

The Clockwork Cat

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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The Clockwork Cat

From the Worlds of *Hollow Moon*

A short story by
Steph Bennion

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The Casebook of Ostara Lee
THE CLOCKWORK CAT

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

Ostara Lee, private detective, receives a mysterious summons to the wealthy city of Bradbury Heights.

A brass clockwork cat, stolen from the Dickens Christmas Fair, seems to be her only friend...

DETECTIVE OSTARA LEE, as was often the case, did not have a clue. Lurching unsteadily towards her was a four-legged mechanical contraption that looked like a mad Victorian sculptor's attempt to use gearbox innards to model a raccoon. The scruffy boy on the other end of the machine's string lead had singled her out from the dozen or so passengers disembarking from the skybus. Ostara mused she was probably the only one looking lost beneath the Christmas illuminations in Bradbury Heights station.

She looked from the boy to the clunky creature and back again. The strange robot, a knee-high confusion of levers, whirring cogs and a single beating piston in a cage of brass ribs, was a world away from the bioplastics and synthetic muscles of sensible twenty-third-century cybernetics. The machine turned its glowing red stare towards her and raised its triangular ears. The crimson dusk of Barnard's Star outside the steel and glass dome gave the creature's whiskers and pointy metal teeth a disturbing macabre sheen.

"Can you help me, miss?" the boy asked, raising mournful eyes to her own. He wore ragged brown trousers, a dirty blue jacket and battered black top hat that made him look like a period-drama street urchin. "I am poor and homeless this Christmas and have nothing to sell but my clockwork cat! Can you spare a few credits for poor little me?"

Ostara sighed. People asking her for money were less of a novelty. Behind the boy, holographic angels drifted along the station platform, their heavenly trumpets raised in silent joy. Distracted, Ostara watched as the angels metamorphosed into a plump Santa Claus on his sleigh, trailing a

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banner reminding travellers that there were only two shopping days left until Christmas. She had been warned that the mostly American population of Bradbury Heights still saw the buying of expensive gifts a necessary part of seasonal celebrations. Her bemused stare turned into a frown as the boy's words filtered into her brain.

“A clockwork, err... what?” she asked. “That thing's supposed to be a cat?”

He gave her a scornful look. “Don't you have robot cats in China, miss?”

“I'm from Newbrum,” Ostara chastised him. Race was not supposed to be something remarked upon in the cultural melting pot that was the planet of Ascension, but those who lived in Bradbury Heights could be rather blunt. “Of course I've seen robots before. But that cat, like your tongue, is straight out of the nineteenth century!”

“It's the Dickens Christmas Fair,” he remarked. “They're all the rage, miss!”

“Scruffy street beggars follow fashion?”

The boy looked hurt. “I am poor and homeless and...”

“I'm a private detective,” said Ostara, holding up her hand to silence him. “You're wearing a shiny wristpad and new shoes, there's barely a day's dirt on your face and you certainly look well-fed. What's more, you haven't stopped glancing at the station security cameras since you accosted me. What's your game, young man?”

The boy seemed impressed. “You're a detective! That's cool.”

Ostara smiled, shyly tucking a loose strand of her long black hair behind her ear. She would be the first to admit she was hardly the most talented sleuth in the five systems, not that there was much competition on Ascension. Since starting her agency back in the spring, she had taken countless virtual-reality college courses and even some proper cases, a few of which she actually solved. She still owed several VR firms the cost of her training, but the important thing was she had become a better detective.

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Even debt collection agencies had begun using her services; rather foolishly, she thought, for she was hardly likely to prioritise the college debts against her own name when working through their lists.

“Well?” she asked.

“It’s a family heirloom,” the boy replied, not entirely convincingly. “Ugly looking thing, ain’t it? I’m poor and homeless and hungry! You look a fine and kind woman who don’t turn her nose up at the likes of me. Spare me a few credits and you can have my cat. They’ve all got them at the fair,” he reminded her.

“I won’t get rid of you without paying, will I?”

He shook his head. “My mum says I’m a persistent little...”

“I bet she does,” Ostara interrupted quickly, then sighed. “It might make an interesting gift. A friend of mine lost her electric cat a while ago. How much do you want for it?”

The boy whipped out a hand-held wristpad reader. “Fifty credits, miss.”

“What! That heap of junk is worth ten at most.”

“Twenty five?”

“I’ll give you twelve,” Ostara said firmly. “And that’s me being generous.”

He scowled and held out the reader. Ostara held her wristpad close and heard a long beep. The tiny screen on her wristpad went blank, which was not supposed to happen. Moments later, the start-up screen appeared as the device reset itself.

“You got a dodgy wristpad there. Buy it down Hockley Market?” he asked cheekily, then grinned and handed her the string. “Here’s your cat, miss. Enjoy!”

With an impish bow, the boy spun on his heels and ambled away across the station concourse. Ostara could have sworn she heard him laughing as he broke into a run. She looked at the clockwork cat on the other end of the string and frowned. A puddle of oil had appeared beneath

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the robot's hindquarters. Looking closer, she saw the mechanical workings were all for show: the cat had a recharging socket for the electronics that really powered its artificial-intelligence existence. The notion that the brass robot might make a good Christmas present was already fading.

"You've been robbed," a man suddenly growled. His voice came loud in her ear.

Ostara jumped and turned around. Standing far too close for comfort was a man in his mid-twenties, barely older than herself. He wore midnight-hued neo-Victorian garb with a long cape, with slicked black hair and a pallid complexion masked by dark enhanced-reality shades. She was startled to see what looked like a bat hovering at his shoulder, a miniature drone with wings that trailed holographic images as they furiously beat the air. The man's attire was that favoured by the Dhusarian Church of Ascension. He was also an officer in the Newbrum Police, someone she had crossed swords with many times before.

"Captain Nyx," Ostara said sourly. "This must be my unlucky day."

Nyx stepped closer, brandishing the sly smile of a predator. Ostara hesitated, suddenly afraid. Without warning, his hand shot towards her and grabbed her by the throat. Ostara shrieked and dropped the string, her fingers clawing desperately at those clamped around her neck. She could feel the air being squeezed from her windpipe as his cruel grasp tightened. Nyx brought his face close to her own, licked his lips and grinned.

"Let go of me!" she wheezed, still struggling.

Nyx released his grip and gave her a shove. Terrified, Ostara staggered backwards, her hands clutching her bruised neck as she gasped for breath. Nyx regarded her with distaste, as if he knew she had bought her trousers and jacket from a second-hand stall. Somehow, she stood her ground, fixing him with a glare of hatred and fear. Her nemesis had never before been so boldly antagonistic towards her in public.

"You despicable man," she hissed. "I'll report you for that!"

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“Ostara Lee, the great detective,” he sneered. “Report me? The good folk of Bradbury Heights care little about scum like you. Unless it’s to sell you cheap trinkets for Christmas. I feel sorry for whoever it is you’ve bought that thing for.”

He gestured mockingly at the motionless robot near her feet. The clockwork cat, which up until now had not uttered a sound, rose upon its brass legs and growled.

“Well, I pity whoever has you at their table come Christmas Day,” snapped Ostara, more bravely than she felt. “Why are you here? This isn’t your pond, you slimy toad.”

“Oh, it’s a terrible tragedy,” Nyx said nonchalantly. “Police Commissioner Forseti’s shuttle was reported missing over the sea. I have my Dhusarian Church hat on today, here to console relatives and so on. All those aboard are feared lost.”

“You’re not wearing a hat,” retorted Ostara, confused. Her wary gaze kept drifting to the drone fluttering at Nyx’s shoulder, which had captivated the attention of her cat. “You couldn’t console a chocoholic even if you had a pocket full of, err... chocolate.”

“Whatever. Do you like my new toy?” Nyx asked lightly, motioning to the hovering drone. “A gift from my adoring congregation. Very useful for making hands-free holo-vid calls. I call it my bat phone.”

Ostara shifted uncomfortably. Captain Nyx’s apparent lack of concern over a shuttle crash seemed callous even for him. Her gaze fell upon the huge holo-vid screens at the far side of the concourse. The downed shuttle mentioned by Nyx was headline news: BBC Ascension was showing shaky footage taken from a flying boat skimming the sea. Ostara’s eyes went wide as she read the summary scrolling across the screens.

“Twelve people feared drowned,” she murmured. “You don’t seem to care!”

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“Flesh is fleeting,” he said solemnly. “The mind is all. Those who embrace the Church have their thoughts and memories preserved. It is the way of the greys.”

“I’ve seen what your church gets up to,” she said coldly. “It’s not right.”

“Anymore than all this?” he asked, gesturing to a passing holographic Santa Claus. “This despicable season of false goodwill? It will be all the merrier if you keep out of my way. Be careful, Detective Lee. Bradbury Heights is no place for strangers.”

With a final sneer, Nyx turned away. Ostara scowled and rubbed her aching neck, watching his billowing cloak as he walked across the concourse and out of sight. Away from his police colleagues in Newbrum, Nyx was nastier than ever. The clockwork cat at her feet had not once taken its baleful electronic stare from the buzzing drone.

“Do you eat bats?” Ostara asked bitterly. “Feel free to take a bite out of that one, anytime.”

The cat looked at her. She got the impression it was wondering whether she was referring to the fluttering device or Captain Nyx himself.

* * *

The skybus station sat within the southern rim of Bradbury Height’s main dome. Beyond the glass to the east, the bloated globe of Barnard’s Star was slipping below the horizon. The red dwarf was tiny compared to Earth’s own sun, but Ascension orbited far closer, whizzing around its parent star once every three Terran weeks. The planet also had an unusual retrograde rotation, which left it with days seven times longer than those of Earth and a sun that rose in the west. Gravity on Ascension was half that of humankind’s homeworld; those Ostara knew who had visited Earth always came back with excruciating aches and pains. She was a relative newcomer to Ascension but it all seemed normal to her now.

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The squat winged shape of the skybus, an electric-turbine shuttle powered via a flexible link to a monorail track, stood silently beneath the sloping glass roof. The service was heading back to Newbrum spaceport in half an hour and passengers were starting to gather on the concourse. Yet there was no sign of her contact, who should have been waiting for her at the station. Puzzled, Ostara tapped the screen of her wristpad and read again the message that had brought her to Bradbury Heights:

Detective Lee, I wish to hire you to look into the affairs of businessman Bouki Moritasgus. I will meet you off tomorrow's noon skybus to Bradbury Heights. Lestrade.

The message had been sent to her private account for friends and select clients, not her public network address. Yet both names in the note were a mystery: a network search had revealed little on Moritasgus, who seemed better than most at guarding his privacy; while the only Lestrade she knew was Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional inspector of Scotland Yard. Whoever Lestrade was, he or she was not here as promised. The message had no return address for Ostara to send a query in reply.

She looked at the clockwork cat, which having bitten through the string at its neck was now clawing the concrete floor. The cogwheels caged by its brass ribs whirred slowly; deeper within, a solid piston rocked back and forth. Time was ticking on.

"Come on," she told the cat. "Let's see if we can find the mysterious Lestrade."

* * *

Captain Nyx cast a furtive glance at the brightly-lit market plaza outside the skybus station and headed for a secluded seating area near the dome wall. A small ornamental fountain tinkled nearby, conveniently loud enough to frustrate any surveillance microphones pointing his way. Once

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out of sight of the station entrance, Nyx beckoned to the fluttering drone at his shoulder. The shimmering hologram projected by its wings unravelled into a list of icons. Nyx jabbed a finger to open his contact list and initiate a holoivid call. The icons gave way to the scowling dark features of a man he had learned to detest.

“Well?” snapped the man. “Did anyone turn up?”

“That idiot detective from Newbrum,” Nyx remarked drolly. “But there’s no sign of her contact. I suggest you get ready in case she comes knocking.”

* * *

Bradbury Heights sat north of Ascension’s barren equatorial plains, near where melt water pooled from the snow-capped peaks of the New Malverns before flowing to the distant Tatrill Sea. Like all settlements on Ascension, the city sat beneath airtight domes, there to protect inhabitants from the poisonous thin atmosphere and harsh radiation flares that blighted the world. Yet beyond the steel and glass dome, the lake in the foothills nurtured primitive alien life: weird bugs and weeds that were of great interest to those seeking exotic organics for chemists back on Earth. It was one of the more picturesque sites on Ascension, albeit only marginally less bleak than the coastal scrubland of Newbrum. Ostara felt a pang of regret that she saw none of this. The long dark night was encroaching and the landscape beyond the dome was shrouded in the red-tinged shadows of dusk.

The station was at the end of a wedge-shaping plaza that stretched to an apex at the centre of the main dome. There were people everywhere, dressed in the colourful skimpy styles fashionable amongst the wealthy. Bordering the long edges of the plaza stood glitzy retail outlets, with holographic window displays of toys, sporting goods and clothing, more often than not accompanied by an animated Santa Claus upon his sleigh. A

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moving walkway ran through the centre, past garish market stalls selling gifts and take-away food. Holographic projectors provided the illusion of falling snow, the flakes dissolving into a hazy mist of light centimetres deep on the ground. For those who liked shopping, it was a winter wonderland.

The city's main dome was barely half a kilometre across, but clever holographic screens made the plaza look as if a surrounding snow-bound forest stretched to a distant horizon. The only thing not wintry was the climate, for the pine-scented air was pleasantly warm and fresh. Ostara realised this was why the scene looked so odd; if snow really had been falling, she doubted shoppers would be wandering around in scraps of cloth better suited to a tropical beach. The toned, bronzed flesh on display made her feel very unfit.

The clockwork cat clunked to her side and growled. Ostara guessed she was not alone in feeling out of place. The robot's gaze was on a nearby bearded man dressed in a flowing old-fashioned suit of blue and matching jaunty cap, his left hand holding the lead of a large mechanical dog of a similar design to the brass cat. Ornately-framed holoivid screens hung across his chest and back from straps over his shoulders. In his right hand was a megaphone. As Ostara watched, the man raised it to his lips.

"Come to the Dickens Christmas Fair!" he cried. "See the art, science and mechanical wonders of Victoriana as we celebrate the old-fashioned way! Come with me to where the streets are paved with gold! Find us in the bio-dome at Corporation Square!"

The screens hanging from his shoulders showed quaint scenes of people in archaic period dress enjoying the sedate thrills of antique funfair rides. Ostara thought the bobbing horses on the gaily-painted carousel looked fun.

"Anyone you know?" she asked the cat. It seemed fixated by the robot dog.

Her brass companion made no reply. Raising her wristpad, Ostara consulted her guide to Bradbury Heights and found Corporation Square.

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The city's western bio-dome, a public arts and recreation arena, was home to a small public library, which was as good a place as any to start her search for Lestrade. The man with the megaphone walked on.

“Fancy a trip to the Christmas Fair?” remarked Ostara, looking at the cat.

The clockwork robot raised its head and showed her its sharp metal teeth. She guessed it had not been built with conversation in mind.

* * *

Ostara hurried through the market, trying to ignore the stares of scantily-dressed shoppers who were looking at her as if she had crawled from the drains. Reaching the centre of the dome, she paused to gaze up at the seven-storey cylindrical tower that was City Hall, home to local government and Nyx's contemporaries in the Bradbury Heights police force. The streets basked in a cheery false glow not often seen outside of cheesy holoivid soap operas. Like Newbrum, the walkways were lined with ultra-violet lamps to boost the red dwarf's crimson glow. Unlike in Newbrum, all the streetlamps worked.

The security guards outside City Hall were giving her hostile looks. Ostara turned left and continued along the tree-lined West Avenue, past the neo-classical façade of the opera house, a row of smart apartment blocks, then the arched entrance to yet more retail outlets where the annoying wail of Christmas songs filled the air. Other than the boisterous Hockley Market, shopping malls were unheard of in Newbrum. Bradbury Heights had four, despite a population barely half that of the three thousand in her adopted home town. Bright neon hoardings overshadowed every street corner, their animated displays promoting everything from holoivid shows to skiing vacations at Ascension's fake alpine resort of Kirchel. Ostara hastened onwards to the end and into the wide tunnel to the neighbouring bio-dome. The clockwork cat clanked merrily at her side,

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seemingly content to follow its new owner without a string around its neck. It was the only friend she had made in this city.

Her spirits were lifted the moment she emerged from the tunnel. Bradbury's Height's bio-dome took her breath away. It was almost as large as the city's main dome, only this time filled with beautiful landscaped gardens, trees, golfing greens and even a small boating lake. Sprawled across an open-air square near the lake was the Christmas Fair. Intrigued, Ostara followed a group of people making their way to the festivities. Artificial snow lay in drifts around the fair, a patch of winter amidst the constant summer of the park.

The Dickens Christmas Fair was a twee re-imagining of nineteenth-century London, when the first Queen Victoria reigned supreme: a confusion of fake shop fronts, market stalls, old-fashioned fairground rides, strange clockwork contraptions and countless people in period dress. Ostara stared rapt at the holovids near the entrance showcasing the delights on offer within. A recorded commentary explained the theme was, 'Christmas, as told by Charles Dickens', for no other reason than it was the four-hundredth-and-fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Pickwick Papers*, his first novel. The lake had been transformed into an ice rink and Ostara stared wistfully at the revellers on skates. Beneath the fake snow, the square glowed a rich yellow, luring visitors into the fair. The streets really were paved with gold.

A pleasant odour tickled her nostrils. Ostara was hit by a sudden urge to go inside and spend lots of money. As she stepped over the threshold to enter the fair, her wristpad emitted a sonorous buzzing. A nearby attendant, a man dressed in an archaic frock coat of black and red, stepped towards her and shook his head. Ostara's heart sank, for she too knew what the sound meant. Raising her wristpad, she looked at the screen and sighed. Her credit account was empty. She cursed as she remembered how her wristpad had malfunctioned when the boy took payment for the cat.

"The thief!" she exclaimed. "That little brat drained my account!"

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The attendant looked at the clockwork cat and glanced into the fair. A group outside the Hall of Mirrors, resplendent in cog-festooned Victoriana clothing and ludicrously-tall hats with goggles, were accompanied by brass robot cats and dogs of the same design. Ostara had a horrible feeling the boy had stolen the clockwork cat from the fair. She had barely been in Bradbury Heights an hour and was already a penniless vagrant in possession of stolen goods. Ostara gave the attendant a sheepish grin and backed away. Almost immediately, the desire to spend money faded, as did the tantalising smell. The boy was not the only thief around. The fair was pumping spendthrift pheromones into the air.

“Bunch of crooks, the lot of them,” Ostara muttered.

The charms of Bradbury Heights were rapidly wearing thin. Consulting her wristpad again, she located the library. She had come here to find the mysterious Lestrade. Without a case to earn her some credits, it was a long walk home to Newbrum.

* * *

Books were supposedly a thing of the past. Most cities still had libraries, only now they were temples to stories in all their forms, public portals to the centuries of wisdom, wit and deceit stored on the mighty orbiting servermoons of the five-systems network. Books still existed, albeit mostly as electronic texts or holovids to be consumed via the device of choice. Yet Bradbury Heights library had shelf upon shelf of books in a real, physical sense: bound volumes of paper in heavy card jackets; novels, histories, biographies and more. Ostara, herself the proud owner of antique volumes of Sherlock Holmes stories, was impressed.

The library itself, situated on the far side of the frozen lake, was built in the style of a small pillared temple of Ancient Greece. The open-air café on the waterfront terrace was busy with people taking lunch, more often than not with a book in their hand. After leaving the clockwork cat at a

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recharging point, Ostara wandered around the library, looking at the titles on display. They were all new: printed by a machine in the library itself, with well-known works ready to take away and any other texts available within minutes. It was no surprise that the books of Charles Dickens were proving popular with visitors to the fair.

Remembering her quest, Ostara went to a vacant network portal, found the Ascension-wide citizen database and entered the name 'Lestrade'. There were no entries found. She had no more luck with the electoral register, nor with a list of registered businesses. On a whim, she looked for anyone using 'Lestrade' in their local network profile and got the same blank result. Her client remained as elusive as ever.

"Clueless again, detective?" came a sudden voice.

Startled, Ostara's blood ran cold. Nyx leaned casually against one of the bookshelves, earning a stern stare from the young woman stocking shelves nearby. The bat-shaped drone fluttered at his shoulders, its wings trailing a ghostly hologram of a network profile page. Ostara saw with annoyance that it was her own, with the message from Lestrade open for all to see. Her supposedly secure messaging account had been compromised. Her hand went to the bruises she could still feel upon her throat.

"You're following me," she accused him. "How did you get into my account?"

"I am an officer of the law," he said with a sneer. "You are a person of interest, Detective Lee. It is my civic duty to keep an eye on trouble-makers such as yourself."

Ostara glared at him. "Leave me alone. This is harassment!"

"Call it preventative policing," said Nyx. He gestured to the hologram projected by the bat's beating wings. "Prying into certain affairs could prove hazardous to your health."

"Is that a threat?" she asked nervously.

The librarian was watching with concern. Nyx glanced towards her and momentarily stiffened, as if he had forgotten there was someone else

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present. Moving away from the bookshelves, he fixed Ostara with a steely stare.

“A friendly warning,” he hissed. “Go back to Newbrum, Detective Lee. Better still, hitch a lift back to that crazy asteroid you used to call home. I’m sure your piteous talents were much more appreciated out there than on Ascension.”

He clicked his fingers at his fluttering bat and the hologram vanished. Nyx shot Ostara one last glare, turned on his heels and noiselessly slipped away through the library, the drone fluttering behind him. Ostara realised she was trembling. The young woman at the bookshelf stood motionless with a volume in her hand, staring at her with wide eyes.

“Asteroid?” the librarian asked hesitantly.

“The *Dandridge Cole*,” mumbled Ostara, trying to calm her nerves. Meeting Nyx twice in one day was too much for her. “We call it the hollow moon.”

“You’re one of those refugees?” asked the woman, visibly startled. Ostara frowned, offended by the librarian’s reaction, who immediately looked apologetic. “Sorry. You must know how they moan about you arriving and taking all the housing and jobs.”

“I’m self-employed,” Ostara said coolly. “I sleep in my office.”

The young woman looked mortified at having caused offence. Ostara sighed, held a hand out in greeting and attempted a smile. The librarian hesitantly shook the offered palm. Ostara tapped her wristpad and sent her business profile to the woman.

“Wow,” the librarian murmured, looking at the screen of her own device. “Newbrum’s premier private detective agency! Are there many others?”

“Err, no. I’m the only one,” Ostara admitted. “But the best!”

The woman looked hesitant. “I saw the message,” she said. “Are you on a case?”

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“My contact never showed,” Ostara said glumly. “And there’s no trace of them in the city database. There’s an Inspector Lestrade in Sherlock Holmes,” she added brightly.

The librarian rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know. Maybe it’s a code? The sender might be a real inspector who wants to keep things quiet.”

Ostara frowned. “There’s only one Police Inspector on Ascension and I’ve never met her,” she told her. The woman in question headed a small team of detectives with jurisdiction across the whole planet, who were headquartered in Bradbury Heights to reassure the American pharmaceutical companies and employees who owned most of Ascension’s wealth. “I can’t think why she’d want me on a case.”

“Not many people know the Sherlock Holmes stories these days,” the librarian said sadly. “If it is a code name, it must be from someone who knows that you do.”

“Lestrade,” Ostara murmured. “Who would use a name like that?”

She sighed. A message sent as a joke, by someone who would take great pleasure in luring her away on false pretences, was exactly the sort of thing a certain malicious captain from Newbrum would do, especially one aware of Ostara’s obsession with Sherlock Holmes. Nyx’s sneering presence in Bradbury Heights suddenly made sense.

“Damn you, Nyx,” she muttered. “I’ll get you for this.”

“Bouki Moritasgus is real enough,” the librarian added brightly, interrupting Ostara’s gloomy thoughts. “He’s a big businessman in the city. Shipping, I think.”

“Yes, I looked him up,” Ostara said carefully. “Do you know him?”

“Not personally. He’s on the news a lot. I always thought he seemed a bit dodgy.”

“Maybe there is a case, after all,” remarked Ostara. “It’s Moritasgus I need to find!”

The woman frowned. “Wasn’t his business address on the database?”

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“I was just about to check!” snapped Ostara. Her head was starting to hurt. “Do I look completely clueless?”

The librarian gave her a long appraising stare. Ostara wracked her brains for a witty follow-up but none came. The woman nodded and turned away, a playful smile dancing across her face as she resumed restocking the shelves. Ostara scowled and went back to the network portal, her mind buzzing. She had a dodgy businessman to find.

* * *

Bouki Moritasgus ran a shipping business from his home in the eastern dome of Bradbury Heights. Ostara had no credits for an autotaxi, but it did not take long for her and the clockwork cat to walk from the bio-dome and across the main city.

The steel and glass dome to the east was smaller and almost entirely residential. To her surprise, many of the buildings were individual houses as might be found in city suburbs on Earth, which she never knew existed in domed settlements where habitable space was at a premium. Every dwelling on the tidy tree-lined streets had a sun terrace or garden; some even had parking for private aircars, for the east dome had a large airlock for flyers brave enough to venture outside. In the centre of the dome was the Bradbury Heights University campus, a graceful trio of square glass towers within a tiny park. The neighbourhood reeked of money. Bouki Moritasgus was clearly a very wealthy man.

Ostara found the businessman’s house on the far side of the eastern dome, in a select neighbourhood that enjoyed views of the scenic New Malverns through the dome glass. Moritasgus’ home was one of the largest: a three-storey detached villa built from local grey stone, with full-height windows and the external living scaffold of a biological power plant. The entrance porch alone was bigger than her office in Newbrum. The high tree-lined wall surrounding the property flanked an imposing steel-bar gate,

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through which she spied dome-headed robot sentries, sinister metal machines with a single long eye stalk and a plasma rifle for an arm, gliding silently as they patrolled the garden and driveway. She had met no one on the streets since entering the dome but knew she was being watched.

Now she was here, Ostara was unsure of what to do. Several hours had passed since her arrival in Bradbury Heights and the streetlamps were darkening towards an artificial night. She was hungry and weary, which no doubt explained why the plan that formed in her mind was so feeble. Unfortunately, it was the only one she had. Followed by the cat, Ostara went to the gate and raised her hand to the communicator panel on the wall.

“Can I help you?” snapped a voice.

Ostara jumped, her outstretched finger centimetres from the panel. The sharp female tones had come from behind. She turned and gulped. The security guard who stood there was twice the size of Ostara, wearing sleeveless green overalls packed with muscles and a scowl not quite masked by dark enhanced-reality shades. The woman’s hair was shorn short and tribal tattoos patterned her tanned skin. The scary plasma pistol holstered at her waist spoke volumes. Her heavy boots had not hindered her silent approach.

“I was, err... robbed,” Ostara said nervously. Though not a lie, her plea sounded unconvincing even to her. “I don’t have any credits and wondered...”

“We don’t do charity,” the woman growled. Her head tilted to where the clockwork cat was digging its claws into the driveway. “What’s with that heap of junk?”

“It’s a long story,” Ostara admitted. “You see...”

“You from Newbrum?” she asked, interrupting.

“Yes, I’m...”

Ostara’s words died on her lips. The security guard, her scowl now a wry grin, had drawn her pistol and was pointing it in a rather unfriendly

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fashion. Ostara's day trip to Bradbury Heights was rapidly going from bad to worse. The woman waggled the barrel of the gun and gestured for Ostara to move away from the gate.

"Not that way," she said roughly. "We have a place reserved for you."

Ostara tentatively raised her hands and stepped back. The brass cat stopped its excavations and followed, seemingly unconcerned about the turn of events.

The guard led her along the wall to a narrow recess. After placing her own hand on a panel to open a concealed gate, she directed Ostara through into a brick-walled alley that ran the length of the house's aircar garage. The woman urged her onwards to a door at the rear of the garage, which she opened in the same way as the gate. The garage was in darkness and the air smelt musty with a faint tang of oil. Ostara hesitated before the open doorway.

"In there?" she asked nervously.

"It won't be for long," said the guard, her tone less than reassuring. "The boss will be back soon. He is very much looking forward to meeting you."

Ostara did not like the way the woman said that. She felt the gun prod her again and realised she had little choice in the matter. With a shudder, she stepped into the garage, the clockwork cat still at her heels. The guard came to the doorway and paused.

"Sleep well," she hissed. "Hope the space rats don't bite."

Ostara shrieked. The door slammed shut, sealing her in the darkness. The last thing she saw before the door cut off the light was a flurry of black shapes, scurrying across the floor towards her.

* * *

Bouki Moritasgus missed the mountains and seas of his native Haiti, but had to admit that Ascension was far more conducive to a life of crime. It

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was well-known amongst the entrepreneurs who had taken the leap into the unknown that the five systems was a mess. Away from Earth, settled worlds often had no proper government to speak of; where they had, they were all talk and no teeth. Moritasgus himself often toyed with the idea of moving into politics and so kept his transgressions relatively minor, yet smuggling illegal goods to buyers in Bradbury Heights had proved surprisingly lucrative. It was not only his personal treasury that had got fat; wealth invariably brought a corpulent lifestyle, but at least Ascension's low gravity kept the weight off his bones.

He was currently away on business, riding his private aircar to the lawless trading post of Lan-Tlanto on the far side of the planet, where he had an appointment with a supplier of exotic alien wildlife. Even for those who operated on the right side of the law, Ascension's value was in the unusual native flora and fauna which had evolved beneath its red dwarf sun. The big prizes were found down in the equatorial Eden Ravines, a vast network of canyons larger even than Valles Marineris on Mars, at the bottom of which the atmosphere was thick and warm enough to sustain a dark jungle filled with all manner of bizarre alien life. The Ravines were protected in law and pharmaceutical companies of Bradbury Heights paid huge sums to get the few research permits on offer. Traders like Moritasgus went to Lan-Tlanto and the adventurers all-too willing to dodge the authorities in exchange for quick credits.

At the moment however, he had other concerns. The face on his gold-plated wristpad was that of his security chief at his Bradbury Heights home.

"This had better be important," Moritasgus grunted.

"She's arrived," said the woman on the screen. "And secure."

"Good," he replied. "I'll deal with her in the morning."

He brusquely ended the call. A few deft taps on the screen brought up a new face, this time of a shifty-looking young man dressed in black.

"You were right," said Moritasgus. "Do you think she knows anything?"

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“Hasn’t got a clue,” retorted Captain Nyx. “Though that’s hardly unusual for the so-called premier detective of Newbrum. All we need to do now is find out who Lestrade is.”

* * *

Ostara shrieked again as she felt something run over her boot. She had managed to find the door handle in the cloying darkness but her exit was locked. Beyond the door, she heard the muffled voice of the guard, then a low chuckle and retreating thud of footsteps. In a panic, Ostara reached for her wristpad and turned on the inbuilt torch.

She almost wished she had stayed in the dark. A dozen or so large space rats crouched before her, blinking in the sudden rush of light. These were black rats of Earth that had stowed away on freighters and grown huge on new low-gravity worlds, just one mutation of many attributed to cosmic radiation in unshielded cargo holds. The creatures before her were a metre long from whiskers to twitching tail, their jaws armed with incisors the length of her thumb. The clockwork cat growled and raised its tail, its eyes upon the rats.

“Crapping hell,” murmured Ostara. Her terrified stare fell upon a broom by the door. A couple of steps later it was in her hands, not that she thought it would be much use.

The clockwork cat flexed its brass jaws. Ostara’s eyes went wide. Its teeth were stainless-steel daggers, a row of scalpels that glinted in the light of her wristpad. The cat lowered itself close to the floor and slunk towards the nearest rat, its articulated brass tail swishing slowly from side to side. Suddenly, it lunged.

It was a massacre. Ostara watched in horror as the cat leapt from one space rat to the next, trapping them in its sharp talons and ferocious jaws before snapping their necks with ease. The rats did their best to flee but the cat moved with incredible speed, darting around the garage with a high-

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pitched whine of whirring cogs. Ostara shrieked as a rat scurried behind where she stood. She was nearly bowled over by the pursuing cat.

In less than a minute, every rat was dead. The garage floor was smeared with blood. The clockwork cat waddled to a halt before Ostara, bits of torn flesh hanging from its teeth. The red glow of its electronic stare seemed more malevolent than ever.

Ostara took a hesitant step back. “There’s a good kitty,” she murmured.

Somehow she did not feel like patting the brass robot on the head. The speed at which the cat had wiped out its prey scared her. Moving gingerly, she used the broom to gingerly sweep the mangled rodents into a pile at the far end of the floor. Ostara was glad the cat was on her side. She wondered why the Dickens’s Christmas Fair needed such a vicious killer.

Rat corpses aside, the garage appeared to be empty. Whilst sweeping, she came across the controls for the large roller-shutter door, but jabbing the switch had no effect. Dropping the broom, Ostara sat down on a broken packing crate and pile of folded canvas covers, which seemed the best she could hope for by way of a bed. The fear that had gripped her at the sight of the rats had faded. Now she was tired, hungry and very annoyed at being locked up for no good reason. With a sigh, she curled up on the canvas and stared at the watching cat.

“Space rats,” she murmured. “But how did they end up here?”

* * *

Ostara woke with a start. The roller shutters at the far end of the garage were opening, spilling the glow of streetlamps upon where she lay. A bulbous blue aircar sat on the landing pad outside, the whine of its turbines dwindling into silence, the nacelles either side of the four-seater pod pointing down. As Ostara raised herself from her canvas bed, a hatch in the side of the aircar folded open to become steps. The large, dark-skinned

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man who emerged wore an expensive grey suit with silver threads that caught the light. His head was entirely hairless, his eyes hidden behind dark mirrored shades. A second man, wearing a dark green flight suit and holstered plasma pistol, followed him out onto the drive.

Ostara scrambled to her feet and hurriedly brushed the dust from her clothes. The clockwork cat trotted from the shadows and came to her side. The man in the grey suit paused at the garage door and tilted his gaze towards the pile of savaged space rats.

“You have been busy,” he remarked. “Your contraption did this?”

“Pets of yours, were they?” asked Ostara, still angry. “Your guard locked me in!”

“My security team can be overly wary of strangers,” he admitted, flashing her a smile. His voice had an oily, patronising tone. “But here you are, delivered safe and sound to me on Christmas Eve. My mail-order bride!”

“What?!”

“You’re shorter than I imagined,” he said, stepping into the garage. “But trim and not unattractive. There’s a fire in your eyes that bewitches me.”

“I am not your mail-order bride!” protested Ostara.

“Don’t be shy!” he exclaimed. “There’s no shame in matrimony for money.”

“I am not for sale!” she cried. “I’m...”

She hesitated, then frowned. The man was grinning, obviously enjoying his joke. Ostara scowled, for she had come close to revealing who she was, which was probably not what detectives are supposed to do when in the lair of the accused. The clockwork cat clunked towards the man and growled.

“Let’s start again,” Ostara said coolly. “Who are you?”

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“Bouki Moritasgus, at your service,” he said, with a gentle bow. “Esteemed purveyor of rare and expensive novelties for discerning clientele. And you are?”

“Not your bride,” she said firmly. She remembered the story she tried to spin for the guard yesterday. “I was robbed of all my credits and knocked on your door asking for help. I didn’t expect to be imprisoned in a garage all night! Is this how you treat your guests? No wonder you need to buy a wife.”

“You looked for charity, here in the east dome?” remarked Moritasgus. “And renegeing on a promise to marry is a breach of contract on your part. I placed my order in good faith and do not appreciate being spurned on Christmas Eve. It’s heartless!”

“What?” Ostara was confused. “I told you, I am not your bride!”

“Does the name Lestrade mean anything to you?”

Ostara hesitated. “I suspect it’s the punch line to yet another joke on me.”

The guard by the parked aircar was trying to suppress a smile. Moritasgus stroked his chin as if in thought. His dark glasses made it difficult to judge his expression.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said to Ostara. “I don’t do charity, but can do a deal. That brass cat of yours looks handy at pest control. I’ll take it off your hands in exchange for letting you toddle off and be a bride elsewhere. I’ll even throw in a few credits for expenses.”

“You’re mad,” Ostara told him. “And that cat cost me twelve credits.”

“You were robbed,” he said. Raising his hand, he beckoned to the guard. “Transfer twenty to her account and get her out of my sight.”

Ostara opened her mouth to protest, but held her tongue. The guard gestured for her to join him by the aircar. As the clockwork cat tried to follow, Moritasgus deftly reached down and flicked a concealed switch beneath its metal ear, stopping it dead. Ostara sighed. Even her mechanical friendships did not seem to last.

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The guard tapped his wristpad and she heard a beep as the credits were transferred. With one last sorrowful look at the motionless brass cat, Ostara allowed the guard to escort her to the street, then started the long walk back to the main dome. Her mission for the mysterious Lestrade had failed.

* * *

Captain Nyx watched as the blue aircar touched down on the pad near the dome wall. The east dome airlock was usually the domain of wealthy residents travelling privately to Newbrum spaceport, who could afford to wallow in the luxury of their own vehicles rather than ride the skybus with poor people. The innocuous grey vehicle inside the airlock behind him, having just arrived through the darkness to Bradbury Heights, was a larger model converted to carry freight. Its crew were also still inside, busy sorting the cargo. Nyx was content to monitor their activity on the holovid projected by his drone's fluttering wings. He had seen the dark shapes scampering about the airlock chamber and had no desire to release more space rats into the dome.

Moritasgus stepped from the aircar and started towards him. His driver followed a few paces behind, carrying something that glinted yellow beneath the street lights. Nyx grinned as he recognised the stiff-legged clockwork contraption in the man's arms.

"I see you've met the great detective," said Nyx, as the businessman approached.

"Indeed," said Moritasgus. "A woman easily baffled. She is almost certainly oblivious to the business I am conducting on behalf of your church. She thinks the message from the elusive Lestrade was a ruse."

"Business?" Nyx smiled wryly. "Gun-running, the authorities would call it."

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“Whatever. Miss Lee seems somewhat out of her depth. I may have been too cruel.”

Nyx smiled. “What did you do?”

“He made out she was his mail-order bride,” the driver said, smirking.

“I do not pay you to talk!” snapped Moritasgus. “Take that thing to the airlock and see if can get rid of those rats. It would be ironic after years of dodging Nyx’s comrades at the police department if we were caught instead by Environmental Enforcement.”

“Detective Lee’s clockwork cat?” Nyx raised a surprised eyebrow. “It catches rats?”

Moritasgus beckoned to the driver and flicked the switch under the robot’s ear. The cat wriggled free of the man’s grip and landed feet-first on the floor. Its baleful electronic stare fell upon Nyx and the bat-shaped drone hovering at his shoulder. The cat growled.

“Feisty little box of cogs,” murmured Nyx, suddenly uneasy.

The clockwork cat leapt up onto his chest. Nyx yelled in panic as he felt its metal claws dig through his tunic into his skin. The cat scrambled towards his face, lurched onto his shoulders and launched itself at the fluttering drone. There was a horrible metallic crunch, then the clockwork cat was on the ground once more, shaking the mechanical bat in its jaws. Nyx cried out again, this time in anger.

“My bat phone!” he cried. “It’s eating my drone!”

The cat stopped dead, looked up at Nyx and released another metallic growl. Perturbed, Moritasgus and the driver edged away. Nyx took a nervous step back. His tunic stuck to his skin where the stinging puncture wounds from the cat’s claws had left their mark.

“Nice kitty,” he murmured. “Good kitty...”

The cat cocked its head, its stiff brass features somehow managing to look amused. Nyx took another backwards step and found himself up against the airlock door. The clockwork cat slunk forward and crouched low, the stare of its glowing eyes fixed upon his own.

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The cat growled again, then leapt. Nyx's shriek surprised even himself.

* * *

Ostara trudged despondently across the last few metres of the plaza outside Bradbury Heights station. The twenty credits Moritasgus had paid for the cat was enough for a ticket home to Newbrum. There was nothing else keeping her in this dreadful city.

A white hovertruck suddenly sped past on the road bordering the plaza. It was an ambulance, its loud warning bells slightly less annoying the wailing sirens heard in Newbrum. Ostara scowled as she watched it go past. Even the ambulances were special in Bradbury Heights. Then another zoomed past, heading in the same direction, followed by a third. She did not need to be a detective to know something was wrong.

She looked to see where the ambulances had come from and saw a group of uniformed fire fighters near a large airlock away to her left. Outside the steel and glass dome, a small delta-winged shuttle stood crookedly on a landing pad, belching smoke. A huge wheeled robot in fire-services livery stood alongside, spraying foam onto the downed craft.

Ostara realised she had company. A boy in scruffy Victorian clothes stood nearby, alternating his inquisitive gaze between the distant fire crew and herself.

Her eyes narrowed. "You again," she grumbled. "You sold me a stolen cat!"

"I came to say sorry," the boy said meekly. "I was supposed to give you a dog, but it ran away. You'll tell Lestrade I tried my best, won't you miss?"

"Lestrade?" asked Ostara, excitedly. "Do you know him?"

"Her," the boy corrected. "She was on that shuttle. Thought they were all dead, I did."

"That's the missing shuttle? Commissioner Forseti was on that flight."

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“And Lestrade,” the boy reminded her. “Tell her it wasn’t my fault, will you?”

“Do I get my twelve credits back?” she remarked. The boy dropped his gaze, a guilty expression etched upon his face. “Never mind. Where’s Lestrade now?”

“They’re ambulances, ain’t they?” the boy retorted. “Where do you think?”

* * *

Bradbury Heights Hospital was in the north of the main dome, not far from City Hall. Ostara arrived on foot just as the last ambulance was being unloaded. The public entrance of the squat white building was too far away from the ambulance bay to see who were on the trolleys, but their heads were uncovered, which meant they were still alive.

Inside the lobby, police and fire crew mingled with visitors and staff. Away in a secluded corner, a police officer stood next to a nurse attending a man on a trolley. Ostara caught a glimpse of the patient’s face and hesitated. When she saw the clockwork cat on the trolley with him, lying between the man’s legs with its jaws clamped around his groin, she could barely contain her glee. Trying to hide her smirk, she sauntered over.

“Captain Nyx,” she remarked, relishing his scowl of pain. “Fancy seeing you here!”

“Your blasted cat attacked me!” he cried. “Look at it!”

The officer looked at Ostara. “Is that your device, ma’am?” she asked.

“It was taken from me this morning by a man named Bouki Moritasgus,” Ostara said carefully. On a whim, she tapped her wristpad and sent her profile and contact details to the officer, hoping it would divert her suspicious glare elsewhere. “I’m happy to make a full statement whenever is convenient, officer.”

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“Newbrum’s premier private detective agency,” the officer remarked wryly, looking at her wristpad screen. “Are there many others?”

“One too many, if you ask me!” wheezed Nyx from his trolley.

“Captain Nyx, you are a horrible man,” Ostara retorted. “You got what you deserved.”

The nurse smiled and pushed the trolley away. Nyx’s mumbled obscenities faded into the noise of the lobby. Ostara glanced at her wristpad in irritation. She needed to change that line on her business network page. The police officer had not moved.

“A pleasure to meet you, Detective Lee,” she said. “One of the patients brought in from the shuttle asked us to look out for you. She’s up on the first floor ward.”

Ostara caught her breath. “Lestrade?” she asked cautiously.

The officer smiled. “I believe that was the code name she gave you, yes.”

* * *

The first floor ward was a haven of tranquillity after the lobby downstairs. Ostara paused in the doorway and looked past the reception desk towards the private rooms for patients. The medic at the desk rose to meet her, then stopped as a young police officer moved into view outside one of the rooms and beckoned to the detective.

Ostara crossed the ward to the room. Inside, the patient tucked up in bed looked tired, her blond hair lying in straggles across her brow. The woman’s imposing pale features were those Ostara knew well. That did not stop the officer regarding their visitor with suspicion.

“Administrator Verdandi!” Ostara greeted, approaching the bed.

Her mysterious contact was not who she expected. Verdandi led the tiny government of Newbrum and was the highest-ranking politician on

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Ascension while the post of planet-wide governor went unfilled. She seemed annoyed at being confined to a hospital bed.

“Detective Lee,” Verdandi acknowledged, managing a smile. “I was starting to think my message was too cryptic.”

Ostara hesitated. “You are Lestrade?”

“Indeed. Did young Tomten deliver Baskerville to you?”

“Tomten?” asked Ostara, taking a seat next to the bed. “Baskerville?”

Verdandi sighed. “I concealed an espionage device and a coded message for yourself inside one of those mechanical dogs so popular in this awful city. Tomten is one of our young scouts, whom I entrusted to deliver it to you. I take it he failed?”

“He sold me a clockwork cat,” Ostara told her. “I’m pretty sure he stole it from the Christmas Fair. He said he meant to give me a dog but it ran away. Baskerville and Lestrade were clues, right?”

“I thought you’d appreciate those code names,” the woman admitted. “Damnation! This puts back my operation by weeks.”

“Operation? I’m so sorry! I never realised the shuttle crash was that serious!”

“I meant a police operation,” Verdandi snapped irritably. The officer standing across the bed smiled. “The Commissioner and I believe that businessman Bouki Moritasgus is linked to corruption in the force, but we’ve struggled to get proof. We need someone to follow Moritasgus, in a surveillance job not involving the police. I have no jurisdiction in Bradbury Heights so I contacted you, the only private detective on Ascension.”

“And the best!” quipped Ostara.

Verdandi frowned. “Quite. Though it seems my summons was in vain.”

“But you are okay? The shuttle...”

“I’m suffering the effects of smoke inhalation, that’s all. The shuttle came down in the marshes between here and the sea. The pilot managed to get the engines going again and brought us back safe. For some reason,

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officials here thought we had ditched in the sea and were drowned. I'm starting to wonder if someone tried to silence the Commissioner and I. Between you and me, the explosion that caused the crash was no accident."

Ostara was shocked. The presence of the police officer at Administrator Verdandi's bedside now made sense. As did much of what she herself had been through over the last twenty-four hours, now Verdandi had revealed what was behind her message. Ostara offered a sympathetic nod, her mind elsewhere. A tale of Moritasgus and police corruption put a different slant on the clockwork cat's presence in the vicinity of Nyx's nether regions.

"Captain Nyx," she said slowly. "He met with Moritasgus today."

Verdandi's eyes gleamed. "Can you prove that?"

"There's a mechanical brass friend of mine who can," Ostara told her. "Nyx is here in the hospital, getting his wounds treated. Was Nyx investigating Bouki Moritasgus? They were both really horrible to me."

"No," Verdandi said firmly. "There is no case open on Moritasgus."

"Why the space rats? Were they left there to eat me?"

"Detective Lee, you can do better than that!"

Ostara pursed her lips. As she thought about why Nyx and Moritasgus might meet, she remembered the crate and canvas sheets that had served as an uncomfortable bed the night before.

"Is this about smuggling?" she asked.

"I believe so," said Verdandi. She turned to the officer. "Don't let Captain Nyx leave this hospital. Call for back-up if you need to, but be discrete. Quickly!"

The police woman nodded and stepped out of the room to make a wristpad call. Verdandi gave Ostara an expectant look.

"Perhaps your time has not been wasted, after all. Tell me what you know."

Ostara nodded and proceeded to tell her tale. As she did, more pieces of the jigsaw fell into place. The space rats were evidence that Moritasgus

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was storing goods at his home from a ship that had not been through Ascension's usual quarantine procedures, which meant he had something to hide. There were only two spaceports on Ascension: the main transport hub at Newbrum and the illegal outpost of Lan-Tlanto. Verdandi seemed pretty sure that Moritasgus was flying aircars back and forth to meet ships at the latter. The police officer shortly returned with news of her own.

"Captain Nyx is being watched," she reported, then looked to Ostara. "That clockwork cat of yours had to be dismantled, sorry. There was a communication drone jammed in its jaws, which we think belonged to Nyx. One shaped like a bat?"

"Yes!" cried Ostara. "He had it with him yesterday. I told the cat to eat it."

Verdandi kept her gaze on the officer. "Confiscate it as evidence," she ordered. "If that device can link him to Moritasgus, I want it secured. See to it personally."

The officer nodded. "Yes ma'am."

Ostara's eyes followed as the woman left the room. She had tried to join the police herself when she first arrived in Newbrum, but Nyx had been the interviewing officer, treating her with scorn. It felt good to have helped solve a case, even if was more by luck than judgement. Maybe being a detective was about lucky breaks, she thought.

"Detective Lee, you're hardly the greatest detective in the world," Verdandi said, giving her a strange look. Ostara opened her mouth to protest and was silenced by a wave of a hand. "But you're honest and determined to do right, qualities somewhat lacking in certain quarters. You're aware that the Que Qiao Corporation is having to transfer the administration of various planets to the new Federation, are you not?"

Ostara nodded, wondering where the conversation was going.

"Que Qiao own the contract for policing in Barnard's Star, but as a Commonwealth colony we're otherwise independent," said Verdandi. "I

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want Ascension to stay that way. Did you know the new Federation is linked to the Dhusarian Church?”

“President Uma and Priest Taranis joined forces to get a UN resolution,” said Ostara. Her involuntary shudder was for the priest; the one time she met Taranis, he had just released a batch of vicious cyberclone monks, two of which she later came up against in Newbrum. “But what does that have to do with Captain Nyx and Moritasgus?”

“Rumours are that the Dhusarians are replacing Que Qiao governors in Epsilon Eridani with their own people. Nyx is a leading light of the Dhusarian Church in Newbrum and a police officer on Que Qiao’s payroll. Moritasgus is suspected of fraternising with illegal weapons dealers in Lan-Tlanto. The last thing I want on Ascension is civil war.”

Ostara’s eyes went wide. “War?!”

“It won’t come to that,” Verdandi replied briskly. “Commissioner Forseti detests Nyx. Hopefully there’s enough evidence now for him to be dismissed from the force. But enough of shop talk. Look, we have a visitor!”

Ostara glanced to the door and saw a familiar scruffy boy standing there with a bunch of flowers in his hands. Real flowers were an expensive luxury and incredibly hard to obtain on Ascension, not that she believed the boy had paid for them.

“You again,” she remarked frostily. “You drained my credit account.”

“Pitiful amount it was,” the boy retorted sullenly. “I thought detectives were rich.”

Verdandi gave the boy a stern look. “Is this true, Tomten?”

“You said I could claim expenses,” he replied sheepishly. He offered Verdandi the cut flowers, a clutch of pink and crimson Dahlias wrapped in recycled paper. “These are from the scouts, ma’am. I’m sorry I lost your robot dog.”

“Thank you for the flowers,” said Verdandi, taking them from him. “And the apology. Now say sorry to Detective Lee. You shouldn’t steal from friends. Or sell them stolen goods.”

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Tomten raised his gaze to Ostara's glare. "Sorry miss."

"I knew you were a secret agent," Ostara replied loftily. The lie sounded feeble even to her. "Good work, Tomten."

"Tomten, you and your friends will be working with Detective Lee in future," said Verdandi. Ostara looked at her in surprise. "She will be handling some very important cases for me and needs you as her eyes and ears. What do you say?"

"We're game," Tomten said brightly. "We get paid, right?"

"You want me for important cases?" asked Ostara, hardly believing her ears.

"You've earned my trust," said Verdandi. "Now work on those detective skills!"

"You'll be my Baker Street irregulars!" Ostara exclaimed to Tomten, who looked bemused. She held out her hand and he shook it gingerly. "My own little Christmas Elf, bringing me the best present ever! Administrator Verdandi, thank you for giving me this chance," she said, her eyes shining. "I won't let you down!"

Verdandi sighed. "I'm sure we've had this conversation before."

Ostara could not stop smiling. What had seemed like a disastrous trip to Bradbury Heights had ended with a promise of proper work, Verdandi's respect and Captain Nyx chastised, lying in agony and under arrest. It was a Christmas Eve to remember. She raised her wristpad to check the time, wondering if she could make it to the station to catch the last skybus home for Christmas.

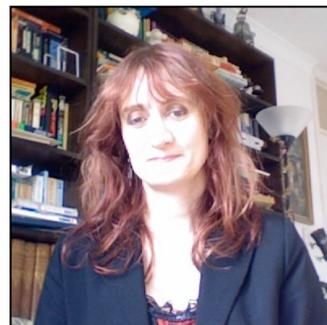
She frowned. "Tomten, did you steal my wristpad?"

"Piece of junk," the boy retorted, handing it back. "I'll get you a new one."

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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