caught up with the others in a storage area two compartments along, busy negotiating another dense patch of growth. The red-clad Mulian was directing Leizu to cut a path to a hatchway on the left, leaving Hengjiang to clear away severed plant stalks and vines. The hatch they aimed for was open, but completely blocked by a biological cascade of green and brown. The intercom earpiece of Ganesa's mask hummed with colourful Mandarin curses.

"What's through there?" she asked Mulian.

"The dome," he replied. "Saw ships like this in my younger days, back when I worked the space docks above Daode. Crew quarters are inside the biodome."

"A biodome!" exclaimed Ganesa, remembering the mysterious green structure they had seen from the *Sun Wukong*. "Whoever's left aboard isn't keen on pruning."

"We're through!" called Hengjiang.

Still hacking away, Leizu slipped through the hatch. As Hengjiang went to follow, Mulian grabbed his shoulder and rudely pushed him aside. Ganesa watched the Gangster Chinese Santa scramble through the broken greenery after Leizu, wondering why he was so keen to see what lay inside. Another creak reverberated through the hull, louder than the last. The *Aurora* was becoming creepier by the minute.

"Hey Hanuman," she called softly. In her mind's eye, her cranium implant had an open headcom channel to the *Sun Wukong*. "We're going into the dome."

"Roger that," he said, loud inside her head. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

"Yeah, like that narrows it down," Ganesa retorted.

Grabbing a vine, she hauled herself across the storage compartment and through the hatch. There she paused, momentarily disorientated, for the doorway opened in the floor of the dome. Around her lay a circular space some thirty metres wide, crammed with what could only be

described as a jungle. Overgrown shrubs and ferns were smothered in vines, growing unchecked to fill every available space and onwards through the door. The domed roof was a frame of interlocked glass hexagons stained green with mould, glowing and fading as the asteroid rotated in the Epsilon Eridani sunlight. Around the edge of the floor and in the centre, indistinct mounds which might be crew facilities or equipment were blanketed by thick foliage. The dome reminded Ganesa of the research plantations near Anjayaneya on Yuanshi. She fervently hoped there was no creepy laboratory with dissected aliens, like the ones they had seen two months ago which still haunted her nightmares.

Mulian had an odd gleam in his eye as he barked instructions to Leizu and Hengjiang, who were clearing a route to whatever lay buried at the centre. Scrambling clear of the hatch, Ganesa gingerly pulled herself along Leizu's trail of destruction. Navigating a jungle in microgravity was not easy. To her alarm, the others had removed their masks.

"The air's fine," Hengjiang told her as she arrived. "The plants kept it fresh."

Leizu paused her hacking. "We ain't dead, anyway," she conceded.

Ganesa cautiously lifted her mask and sniffed. The air smelt damp yet refreshing, tinged with the delicate sweet odour of tree pollen. Photosynthetic gardens were widely used on larger crewed spacecraft to supplement life-support systems but it was quite something to see one survive and thrive on a derelict. No one else appeared to be kneeling over and turning blue. She tentatively slipped the mask from her face.

"Neat," she said, impressed. "Smells better here than on the *Sun Wukong!*"

"I heard that!" came Hanuman's miffed tones inside her head.

Mulian had pushed impatiently ahead, ripping away the rampant vegetation with his gloved hands. The construct in the centre of the dome, buried beneath layers of unfettered jungle, had a door. The last tangle of greenery blocking the entrance gave way to Leizu's blade. Mulian shoved her aside and yanked open the hatch.

Lights flickered on, revealing the cramped interior of the *Aurora's* sleeping quarters. Ganesa peered inside, casting her gaze over the dusty zero-gravity bunks and medical suite. Startled, her stare fell upon a silver

coffin-sized casket strapped to one of the beds, silently signalling its presence with blinking status lamps. Entering the cabin, Mulian hesitantly approached the capsule and squinted through the frosted glass lid.

“There’s someone inside,” he reported. “A woman.”

“Hanuman,” murmured Ganesa. “I think we’ve found the last of the crew.”

She followed Leizu and Hengjiang inside and looked at the casket. A young woman of Chinese heritage lay within, her eyes closed and chest gently heaving. Wires from sensor tags on her arms and chest criss-crossed her white gown to a small monitoring unit inside the pod. Ganesa’s gaze lingered upon the woman’s heart-shaped features, smooth skin and neatly coiled dark hair. The sleeping stranger was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Ganesa’s fingers instinctively reached for the release mechanism to open the lid.

“Hey, should you be...?” began Hengjiang.

“Too late,” grunted Mulian, as a hiss of air escaped the capsule.

Ganesa pulled open the lid, tingling with anticipation. Without knowing exactly why, she leaned forward and kissed the woman on the cheek. Leizu looked bemused.

“Quite finished?” remarked Mulian.

Feeling sheepish, Ganesa nodded. Her eyes lingered upon the woman in the pod, convinced that a flush of colour and gentle smile had crept across the sleeping beauty’s face.

* * *

Ganesa was loath to leave the woman’s side, but the medical pod’s internal power pack was showing a fault and they could not remove the capsule to the *Sun Wukong* without disconnecting it from the *Aurora*’s supply. Hengjiang had some medical knowledge and warned against taking her out, reasoning the casket was likely keeping the woman alive. Mulian was keen to check the rest of the ship. Ganesa offered to return to the *Sun Wukong* and collect a replacement power pack before meeting them back in the biodome.

Mulian, Leizu and Hengjiang split the *Aurora* between them and went their separate ways, eager not to waste time exploring what they could. Arriving back at the *Sun Wukong*, Ganesa found Hanuman in the passenger cabin, watching in horrified fascination as Nugua fed the snakes. The cover had been removed from their enclosure, revealing a large glass terrarium filled with sinuous creatures each as long as she was high, serpents with distinctive hoods and patterned skin of yellow, tan and brown. Nugua held a tub of bright yellow frogs, very much still alive, which she was feeding one by one down a delivery chute. Ganesa stared in horror as a snake lunged at a poor unsuspecting amphibian and swallowed it whole.

“Indian cobras?” she cried, dismayed. In her mind, her implant interface shimmered and seemed to hiss, urging her to switch off her headcom. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Pigsy Chiyou has a weird taste for danger,” Hanuman said glumly. “This whole affair is as mad as, well... a box of frogs.”

“They’re very special snakes,” Nugua said brightly, fishing another squirming frog from the tub. Ganesa noticed she wore protective latex gloves. “Don’t worry! They’re locked up tight and I have the only key. They’ve got food and the tank is heated. I have plenty of antivenin if Pigsy’s kitchen staff are stupid enough to get bitten.”

“Good to know,” muttered Hanuman. “Hey, Ganesa. You found a corpse?”

“She’s alive!” she told him, grinning. Giving the terrarium a wide berth, she went to an equipment locker and found a spare power pack. “Asleep in a medical pod. Mulian and the others are searching the rest of the ship.”

Hanuman smiled. “Alive, huh. Is she pretty?”

“Well, you know, I mean...” Ganesa began coyly, feeling herself blush.

“Aww, I know that look anywhere!” chirped Nugua. “Someone’s in love!”

Ganesa scowled. “Who knows if she’ll even wake up after being in a pod for so long,” she said, desperately trying to pull the conversation back

on track. “We must do what we can to bring her home. I bet Chiyou’s place has decent medical facilities.”

“Let’s get her aboard before Mulian persuades us otherwise,” agreed Hanuman. He looked at Nugua. “Hey, snake charmer. You okay to watch the ship?”

“Sure,” she replied, engrossed in feeding her charges. “You go get her girlfriend.”

Hanuman went to the flight-deck hatch and pulled it closed, then with a wary glance at Nugua and her snakes tapped the keypad to lock the door. Ganesa waited while he grabbed a mask and some cargo straps, then followed him to the door.

Leaving the *Sun Wukong*, they closed the airlock and made their way through the vegetation-choked compartments of the *Aurora*. Sounds of movement from the others did little to mask the sinister groans of the hull. Ganesa led Hanuman to the biodome and along the cleared pathway to the crew bunk room. Reaching the door, she gasped.

“The medical pod!” she exclaimed, bursting into the habitat.

She stared in disbelief at the silver casket. The frosted glass lid was open, revealing a comfy padded interior still bearing the dents of the previous occupant’s form. Detached sensor wires and restraining straps floated like wisps of seaweed on the tide.

“This woman in a box thing,” said Hanuman, frowning. “Wishful thinking?”

A piercing scream sounded through the ship. Ganesa looked at him in alarm.

“That was from the *Sun Wukong*!” she cried. “Come on!”

Dumping the power pack and cargo straps, they hurried back to their ship, moving recklessly in the *Aurora*’s microgravity from one handhold to the next. The docking port to the *Sun Wukong* was open. Hanuman lunged into the airlock chamber and halted. Unable to stop, Ganesa crashed into his back, causing him to yelp. Hanuman gestured frantically into the *Sun Wukong*. Around the passenger cabin, sinuous shapes slithered along handrails and across the backs of seats, flaring their hoods and tasting the air with forked tongues. Near the open lid of the terrarium, Nugua floated limp and unmoving.

“The snakes are out!” cried Hanuman. “They got Nugua!”

* * *

Mulian stared solemnly through the airlock. Neither Hanuman nor Ganesa dared enter the *Sun Wukong* after seeing the snakes loose. It had been left to the indomitable Leizu to dart inside and recover the unconscious Nugua, pulling her swiftly into the *Aurora* before the cobras could slither her way. The frogs had also escaped but were not as adaptable to zero gravity, giving the snakes an easy lunch. Nugua was in a bad way.

“She’s been bitten,” confirmed Hengjiang, after finding a pair of puncture wounds on the woman’s arm. “Only the symptoms are wrong. Cobra venom takes time to work through the body and cause paralysis. Victims are usually still conscious.”

Mulian arched an eyebrow. “Expert on snake bites, are you?”

“I was a trainee paramedic,” he said coolly. “There’s cobras on Daode.”

“Rich idiots like your boss illegally import them as exotic pets,” said Ganesa, sighing. Daode was the outermost of Shennong’s three planet-sized moons, a sister world to her home of Yuanshi. “Inevitably, some escape. I bet you use the same supplier.”

“The antivenin pack is missing,” reported Leizu. “Nugua always kept it close.”

“So’s your saxophone,” Hengjiang told Mulian. “Bad luck, boss.”

“What medical supplies we have are on the *Sun Wukong*,” said Hanuman, looking doubtfully into his ship. “We can’t do anything until those snakes are back in their box.”

“We should get Nugua to where we found the medical pod,” urged Ganesa, trying not to think of their predicament. “I saw equipment and a medicine cabinet there.”

“What about that damn woman?” asked Mulian. Leizu and Hengjiang exchanged puzzled glances, having not heard the news. “Where did she go?”

“One problem at a time!” snapped Ganesa. “Come on!”

Leizu and Hengjiang gently took hold of Nugua's comatose form and hurriedly conveyed her through the plant-clogged *Aurora* to the biodome crew quarters. Easing her into a bunk, the others watched anxiously as Hengjiang meticulously cleaned the swelling wound and placed an oxygen mask over her face. Wires were run from the casket's medical monitor to sensors on her arms and chest, then he drew some blood for testing. Leizu had found the ship's medicines store but to no one's surprise the spaceship carried nothing for venomous snake bites. Hengjiang looked increasingly distraught as he rifled through the cartons of drugs. He looked at the anxious faces around Nugua's bed.

"There's nothing I can do," he said helplessly. "We need those antivenins."

Silence fell upon the cabin, broken only by the disconsolate beeping of the monitor relaying Nugua's vital signs. Hanuman had found a terminal for the *Aurora*'s onboard AI and was wiping dust from its holoivid display. Ganesa looked at the others studiously avoiding Hengjiang's pleading gaze. Mulian stared at the comatose Nugua, then at the device analysing her blood. Frowning, his eyes went to a large ventilation outlet in the wall above the bunks. The grill was hanging loose.

"Nugua knew better than anyone to keep the terrarium closed," remarked Mulian. He glanced irritably at Hanuman, who was tapping the terminal keyboard. "She's the only one trained to handle those snakes. Someone else let them out and caught her off guard."

"What?" exclaimed Leizu. Her glare narrowed. "Who?"

Mulian gestured to the empty casket. "There's one person aboard unaccounted for," he declared. "Someone who's been asleep and abandoned in deep space for a very long time. Who knows how that affects the mind?"

Ganesa tensed. "You can't be serious."

"Unfortunately I am," he growled, looking fierce. "I think our damsel in distress is no innocent sleeping beauty. We have a homicidal maniac on the loose!"

* * *

Hengjiang insisted on staying with Nugua as Ganesa and the others returned to the *Sun Wukong* to consider their options. Back at the airlock, there was more bad news. The liberated snakes had spread into the *Aurora*, slithering along handrails into the tangle of overgrowth. One cobra was curled around a thick vine near the docking hatch, tasting the air with its forked tongue. Ominous rustles rose from the dark recesses of surrounding greenery. Ganesa nervously tugged the collar of her flight suit, trying not to panic.

“Feeling the heat?” Hanuman asked wryly. “My fault, sorry. I found the environmental controls for this wreck and cranked up the temperature. I thought if the *Aurora* is warmer than the *Sun Wukong* the snakes will just merrily slither away.”

“Idiot,” grumbled Ganesa. “They were contained before. Now they’re everywhere!”

“They’re precious cargo,” complained Mulian. “Pigsy Chiyou...”

“Can get stuffed,” Hanuman interjected irritably. “I want them off my ship.”

Ganesa looked at the empty terrarium. “What about the frogs?” she suggested. “Can we lure your precious beasties back into their tank with a promise of lunch?”

“The snakes ate them all,” said Hanuman, shuddering. “Besides, would you touch anything with skin that yucky colour? What sort of frogs were they anyway?”

“Hey, look up there!” exclaimed Leizu, pointing to a section of wall halfway along the compartment. “The ventilation grill is loose! Just like in the bunk room. I reckon that’s how our sleeping beauty got here and freed the snakes without being seen.”

“We don’t know for sure she did this,” Ganesa said fiercely. “All that’s important is getting Nugua to a hospital. That woman probably needs medical help too.”

Hanuman grimaced. “The one hiding in the vents like a sci-fi movie monster?”

“He’s right!” said Mulian. “Whoever was in that pod is a threat!”

“Says who?” protested Ganesa, not wanting to believe it. She glared at Mulian. “You’ve searched this ship. Is there anything we can use to tackle the snakes?”

“I suppose a mongoose is too much to ask for,” Hanuman suggested weakly.

“Very funny,” grunted Mulian. “We found a workshop, a couple of food stores, that’s it. The hull’s buckled going forward and hatches to the bow section are jammed shut. An explosion has exposed the drive room to vacuum. The ship’s lifeboat pod is gone.”

“There’s welding torches in the workshop,” suggested Leizu. “Wouldn’t take much to turn them into flamethrowers. Singe a cobra or two and send them slithering,” she added wickedly, seeing Hanuman’s perturbed reaction. “I’ll be careful, honest.”

“I forbid it!” snapped Mulian. “Those snakes are...”

“Precious cargo, yeah,” muttered Hanuman.

“Not sure flamethrowers are wise even without this crazy overgrowth,” said Ganesa, sighing. “But it’s the only plan we’ve got. We tool up, flush the snakes from the *Sun Wukong*, look for our awoken castaway and get the hell out of here. Agreed?”

Mulian frowned, opened his mouth to argue, then caught her fierce glare of resolve and stayed quiet. Looking pensive, Hanuman nodded. Leizu grinned, barely containing her glee at the prospect of barbecuing snakes. Dealing with unwanted guests was definitely in the top ten of why Ganesa hated the cultural craziness of Christmas.

* * *

Hanuman’s tampering of the *Aurora*’s climate control was slowly drawing the cobras from the *Sun Wukong*. Ganesa left him keeping watch from the *Aurora*’s spacesuit storage room next to the airlock, slightly envious that he had found an excuse to hide in a cupboard until the snakes went away. Instead she was with Leizu, braving the ship’s overgrown, cobra-infested passages on their way to the *Aurora*’s workshop. Mulian seemed less wary of the slithering escapees and had returned to the biodome, where

Hengjiang remained solemnly watching Nugua as she slipped ever deeper into a coma.

The ship's small workshop had not yet succumbed to the relentless creeping greenery. Closing the door behind them, Ganesa cast her gaze across bits of equipment, tool racks and boxed spare parts. There was even an autofab, a liquid-alloy printer capable of reproducing basic components. Next to it was a console for the ship's AI, its status indicator glowing green. Leaving Leizu to examine the welding gear, Ganesa went to look.

"Hey, this is on," she remarked, as the console screen lit beneath her fingers.

"Mulian was looking at it," said Leizu, absorbed in dismantling one of the torches.

Ganesa waited for her to elaborate and was rewarded with a shrug. Scrolling through the command menu, she found the viewing history and saw a recent access request for the ship's log. She wondered why Mulian had not mentioned this earlier. Intrigued, she opened the entry for the *Aurora's* final fateful voyage.

Not many spacecraft flight journals began with a tale of treason, attempted murder and revenge. The log confirmed that the young woman in the medical pod was indeed Chen Changmu, the only daughter of the notorious Chen Sien Tsang, the Taotie gangland boss who with her late husband Wuguan once ruled the lawless underworld of Yao Chi city. Changmu had just turned twenty, an auspicious 'coming of age' amongst the criminal fraternity. The journal related how seven heads of allied gangland dynasties had gathered to present gifts, only to be joined by an uninvited young upstart from a rival family who arrived on the pretence of making amends. His gift was a fancy garment fabricator, with a sabotaged needle that pricked Changmu and infected her with an unknown poison. Back then Yao Chi was not yet a fully fledged city and hospital facilities were basic. So it was that Changmu was bundled unconscious into a medical capsule, taken aboard the *Aurora* and whisked away. Her only hope was the city of Hemakuta, founded decades before by Indian settlers on Shennong's moon of Daode, where there was the medical expertise to save her life.

Unfortunately for Changmu, aboard the *Aurora* was a saboteur. The explosion in the drive room was no accident, sending the spacecraft astray. The patient in the casket had slept on, left alone aboard the *Aurora* for nearly ten years. Most startling of all was the identity of the eighth party guest, the assassin from the rival family. It was none other than Pigsy Chiyou himself, then but an ambitious young mobster keen to make his mark.

“Ten years,” murmured Ganesa. She suddenly remembered how she kissed the sleeping Changmu. “Oh my! Hope it’s not contagious!”

A shuffling noise from the ventilation shaft made her pause. Looking up, Ganesa released an involuntary yelp as a blast of fire shot across the workshop. Leizu hefted her makeshift flamethrower, grinning in delight.

“Not bad,” she declared. “How many do you want?”

* * *

Ganesa had to admit that brandishing a flamethrower did wonders for her nerves. Sensibly, she also carried a fire extinguisher; Leizu was similarly armed. A quick blast with one and then the other sent the first cobra they encountered slithering for cover. A second looked ready to strike, which Leizu took great pleasure in roasting with a liberal spray of heat. Flames rolled along the passageway, igniting the tangled overgrowth and filling the air with pungent smoke. Ganesa frantically fanned the nozzle of her extinguisher, coating everything in sticky fire-retardant foam. It was a hell of a way of deal with snakes.

Back near the *Sun Wukong*, Hanuman had also heard noises in the vents, not all of which were the grumbling of the *Aurora*’s air filtration system coughing up smoke. Looking flustered, Mulian had returned from where Hengjiang watched their ailing comrade.

“How’s Nugua?” asked Ganesa, flicking foam from her hair.

Mulian scowled. “Someone has to go into the vents and flush out that woman.”

“You’re too fat,” Leizu observed wryly. “Looking for a volunteer?”

“Hengjiang is caring for Nugua,” he said. “Which leaves you three.”

“You can’t risk anything happening to me or Ganesa,” Hanuman said nervously. “Not unless you’ve got another pilot stuffed up your saxophone.”

“You think I can’t handle your ship?” scoffed Mulian. “I flew crates just like it back in my gun-running days. I need one of you in the vents to watch Leizu’s back.”

Ganesa’s heart sank. “Wonderful. It’s me, isn’t it?”

Hanuman flashed a wan smile. “You know my heroic demeanour is just a facade.”

“Our quarry can’t stay hidden for long,” Mulian reassured Ganesa and Leizu. “I’ll watch the vents in the biodome. Your brave comrade will do the same here.”

Hanuman’s face fell. Leizu grabbed a handrail, pulled herself towards the air-conditioning vent and yanked open the loose grill. Ganesa peered into the cramped square duct and shuddered. Her flamethrower-wielding partner hefted her weapon.

“Let’s go hunting!” cried Leizu. “Burn some beasties!”

“Snakes on a spaceship,” grumbled Ganesa. “You go first.”

* * *

The metal ducts were barely wide enough to crawl through, a task not made any easier with no gravity or handholds to assist them. The main ventilation channel ran the length of the ship, with spurs leading off to the airlock lobby and biodome. Conduits to other sections were too narrow for human egress, though unfortunately roomy enough for snakes. Following Leizu, Ganesa shimmied forwards in the wavering beams of their torches, trying not to think of what might be ahead. Despite the promises of countless science-fiction movies, there was no magical scanner to pinpoint foes of flesh and blood in the claustrophobic darkness.

Billowing orange flame lit the tunnel ahead. Peering past Leizu, Ganesa thought she spied movement beyond the haze of heat. Her nerves were on edge, rattled by distant frantic thuds and shuffling noises. The

glimpse she caught of whatever had fled Leizu's flamethrower looked too big to be a snake.

"Was that her?" she asked nervously.

"'Twas the night before Christmas," Leizu intoned, looking back over her shoulder with a creepy torchlit grin. "And all through the house, not a creature was stirring, except... a bloodsucking space vampire fresh from her coffin!"

"Thanks," muttered Ganesa. "You're not helping."

They were at the junction where the spur from the airlock area joined the central ventilation duct. Ganesa was pretty sure their quarry had gone right towards the biodome. An alert blinked in her mind's eye, signalling an incoming headcom call. A deft prod of a virtual finger brought Hanuman's voice into her head.

"I heard something!" he exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," she grumbled. "No thanks to you."

She could picture his look of dismay. "What did I do?" he protested.

"Come to Hundun, you said," retorted Ganesa. "Get together, have a few laughs..."

"You wanted to see Pigsy Chiyou's hideout as much as me!"

Leizu turned right. A second blast of fire lit up the tunnel, revealing the sinister silhouette of a cobra ready to strike. Ganesa's involuntary shriek earned a grunt of pain from Hanuman in return. Faint, plaintive hoots drifted through the air.

"Snakes!" she hissed, wondering what the sound was. "Gotta go!"

It dawned on her that she had neglected to check for beasties sneaking up on them from behind. Pausing at the junction, she shone her torch towards the ship's bow. The beam swept down a short length of ducting and landed upon a closed hatch, presumably sealed by automatic systems when the *Aurora* hit the asteroid. The truncated tunnel was mercifully empty. Relieved, Ganesa turned her torch back the way they had come.

"Uh-oh," she muttered. "Leizu, we have a problem!"

The air duct behind them seethed with snakes. Ganesa gulped, mesmerised in fear. Survival instincts took over and she watched herself as if in a dream, raising the flamethrower and taking aim. Orange fire

leapt down the tunnel, frying the nearest cobra and sending the others skittering away. Still she held her finger on the trigger, oblivious to the growing heat. A deft kick from Leizu's boot brought her out of her daze.

"Don't overdo it!" the woman snapped. "Put that fire out!"

Ganesa released the flamethrower. Lifting her extinguisher, she doused the charred cobra in retardant foam. More flames lit the tunnel towards the biodome as Leizu launched another volley. The smoky, choking heat inside the duct was making it hard to breathe. Somewhere ahead, the eerie hooting heard earlier was getting louder.

"Cobras don't attack unless hungry or provoked," gasped Leizu, wiping the soot from her eyes. "They ain't acting right. A bit crazy, like they're high on something."

Ganesa groaned. "Well, that's good news. Snakes on drugs."

"Go," urged Leizu, gesturing back the way they had come. "We've done enough."

There was barely enough wriggle room inside the junction to turn around. Ganesa gulped as more snakes arrived at the cremated remains of their comrade, slithering from the smaller side conduits as if on a promise to be fed. Flecks of retardant foam and charred cobra flesh smeared her flight suit as she scrambled back to the vent. A horrible headache gripped her skull, her throat burned and she was struggling to focus. Using flamethrowers inside the ducts had sucked oxygen from the air. In hindsight it had been an incredibly stupid idea.

Hanuman was at the vent, waiting to pull her out. Ganesa fell into his arms, too busy gasping for fresh air to be of help. The pungent smell of smoke lingered as flakes of foam drifted around them like snow. The strange hooting had gone.

"It's full of snakes!" she cried. "Leizu's still in there!"

"I'm fine!" yelled a voice, muffled by a length of ducting. A shrill scream echoed from the vent. "Ow! Get this frigging snake off my ass!"

A muted roar and waft of hot air broke from the opening, lit by a faint orange glow. Wincing, Ganesa put a hand to her brow, wondering when her headache had decided to hiss and slither. Hanuman pulled off his microphone and earpiece.

“Mulian’s switched off his headset,” he said urgently. “What the hell is going on?!”

* * *

The *Aurora* had become uncomfortably warm and humid. Ganesa stared warily into the overgrowth around the airlock hatch but the snakes had gone. Following Hanuman into the *Sun Wukong*, she had to admit his plan had worked; the passenger cabin was noticeably cooler than the *Aurora* and clear of scaly beasts. Unlocking the flight deck, she quickly checked the ship. Hanuman went to a locker and withdrew his plasma pistol.

“I’ve had enough of party games,” he growled. “Time to play by our rules.”

Ganesa hefted her flamethrower. “Sautéed snakes is my new Christmas dish!”

Returning to the *Aurora*, they closed the airlock. Ganesa led the way, following the frantic thuds from Leizu inside the duct towards the biodome. Air vents oozed extinguisher foam and acrid smoke, yet the overgrown passageways were suspiciously clear of snakes. It was as if the cobras had been lured away, just as she and Hanuman were now being drawn deeper into the wrecked ship. It was not a comforting thought.

The tooting sound she heard earlier drifted upon the grimy humid air, mournful and plaintive, melodic yet sad. Reaching the doorway to the biodome, Ganesa paused and peered through the massacred foliage, looking for any sign of the others. The strange noise was louder here. She glanced to Hanuman, who was trying his best to look resolute.

“Hengjiang was with Nugua,” she said. “Leizu might head for the vent there.”

They hurried through the overgrown biodome. Entering the crew quarters, Ganesa gasped. Hengjiang drifted unconscious next to the comatose Nugua, a look of pain etched on his face. Across the room, a large cobra twisted sinuously around a handrail, its head raised and hood flared as it tasted the air with its tongue. Ganesa cautiously approached Hengjiang, took his wrist and checked for a pulse. He was alive, but weak and failing fast. There were a pair of puncture wounds on his forearm.

“He’s been bitten,” she told Hanuman. “Why did...?”

A groan broke from the air vent, cutting off her words. Hanuman hastened to the duct and wrenched away the loose grill. A soot-smearred hand emerged, scrabbling for purchase. Leizu’s face appeared, creased in pain. She looked distraught.

“Too many snakes,” she gasped. “They got me!”

She tried to wriggle through the opening and slumped. Ganesa’s heart thumped as she helped Hanuman ease the warrior from the duct. Leizu’s arms, blistered and flecked with foam, bore multiple puncture wounds. The instant she was clear, Ganesa angrily turned her flamethrower to the vent and pulled the trigger. Blackened remains spun away on the hot backdraft and shot across the room. Something glittered upon the snake’s head.

“Easy now,” warned Hanuman. Much to her disgust, he went to the charred cobra and gingerly picked it up. “You’ll use up the oxygen.”

“Screw this ship,” retorted Ganesa. “We’re finding Mulian and getting the hell out of here. Why on Yuanshi would anyone think snakes are...?”

A loud piercing shriek interrupted her rant of frustration. The cry had come from the biodome outside. Ganesa glared at the entrance hatch.

“I can’t even finish a sentence in this place! Who was that?”

Still holding the dead snake, Hanuman hurried to the door. Ganesa let go of the flamethrower and gently pulled the unconscious Leizu into the webbing of a spare bunk, then did the same for Hengjiang, more on impulse than with any definite plan. In another berth, Nugua slept on, still hooked up to the medical capsule’s monitor. The situation was rapidly spiralling out of control. Peering through the doorway, Hanuman raised his pistol.

“Mulian!” he hissed. “He’s got your sleeping beauty!”

* * *

Grabbing her flamethrower, Ganesa hurriedly followed Hanuman from the crew quarters. The red-suited Mulian had finally cornered the

runaway from the medical pod. Chen Changmu cowered before him, clinging to the branches of a broad-leafed plant on the far side of the dome, covered in scratches and with her white gown torn. Surrounding her in the overgrowth were a dozen cobras or more, hissing with their hoods flared. The young woman looked simultaneously very much alive and half-scared to death.

What Ganesa did not expect was Mulian's saxophone. Gangster Santa's horn had not been stolen after all. Poised in microgravity with his boots tucked into a foothold, Mulian had his lips to the mouthpiece, filling the air with plaintive brassy hoots. He played no discernible melody, just a seemingly random sequence of tones, breathy and haunting in equal measure. Changmu's face betrayed a mixture of bewilderment and fright.

Hanuman was transfixed by the snakes. "Look!" he gasped. "They're listening!"

Ganesa stared to where he pointed. Every single cobra was swaying, seemingly bewitched as Mulian meandered up and down an eerie atonal scale. As he hit certain notes, the hissing snakes advanced, slithering ever closer to the cowering Changmu. It was a scene so surreal that for a moment Ganesa was at a loss. The look on Hanuman's face mirrored her own confusion. Slowly advancing, she raised her flamethrower.

"Drop the horn, snake charmer," she growled. "Or I'll fry you where you stand."

"What?" cried Hanuman. "I thought your girlfriend was the one giving us grief!"

Mulian stopped playing. Changmu huddled deeper into the overgrowth, her frightened stare darting to each of them in turn. Opening her mouth, she tried to speak but seemed unable to form any words. Mulian lowered his saxophone.

"It is as I feared," he declared, feigning a look of sorrow. "Being left for so long in the medical pod has driven the poor woman insane. I merely attempt to calm her nerves."

"With a saxophone?" scoffed Ganesa. "I like jazz but that was not soothing."

Changmu shook her head and performed a cute mime of vomiting. Still holding the charred cobra, Hanuman turned his baffled expression

from Mulian to Changmu and back again. His other hand brandished his pistol, though he seemed unsure of where to aim.

“I read the ship’s log,” Ganesa challenged Mulian. “Your boss tried to kill her!”

“Your feelings for your sleeping beauty have clouded your judgement,” he remarked. “You were hired for a job. Pigsy Chiyou is your boss too!”

At the mention of his name, Changmu shuddered and withdrew deeper into her sad excuse for a hiding place. The cobras shifted, keenly tasting the air. Ganesa wished Hanuman would concentrate on the very real problem of live venomous snakes and not keep staring at the blackened specimen in his hand. Her stare went to Mulian’s saxophone.

“Okay, you’ve lost me,” she admitted. “What’s with the tooting, Santa?”

“Technological snake charming,” said Hanuman. He held up the dead snake, showing her the flash of silver beneath the charred skin of its head. “Look, an AI chip! Zombified to show their fangs whenever they hear a saxophone. Who can’t relate to that?”

“The snakes have brain implants?” scoffed Ganesa, then hesitated. “Wait, I sensed them! My implant picked up... something. No, that can’t be right!”

“Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?” taunted Mulian.

“Ridiculous?” scoffed Hanuman. “We’re already at ‘box of frogs’ level lunacy!”

“The frogs!” cried Ganesa, remembering the vivid colouring of the amphibians that Nugua fed to the cobras. “Of course, they’re poisonous! Old South American cultures use frog toxin for blowpipe darts. Is that why the symptoms of those bitten are wrong? The snakes have been given a different diet to change their venom!”

Mulian looked sly and not a little impressed. “The snakes have a genetic mutation that lets them prey on golden poison frogs without harm,” he admitted. “The toxin carried by the frogs is absorbed into their venom. The snakes are released near their target, a certain song plays on the network; one bite induces a coma, then death! No witnesses, no suspicious strangers, just one more unfortunate death amongst many. Of

course, before the snakes, Pigsy had to rely on poison-tipped birthday gifts,” he added slyly.

“I knew it!” cried Ganesa, then frowned. “She doesn’t look very dead.”

Changmu’s eyes went wide. She was trying to crawl through the undergrowth and away, not that there was anywhere to go. Mulian looked at her in disgust.

“It seems her prolonged sleep in the medical pod neutralised the poison,” he said, sounding disappointed. “Her survival is a temporary state of affairs. As is yours!”

Hanuman sighed. “Assassination snakes! This gets dumber by the hour.”

Ganesa looked at the dead cobra in his hand. Changmu whimpered as one of the snake’s friends flared its hood, still very much alive and coiled ready to spring. Alarmed, Ganesa aimed her flamethrower. Changmu’s reactions were quicker still. With a shriek, she leapt back as the cobra struck and missed, earning a disgruntled hiss from the snake. The young woman scrambled away, watching warily.

“Mulian stole the antivenins from Nugua and opened the terrarium,” Ganesa told Hanuman. “I’m guessing Pigsy Chiyou knew where the *Aurora* had crashed and tricked us into delivering his pet Santa to finish the job. I heard Mulian tooting his horn when the snakes came after me and Leizu.” She gave the red-clad man an icy stare. “What was the plan? Steal the *Sun Wukong* and leave us here to die? Why is Changmu such a threat?”

“She is on the list,” Mulian said simply, looking sly. “Santa knows if you’ve been bad or good. I aim merely to deliver what my boss desires this festive season.”

Hanuman grimaced. “Corpses? Not sure that’s the spirit of Christmas.”

“Bad Santa!” croaked a voice. “Pigsy killed my father!”

Changmu had managed to scramble unseen through the undergrowth and away from the snakes. Bracing herself against a stunted tree, the woman pointed an accusing finger at the self-styled Sheng dan Lao ren. Looking wary, Mulian stepped back.

“Just business,” he said airily. “Would an early Christmas present ease the pain? How about a puppy? A nice new dress, perhaps? Or maybe a soothing tune on my...?”

“No!” shrieked Changmu. “You are an evil man!”

Looking fierce, she launched herself at Mulian, angrily hurling herself forward in zero gravity and knocking him from his foothold. As they tumbled towards the nest of hissing cobras, the young woman grabbed a vine and swung away. The gangster Santa shrieked and let go of his saxophone, which promptly snapped back on its neck strap and smacked him in the face. Mulian crashed into the snake-infested bush, his nose welling blood. As one, the cobras hissed and flared their hoods.

Ganesa watched in horror as the first snake struck, biting the exposed skin of Mulian’s arm through a tear in his bright flight suit. In a panic, he tried to scramble free but the strap of his saxophone was caught on a severed branch. Another snake struck, then a third. Mulian cried out in anguish, his face contorted in pain. The cobras had finally come to the end of their tether with the Chinese Santa’s snake-charming ways.

Changmu scrambled clear. Ganesa stared aghast as Mulian fought to squirm free of the attacking cobras, his bloodied face a picture of despair. A crueller person would have left the snakes to finish the job. Even so, it took a glare of alarm from Hanuman before she raised her flamethrower and sprayed an arc of fire around Mulian. The surrounding overgrowth quickly burst into flame, filling the air with smoke. In the midst of the blaze, Chinese Santa had lost consciousness, floating tethered by the noose of his fateful horn.

“Enough is enough!” ranted Ganesa, exasperated. “I have had it with these froggy-sucking snakes on this dumbass-frigging spaceship!”

Hanuman looked shocked. “Err... How did you know his clothes were flameproof?”

“He’s Santa,” she said grimly. “Crawls down chimneys for a living.”

Ganesa dropped her weapon, hefted the extinguisher and doused the scene with foam. Stray flecks billowed around them, turning the biodome into a giant snow globe. The cobras had gone, abandoning Mulian’s unmoving form.

“Is he dead?” rasped Changmu, her voice still raw.

SNAKES ON A SPACESHIP

“Not yet,” she muttered. “He’d better hope we find the antivenins. I vote we drag him and his crew onto the *Sun Wukong* and get the hell out of here before his slithery pets return. The Daode orbiter has a good medical unit. We’re going home.”

“Piggy Chiyou’s not going to like this,” said Hanuman, sighing. “Never mind.”

“You kissed me,” said Changmu, smiling at Ganesa. “I remember now.”

Ganesa felt herself blush. “Damn! Is that what woke you?”

“Maybe,” she replied shyly, with a twinkle in her eyes that did strange things to Ganesa’s innards. Changmu massaged her sore throat. “I must contact my family. Mother had friends on Daode. Where are we? How long was I inside that pod?”

“They’ll be time to chat when we’re out of here,” said Ganesa, tentatively taking the woman’s hand. “Damn you, Hanuman! Do we ever get jobs where things go to plan?”

“I promised you a party,” he apologised. “Never mind.”

“I got you a bottle of Dead Horse Gin we can share on the way home. Still, it’s not all bad,” she added, smiling coyly at Changmu. “Got any mistletoe? If this is your idea of Christmas, I gotta be here for New Year’s.”

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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