

THE IVORY TOWER

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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CANIS MAJOR

WyrdStar

The Ivory Tower

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

A short story by
Steph Bennion

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THE IVORY TOWER

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

Civil war was raging on the moon of Yuanshi and Raja Surya has been brought to a lonely tower in the middle of nowhere for his safety. Worse still, caretaker Amashilama was making him do exercise.

But who was the mysterious stranger, lured by his terrible singing and bringing him gifts?

RAJA SURYA DECIDED HIS MOTHER HAD GONE MAD. He looked around the room in disgust, unimpressed by the spartan furniture and the old-fashioned holovid on the wall. Someone had strung cheap Christmas decorations around the room, making the scene more depressing still. Outside the window, the fat yellow crescent of the gas-giant planet Shennong hung ominously in the starry night, casting a sickly glow across the surrounding bamboo forest. High in a tower at a remote outpost on the far side of Yuanshi, Surya felt like he had taken two wrong turns past the middle of nowhere.

The famed and feared Maharani Uma, Surya's mother and leader of the Indian royalist rebellion, looked tired and vulnerable in her military fatigues. The dark-haired woman in a green uniform next to her was Amashilama, the stern lieutenant who had awaited their arrival. On the Maharani's right was the elderly Yaksha, the household matriarch at the Crystal Palace of Kubera, wearing her habitual blue saree. Guarding the balcony door were Corporal Namtar and Private Inari, human shields against possible sniper attacks. The Maharani had still not forgiven them for their part in a kidnap plot two months earlier.

"You'll be safe here with Yaksha," she insisted, fixing Surya with a pleading stare. "Que Qiao's last raid on Lanka nearly killed us all! I could not bear it, if you..."

"But they didn't," protested Surya, cutting off his mother's words. "All my things are at Kubera. My games machine! This isn't fair! And it's nearly Christmas," he added, trying a different tack. "I don't want to stay here all alone."

"Since when do we celebrate that commercialised orgy?" retorted Amashilama, ruffling his dark hair in a most irritating way. The moon of Yuanshi was predominantly Hindu, but the Christian festival was hard to

ignore on American servermoon broadcasts. “Your mother thinks only of you. She has enough on her plate without worrying about you getting hurt too.”

“I’ll be here to look after you,” Yaksha reassured him. “It’ll be an adventure!”

“If I may interject at this juncture,” said Namtar. “The young Raja...”

Maharani Uma silenced him with a glare, raising a smirk from Inari.

“Commander Kartikeya is convinced there is a Que Qiao Corporation spy at Kubera,” she told Surya. “Until we find the traitor, it’s safer for you here. You’ll be home for Makar Sankranti,” she added. “Your cyberclone will act as a decoy until your return.”

“You’re replacing me with that stupid robot?” exclaimed Surya. He had hoped to never see his creepy android double again. “I thought it was broken.”

“The future of Yuanshi rests upon your shoulders,” she told him. Smoothing his tousled locks, the Maharani frowned. “Your hair is getting long, young man! It’ll be a trip to the hairdressers first thing when we get you back to Lanka.”

His mother used the same severe tone to command her rebel officers. Realising her mind was set, Surya meekly went to the lever by the door. The tower was used for secret research and designed so access could only be granted from inside. The last resident scientist had moved to another part of the station just that morning, leaving Amashilama alone in the room waiting to lower the staircase for Maharani Uma’s entourage. The research centre was protected by anti-aircraft missile batteries, but its main defence was its location: deep within a bamboo plantation in the middle of Jangala, the untamed island continent on the Shennong side of Yuanshi. The top floor balcony was the only way in or out.

“This lever deploys the staircase,” said the Maharani. “You have to hold it down to keep them lowered. There is an intercom at the bottom for visitors. If it’s not Amashilama or myself, don’t lower the stairs. The door is bullet-proof glass, so keep it closed.”

Surya eyed the lever and frowned. “How do we leave?”

“We don’t,” Yaksha said firmly. “No one must know we’re here.”

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“I shall visit every day,” said Amashilama, looking disdainfully at the old woman.

Surya gazed around the room, then at his mother’s determined stare. He opened his mouth to protest one last time but it was no use. Maharani Uma, leader of Lanka’s royalist forces and commander-in-chief of the rebel army, always got her way.

“Fine,” he mumbled sulkily. “That holoivid better have all my programmes.”

“Come here and give me a hug,” said the Maharani, her tone softening.

Surya accepted his mother’s embrace. Amashilama watched from the balcony doorway, her stern features drawn into a curious tight smile.

* * *

The lever to lower the external staircase was a short rod protruding from a wall slot by the balcony door. Touching the handle switched the holoivid to security systems mode, which had camera views of every room and the stairway outside. Holding down the lever, Surya listened to the soft clunks as the stairs descended. Yaksha was grumpily directing Namtar to carry their luggage to the bunk room, who in turn had sent Inari onto the balcony to see if their presence had alerted enemy snipers.

“This sucks,” complained Surya. “I’ll be so bored!”

“You can call me anytime on holoivid,” his mother chided gently. “The connection is scrambled and can’t be traced. But can I ask you not to contact any of your friends? Promise me you will not tell anyone where you are.”

Holding the lever, Surya’s arm was starting to ache. “Yes, mother.”

“I ain’t been shot,” Inari called from the balcony, earning a snort of disappointment from Namtar. “We’re clear to leave.”

Maharani Uma, Amashilama and Namtar joined him on the balcony and with a wave of farewell they left. Yaksha watched them go, wrapped in darkness and the fading clunk of footsteps. The Maharani’s voice from the wall holoivid shook Surya from his gloom. The camera relayed a wide-angled view of her entourage at the bottom of the tower.

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“Surya? We’re down. You can let go of the lever.”

He released his grip, letting the handle spring back. He joined Yaksha on the balcony, where the rising staircase was already halfway up the tower, glinting in the golden light of Shennong. Maharani Uma gave a final wave, turned and led her party away.

“Don’t fret,” said Yaksha, patting Surya’s arm. “We won’t be here long.”

She bustled back inside to unpack. Surya remained on the balcony, staring into the night. After what seemed an age, the red and green navigation lights of his mother’s aircar rose from the far side of the station and faded into the distance. The noisy thuds from Yaksha in the bedroom somehow left him feeling more alone than ever.

Despondent, he returned inside and switched the holovid to his favourite channel. As the sound of animated superheroes filled the air, Surya went to the food molecularisor and scrolled through the menu. To his horror, there was no pizza, burgers, ice-cream or any of his favourite comfort foods. Either the Indian scientists who formerly used the tower had deleted all western foods on principle, or his mother was conspiring to keep him healthy.

“Not fair,” he grumbled. “I’ll starve to death!”

Yaksha was still busy unpacking. Sighing, Surya ordered samosas and chutney from the molecularisor and returned to the balcony. The laboratories still occupied by scientists were on the far side of the complex behind the tower and all he could see was a forest of bamboo, blanketed by the yellow glow of Shennong. The nearest human settlement was the remote town of Anjayaneya, fifty kilometres away. Staring into the cloying darkness, Surya suddenly spotted a glint of light, like the beam of a torch momentarily turned towards the tower. He stepped onto the balcony and looked down.

“Hello?” he called softly. “Is anyone out there?”

The plantation was silent and still. In the room behind him, a catchy advertising jingle burred from the holovid. Surya’s eyes remained on the forest, mentally reshaping the jingle around his rumbling stomach. On a whim, he tunelessly broke into song:

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“Give me pizza, I’m hungry as a horse!

“Lots of toppings and dipping sauce!

“Pizza, pizza, pretty pretty please!

“Pineapple, ham and lots of cheese!”

A soft ping and waft of something hot and spicy signalled that the molecularisor had fabricated his meal. With another sigh, Surya backed into the room to collect his supper, then remembered his mother’s instructions and pulled the glass door closed. He had only been here ten minutes and already he was hallucinating.

* * *

The moon of Yuanshi took five Terran days to orbit Shennong, during which it always kept the same face turned towards its gas giant parent. It was impossible for people to live by the rising and setting of a sun five times slower than on Earth, so human settlements kept to Indian Standard Time and used artificial light to shape their days. When Surya awoke after an uneasy night’s sleep, the gas giant’s sickly glow had intensified, bringing a false dawn to the long Yuanshi night. The window in the bunk room was splattered with rain. Surya gazed at the gaps between retreating storm clouds, searching for glimpses of ancient constellations and the unmoving Shennong, which had grown from a crescent to almost full while he slept.

The tower’s sleeping quarters were off the main room, furnished with bunk beds and storage cupboards, with a further door opposite the window leading to a small bathroom. Surya had been annoyed to learn there were no other bedrooms, forcing himself and Yaksha to share. The old woman was still asleep, snoring gently beneath a heap of bedding.

He could not be bothered to get washed and dressed. Wandering into the main living area, he switched on the holovid, filling the room with low-volume chatter. Across from the balcony door, empty workbenches bore lines of dust where the scientists’ computer equipment had been. There was another door in the corner of the room, though he could not remember what his mother said was there. Opening it, Surya grinned

with delight. The tiny room beyond contained what looked like a virtual-reality gaming console.

“Yaksha!” a voice suddenly snapped, making him jump. “Why aren’t you on watch?”

It was Amashilama. The holoivid had switched to a view of her glaring into the camera at the base of the tower. Surya blinked and brought up his cranium implant’s time display.

“Yaksha’s still in bed,” he replied, shuffling to the screen. “It’s not that late!”

Amashilama rolled her eyes. “I expected more from that lazy old fossil. Heavens above, look at the state of you! Raja Surya, tidy your hair and let down the stairs!”

Surya glumly pulled the lever. Using his other hand, he frantically smoothed his unruly locks. A minute or so later, Amashilama appeared on the other side of the glass balcony door, scowling and dripping wet. A hazy dome of ricocheting raindrops crowned the stick of her sonic-shield umbrella, which she was struggling to keep upright in the wind. Letting go of the lever, Surya opened the door.

“You’re still in your pyjamas!” Amashilama scolded, stepping into the room. “What would your mother say if she saw you?”

Surya shrugged. Switching off the umbrella, Amashilama leaned it against the wall and unpeeled her wet coat. The holoivid returned to its cartoon violence, replaying the superhero tropes of the night before. Yaksha appeared from the bunk room, dressed and looking spry.

“Good morning both,” she greeted. “Lieutenant, did you pick up my food order?”

“I didn’t have time,” snapped Amashilama. “Is the ’risor not working?”

“It only makes boring stuff,” complained Surya. “Everything’s got vegetables in it.”

“You have to eat healthily! I see you’ve found the gym.”

He gave her a blank look. Amashilama gestured to the tiny room on the far side of the living area and what he had taken to be a gaming machine. Surya’s heart sank.

“That’s a gym?” he asked forlornly.

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“A virtual-reality exercise machine!” she said brightly. “Row a canoe with krakens, cycle the canyons of Mars, run the New Delhi marathon! Doesn’t that sound fun?”

“More like hard work,” he muttered.

“That’s the point,” said Yaksha. “Stops you getting fat and lazy.”

“Well, you’d know about that,” retorted Amashilama.

“Yes,” Yaksha said wryly. “I’m looking at a prize specimen right now.”

Surya eyed her withering glare, having not realised that the two women did not get along. He stared dejectedly at the exercise machine. As heir to the throne of Yuanshi, he reckoned it was his choice whether the future Maharaja should be fit or fat. Yaksha turned her back on Amashilama and went to the molecularisor to prepare breakfast. Sighing, Surya retreated to the bunk room to get changed.

He returned fully dressed to find Yaksha still studiously ignoring their visitor. Amashilama stood near the holovid, running her nimble fingers along the unit’s projector frame. Hearing him enter, she hurriedly withdrew her hand and forced a smile. Her expression warned against questions.

“Is mother coming today?” Surya asked instead.

“Maybe tomorrow,” she said. “She’s very busy. There’s a war on, you know.”

“I know,” he grumbled. “That’s why we’re in this dump.”

“For your own protection,” interjected Yaksha, bringing him a bowl of cereal. “This place was good enough for your mother. Would you rather be in Lanka with the bombs?”

“Yes,” he said flatly. “And mother never stayed here. She would have said!”

“She doesn’t tell you everything,” remarked Amashilama.

“Your father sent your mother here when she was pregnant with you,” Yaksha told him. “Back then, this centre was experimenting with food crops. Did you see the spiky blue flowers at the bottom of the tower? That’s rampion, introduced from Europe. Your mother had a craving for the leaves. Taste like spinach, apparently.”

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“Rampion is also called rapunzel,” added Amashilama, eyeing Surya oddly. “Like the pathetic princess in the fairytale. She needed a haircut too.”

“Is that why father sent mother here?” asked Surya, confused. “To eat salad?”

“Don’t be silly!” retorted Yaksha. “Like you, she needed somewhere safe. Priest Taranis’ saboteurs had just raided the corporation’s space station and blown it to pieces. Que Qiao sent wave after wave of bombers to Lanka in revenge. It was a dangerous time.”

“Taranis was crazy,” Surya said sagely. Two months before, he and his friends had cast the priest into space with his horrible clone creations, thwarting his attempt to usurp Maharani Uma and seize power on Yuanshi. “I bet Father was angry.”

“The Maharaja and Taranis were friends,” Yaksha reminded him. “Que Qiao wanted rid of them both and now they’re gone. Why do you think your mother is so worried?”

“I can look after myself,” he mumbled.

“You can’t even get up in the morning and brush your hair,” chastised Amashilama. “Look at you, born into Yuanshi royalty and watching children’s cartoons!”

“Leave the boy be,” snapped Yaksha. “He’s only thirteen.”

Scowling, Surya reached into his mind’s eye, found his cranium implant application for the holoivid and switched it off. A sudden silence dropped like a shroud.

“Eat your breakfast,” said Amashilama. Surya looked in disgust at the bowl of dried fruit and cereal grains Yaksha had brought from the molecurisor. “Then it’s time for some exercise. Let’s see what the machine has to offer, shall we?”

* * *

Amashilama left a couple of hours later, by which time Surya was heartily sick of the virtual-reality gym. Yaksha sat at one of the abandoned workbenches, scrutinising reports on her touch-screen slate and messaging palace officials back at Kubera. Exhausted, Surya retreated to the sofa

and dropped into its embrace, dislodging the patterned fabric hiding the tatty cushions beneath. He spent the rest of the day watching holovids, flicking from one programme to another in search of something to relieve his boredom. It seemed the more channels they had, the less there was worth watching.

Amashilama's jibe about cartoons had stung. Grown-ups liked to watch the news. Surya forced himself to sit through the latest headlines, which only depressed him more. He and his mother had recently returned to Yuanshi after nine years of exile, ready to rejoin the people fighting for independence against the ruling Que Qiao Corporation. Reporters were saying their return had made the civil war worse. Perturbed, Surya switched channels and stumbled upon the media review show Popcornucopia!, whose presenter was discussing a big-budget holovid movie about Yuanshi. The film trailer depicted his mother's royalist forces as terrorists, hunted by square-jawed heroes and suave secret agents. Surya scowled.

"Yaksha?" he asked, disturbing the old woman's work. "Are we the baddies?"

"Of course not!" she retorted. "We just want to make our own laws and not let the corporation rule our lives. Que Qiao thinks Priest Taranis' followers are violent and evil."

Surya giggled. "Dhusarians? They run away from fights!"

"People use religion to separate the world into us and them," said Yaksha. "I'm no fan of Taranis, but his followers are no worse than others. Except when his Church decreed that having fun was distracting us from 'being at one with the greys'," she muttered.

"They call us fascists. What does that mean?"

"They're the ones who started the war! Where did you hear that?!"

Surya switched back to the news channel. An earnest professor was talking about the emblem of the Dhusarian Church, a six-pointed star of two overlapping triangles around a central spiral. Some versions replaced the swirl with a bent-armed cross known as a swastika. The professor was explaining that this had been used by fascists in Europe three centuries before, evil warriors who hated everyone else and wanted to conquer Earth.

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“They’re talking rubbish,” scoffed Yaksha. “These so-called experts know nothing!”

Surya smiled. Even he knew the crooked cross was an ancient Hindu symbol. Sighing, Yaksha returned to her slate. Surya idly flicked channels and was soon back to watching superhero cartoons. There at least the fight between good and evil was easy to understand.

* * *

The day dragged on. Outside, the rain had finally stopped. Dotted by the tiny shadow of Yuanshi, Shennong was fully lit, bathing the forest in an amber sheen. Yaksha yawned and stretched wearily, disturbing Surya who had forgotten she was there.

“Time for bed,” she declared. “Surya, don’t stay up watching rubbish.”

“I won’t,” he promised. “I’ll find something good eventually.”

“Very funny.” Rising from her chair, she made her way to the bunk room door. “Try to be dressed in the morning for when that damn woman returns.”

The door clicked shut behind her. Surya settled down to watch his cartoons. After a while he sneakily brought up the security systems menu, flicked through the different views and found the camera for the bunk room. Yaksha was in bed, snoring gently.

Surya was not in the least bit tired. Bored, he went to the food molecularisor and scrolled through the menu, dispirited by all the healthy food on offer. The soft tones of someone suddenly speaking broke from the wall holoivid, startling him.

“Hey there, stranger,” came an unfamiliar voice. “Did someone order a pizza?”

Surya froze. It was a woman who spoke, but not his mother or Amashilama. Approaching the holoivid, he brought up the view outside the tower. A hooded figure stood by the intercom, holding a flat square box before her. Prickles of fear ran down Surya’s neck.

“Pizza?” he asked. “For me?”

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“Special delivery!” the woman replied gaily. She sounded young. “Lower the stairs and I’ll bring it up. It’s real pineapple, but I think the ham is fake,” she added.

His mouth started salivating. “I’m not allowed to let anyone in,” he said.

“What if I left the box on the steps? It’s a shame to let it go to waste.”

Surya cautiously went to the balcony door and looked down through the glass. The cloaked figure was just visible alone in the dark. The thought of the pizza she carried was too much. He figured that as long as the door was locked there was no harm in lowering the stairs. Securing the door, he returned to the intercom.

“Okay,” he agreed. “Just the box.”

He pulled the lever, his eyes on the screen. When the stairs reached the bottom, the figure placed the box on the bottom step and retreated. Surya released the lever and pressed his face against the door glass. The stranger was true to her word. As the staircase returned to the top, all that came with it was the square box.

Surya cautiously unlocked the door, stepped onto the balcony and picked up his delivery. The box, bearing a stupid ‘SPACE INVADER PIZZA’ logo and the address of a restaurant in Anjayaneyya, was warm to the touch and gave off a delicious smell. Hurrying inside, he locked the door and opened his prize. The pineapple and fake ham pizza, deep in melted cheese, was a glorious sight to behold. Surya scurried to the holovid.

“Thank you!” he said, keeping his voice low. “This looks...”

His mysterious benefactor had vanished into the dark. Shrugging, Surya took the box to the couch and settled in front of the holovid. It took just one slice for him to decide the pizza was the best thing he had ever tasted in his life.

* * *

Surya never made it to the bunk room and fell asleep on the sofa. Strange murmurs infiltrated his dreams; distant shouts, the whine of aircar

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turbines, the thud of boots. When he woke several hours later, lethargic from a stomach full of pizza, a glimmer of dawn lay upon the eastern horizon. The sky was clear, the mighty Shennong waning once more. The holovid, having switched itself off, came back to life with the morning's news headlines.

Yaksha would soon be rising. Surya rubbed his eyes, scrambled from the sofa and trod on the forgotten pizza container. The box was perforated, allowing a circular disc to be removed and popped into shape to make a crude science-fiction flying saucer. With nothing better to do, Surya idly crafted the cardboard toy and considered his handiwork.

"Space invader pizza," he intoned solemnly. "Take me to your larder!"

Raising the cardboard saucer, he experimentally spun it across the room and cringed as it hit the wall with a thud. Surya hurriedly retrieved the disc and shoved it back into the pizza box. There was a slip of paper inside he had not noticed the night before. Sticking it into his pocket, he kicked the empty box and flying saucer under the couch. Neither Yaksha nor Amashilama would be pleased to learn of last night's visitor.

Surya opened the balcony door and went outside. On the holovid, an annoying advertisement for the latest laser toothbrush serenaded him in song. Surya stared at the endless bamboo forest, silently composing his own words to the melody. With no sense of pitch or melody, he broke into song:

*"Here I am, up in the sky,
"I'm so bored that I could cry,
"The 'risor's rubbish, why oh why,
"I want some fries and apple pie!"*

A glimpse of movement made him pause. Startled, he scrutinised the overgrown garden surrounding the research centre, then the shadows of the bamboo plantation. It would be just his luck if a scientist from the research centre had been passing and heard his terrible singing. Or maybe it was a thunderworm, driven from the thick mulch of the forest by yesterday's rain. He hated that he could not leave the tower and explore.

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A sudden shriek of a blood yerker broke the hush. Then he saw it, a native bat-like creature flittering above the forest canopy. Surya watched it fly away and sighed, feeling more homesick than ever. He wished he could sprout wings and follow.

* * *

Yaksha rose shortly afterwards. The holo-vid was on but muted, silently showing animated cartoon bravery. The open balcony door filled the room with the sweet scents and sounds of the forest.

“You weren’t in bed,” Yaksha said accusingly. “Did you stay up all night?”

“I fell asleep on the sofa,” confessed Surya, wondering what else the old woman had noticed. “But look! I’m up and dressed!”

“Go take a shower,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Amashilama will be here soon.”

Surya glanced towards the exercise machine, wondering if there was a way to disconnect the treadmill and download some bloodthirsty games before his punisher arrived. Grumbling, he retreated to the bunk room to freshen up.

Amashilama arrived before he could sabotage the gym. Standing by the lever, Surya perfected his look of innocence as the woman made her way up the stairs.

“Your hair is a disgrace,” she chastised him as she stepped through the door. “Your father’s hair was always so short and neat.”

“He wore hats,” argued Surya, thinking of the photos his mother had kept. He barely remembered his father, who had been assassinated by Que Qiao agents when he himself had been just four years old. “You and Yaksha have long hair. Why can’t I?”

“You’re a prince,” said Yaksha. “You have the power to set trends.”

“Would you put hairdressers in Lanka out of business?” asked Amashilama.

The old woman frowned. “That’s not what I meant. If Surya wants...”

“Wants what? To look like a grubby pop musician?”

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“Are you saying you know better than the heir to the throne?” asked Yaksha.

“No time to discuss that now,” retorted Amashilama, gently guiding Surya to the VR machine. “Let’s see you do those exercises I showed you!”

Surya groaned. It was going to be a long morning.

* * *

It was a day of twilight. Yuanshi continued its tidally locked orbit of Shennong, slowly brightening Jangala’s eastern horizon as the sun edged closer to dawn. Surya’s session on the exercise equipment roused his sluggish spirits, but once Amashilama left he was soon back to slouching on the sofa, watching holovids and yawning again. He hated twilight days. By the time Epsilon Eridani rose, the clock would be telling him it was time for bed.

Yaksha seemed particularly grouchy while Amashilama was around, eyeing her with suspicion when she thought no one else was looking. The elderly matriarch was spending more time than ever on her slate, swapping messages with people back in Lanka. Her frown grew deeper after every conversation.

“What’s wrong?” asked Surya. An urgent holovid meeting had etched a grimace onto Yaksha’s face that seemed in no rush to fade. “Has Lanka been bombed again?”

“Your mother is fine,” she reassured him. “Que Qiao is reinforcing its garrison at the Anjayaneya plantations. Two dozen extra troops with gunship support, out there on the other side of the forest. Your mother’s worried that we’re not safe here anymore.”

Surya grabbed the sudden spark of hope. “Are we going home?”

Yaksha smiled wryly and shook her head. “We’re staying put for now. Kartikeya doesn’t think the corporation’s troop movements are anything to do with us.”

Surya sighed. Commander Kartikeya, who should have been sacked after sabotaging the peace conference two months ago, only managed to stay second in command because his rival royalist officers had been

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captured or killed. Catching the boy's look, Yaksha offered a smile of sympathy and went back to her slate.

Discomforted, Surya settled down to watch the movie *Space Pirates of the Galilean*, interspersed with glares at the molecularisor for its inability to serve his favourite snacks. Yaksha joined him for a while on the sofa, asked a few inane questions about the film's nonsensical plot, then admitted defeat and declared she was retiring to bed.

Surya watched the rest of the movie, flicked through the channels and found a seasonal comedy special which was nowhere as funny as the network guide review. He was just contemplating going to bed himself when the holovid suddenly switched to the security systems screen. The camera at the base of the tower showed a shadowy figure standing in the gloom. The visitor carried what looked like a shopping bag.

"Hey there, my prince," called a familiar voice. "I've an early Christmas present for you! Fries and apple pie, as requested."

Surya slid from the sofa and hurried to the screen. The mysterious young woman lowered the hood of her cloak, revealing pale features, piercing green eyes and a mass of curly brown hair. She was definitely no one he should be talking to.

"Prince?" he asked hesitantly, squinting at the image. "You know who I am?"

"I do now. I saw your face on the intercom last time I was here."

Surya frowned. "I didn't ask for anything," he said. "Who are you?"

"A space knight of templar," she said mysteriously. "I write songs too! There are easier ways to order food, you know."

"Fries and apple pie?"

"Fresh from an all-night café in Anjayaneya. All bagged up and still warm."

"The pizza was nice," admitted Surya. "But you can't come in."

"Hark at Mister High-and-Mighty in his ivory tower! Did you read my note?"

Miffed at her reaction, he remembered the slip of paper from the pizza box. Withdrawing the note from his pocket, Surya stared at the short message.

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“Beware your mouse leaper’,” he read. “She’s nit to be tested’. What?”

“Housekeeper!” the young woman snapped irritably. “Not to be trusted. My handwriting’s not that bad! Do you want what I’ve brought or not?”

“Are you alone?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m alone. And ready to eat this myself if you don’t want it! What is it your visitor says? Raja Surya, tidy your hair and let down the stairs!”

Surya’s stomach rumbled. He nervously checked the bunk room camera feed and saw Yaksha snoring away in bed. The memory of pizza pushed aside his doubts. He switched the view back to the woman outside, scuttled to the wall lever and pulled it down.

“I’m lowering them now,” he called, trying to whisper. “Put the food on there.”

“I don’t mind bringing it up myself,” she suggested hopefully.

“No!” hissed Surya. “Yaksha’s asleep in the next room!”

“Maybe next time,” said the woman, giving a little laugh. Surya liked the sound of her voice. “I’m only trying to look out for you, my prince.”

The stairs reached the ground. On holovid, Surya watched the woman move forward, place the bag on the bottom step and retreat. He released the lever and opened the balcony door. The first orange sliver of light that was Epsilon Eridani peeked above the eastern horizon, colouring the mist clinging to the canopy of bamboo.

The stairs clunked to a halt. Surya crept onto the balcony, shivering in the cold air. Down below, his visitor stood in the open, looking up at the tower. As he picked up the bag the smell of apple pie hit his nostrils, making him feel faint with hunger. Not waiting to go back inside, he pulled out the carton of fries and shovelled a handful of the sweet potato delights into his mouth. The taste was exquisite.

“Thank you!” he called softly. “They’re...”

His words faltered into silence. The woman had left as mysteriously as she came.

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* * *

Surya ate the fries and apple pie on the balcony, enjoying the spectre of Epsilon Eridani's slow dawn. There was another handwritten note hidden in the foil pie tray, which this time he took time to read. Pursing his lips, he frowned.

“Beware your housekeeper’,” he read. “I think she’s a Que Qiao spy’.”

‘Housekeeper’ had to mean Amashilama. Yaksha had been a loyal adviser to Surya’s mother for as long as he could remember. Collecting the bag and empty food packaging, he went inside and stuffed the evidence of his clandestine delivery under the couch with the pizza box and cardboard flying saucer. He should have been in bed hours ago.

He crept to his bunk and curled up to sleep, comforted by the lingering taste of apple pie. Yet it was the memory of the mysterious woman standing below, a friendly face with nice curly hair, which kept the smile on his lips as he slipped into his dreams.

* * *

He woke to the sound of Yaksha angrily stomping around the living room next door. A quick mental jab to bring up his implant’s time display confirmed he had overslept. It was Christmas Eve, not that it meant anything stuck in the tower.

With a groan, Surya rolled from his bunk and shuffled meekly from the room to face the old woman’s wrath. He assumed her temper was because she had found what was hidden beneath the sofa. It took him by surprise to find he was wrong.

“The network’s gone down,” Yaksha said irritably, waving her touch-screen slate. “No holoivid, no comms, nothing! I’m supposed to be calling your mother in half an hour.”

“No holoivid?” asked Surya, perturbed. Things were suddenly looking bleak.

“Afraid not. I’ll have to report it to the research centre. Damn nuisance!”

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“Out there? But...”

“You stay here,” said Yaksha. “Lower the stairs, would you?”

Apprehensive, Surya went to the lever and pulled. The holoivid, flashing a ‘network failure’ message, switched to the security systems screen. Yaksha slipped on her boots and jacket, opened the balcony door and took in the brightening dawn. It struck Surya that not once had they seen any sign of the scientists supposedly working in the rest of the complex. He heard a clunk as the stairway settled into place.

“I’ll be back before Amashilama arrives,” promised Yaksha. “She’ll moan if she finds the network’s down, even more so if she learns I left the tower.”

Surya nodded glumly, dreading the possibility of facing Amashilama alone. Holding the lever, he watched as Yaksha stepped onto the balcony and started down the stairs. After what seemed an age, she appeared on screen, pulling a face at the camera below.

“Back soon,” she called through the holoivid. “Don’t talk to strangers!”

Releasing the lever, Surya went onto the balcony. Down below, Yaksha was scurrying away towards the landing pad and research station’s main entrance. Now there was a bit of daylight, he could see the tiny blue flowers of rapunzel growing around the tower. Sighing, he returned to the sofa, tried to change the holoivid channel and stared morosely at the flashing ‘network failure’ warning. He was not sure if his heart could sink any lower.

* * *

Yaksha had still not returned by the time Amashilama arrived to torment Surya on the exercise machine. Bored, he was experimenting with bizarre concoctions from the food molecursor when she appeared on holoivid, staring sternly into the camera.

“Raja Surya!” she snapped. “Tidy your hair and let down the stairs!”

Scowling, he stomped to the lever and pulled. With his free hand, he messed up his unruly locks in protest, then thought better of it and

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frantically smoothed his hair. By the time Amashilama arrived on the balcony he was more flustered than ever.

“Don’t you own a hairbrush?” she chastised him, stepping into the room. “You’re still in your night clothes! You’re a prince of the realm, not an invalid!”

“Yaksha’s not here,” said Surya, hoping to deflect the conversation. “We’ve lost our network connection so she went for help.”

“Stupid woman’s probably got lost,” Amashilama said dismissively. “Have you put on weight? You’re getting a bit of a belly, young man. I must check the ’risor settings.”

Her eyes had found the mess he had made with the molecularisor. It took all of Surya’s will not to look at the sofa and the take-away packaging stuffed beneath. Perturbed by her tone, he kept quiet as Amashilama busied herself collecting empty food bowls and folding his discarded clothes. Surya slunk to the bunk room to get changed.

The exercise session on the VR machine went as badly as ever. Yaksha had still not returned by the time he finished. After everything Surya’s mother had done to bring him to this remote outpost, Amashilama seemed oddly unbothered about Yaksha’s absence and got ready to leave as usual, evidently at ease with leaving him in the tower all alone. Worn out by exercise, Surya was in no mood to ask her to stay. Yet as he held down the lever, it dawned on him that until someone returned, there was no one to lower the stairs for himself. He had become a prisoner like in a fairytale, a prince trapped in a tower.

* * *

The day crawled by slower than an ailing thunderworm. With no holovid to watch, Surya idled away the hours on the balcony, watching Epsilon Eridani slowly clear the horizon. The half-lit gas giant Shennong remained high in the sky, its distinctive bands of cream and rusty red muted by the brightening sky.

A shimmering shape rose from the bamboo plantation. Glistening all colours of the spectrum, an ethereal sphere trailing tentacles floated up through the mist. It was a rainbow cloud surfer, a huge jellyfish-like

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creature unique to Yuanshi, which used a hydrogen-filled sac to fly. Surya had never before seen one for real. Disquieted, for some reason his brain decided an appropriate reaction was to concoct a song:

*“Rainbow cloud surfer, will you fly to me?
“Bring fried chicken, I’m hungry as could be...”*

He stopped singing, startled by a movement at the edge of the bamboo plantation. A familiar cloaked figure stepped into the open, looked up and waved.

“I’m all alone,” called Surya, waving back. “No need to hide!”

The young woman paused, then trotted across the clearing to the tower. Inside the room, the holo vid security screen activated as she approached the intercom.

“Merry Christmas, my prince,” she greeted. “What happened to your chaperone?”

“She went to the research station to get help,” said Surya, somewhat distracted. The face caught on camera was beautiful. “We’ve lost our network link.”

“The research station?”

“The scientists in the rest of the building. We’ve no holo vid or anything!”

“My prince, there’s no one there. They left two days ago.”

Surya’s eyes went wide. “They’ve gone?!”

“Troopers came and cleared the building,” she replied, frowning. “Can I come up? This conversion would be a lot easier face to face.”

“I’m not allowed to let in strangers. I don’t even know your name!”

The woman hesitated. “It’s Carya,” she told him. “Look, it’s confession time. I’m on a mission of sorts, hunting for someone you might know. I’ve been bribing you with food so you’ll talk to me. But maybe you need my help more than I need yours.”

Surya frowned. He was torn between Yaksha’s stern instructions and a fear of being trapped in the tower alone. A tingle of anticipation urged him to trust his instincts.

“Okay,” he said, hoping he was making the right decision. “You can come up.”

“Excellent! Raja Surya, tidy your hair and let down the stairs!”

She was teasing him with Amashilama’s habitual taunt. Surya went to the lever and pulled. Moments later, the stairs clunked to a halt, then gave way to the rapid thud of ascending boots. He realised too late the balcony door was still wide open. If she turned out to be an assassin, someone with his stupidity deserved to die.

Carya reached the balcony. Surya whimpered and let go of the lever. She was younger than he expected, perhaps still in her teens and just a few years older than himself. Her long hooded coat, matt black and flared from the waist down, stopped just short of her heavy boots. Her glorious radiant smile filled the room. Surya was instantly smitten.

“Hello Carya,” he said, feeling unexpectedly bashful. “I’m Surya.”

“I know,” she replied, returning his grin. “The prince in his ivory tower.”

Reaching into a concealed pocket, she withdrew a palm-sized controller and pressed a switch. With a beep, the camera feed on the wall holoivid vanished in white static.

“Ivory tower?” he asked, frowning.

“Detached from reality,” said Carya, watching his reaction. “Hidden away safe and sound while your mother’s revolutionaries and Que Qiao throw bombs at each other.”

She pushed aside her coat and pocketed the device. Surya was startled to see she wore a powered exoskeleton around her waist and legs, a rare sight on Yuanshi where gravity was quarter that of Earth. Then he saw her holstered pistol, an odd-looking device with a small mesh dish at the end of its stubby barrel. It was a stun gun, non-lethal but still capable of delivering a powerful punch at close quarters.

“Que Qiao started this war,” said Surya. “They want to control our lives!”

“There’s two sides to every story,” she pointed out. “They built your cities, made the moon habitable and gave your people jobs. Maybe they think you’re being ungrateful.”

“Where’s Yaksha?” he demanded, annoyed. Carya gave him a questioning look. “The old woman staying here with me. She was wearing a blue saree. Have you seen her?”

“No, I haven’t. Did you read my second note?” she asked. “The other woman, the one who comes every day, reminded me of a horrible prison guard who I, well... that doesn’t matter. Anyway, I followed her. She’s been visiting the military garrison at the exobiology plantations. There’s loads more troops there now.”

“Amashilama’s been talking to Que Qiao?!” exclaimed Surya, his mind whirling. “She’s horrible. She makes me do exercise!”

Carya smiled. “Exercise?”

“On that,” he said, pointing to the gym machine. “It’s boring and it hurts.”

“Keeping fit is no bad thing,” she pointed out.

“Amashilama said I was getting fat! I like you bringing me pizza and fries and apple pie,” he added hurriedly, not wanting to jeopardise future treats. “Is that your job?”

Carya laughed, a playful joyous sound that sent fresh tingles across his skin. Smiling, she leaned nonchalantly against the door frame, letting her cloak to fall open. Beneath her exoskeleton, she wore a figure-hugging black combat suit, a sight which caused his heart to do triple jumps. Shuffling to the sofa, Surya sat down and hurriedly crossed his legs.

“No,” she said, smiling wryly. “I’m just a roaming minstrel, out to right wrongs. You’re a very important young man, Raja Surya. I heard the speech you and that girl gave at the peace conference. Governor Jaggarneth and his cronies didn’t like it one bit.”

Surya beamed. “My speech? With Ravana?”

“Is that really her name? Poor girl. The point is, the people of Yuanshi look up to you. One day you might be making decisions over their lives. Are you ready to do what’s right?”

“Is Amashilama here to...?” began Surya, then hesitated, scared of acknowledging that Que Qiao might want him out of the way. He remembered Carya’s earlier remark. “You said you were looking for someone. I’d like to help.”

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Carya paused. “Not all spies are bad,” she said mysteriously. “I’m looking for another, who we think is undercover at Kubera Palace. Here, I’ll show you.”

She pushed back her coat sleeve, tapped the screen of her wristpad and showed Surya a profile picture of a stern, red-haired woman. Surya frowned, then shrugged.

“What about Yaksha?” he pleaded. “Will you wait until she comes back?”

“Your mother would have me shot,” she said wryly, though did not seem overly concerned. “Yaksha will turn up. I’ll see if I can find out where she’s gone.”

Surya nodded, captivated by her smile. Carya was a superhero made real, a knight in tight clothing rescuing princes in distress. He barely knew his mysterious angel but suddenly she was the most important person in the world. A tingling sensation ran over his skin.

“I love you,” he blurted out. “Will you marry me?”

“No,” she said firmly. “You’re far too young and I’m no princess.”

She returned to the door and stepped onto the balcony. Feeling embarrassed, Surya went to the lever and pulled. Carya withdrew the jamming device from her pocket and pressed the switch, restoring the camera view.

“You’ll be back, won’t you?” asked Surya.

“How could I leave you alone on Christmas Day?” she teased. “But keep an eye on Amashilama. Watch her like a hawk!”

Surya nodded. Carya trotted down the stairs, paused to wave into the camera at the bottom and retreated. By the time he released the lever and hastened onto the balcony, she was nowhere in sight. Surya stared dejectedly across the brightening bamboo forest. Now she was gone, he felt more alone than ever.

* * *

The sun continued to rise, casting a golden glow across the bamboo plantation. Surya was so bored he spent an hour exercising on the VR gym, but with no network connection there was not even the option of

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competing remotely against other users to make things less dull. Still there was no sign of Yaksha. When the room's automatic systems began to darken the window glass to simulate evening, Surya admitted defeat and went to bed. He slept fitfully, twitching at every tiny sound from the forest outside.

Surya overslept. As the clocks reached ten o'clock the next morning, he was rudely awakened by a voice bellowing from the living room. Groaning, he threw back his sheets and staggered from the bunk room. He was greeted by a blaze of bright sunshine at the windows and Amashilama's stern glare on holoivid.

"Raja Surya!" she called, sounding annoyed. "Tidy your hair and let down the stairs!"

"I'm a prince!" he muttered under his breath, stomping to the lever. "I should be the one telling people what to do."

"I heard that!" she snapped. "Watch your mouth, young man!"

Surya pulled a face, then remembered there was a camera on him too. Holding down the lever, he tried to picture what would happen if he let go before Amashilama reached the top. After what seemed an age, she arrived breathlessly on the balcony. Surya released the handle a moment too soon, forcing her to hurriedly jump from the last step as the staircase began to rise once more. He deliberately took his time unlocking the balcony door.

"Be careful!" Amashilama scolded. "I almost fell!"

"My arm was hurting," protested Surya. "You take so long to climb up. Not like..."

He stopped himself just in time. Amashilama stepped into the room, lowered the bag she carried to the floor and gave him a glare dripping with suspicion. Surya gulped.

"Like who?" she asked slowly.

"Superheroes?" he suggested, gesturing to the silent holoivid. "Where's Yaksha?" he asked, valiantly trying to change the subject. "She should be back by now."

"Don't play games with me, young man! Who else has been here?"

"No one!"

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The woman's scowl intensified. Apprehensive, Surya watched her stalk around the room, her eyes scrutinising every square centimetre for something amiss. Amashilama paused before the sofa and stared suspiciously at the dark space beneath. Surya fidgeted nervously as she knelt down and pulled out the discarded pizza box and cardboard saucer.

"What's this?" she demanded. "Where did you get it?"

"I've never seen it before in my life!"

"Don't lie to me!" growled Amashilama. "Who brought this here?!"

Surya sighed. "It was delivered," he said meekly, hoping a half-truth would suffice. "I wouldn't let her bring it up so she left it on the stairs."

"You had a pizza delivered?"

"Err... yes," he said.

"How?" she asked, regarding him slyly. "What's the address of this tower?"

"It's, err..." began Surya, feeling his story begin to unravel. "They use drones," he said brightly. "I stood on the balcony and waved! How else would it get here?"

"What nonsense," retorted Amashilama. Leaving the pizza packaging on the floor, she went to the holovid and prodded the security system menu. "Let's see what the camera shows, shall we? Here we are, main living quarters, last twenty-four hours."

Surya's heart sank. Fast-forwarding through the recording, Amashilama soon found Carya's arrival on the balcony. She watched stony-faced as the mysterious stranger produced the jamming device, whereupon the footage disappeared in static. Amashilama cursed and skipped forward to where the picture became clear again, just as Surya's visitor was leaving the tower. The camera had not managed to get a clear view of Carya's face.

"Pizza delivery girl," Surya said sullenly.

"With a security camera jammer? Who is she really?"

"I don't know," he replied, which was not entirely a lie. "She heard me singing and brought me food. She offered to help look for Yaksha."

Amashilama glared at the image on the screen. "Will she be back?"

Surya shrugged, then nodded.

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“In that case, there’s only one thing for it,” declared Amashilama. “I’m staying here until she returns. I want to see who this mysterious pizza sneak really is!”

* * *

With his mind elsewhere and no holovid programmes to remind him, Surya had forgotten it was Christmas Day. The festival was popular in Yuanshi’s main spaceport city of Ayodhya and other settlements run by Que Qiao, but not generally observed in the moon’s Hindu royalist enclaves like Lanka. Amashilama was nevertheless determined to bring festive cheer to the tower. She gestured to Surya to open the bag she had brought.

“Put those up,” she told him. “This room’s like a morgue!”

Surya solemnly emptied the bag. It was packed with strings of tinsel, fairy lights and gaudy ornaments, glistening like fake jewels snatched by an unlucky thief. Sighing, he got to work adding them to the poor excuse for decorations gathering dust around the room.

The atmosphere became more tense as the day progressed. Amashilama never strayed far from the balcony door, keeping watch for Carya’s return. Surya became so nervous of her moody presence that when she suggested he spend an hour or two on the exercise machine, he dutifully went to the VR gym without complaint. Immersing himself in the rowing simulator, he drifted down a virtual River Ganges, making little effort to exercise.

Christmas Day was the worst Surya could remember. The clocks slowly crept into evening, the windows darkening once once. Outside the open balcony door, Epsilon Eridani was near its peak, partly eclipsed beneath the wafer-thin crescent of Shennong. Abandoning the virtual gym, Surya sat morosely on the sofa, wondering if it was too early to go to bed. Amashilama’s scowl continued to deepen, increasingly frustrated at Carya’s failure to show. Just then, she cursed and drew back from the door. Startled, Surya saw her pull a small pistol from a concealed holster. It was a deadly plasma weapon like those issued to special agents, far more sinister than Carya’s stun gun.

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“She’s coming!” hissed Amashilama. “Invite her inside and say you’re alone.”

Surya looked warily at her pistol and nodded sullenly. Amashilama hastened to the bunk room and pulled the door closed, leaving a small gap. Surya went to the wall lever and stared mournfully at the holoivid screen. Carya was waiting at the intercom below.

“My prince, I have returned,” she called. “Has Yaksha come back?”

“No,” Surya replied in a dull monotone, trying to ignore Amashilama glaring from the bunk room. “I’m alone and lonesome, here all on my own.”

“Don’t overdo it!” growled Amashilama.

“I wouldn’t want to leave you without friends on Christmas Day,” she said solemnly. Carya’s eyes darted to Surya’s surroundings on the holoivid link and she smiled wryly. “Ah, I see. Lower the stairs, my prince!”

Surya pulled the lever. The staircase began to descend, adding a muted clunking to the anxious thudding inside his chest. Carya hit the steps the instant they neared the ground, her boots ringing a rapid staccato on steel. In no time at all she was on the balcony, peering anxiously through the open door. She had drawn her stun gun.

Catching Amashilama’s glare, Surya reluctantly released the lever, cutting off any escape. Carya stepped inside and stared levelly towards the bunk room. Amashilama swung open the door and stepped forward, her pistol aimed at the young women.

“Merry Christmas,” said Carya, who did not flinch. “I see you already have a visitor, my prince. Did I mention that Santa knows who’s been bad and good?”

“Drop your weapon!” snarled Amashilama. A mean look flashed in her eyes. “Now!”

Carya lowered her stun gun to the floor and slowly opened her coat to show she had no concealed weapons. Surya scurried to the other side of the sofa, dropped down to hide and yelped as his knee found a sharp corner of the discarded pizza box. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he peered over the top of the couch.

“Who are you?” demanded Amashilama, sneering nastily. “What’s with the fancy exoskeleton? Special operations kit?”

“My legs don’t work,” Carya said simply. “Childhood accident, no concern of yours. What’s your story? I saw you with Que Qiao troops at the plantations. Hardly fitting for someone supposedly fighting for the royalist cause.”

“You saw nothing! Who do you work for?”

“I’m between gigs at the moment. The prince seemed lonely so I dropped by.”

“We have ways of learning the truth,” threatened Amashilama. “Messy, painful ways. Maybe I should call the palace guard and have you thrown in jail.”

“You do that. I’ve lots to tell them. I’ve been following you for a while.”

Amashilama responded with a snort. Keeping her weapon trained on Carya, she went to the holoovid, reached to the top of the projector frame and removed a hidden device. The network failure warning promptly cleared. Surya stared glumly as the entertainment channel he had been watching lit up the screen. A knight in armour was battling a bear and losing badly. It was the Christmas edition of Gods of Avalon, the season premier for the next batch of witless contestants who thought fighting robot beasts in a fake fantasy world was a good way to become famous. It was one of his favourite shows.

“You’re no stranger to signal jammers,” said Amashilama, pocketing the device. “I remotely triggered this one yesterday morning. Yaksha was getting suspicious so I cut her off from the Maharani. Now the stupid woman has left the young Raja exposed.”

“I’m not!” objected Surya. “I got dressed this morning!”

“You sold him out,” Carya challenged her. “I saw Que Qiao troopers heading this way. What’s the plan? Hold the boy hostage until his mother surrenders?”

Surya’s eyes went wide. Still behind the sofa, he shifted position and brought his other knee down on the corner of the pizza box, bringing forth a fresh stab of pain. Scowling, he pushed the packaging away, dislodging the cardboard flying saucer and stale bits of uneaten pizza crust. On the holoovid, the Gods of Avalon contestant threw aside her broken sword and spun her circular shield at the robot bear, knocking it

off balance. Suddenly inspired, Surya surreptitiously reached for the cardboard saucer on the floor.

“You talk too much,” growled Amashilama, glaring at Carya. Wagging her gun, she gestured to the balcony door. “Let’s go for a walk, shall we? Surya, lower the stairs.”

“No, I won’t!” retorted Surya, peering out from behind the sofa. He flashed Carya a sly smile worthy of a movie superhero and was a bit put out by the confused stare he got in return. “I’m going to call mother and tell on you!”

“Do as you’re told, young man!” snapped Amashilama. “Go to the lever!”

Surya stood up. With a sudden dramatic flourish, he raised the cardboard flying saucer and launched it whirling across the room. The spinning disc hit Amashilama square in the forehead, causing her to shriek in surprise. Carya dropped into a crouch, grabbed her stun gun and fired. Surya gasped in shock as Amashilama fell back against the wall and slid to the floor, knocked out cold. A small cut had opened above her left eye.

Carya cautiously stepped closer. A lock of Amashilama’s hair had come loose from her bundled tresses, falling over the woman’s face. Surya reached to his own head and smoothed his unruly hair. Holstering her gun, Carya checked the woman’s pulse.

“She’ll live,” she told Surya. “Good shot, by the way.”

“I was aiming for her gun,” he said glumly. He was going to be in so much trouble when his mother heard about this. “What now?”

“I’m getting you out of here,” said Carya. “There’s a royalist resistance cell in Anjayaneya who can get a message to your mother. They’ve been most helpful in running errands to local takeaways,” she added wryly.

“What about the stairs?” he asked. “One of us has to hold the handle.”

Carya went to the lever and pulled it down, then frowned when she saw how it sprung back upon release. Surya looked at the fallen Amashilama, slouched crookedly against the wall. A wicked smile crept onto his lips. Grabbing the unconscious woman’s arm, he heaved her

towards the lever, dislodging more of her bundled hair. Surya wrapped the woman's hand around the handle. Her limp fingers would not stay closed to hold the lever in position.

"Nice try," remarked Carya. "Maybe..."

Exasperated, Surya grabbed a length of Amashilama's hair and wrapped it around the lever. It was a cruel thing to do, but he could not deny the inner glow of satisfaction as the handle stayed down. Beyond the balcony door, he heard the stairs unfolding to the ground.

"Let down your hair and lower the stairs," he muttered.

"That's one way of doing it," admitted Carya. "Shall we go?"

Surya nodded. His gaze returned to his beloved holovid. It was showing a scene with a young boy, a wizard and a group of knights in medieval costume. The boy was waving a rusty sword, enjoying being the centre of attention. Surya suddenly saw himself, a prince of the realm, a figurehead for the people fighting for freedom. It was time he started acting like one. After one last glance at Amashilama, he followed his own brave knight onto the balcony and hastened down the steps. The fresh air of freedom never tasted so sweet.

* * *

Surya raced down the stairway after Carya, taking the last few steps at a leap. The slow-moving sun had shifted west and the bottom of the tower was in shadow. Carya picked up a bag she had left by the intercom and swung it to her shoulders. Just then, Surya spied several figures approaching from the aircar landing pad. His heart leapt as his mother came into view and hurried towards him, accompanied by Yaksha, Namtar and Inari. Surya rushed forward and flung himself into her embrace.

"Mother!" he cried. "Amashilama is a Que Qiao secret agent!"

"Yaksha told me everything!" exclaimed Maharani Uma, her face etched with relief. "Thank the gods you're safe! How did you get out of the tower?"

"We knocked Amashilama out and tied her hair to the lever," said Surya. "Carya..."

He glanced towards his rescuer and hesitated. All he saw at the bottom of the stairway were the tiny blue flowers of rapunzel, trembling gently as a spicy odour drifted on the breeze. The mysterious woman had gone. Inari keenly sniffed the air.

“We?” asked Namtar, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Smells more like pepperoni to me,” Inari said sagely, wrinkling his nose.

“Surya, I’m sorry for leaving you alone,” apologised Yaksha. “I went to the research centre but everyone had gone. Then I ran into the local resistance cell, who didn’t believe who I was! I eventually convinced them and got a message to your mother.”

“We came as quick as we could,” said the Maharani. “Amashilama! A Que Qiao spy!”

The stairway behind Surya gave a creak and began to rise. A sudden wail drew their attention to the balcony at the top of the tower. Amashilama clung to the safety rail, her hair falling loosely around her face. She glared down and shook her fist.

“I never liked her,” grumbled Yaksha, offering Surya a comforting hug. “Narcissist leech. Always sucking up to your mother to make herself look better.”

“I’ll deal with her later,” Maharani Uma said icily. “Surya, you’re coming home to Lanka. If Amashilama’s not the traitor we’ve been looking for, she’ll tell us who it is. You’ll be safe enough now at Kubera with us.”

“Merry Christmas,” Inari said glumly. “Wish I had a family to go home to.”

Namtar opened a maintenance hatch in the tower wall, drew a pistol from a concealed holster and fired, severing the power supply in a shower of sparks. Amashilama would not be able to lower the stairs or call for help. Leaving her yelling from the balcony, Maharani Uma led them to the front of the deserted research station. An aircar stood on the landing pad, a small boxy vehicle in camouflage livery with pivoting turbines at each corner. Namtar and Inari hastened ahead to check for intruders. As Surya, his mother and Yaksha caught up, Inari reached into the passenger

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compartment and withdrew a flat cardboard box. A familiar spicy whiff reached Surya's nostrils.

"Christmas present," grunted Inari, offering it to Surya. "Smells good."

"From who?" the Maharani asked suspiciously. "We didn't bring that with us."

Surya took the box. Opening the lid, he saw the glorious sight of freshly cooked pizza, still warm from the oven. There was a note tucked under the edge. Holding the box in one hand, he pulled the slip of paper free.

"Merry Christmas, my prince'," he read out loud, grinning at his mother's wary stare. "'Time to grow up and live happily ever after'."

Smiling, he shoved the note into his pocket and took a slice. Somewhere out there, his saviour looked after him still. He hoped 'ever after' included more pizza like this.

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.

THE AVALON JOB A novel by Steph Bennion

Ravana O'Brien is confronted by her past in more ways than one. Secret agent Kedesh is back on the scene, seeking help for a mission to Alpha Centauri. Artorius, the young boy taken by Que Qiao agents after fleeing the Dhusarian Church, has been traced to a shadowy American base on the moon of Avalon. A second alien portal has been found, a mysterious ancient machine that can twist space and time.

Avalon is no ordinary world. The moon hosts the vicious celebrity show *Gods of Avalon*, where players fight to survive against cyberclone beasts. Infiltrating the secret base means getting past the game arenas, but Ravana cannot trust the slippery Kedesh and has enemies old and new out to see her fail. The rejuvenated Priest Taranis has a new chosen one, a man called The Raven who seeks Ravana's doom. A rumour of hidden gold is sowing confusion. Artorius is the key to those who want the alien portal open. Watchers are playing the ultimate game.

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