

The Watcher And The Priest

A short story by STEPH BENNION

GEMINI

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Procyon

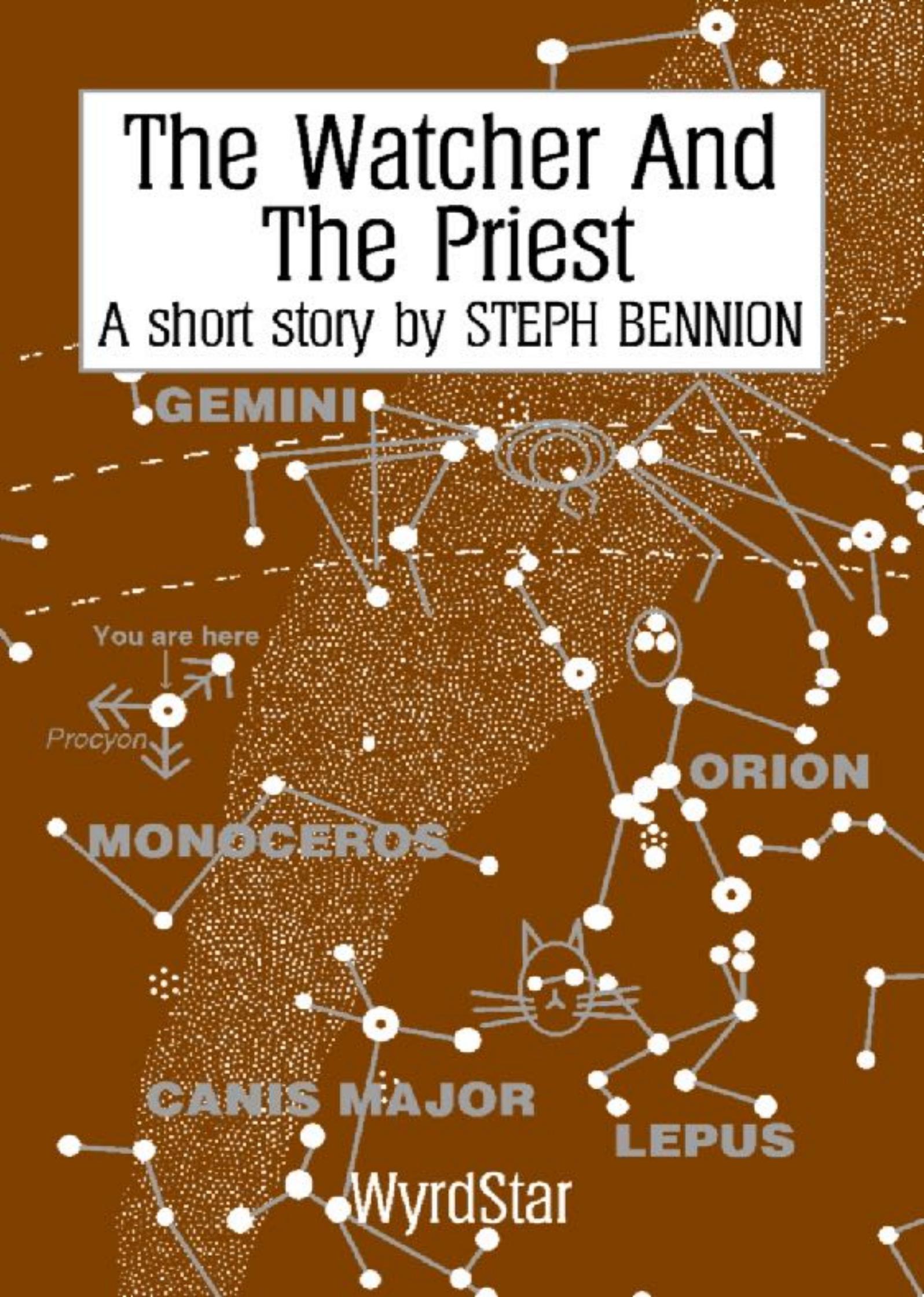
MONOCEROS

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WyrdStar



The Watcher And The Priest

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

A short story by
Steph Bennion

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THE WATCHER AND THE PRIEST

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

Priest Taranis is far from home and close to death, his quest to find the mythical world of the greys having ended in disaster. Against the odds, help is at hand, but who is the mysterious stranger wearing his boots? Caught between masters and slaves, sacrifices must be made if he is to live to tell his tale...

THE SPACESHIP DRIFTED in the silent void, spinning slowly as the last remnants of life-giving air vented into space. The *Accueillir les Extra-Terrestres* was nothing special: a flying-wing interstellar transport common to the Epsilon Eridani system in the late twenty-third century, though few ships had been prepared so thoroughly for a voyage into the unknown. What made it unique was the light that cast its glare upon the tumbling broken hull. The distant bright white sun and dwarf companion was that of Procyon. No human-crewed ship had ever before ventured to this star. The rogue chunk of ice that had smashed through the spacecraft's frame looked certain to leave their tale untold.

The *Accueillir les Extra-Terrestres*' fusion reactor was a blackened, mangled husk, damaged beyond repair. With no power other than the dwindling reserves of its fuel cells, the vessel's extra-dimensional drive could not take them home. They were eleven light-years beyond the nearest of humanity's outposts in the Epsilon Eridani system and there was no way to call for help. They were alone like no one had ever been before.

Priest Taranis had brought his followers to the edge of nowhere. The mythical planet they had travelled so far to find was just that, for the debris of creation encircling Procyon had never coalesced into worlds and moons. They had reached the end of the road.

Against the odds, help came.

* * *

Taranis drifted in and out of consciousness for days. He was no longer aboard the *Accueillir les Extra-Terrestres*. The green-walled chamber in which he sat looked organic, a dome of thick branch-like growths like the

roots of a tree, interspersed with a web of smaller vines and mysterious patches which glowed sky blue. Eerie music murmured softly, abstract and alien to his ears but somehow soothing. Each laboured breath he took tasted fresh, life-giving air quite unlike the recycled atmosphere of a spacecraft; or even that of his Epsilon Eridani home world, the terraformed moon of Yuanshi. A faint wave of panic washed over him as he wondered where he was. It mattered not. He was safe.

The days passed and his strength returned. He was sitting within the familiar contours of his spider walker, the mechanical eight-limbed mobility chair he had relied upon since he was young. The joystick on the right-hand armrest no longer seemed to work, leaving him unable to manoeuvre. Strange tendrils clung to his upper arms, looping down to the floor and up again to join other stout growths across the ceiling. The loose-fitting white tunic he wore was freshly-laundered and one he recognised as his own.

With a growing sense of alarm, he tried to move his withered legs and felt nothing at all. He guessed he was in some sort of medical facility, but wondered why he was in his chair and not a proper bed. Trembling, his fingers reached down to where his torso met the seat of his mobility chair.

Taranis screamed. The lower half of his body had gone.

He reached beneath his tunic, hesitated and then touched the still-healing scar tissue beneath. With growing horror, he traced the wrinkled contours of his skin to an unfamiliar mesh band attached to his seat. His flesh merged smoothly with the seat of the chair. A shiver ran down his spine. He and his spider walker had become one.

“My legs...” he murmured. “Lord alien greys! What has happened to me?”

He could not stop his fingers from shaking as they fell upon the tubes that ran from behind his seat and up his back, past his neck to his head. What felt like metal plates covered parts of his skull. Years ago he had submitted himself to surgery to install a security-forces implant inside his cranium, a device that gave him thought-control access to certain types of hardware by way of tiny filaments grown into his brain. The tubes

entered his skull where the implant was located. Someone had hard-wired his chair straight into his head.

A memory returned of being trapped in the wreckage of the ship, unable to move. It was not unknown for people to lose limbs after being cut free. Yet no human doctor in their right mind would ever think of reassembling a damaged body in such fashion. Taranis withdrew his quivering fingers and buried his face in his hands.

“Who did this?” he whispered bitterly. He surprised himself with the realisation that he was more angry than dismayed. “Why was I not left to die?!”

He took a deep breath and concentrated on the facts. He was disfigured but alive. The mobility chair had been part of his life for almost as long as he could remember, so in a way there was no great change. The damage inflicted by his rescuers could possibly be fixed when he got back to civilisation. Right now, he needed more information.

In his mind, a jab of a mental finger brought up a line of symbols representing various functions of his cranium implant. A faint web-like shadow of his chair and its eight spindly legs lay behind the familiar control icons, something he was sure had not been there before. No external networks were evident, which was unheard of in the five systems. Nor could he link with any of the communication wristpads worn by his crew. He was however receiving remote readings from two medical implants, which meant their owners were alive and near.

Being unable to connect with the outside world felt worse than losing his legs. He opened a storage cubby-hole below the armrest of his chair and extracted a tiny camera drone the size of his fist. He carefully unfurled its rotors, pressed the power switch and watched as it whirred into life. A gentle sweep of his hand launched the drone on its mission.

The tendrils wrapped around his arms pulsed and squeezed tighter, though he felt no pain. A weariness seeped into his veins, easing his grief. Taranis’ eyes closed once more.

* * *

The sound of footsteps reached his ears. Taranis lifted his head and saw an archway had opened before him, filling the chamber with cool blue light. Two figures stood silhouetted in the entrance. On seeing him move, they hastened forward and came to his side.

To his surprise and relief, it was communications officer Belenus and pilot Sirona, two of his crew. Belenus, a bald-headed young man with pale blotchy skin, had an arm in a sling and a myriad of fresh scars across his face. Sirona, a middle-aged woman with dark hair and a Mediterranean complexion, bore an interesting collection of bruises and a pronounced limp. Both wore flowing cream-coloured open robes over their battered flight suits. Their wary glances suggested this was first time they had seen his crippled form since their rescue.

“Priest Taranis!” cried Belenus. “You’re alive!”

“Brother Belenus, I am that,” Taranis said slowly, his voice a rasping croak. The tiny camera drone buzzed lazily above their heads. “Though somewhat damaged, as you can see. What manner of a doctor rebuilt me into this perversion? What is this place?”

“We don’t know,” Sirona replied. Her own and her colleague’s first language was French and her heavily-accented English sounded more hesitant than usual. “Neither of us remember being rescued from the ship. Our hosts are... How shall I put this? Strange.”

Taranis’ eyes narrowed. “Hosts?”

Belenus beckoned to someone unseen beyond the arch. A man and a woman entered the chamber, both pale-skinned with tumbling locks of auburn hair. The strangers were a good ten centimetres taller than even Belenus and stocky with it, but despite their heavy build moved with unusual grace. There was something uncanny about their broad mouths and prominent brows, yet the smile upon their faces was genuine. Both wore curious closed robes in a shimmering gold fabric.

Taranis gazed in wonderment. “Angels are among us,” he murmured.

The flame-haired woman came to Belenus’ side. Bowing to Taranis, she held out her hands and then brought them back to her chest over her heart. Her companion, standing silently beside Sirona, dipped his head reverentially.

“They don’t say much,” Belenus admitted. “We’ve somehow got along with sign language. They are pleased to see you are making a good recovery.”

“That depends on your definition,” snapped Taranis. “Are there others?”

“The rest of the crew were in the passenger cabin when the meteoroid struck,” Sirona reminded him, looking pained. “There was nothing we could do to save them.”

“I am aware of that,” he growled. “I refer to the others of this establishment. Your two silent friends cannot be the only ones here. Is there someone in command? What of the medics who used me for their deranged surgery? Is there anyone with a tongue, even?”

“You do not understand,” said Belenus. “They are our saviours.”

“They have presented us with gifts,” Sirona added. She pulled back the sleeve of her robe and showed him the thick gold bangle she wore. “We have a place here with them.”

Taranis’ eyes narrowed. “Here? And where is that?”

“Nirvana,” she said. “Heaven. Does it matter what we call it?”

“We will return when you are recovered,” said Belenus. He sounded disappointed. “You will not want for anything. But you must believe.”

“You dare to question my belief?” exclaimed Taranis, incredulous.

Belenus smiled. The silent woman at his side took his hand, the man likewise with Sirona. As one, they turned and walked back through the archway and faded into the light. Taranis watched them go and scowled. His drone, circling by the door, gave a hesitant twitch as a small silver blur leapt across the departing shadows.

“Heaven!” muttered Taranis. “Fools! This is a living hell.”

“Both being human constructs, of course,” purred a female voice behind him.

Startled, Taranis jerked his head and yelped in pain as the tubes at his back pulled against his skull. To his amazement, a silver and black tabby cat sat on the floor near the wall, calmly washing a paw with its tongue. The cat paused and regarded Taranis solemnly. In a mind-warping blink of an eye, the creature sprang up and suddenly became a tall, slim woman with sleek dark hair and smooth olive skin, clad in a long

white dress and floor-length fur coat of silver and black. Her youthful, playful nonchalance contrasted sharply with the aged wisdom in the depths of her stare.

Taranis' hand instinctively went to the joystick to turn his walker and he cursed upon remembering the controls were broken. The dull ache from where his torso met his chair was clouding his thoughts. He scrutinised the stranger warily.

"An impressive metamorphosis," he acknowledged. "Am I party to mind-altering drugs? Or maybe you are little more than a holographic illusion?"

"For someone driven by belief, you are a sceptical and distrustful man," she retorted. Walking to the front of his chair, she put a hand to her hip. "I expected more gratitude from a man rescued from the jaws of death. The mighty Priest Taranis! Father of the Dhusarian Church. Defender of the faith that only alien gods can save humankind from itself!"

"My fame precedes me," he remarked. "Would you care to reciprocate?"

"I'm the Christmas fairy," she retorted. "Be careful of what you wish for."

"Christmas?" exclaimed Taranis. "It is barely November."

"Time flies when you're having fun. You've been here longer than you think."

"Do not jest with me, stranger. Tell me who you are!"

The woman paused. "I go by many names," she said. "Your ancestors revered me as your small band of followers do you. Homer attributed my deeds to Pallas Athene."

"Athene," muttered Taranis. "Pah! There are no gods but the greys. A true god would have no need for the smoke-and-mirrors arrival, nor gaudy dress!"

"Do you like the coat? I made it myself," she remarked lightly. "And I come and go as I please. Who are you to judge divinity? You've a long way to go before you convince your species that your mysterious greys are anything more than a myth, let alone their saviours."

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“I have seen them with my own eyes,” he told her. “Two such creatures found in the forests of our moon are in our care. I have decoded enough of the sacred texts to know their culture is far in advance of our own. They are no myth.”

“Yet their home world remains just that. Did you find what you sought?”

“At Procyon?” Taranis paused. “Are we still in that blasted star system?”

“That’s for me to know,” Athene replied mischievously. “And for you to find out.”

She twirled on the spot, lifted her arms, then twisted and shrank into an owl-shaped blur, fluttering in a spiral towards the ceiling. Taranis stared in disbelief as the creature swooped past his whirring camera drone, through the archway of light and away. He felt a headache coming on.

“It must be a mind-probe experiment,” he decided. “First my legs, then my sanity! Is there anything left for the butchers in this accursed place to take?”

* * *

Taranis was once more alone. He pushed his aches and pains into the back of his mind, brought up the icons for his cranium implant and contemplated the mysterious wispy filaments forming the ghostly image of his chair. A dull glow rose from an oval mass at the centre, roughly where the spider walker’s artificial-intelligence control unit would be. The part of him aware of his own presence felt different. Startled, he realised he was sensing the inanimate contraption beneath him, right down to the pressure of the steel legs upon the floor.

Focusing on his metal limbs, he imagined them moving. With a scrape of metal, his chair lurched forward and stopped. Exhilaration mixed with the shock confirmation that the circuits of his chair had been routed directly into his brain. Anyone familiar with implants would have set up a wireless connection. He was not sure whether to laugh or cry.

He experimented further and with effort found he could jolt his walker into motion in whichever direction he chose. Local gravity felt greater than that of his native Yuanshi but less than that of Earth. The mental exertion quickly took its toll, for he remained weak following his ordeal. It dawned on him that he had not eaten nor drank in a while, yet felt no need to do so. He wondered if the tendrils attached to his arms provided sustenance. It was yet one more mystery in an ever-lengthening list.

He found a control icon in his mind's eye and watched the hovering drone's life-size holographic protection of Belenus, Sirona and their two silent companions as the recording replayed. Of the mysterious Athene there was no sign; the drone had captured his side of the conversation but no more. Yet he knew the shape-shifting cat woman had been no mirage.

"It is time to explore further afield," he murmured. "By stealth, if necessary."

In his mind, he opened the drone's programming interface and got to work. Strangers generally took offence at being watched, but holographic camouflage could work wonders. Taranis was determined to get to the bottom of this mystery and find a way home.

* * *

At some point, the archway dimmed and became a wall of green, as did the blue panels on the walls. His tiredness got the better of him and he dozed.

A soft thud awoke him. Opening his eyes, Taranis saw a tabby blur leap from the twisted vines of the wall and metamorphose into the mysterious woman once more. This time her white dress was shorter, showing off the toned flesh of her thighs and a shiny pair of black knee-high boots. A new fear arose within him as he realised he had nothing but vague memories of their previous conversation. The woman stepped forward and gave a sly smile.

The priest's eyes narrowed. "You're wearing my boots," he growled.

“You intrigue me, Taranis,” the woman purred. “I felt the need to walk in your shoes for a while. I figured you had little use for them, what with no legs and so on.”

“Callous, slippery and vain,” he remarked sourly. “You should be in politics.”

“Democracy is dead, my dear Taranis. There are better ways to manipulate fate.”

“You remember my name. Why do I not recall yours?”

“Your memory is not what it was,” she said, sounding sympathetic. “Humans are distressingly fragile. Especially those who blast themselves into the void on foolhardy adventures. It is not wise to keep wrecking the ships you take to the stars.”

“I have flown many missions. This is the first that has gone awry,” he retorted.

“The second,” she corrected. “You have forgotten how you got to Yuanshi in the first place. But of course, that vessel you stole does not yet even exist! Entropy is supposed to make time a one-way trip so it’s no wonder your mind is addled.”

Taranis scowled. “You talk in riddles. Who are you?”

“Athene,” she said. “Remember?”

“The ancient Greek goddess?” he scoffed. “There are no gods but the greys.”

Athene sighed. “We’ve done that bit. Your mind is weak, old man.”

“Old man? I’m barely fifty!”

“Take a look in the mirror,” she retorted. “You have not aged well.”

“Belenus and Sirona were here,” Taranis said carefully. He was still monitoring the signals from their medical implants. “Where are they now?”

“They chose a different path,” she said dismissively. “Showered with gifts and swept off their feet by two rather charming individuals. I always thought it was a shame they lost out to you lot when it came to claiming Earth. Lovely red hair.”

“Whereas I get some damn fool Puss in Boots,” muttered Taranis. “Who’s ‘they’?”

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“You ask far too many questions.” Athene stalked closer and stared levelly at the priest. “But not the obvious ones. Your so-called saviours fixed your shattered body, but saw no difference between your own mortal carcass and the multi-legged contraption on which you rely. You are not ready for answers when faced with questions like that.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he remarked dryly. “I am not afraid of the truth.”

Athene sidled closer and smiled. Behind her, the archway brightened, revealing a winding green passageway. Taranis felt the tendrils tighten upon his arms.

“The game is afoot,” said Athene. “Do not fear, my little pawn. I shall return.”

* * *

Belenus yawned and raised his head to look at the figure who had disturbed his slumber. Sirona stood in the entrance archway, stiff and unmoving as if wary of entering his chamber. His allocated quarters was a near-perfect sphere, with marble flooring and walls of living wood lined with tiers of scented flowers. The comfy couch on which he lay was next to a small ornamental pool, into which water tinkled gently from bronze fish seemingly hanging in mid air. Eerie music mixed with a low buzzing sound that tugged at his memory. There was much about this strange place he did not understand, but at the moment he did not care. The red-haired woman lying contentedly at his side was asleep.

“Sister Sirona,” he greeted. “Is something amiss?”

“You must come with me,” she urged. Her voice sounded odd. “Quickly!”

He reluctantly extracted himself from his companion’s sleepy embrace and eased himself from the couch. His arm still ached but he had dispensed with the sling. Sirona turned and hurriedly led him through the arch and down a twisting passageway he had not seen before, though the weird interwoven vines which lined the tunnel wall looked much the same as they did everywhere else. Not for the first time he wondered why anyone would build a habitat in such fashion, or indeed

where they actually were. As he trailed the darting silhouette ahead, he realised Sirona no longer walked with a limp, adding yet another question to the pile.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked instead. “Is this about Taranis?”

Sirona reached a widening in the passageway and stopped. Lurid yellow light seeped from a series of radial cracks marking a concave hollow in the floor. A curious chattering noise drifted from below, barely discernable over the omnipresent whirring murmurs of the alien music. Belenus shuffled closer and paused.

“Slaves and masters await,” declared Sirona. “And they’re waiting for you!”

There was an awful slurping noise as the cracked hollow beneath his feet suddenly sucked back, leaving a gaping orifice ablaze with yellow light. Belenus shrieked, lost his balance and fell. He slid down a greasy, foul-smelling shaft, his hands frantically scrabbling to save himself but unable to halt his fall. Still screaming, he tumbled through the roof of a large chamber and crashed heavily to the ground.

He lay sprawled face down, his fall broken by withered shapes strewn across the floor. Belenus groaned, rolled onto his back and gingerly raised his head, at first seeing only the dusty tattered webs upon the walls. Shifting his gaze, his blood ran cold.

A pair of huge black spiders, standing as tall as a man, watched with baleful eyes from a raised platform. A trio of squat grey-skinned humanoids in white tunics scurried back and forth. Two carried silken parcels in six-fingered hands, which they lifted to the arachnids’ clicking jaws, leaving the third to clear away chewed detritus from the floor. Belenus forced his terrified gaze from the spiders and stared in wonderment at their attendants. The squat hairless humanoids were the size of small apes, with dark almond-shaped eyes staring from an inverted triangular face, exactly as Priest Taranis had described.

“Thralaak!” Their cry was like a burst of white noise. “Thralaak thralaak!”

“The hallowed greys!” whispered Belenus. “But what hell is this?”

The huge arachnids pushed past the greys, lurched to the edge of the platform and lowered their clicking jaws towards him. Belenus shrieked and scrambled back across the floor, through what he now saw were the bones and desiccated carcasses of creatures long dead. He screamed again as a silver blur swooped from the ceiling, narrowly missing his head. An owl dropped lightly to rest upon a blackened skull and swivelled its wide-eyed stare towards him.

A tall olive-skinned man, carrying a spear and dressed in the light battle dress of an ancient warrior, appeared from behind the spiders and strode forward to the edge of the platform. Belenus' relief at seeing who he took to be a fellow human quickly faded at the sight of the fierce anger in the man's eyes.

"Who are you?" demanded the warrior. His words fell upon the cowering Belenus as if carved on tablets of stone. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"I, err..." stammered Belenus. "Are those spiders real?"

One of the greys came to the warrior's side. "Thralaak thralaak."

"Fraak fraak!" shrieked another.

"This man is a gift," purred a voice closer to hand. Belenus yelped as he saw a tall, dark-haired woman in a fur coat standing near where the owl had perched just moments before. "From the exalted Priest Taranis of the human colonies in Epsilon Eridani. He offers this sacrifice to acknowledge humankind's place between masters and slaves."

"He said what?" cried Belenus.

Arachnid jaws chattered. Amidst the scattered bones, he felt their multiple eyes sizing him up and shuddered at the thought of what giant spiders did with gifts. The weird omnipresent music had become insistent and was gnawing into his brain.

"She plays you for fools!" roared the man. "Do not listen to her!"

"Priest Taranis adds that it is customary for his people to exchange gifts at this time of year," the woman added. "They believe that visitors from afar, in a ship that shone like a star, once came to their home world bearing gifts to enrich humankind."

"Thralaak?"

"I assume so," she replied, sounding surprised. "If not, then who?"

“Those things are not our saviours!” said Belenus, raising a shaking hand to point at the spiders. “They are an abomination! There are no gods but the greys!”

“Fraak fraak?”

“Oh yes,” the woman replied. “They created a whole religion around you.”

The monstrous arachnids brought their quivering bodies close to the ground, reached out with their forelegs and stepped off the edge of the platform. Belenus released a strangled cry and backed away until he came against something solid. His hand felt behind him and found a thick upright trunk sprouting stiff hairs that tore at his skin. His brain had barely time to comprehend what it was when the huge leg shifted sideways, knocking him off balance. A clatter of gnashing fanged jaws sounded from above. Belenus froze, raised his gaze and whimpered. A huge spider stood over him, blocking his escape. The woman glanced his way and offered a sympathetic smile.

“Fraak fraak,” screeched a grey.

The spider towering above Belenus opened its jaws wide, dripping saliva onto his head. A numbing sensation spread across his scalp. On the platform, the warrior strode to the centre and bowed mockingly to the woman.

“Tell your priest the masters have accepted his gift,” he said.

* * *

A familiar thump sounded by the entrance arch. Taranis paused in his circuit of the chamber and turned his chair. A silver and black tabby strolled towards him as if it owned the place, which might well be the case. The cat paused, licked a paw, then in a blur leapt up and metamorphosed once more into the mysterious fur-clad woman. Taranis scowled.

“Puss in boots,” he muttered, seeing she still wore his own missing footwear. He felt a headache coming on. “Who are you again?”

“Athene,” she said sternly. “Do I need to wear a name tag?”

“The goddess of the Greeks?” he scoffed. “There are no gods but the greys!”

Athene rolled her eyes. “Yes, so you said. Your mind is scrambled worse than I thought. Shall I check those skull plates to see if you have a screw loose?”

“You’re no doctor. Though it would not surprise me if I learned you were responsible for rebuilding me in such fashion. Is there no one else I can talk to?”

“The overlords of your rescuers wanted you to take on a form that warned of things to come,” she said, though sounded wary. “You still have your wits! Flesh is a mere distraction. Be patient, my dear Taranis. I am doing what I can to appease those who bear you ill.”

“These pointless exchanges are nauseous enough,” he grumbled.

“Your ingratitude is becoming tiresome. You are in no position to fend for yourself.”

“I do not need you to act on my behalf. Take me to your leader!”

“It is a pity you have forgotten so much of what has gone before,” she said wearily. “There are those who dispute you still have a role to play. The gifts you offer may not convince the masters of this place how accommodating you and your followers can be.”

“More riddles,” he complained. “I demand answers!”

“You will get them,” Athene purred sweetly. “And I shall win this game.”

* * *

Sirona stretched her arms wearily, opened her eyes and arose from her couch to see who had disturbed her rest. Belenus stood in the archway to her chamber, stark against the shadows. They had been given near-identical quarters in which to recuperate, but the maze of twisting organic passageways between them made unescorted visits rare. She was struggling to feel at ease amidst the many mysteries of this strange place, but there were compensations. On the couch behind, the flame-haired young man twitched in his sleep, a contented smile upon his lips.

“Hello Belenus,” she said. His arm was still in its sling. “What’s up?”

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Belenus sidled into the room with a curious slinking grace. A strange humming drifted upon the air.

“You must come with me,” he said softly. “Quickly!”

* * *

Athene watched as a monstrous spider put the finishing touches on two fresh cocoons of silk. They hung from the thick vines of the roof like gift-wrapped presents on a Christmas tree, their contents slowly liquefying until ready to be slurped through arachnid jaws. The spiders had made short work of Belenus and Sirona. Spider venom was nasty stuff.

She turned from the gruesome sight and stared at the figure glaring defiantly from the platform. Like her own, the man’s preferred form was one adopted millennia ago, back when humans named him Ares. His attire of an ancient warrior looked ridiculous but no man of Earth could hope to match his heroic, chiselled physique. Two huge spiders stood silently behind him, attended as always by the squat grey humanoids who had once called this strange, sprawling habitat their own.

“I trust these gifts met with the masters’ approval,” Athene said to Ares.

“Humans call us watchers,” he growled. “Yet you refuse to stand idly by.”

“Most are oblivious to our existence,” she reminded him. “You’re one to talk! You cannot win by lashing out in anger, as you did when humans discovered how to leap beyond their own dimensions. All you achieved then was to bring them to your door.”

“The grey ones wanted to protect the shipwrecked priest and his crew. They fear their masters may yet realise humankind to be a threat. Fate must take its course.”

“When our freaky eight-legged hosts decide to act, it will not be war,” said Athene. “It will be an eradication. The superior civilisation crushes all before it, whether intended or not. My little grey pets only survived by becoming slaves.”

“Pets!” the man retorted. His eyes flashed angrily. “Laboratory rats, more like.”

“The great game was created to keep others in check,” she said. “We have become part of the fabric of the universe. Why not have some fun along the way?”

“You disgust me. Does your priest have a proposition? Or is this all your doing?”

Athene smiled. “His followers believe salvation will come from the stars. They are wrong. He must return so that those who despise him continue to challenge him, for in doing so they will find the truth. We have been here before. Now it is my turn to send our reconstructed pawn back to the worlds humans call home.”

She watched him shift his gaze to something beyond the resting spiders. In an alcove behind the platform, half-hidden by creeping vines, was the slab-sided rusting chariot that over a hundred years ago had brought the first travellers from Earth. Humans had outsmarted him on that occasion and he had never forgiven them for it. The one known as Ares looked back at Athene with a stare that burned with a fire as old as her own.

“The priest’s readiness to sacrifice his friends pleases the masters,” he said. “And your willingness to keep things interesting humours me. Your move, warrior.”

* * *

Taranis looked up as an owl-shaped blur fluttered through the archway of his chamber and turned into a familiar tall, dark-haired woman in fur coat and boots. Her method of arrival was no longer worthy of surprise, but to his frustration his mind remained hazy on what had gone before. His camera drone, resting on his lap, had only just returned and he had not yet viewed the latest results of its mission. The woman wore the grin of a predator.

“You again,” he said, annoyed. “Why cannot I recall your name?”

The woman sighed. “We decided you should call me Athene.”

“Charlatan,” muttered Taranis. “There are no gods but the greys!”

“Hold that thought. You are about to meet your saviours.”

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Taranis paused and regarded her carefully. It bothered him that he had yet to be visited by any medical personnel in this mysterious place, nor seen any other inhabitants other than the two silent strangers who had accompanied Belenus and Sirona. Aside from practising walking with his hateful mechanical legs, he had spent his solitary moments contemplating the snippets of footage broadcast back to his implant by his drone, scenes that filled his mind's eye with fragments that could almost be from a dream. He wanted to believe that he and his crew had indeed stumbled upon the mythical home of the greys, but as yet he still could not be sure. Athene's words awoke a sense of wonderment deep within his soul.

"The mighty greys?" he asked hesitantly. "Then it is true?"

Athene smiled, raised her right hand and clicked her fingers. The tendrils wrapped around the priest's arms fell free and slithered into the wall.

"Walk this way," she said. "It is time to meet your makers."

* * *

Taranis followed Athene through the arch into a curving tunnel of thick, tightly-packed stems and twisted vines, interspersed with patches of shimmering blue. Flowers burst from swaying tendrils in a living tapestry of white, yellow and pink, releasing a sweet yet prickly odour that made his nose itch. A bizarre array of insects drifted lazily amidst the blooms, though not in any great number. The strange music from his chamber remained with them, mingling with a myriad of fresh murmurs, distant sounds of movement and faint animalistic shrieks. Taranis wrinkled his nose and sneezed.

His mind had adjusted surprisingly quickly to its interface with the spider walker's AI unit and his mechanical limbs moved easily beneath him. Athene seemed to prefer her feline alter-ego when walking, though would occasionally change into an owl and flutter ahead to wait. Hastening after her, Taranis sneezed twice again in rapid succession, almost knocking the silent camera drone from his lap in the process. He brought his chair to a halt, plucked a wad of cloth from a storage pocket

in his chair and blew the mucous from his nose. It seemed he was allergic to the passageway's floral décor.

A short distance later, the passageway met a larger tunnel that curved onwards in a lazy vertical spiral. Athene took a sharp left and led him upwards, past off-shoots to other passages that branched away in directions that seemed impossible in three dimensions. Taranis was left with the impression that the strange habitat had not been built this way, but instead had grown like a living organism. He sneezed, paused by the wall and raised a hand to feel the smooth warmth of the vines. A cat-shaped blur leapt from the shadows and twisted into the human form of his mysterious guide. Athene looked irritated.

“What is this place?” asked Taranis. “It looks like we're inside a giant tree.”

“Your simplistic description will suffice,” she said wearily. “I must leave to prepare the way, but I will return. Keep to the main passage and you will find what you seek.”

“Did Belenus and Sirona pass this way?”

Athene gave a wry smile. She twirled on the spot and suddenly it was Sirona before him, looking just how Taranis had last seen her. With another flourish she changed into the living image of Belenus, who bowed and returned the priest's grimace with a mocking grin. Taranis blinked and saw the fur-clad Athene standing there once more.

“Regrettably, they are otherwise engaged,” she said. “This is for your eyes only.”

“I am finding it increasingly difficult to believe what I see,” he snapped with false bravado. The final broadcasts from Belenus' and Sirona's medical implants showed incredible levels of stress in the moments before the signals died. “It seems that scheming extra-dimensional pain in the posteriors like yourself have quite the capacity for deceit.”

Athene rounded upon him with a cold scowl not far short of absolute zero, her face etched with haughty arrogance. A shiver ran down what was left of Taranis' spine.

“So you know of my kind,” she hissed. “I may have underestimated you.”

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“You are a watcher,” Taranis replied, dabbing his nose. “Legends of the greys tell of encounters with beings such as yourself. The holy texts speak much of your meddling.”

“Merely guidance of a different sort,” she purred. “Is that not what you seek?”

“You know why I am here.”

Athene smiled, then in a flash of tabby fur was gone.

* * *

The battered hull of the *Accueillir les Extra-Terrestres* stood at the end of the chamber, looking forlorn in the pale blue light spilling from between the thick vines of the walls. All around swarmed an army of engineers: squat humanoid greys and their taller red-headed companions, along with others who looked neither one nor the other. The bustle of activity stopped the moment the silver and grey tabby strolled nonchalantly into view. Their wariness was evident even before the cat metamorphosed into her habitual human form. They had long ago learned to be afraid.

Athene sauntered to the berthed ship and paused. Patches of biological resin glowed with dim green luminescence where repairs had been made to the spacecraft’s punctured skin. A large bulbous growth hung across the powerless engines, clinging to the fuselage with splayed tendrils in the manner of an octopus attacking a whale, albeit one that looked more like a giant watermelon than cephalopod. A faint green light pulsed within, silent yet pregnant with repressed power. The chattering shrieks of the alien repair crew fell quiet.

“Very inventive,” remarked Athene. “Quantum fruit. A nice touch.”

“Frawaak frawaak,” shrieked a grey.

“The time has not yet come to reveal humankind’s place between slaves and masters,” she retorted. “The priest foolishly believes your kind to be his saviours, a deception that has tied him to his fate. Your masters are not mine. I have decreed that he is to return.”

“Thralaak,” cried another.

“Fraak fraak,” called an unseen grey near the back. “Fraak fraak!”

“Bow before the priest. Treat him as your master above all others,” she said, loading each word with barely-restrained menace. She smiled, revealing razor-sharp incisors borrowed from her feline alter ego. “Play your part, or I’ll make mincemeat of you all!”

“Frawaak?”

“A human delicacy,” Athene replied. She raised a talon-like fingernail and ran it across her lips. “The fruity sort is in season back on Earth. Don’t let it be you.”

* * *

Taranis eased his spider walker onwards, inwardly cursing the mysterious cat woman for leading him on such a merry dance. His chair seemed low on power and it was becoming hard to maintain a reasonable pace. He also felt incredibly hungry, leading him to wonder if his digestive system had been plumbed into an organic fuel cell to drive his hated metal legs. His nose streamed more than ever and each sneeze jolted the tubes attached his skull, bringing forth spikes of pain. He was on the verge of turning around when the passageway gave a final twist and opened upon a sight that brought him to a shuddering stop.

He had found his saviours, the legendary greys.

The squat humanoids stood solemnly in lines either side of the broad chamber ahead. Behind them were the taller auburn-haired people, two of whom he recognised as those who had accompanied Belenus and Sirona. All faced his way, their heads bowed respectfully. His heart leapt further as he spied the broad silhouette of a flying-wing spacecraft, berthed amidst a cascade of hanging vines at the far end of the hangar. The ship’s hull had gained some very strange additions, but there was no mistaking the *Accueillir les Extra-Terrestres*.

The bright patches of blue upon the walls and ceiling faded to black. Taranis gasped in astonishment at the sight revealed beyond the twisted stems. Outside, a vast disc of debris shimmered in the void, the cosmic halo of a bright white star. He nudged his chair into a shuffling pirouette and gazed in wonder as the true nature of the aliens’ world was revealed. All around, the branches of a glorious organic habitat stretched into

space, glistening with spots of blue light from the passageways within. Huge oval leaves of pale green, swathed in vapour, were turned to the distant sun. At the extremities of each branch were green pods that glowed just like whatever it was that had replaced the engines of the *Accueillir les Extra-Terrestres*. From his viewpoint, the chamber in which they stood was near the edge of what looked like a near-perfect globe, a huge glistening bauble in space, whose branches radiated from an unseen core far below. Taranis' gaze returned to the distant sun and its faint dwarf companion.

“Procyon,” he murmured. “This is truly incredible. A tree in space!”

He sneezed and batted away a colourful multi-winged insect, his other hand clutching the drone in his lap. In the chamber ahead, a stocky grey and a tall red-headed woman, both dressed in floor-length white tunics, had left their places and were heading his way. Taranis stared in wonderment as the woman came before him and bowed, her hands laden with folds of golden fabric. Helped by the grey, she unwrapped a cloak and draped it across the priest's shoulders. It hung awkwardly over his spider-walker body.

“I am truly honoured,” he said, awestruck. His next words were interrupted by another sneeze and he paused to mop his nose. A dull ache gripped his blocked sinuses and his voice sounded horribly nasal. “I have prayed for this day for so long. Yet it is wisdom, not gold threads, that I seek. The truth of this place is beyond compare.”

“Fraak,” shrieked the grey. “Fraak fraak.”

The Dhusarian Church existed because creatures believed to be greys had been captured on Yuanshi. Taranis' most treasured possession was the mysterious *Isa-Sastra*, known by detractors as the Book of the Greys. The rush of white noise from the lips of the creature before him was music to his ears. He did not understand a word.

“I hope you weren't banking on them speaking English,” purred a voice from behind.

“I would be disappointed if they did,” said Taranis, not bothering to turn. “I imagine the languages of Earth are woefully inadequate for the wisdom they can impart.”

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A silver-winged blur flew over his head. Taranis eased his chair between the rows of bowing figures, the two who had brought the golden cloak falling into step beside him. The greys again began their strange white-noise shrieks in a rhythm that rolled like the sound of waves crashing upon a shingle beach. The taller humanoids kept their heads bowed, their hands crossed upon their chests. Taranis sneezed and rubbed his eyes, overwhelmed with emotion. As he neared his ship, he began to murmur the words of a seasonal Dhusarian hymn:

*“Starship so bright, bringing the light,
Look to the stars for our guide!
Mankind will hear, the truth loud and clear,
Heralds bring joy from the void!
Starship so bright, a sign in the night,
The message is yours and mine!
Wise men shall see, the reality,
The true light of Greys shall shine!”*

The murmurs of the greys fell silent. Taranis looked at Athene, who stood by the open hatch beneath the spacecraft’s wing. The cabin lights were on and cool, pollen-free air wafted from within, inviting him aboard. He was torn between a desire to remain with his saviours and the fear that this might be his only chance of returning to tell his tale. Belenus and Sirona were dead. He was in no shape to fight for his life if the time came.

A bright green insect the size of bird buzzed past his head, making him flinch. He sneezed again and scowled as the tubes pulled against his skull. His mind was made up.

“I am not worthy, nor prepared,” he admitted, sniffing sadly. He turned his chair and raised his hands as if to embrace his silent congregation. “One day, I will return.”

* * *

Athene stalked through the airlock into the *Accueillir les Extra-Terrestres*, leaving the priest to manoeuvre his half-man, half-machine

form towards the ship alone. She barely batted an eyelid upon finding her ancient warrior foe waiting for her inside. Athene waved a hand and the hatch clunked shut, cutting off Taranis' annoyed sneeze.

"The deal has changed," the man growled. "The priest stays here."

"That is not how the game works," she purred. "He must return."

Ares cursed, dropped to the floor and in a furious metamorphosis exploded into the spectre of a colossal spider, the horrific image of the greys' own masters. Athene rolled her eyes in exasperation, sprang into the air in an owl-shaped blur and fluttered to the top of an equipment rack. Fanged jaws lashed out, a feather's breadth from her perch.

"Ogre!" she shrieked. "You've sided with those monsters?"

"They are the future," he roared. "Those fleshy bipeds and emotional cripples who once called us gods are not fit to call this corner of the galaxy their own. The game is futile!"

"You spend a lot of time in humanoid form for someone who despises them," she retorted. "Missing the adulation that came with their tales, my heroic Ares?"

The spider opened its jaws and lunged forward. Athene leapt fluttering from her perch, shape-shifted into a writhing squid-like mass of tentacles and wrapped herself around the arachnid's quivering legs. As quick as a flash, Ares shrank down into the form of a mouse, twisted from her embrace and darted free. Her tentacles slithered back in a rush of silver and black. A tabby cat pounced, pinning the mouse to the ground.

Athene licked her lips. "My move, I think."

* * *

The airlock door opened. Taranis coaxed his mechanical torso through and looked anxiously around the passenger cabin, the tingling of his nose already subsiding. He heard a clatter and cursed as the camera drone fell from his lap and out of the door. Athene leaned nonchalantly against a locker, a grin of fake innocence plastered across her face.

"I heard fighting," the priest said cautiously. "What happened?"

"Pest control," she remarked. "Nothing to worry about."

Blobs of organic paste dripped from the patched rents in the hull. The cabin lights were on, revealing scores of what looked like metre-high seed pods ranged against the rear wall, a charred hole in the bulkhead offering a glimpse of the mangled fusion power plant. Taranis shuffled to the flight-deck hatch, pressed the control and peered through the opening. Another pod was strapped to the co-pilot's seat, from which ran a bundle of wires presumably stripped from non-essential circuits elsewhere. The flight-deck consoles were live and busy running pre-launch checks. Taranis glanced back to Athene.

“Biological fuel cells?” he asked, bemused. “Nice try, but an ED drive needs more power than that. And what's with the glowing melon stuck on the back of the ship?”

“That happens to be a highly-advanced triumph of engineering,” she said, adopting a withering tone. “A biological quantum particle generator and vacuum chamber. Inside are vibrating nanoscopic hairs, stirring the quantum soup to create particles out of nothing, spraying them to induce momentum before they decay back into oblivion. It's far beyond what your tiny mind can comprehend, of course.”

“Your faith in my intelligence is reassuring,” he replied sarcastically. “This quantum drive is enough to take my ship back to civilisation?”

“Eventually. Time dilation will ease the boredom. The years will pass like days.”

A sound of shuffling feet drew Taranis' attention to the entrance hatch. An anxious-looking woman with long fiery locks stood outside, accompanied by a squat grey. Her hands reached out to the priest, then back to her heart. The gesture needed no translation.

“Thralaak thralaak,” the grey screeched solemnly.

“They want me to stay,” Taranis murmured. “She offers me her heart.”

“Your friends succumbed to this false Nirvana. Your destiny lies elsewhere.”

“Belenus and Sirona are dead,” he hissed, fixing Athene with a steely glare. “And my fate is a matter for me alone! You have meddled enough, watcher.”

She returned his gaze with a dispassionate stare. Still Taranis hesitated, for deep inside he yearned to stay and learn what he could from the greys. Yet his camera drone had glimpsed things that had severely shaken his faith. The fate of his crew too rested heavily on his mind. Athene smiled and went to the hatch. The silent woman and the grey scuttled away in fright.

“Will I remember all I saw?” he asked. Somehow he doubted it.

“This time, maybe you will,” she said. “Bon voyage, Priest Taranis!”

* * *

The *Accueillir les Extra-Terrestres* slipped from the hangar, into the haze that clung to the exterior foliage of the strange refuge, accelerating onwards into the void. The gathered humanoids and greys watched until the green glow of the quantum drive faded into the black, then one by one slowly dispersed back down the spiral passageways to their life of servitude. A solitary grey crossed to where the spacecraft had stood, picked up the priest’s fallen camera drone and studied it with a wide-eyed curiosity. Two other figures remained, ancient foes tied by bonds of familiarity and contempt. Ares bore three fresh claw marks down his left cheek.

“You’ve scarred me for life,” he spat, glaring at Athene. “I can feel the fissures in my essence. I had no idea you could reach through and do such a thing!”

“You needed to be taught a lesson,” she purred. “I sense corruption in you.”

“You should not have let the priest return,” he growled, staring out into the void. “Though I am humoured by the crude method of travel. Why not use the portals?”

“Neither slaves nor masters trust us,” Athene retorted. “There would be no knowing where or when he might emerge! The clumsy interventions of your minions on that dead planet are proof enough that humans are not yet ready to know of such things. Besides, this way it will be years before the priest returns to his own people. His absence is useful.

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I have a date on his home moon to stop another useful pawn throwing himself off a bridge.”

“Still you play the long game,” he snarled. “The only true sport is war! Together we could be invincible. We should seize this galaxy anew.”

“We would become like them. Slaves do not need more masters.”

“Pah!” Ares looked away in disgust. “You got too big for the priest’s boots and gifted his companions to those same monsters. You pretended it was of his own volition!”

“It was you who lured them to their fate,” Athene chastised him. “I merely reinforced the deception, as I was curious about your motives. Their final thoughts betrayed you. You appeared before each in the guise of the other. Their blood is on your hands.”

“Lies! I had no part in their deaths!”

Across the chamber, the grey shrieked and dropped the camera drone. The device fluttered from the alien’s hands on spinning rotors, its holographic projector shining bright. A figure appeared in the beams, a dark-haired woman wearing a flowing open robe. The image was promptly replaced by another of a bald-headed young man in similar attire. The recording continued to move from image to the other.

“You must come with me,” the images pleaded. “Quickly!”

The grey jabbed a finger at the hovering drone and the projector beams fell dark, taking away the memory of Belenus and Sirona forever. Ares glared in fury at the grey, who grabbed the device in six-fingered hands and hastened from the chamber.

“Damn that priest!” exclaimed Athene. “He hid his thoughts well. Bearing gifts, he travelled afar. These religious types do like their ritual sacrifices.”

Ares sly grin held a hint of respect. “He is more dangerous than I thought.”

“Wise men shall see the reality,” she said sarcastically, echoing Taranis’ murmured hymn. “Party games at Christmas never end well...”

THE END

About the Author

Steph Bennion is a writer, musician and part-time Westminster civil servant, born and bred in the Black Country but now living in Hastings after finally escaping the black hole of London. Her stories are written as a reaction to the dearth of alternative heroes amidst bookshelves swamped by tales of the supernatural, not that there's nothing wrong with a bit of fantasy now and again. *Hollow Moon*, the first novel in her space-opera tales of mystery and adventure, was published in 2012. *The Avalon Job*, the fourth book in the series, was published in 2020.

As **Stephanie M Bennion**, she has written speculative fiction for older readers. *The Luck Of The Devil*, a tale of supernatural transgender angst in 1990s Ireland, was published in 2018. The time-travelling romp *The Battles Of Hastings*, a novella inspired by her adopted town and the 950th anniversary of the eponymous battle, was published in 2016.

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