

TALES FROM THE WORLDS OF HOLLOW MOON

# THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

SEASONAL SCI-FI FAIRYTALES



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STEPH BENNION

WyrStar

# Three Tales For Christmas

## From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

Short Stories by  
Steph Bennion

WYRDSTAR BOOKS

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# THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

## Seasonal Sci-Fi Fairytales

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### Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Preface                                 | 4   |
| To Dance Amongst The Stars              | 5   |
| Merry Christmas, Mister Wolf            | 31  |
| It's A Blunderful Life                  | 54  |
| Epilogue: Dancing in the City of Deceit | 80  |
| About the Author                        | 88  |
| Illustration: Barnard's Star system     | 89  |
| Illustration: Epsilon Eridani system    | 90  |
| Excerpt from Hollow Moon                | 91  |
| Available from WyrStar                  | 117 |

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“Look to the future now, it's only just begun.”

– Slade, *Merry Xmas Everybody* (1973)

# Preface

## The Worlds of Hollow Moon

A LONG TIME FROM NOW IN A GALAXY WE CALL HOME... It is the twenty-third century and scientists, dreamers, crooks and believers have bridged the vast cosmos, staking their claims where distant suns burn fierce in the sky. Yet for all of humankind's technological marvels, life for many is far from a wondrous fairytale.

Can a poor, down-trodden kitchen slave find her prince in the shape of a young, dashing space captain? When the power fails and parents are away for the night, is it wise to be wandering the forest with vicious robot wolves on the loose? A man caught up in a war wonders if he can go on, so why does a hologram taunt him by showing the greatest blunders of his life? It is supposed to be the season of goodwill!

The science-fiction stories in this collection are inspired by classic fairytales and other well-known fables associated with the Christmas festive period. These are tales of the future, science fiction for the pantomime season: slices of adventure from the space-opera saga that began with *Hollow Moon*. Happy reading!

*Steph Bennion, Christmas 2017.*

## To Dance Amongst The Stars

*Can a poor, down-trodden kitchen slave find her Prince Charming in the shape of a young, dashing space captain? As they meet at the Christmas Ball, she is the first to admit he's not exactly her type...*

“I HAVE AN INVITATION to a Christmas party!” shrieked Thelxiepeia, billowing into the ornately furnished lounge with all the grace of a pregnant airship. She was waving her touch-screen slate as if trying to swat an irritating wasp. “The American Embassy is throwing a ball and they’ve invited me! Me!”

“And me,” Peisonoe pointed out, glancing up from where she wallowed on a couch. The room was filled with electric howls and wails, emanating from the musicians strutting their stuff on the huge holoivid screen dominating the room. “Along with father, mother and everyone else who matters in Lanka. Don’t get any ideas about being special!”

Peisonoe was Thelxiepeia’s twin. They shared the same muddy complexion, rolls of fat, dark lank hair and terrible dress sense that made neither Indian girl as pretty as a picture, despite supposedly being in the flush of youth at a tender eighteen Terran years old. Yet they had been raised to believe that even the plainest of canvas could become a masterpiece with the right patronage. Their mother, with misplaced foresight, had given her daughters trendy non-traditional names. Their father’s contribution was wealth, for he had made a small fortune as an easily corruptible official in the service of Maharaja Kashyap on the moon of Yuanshi. Epsilon Eridani in the twenty-third century was the new frontier for rogue opportunism and a long way from the stifling old-world governments of Earth.

“I didn’t get one,” grumbled the grey haired Indian woman who had followed Thelxiepeia through the door. In her hands was a tray with the sisters’ afternoon tea.

“Yaksha!” scoffed Peisonoe. “Why would you? You’re nobody!”

“Where’s my hot chocolate?” demanded Thelxiepeia. Before Yaksha could answer, the girl had snatched the jug of milk from the tray as if expecting to find a steaming mug of cocoa-scented brew hiding beneath. “You know I always have chocolate at four o’clock!”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“It’s only half-past two,” Yaksha said wearily.

“How dare you answer back!”

Yaksha sighed. “I was merely pointing out...”

The rest of her reply was abruptly cut off as an exasperated Thelxiepeia threw the contents of the milk jug into the older woman’s face.

“I want my chocolate!” the girl demanded. “Get it for me, now!”

Yaksha responded with a steely stare, but said nothing as she lowered the tray to a table and retreated from the room. Once she was gone, Thelxiepeia dropped into the couch next to her sister and gave an exaggerated sigh.

“Where did father get that woman from?” she remarked, exasperated.

“I think Yaksha came with the house,” replied Peisonoe, reaching to take a scone from the tray. “If she were a slave I’m sure father would have sold her by now.”

\* \* \*

The Crystal Palace of Kubera was a huge, castle-like edifice in the centre of the city of Lanka, built as a summer retreat for the ruling Maharaja and his family but rarely used as such. His wife, the Maharani, much preferred the comforts of Sumitra Palace in Yuanshi’s capital of Ayodhya, a city which did not suffer from the seemingly incessant rainfall that blighted Lanka. The Maharaja therefore used Kubera as a way of rewarding officials, teasing them with a life of luxury for as long as they remained in his favour. Minister Lingam, his wife Aglaope and daughters Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe had been in residence at Kubera just over six months, considerably longer than most.

Yaksha stomped noisily back to the kitchen, fuming with barely concealed rage. The Minister himself, a quietly confident man who would undoubtedly go far, treated the staff with respect. He was a man who was always willing to step in to resolve domestic issues with the same keen interest as he would handle problems of state. Lingam’s wife and daughters however were snobby, mean-spirited individuals, who in

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Yaksha's opinion did not deserve the good fortune fate had bestowed upon them.

"A nobody!" muttered Yaksha, her face still dripping with milk. "I'd rather be a nobody than an obnoxious social parasite!"

The kitchen door reacted too slowly to her approach. Yaksha shoved it open with a crash before the automatics had chance, causing the young woman in cook's overalls beyond to jump in alarm. Ganesa was a slim, seventeen-year-old Indian orphan from Ayodhya, who had been assigned to the palace as a public servant, a status that meant she was owned by the state. Slavery was supposed to be illegal throughout the five systems. Maharaja Kashyap had simply redefined the concept based on his own ideas about what was right for Yuanshi.

"Sorry to startle you, my dear," apologised Yaksha, reaching for a towel. She had interrupted her young assistant's contemplation of their new food molecularisor; Ganesa had been trying all morning to fathom how to control it using the images in her mind, having been implanted with a cranium microchip when she was a child. "Those girls make me so mad!"

Ganesa offered her a sympathetic look. "What have they done now?"

"Their mere presence is enough," remarked Yaksha, scowling as she wiped the milk from her face. "It was all I could do to stop myself giving Thelxiepeia a slap! The good news is they'll be out tomorrow evening, so we'll get some peace and quiet. Lingam and his leeches have been invited to a Christmas party," she explained, seeing the girl's quizzical expression. "The annual American Embassy Ball rears its ugly head once again."

"Christmas? But they're Hindu!"

"Our American friends like to remind us poor heathens of the wonders of Christianity once a year," Yaksha said sarcastically. "Actually, this one should be fun. The Dhusarian Church is planning a protest outside the embassy. When they tried that during Diwali it turned into a full-blown riot."

"The Embassy Ball," murmured Ganesa, sighing wistfully. "Dancing! That does sound fun."

"Fancy a chance to meet your Prince Charming?"

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“He wouldn’t be my type. Besides, I haven’t a thing to wear!”

Yaksha laughed. “It’s a shame to see a pretty girl like you stuck down here. At your age you should be out enjoying yourself.”

“Tell me about it,” muttered Ganesa, absent-mindedly running a finger along the back of her neck. “Unfortunately, I have that little marker in my implant that would set off all sorts of alarms if I dared to wander. All things considered, I’ll settle for a quiet night in.”

Yaksha looked on sadly as Ganesa resumed her duties, all too aware that the young woman seemed unhappier by the day. With a sigh, Yaksha turned away and idly tapped the screen of the wristpad she routinely wore. The device was her connection to the five-systems network, though she rarely used its capabilities beyond that of a communicator. As she flicked through her list of contacts, an idea began to form in her mind. Thelxiepeia’s behaviour had left her feeling more bitter than usual. She needed something good to take her anger away. Her eyes fell upon a familiar name and she smiled.

“Ganesa?” she asked. “How do you fancy a bit of magic in your life?”

\* \* \*

By the following afternoon, Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe were on the verge of joint nervous breakdowns as they ploughed through the endless selection of gowns and dresses filling the wardrobes of their rooms. Down in the kitchen, Yaksha had brought a visitor to see Ganesa, who was sitting warily on a stool wondering what she had let herself in for.

“Ganesa, this is Namtar,” said Yaksha, introducing her to a tall, pale-skinned man dressed in a neat civilian suit of grey. “If I am to be your fairy godmother, Namtar here is my magic wand.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” greeted Namtar, politely shaking hands with Ganesa. His Russian accent made her think of exotic, faraway places. “Yaksha has brought to me a veritable tale of woe and invited me to facilitate an audacious escapade away from your somewhat unfortunate circumstances.”



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“I beg your pardon?” asked Ganesa, blinking at the man’s rush of words.

“He’s going to help you get out of here,” replied Yaksha. “You shall go to the ball!”

“But...” began Ganesa.

Namtar had brought with him a small black case, which he placed on a work surface and opened to withdraw a touch-screen slate. Ganesa’s eyes went wide as this was followed by a strange probe-like device, which he connected via a lead to the slate. Her fear increased as he stepped towards her and placed the probe against the back of her neck.

“There is no need for alarm,” Namtar reassured her. “I merely intend to remove the troublesome series of bits and bytes that has enslaved you so.”

Ganesa opened her mouth to protest, then realised what Namtar was saying.

“You can do that?” she asked. “Get rid of the ownership code in my implant?”

She grimaced as a sudden bolt of pain flared behind her eyes. The probe beeped in sympathy. Namtar gave an apologetic grin and stepped back.

“All done,” he said. “You are no longer branded as property of the Maharaja! Official records are a little harder to change, but I have a contact in Ayodhya who owes me a favour. In a few days no one will know you were ever a public servant to the Yuanshi machine!”

Ganesa stared at him, unsure of whether to believe him or not. Namtar busied himself putting away the probe and slate, then handed an envelope to Yaksha.

“You managed to get tickets?” the older woman asked. “I’m impressed.”

“To the ball?” exclaimed Ganesa.

“The very same,” acknowledged Namtar. “Electronic invites, such as the missives sent to your own dear Minister, are regarded as rather vulgar in certain quarters. Holographic heralds are sent by courier to those truly special guests. Which now includes yourself.”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Yaksha withdrew the flat plastic sheet from the envelope and held it in the palm of her hand. A monochrome hologram of a child dressed in an angel costume, no more than ten centimetres high, appeared hovering above her hand.

“Greetings, esteemed companion of Lord Consus!” the tiny figure proclaimed gaily, in a high piping voice. “The Ambassador and his staff wish you a merry Christmas and cordially invites you to the Sixteenth Annual Yuanshi Embassy Ball!”

“Gosh,” murmured Ganesa, as the hologram faded. “It’s for real.”

Yaksha eyed Namtar cautiously. “Where did you get this?”

“The late Lord Consus is sadly unable to attend this year’s prestigious event,” he replied solemnly. “He fell accidentally into a chemical tank during a political visit to a terraforming project; and like the ghost of a rather awful joke, he now has no body to take. He was an executive of some standing within the Que Qiao Corporation, as I recall.”

“Accidentally?” asked Yaksha, giving Namtar a stern look.

“The authorities have been suitably reimbursed to see it that way. His Lordship will be there in spirit; or to put it another way, as trace elements in the winds that blow from the south. I am sure he would have not wanted this invitation to go to waste.”

“There’s only one ticket?” Ganesa had hoped to persuade Yaksha to come with her.

“Lord Consus unwittingly bequeathed his own invitation to an associate of mine,” Namtar confessed. “You are fortunate that he happened to have a second for an unnamed female companion, though he was not the sort of man to take a wife. Or to have any friends at all, if the truth be known.”

“You have been most helpful,” Yaksha told him.

“Always a pleasure to help an agent in... Ow!”

“Agent?” asked Ganesa. Namtar was rubbing his arm and scowling at Yaksha.

“Nothing to concern yourself with, my dear!” Yaksha said briskly. “Namtar, I’m sure you have lots of things to do and other places to be. Don’t let us keep you!”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Namtar nodded, then bowed to Ganesa.

“Freedom is a precious gift,” he said solemnly. “It is one I give gladly. Use it well.”

“I will,” said Ganesa, slightly bewildered. “Thank you.”

Namtar picked up his case and quietly slipped away, exiting via the service door used for deliveries. Ganesa put a hand to her neck and touched the lump at the base of her skull betraying the presence of her implant. Everything was happening in such a rush that the full enormity of the situation was only just beginning to dawn. For the first time in her life, she was free to go wherever she desired. It was a prospect both exhilarating and terrifying.

“I am going to be in so much trouble over this,” mused Yaksha.

“I won’t leave if you don’t want me too,” offered Ganesa.

“I will hear of no such thing!” the older woman retorted, handing her the holographic invitation. “Don’t worry about me. I can look after myself. But I shall miss you.”

Ganesa held the invite in her hand and watched as the tiny fairy reappeared.

“My first night of freedom,” she murmured. “Perhaps that does call for a party!”

\* \* \*

Thelxiepeia appeared at the door of her sister’s bedroom and proudly showed off the latest ensemble unearthed from her wardrobe. Beneath layers of lace scarves and oversized jewellery, she wore a short dress striped in a terrible mishmash of pinks. The outfit did her limited natural assets no favours at all.

“You look divine!” shrieked Peisonoe, trying not to laugh. Her only aim was to look better than her sister, which judging by efforts so far should not be difficult.

“Do you really think so?”

“Of course! You will be the belle of the ball!”

Thelxiepeia smirked as she looked at Peisonoe’s own outfit of an animal-print body stocking coupled with a black leather jacket. They had

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

seen a skinny model wear the exact same thing on the holo-vid show *Galactic Catwalk* last week. There was no denying it was a brave choice, particularly as the model in question had not been burdened with the extra sixty kilogrammes of fat her sister had managed to cram into the stretchy material.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” asked Thelxiepeia, her eyes wide.

“Do you like it?”

“My dear sister, I can honestly say all eyes will be on you tonight.”

\* \* \*

“It’s a pumpkin,” said Ganesa, scratching her head. “Why would anyone want to build a monocycle that looks like a giant pumpkin?”

They were standing in the underground garage beneath the palace, where a couple of dusty ground cars, discarded fishing equipment and a pile of paint cans jostled for space alongside the strangest vehicle Ganesa had ever seen. Monocycles were single-seat electric vehicles where the rider sat within the hub of a giant wheel, which although fast were notoriously difficult to control. This one had been modified with hemispherical side panels and now resembled a huge orange ball with doors and a slot for a windscreen.

“Years ago, the Maharaja decided pumpkins were the new wonder food for Yuanshi farmers to export across the five systems,” explained Yaksha. “This was built to promote the damn things. The one time I drove it, a gust of wind from a passing aircar knocked me sideways and I’d gone half a kilometre or more before I managed to stop it rolling.”

“I am not driving to the embassy party in a pumpkin!”

“There must be a way to make it look less like an overblown Halloween lantern. It’s the only vehicle down here that actually still runs.”

“I could walk,” offered Ganesa.

“Nobody arrives on foot. Especially those with special invites.”

Ganesa gave one of the side panels an experimental pull but it held firm. Looking closer, she saw the spherical bodywork and doors had side windows that had been sealed with painted panels, which after a few tugs proved easier to remove. After some effort, she and Yaksha managed to

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

open six rounded apertures in the upper half of the vehicle, three either side, which was almost enough to suggest something quite different to a giant pumpkin.

“What if it was a different colour?” she mused. She had never been a fan of orange.

“Like gold?” suggested Yaksha, pointing to the paint tins in the corner of the garage. “Popular colour in Kubera, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Gold,” murmured Ganesa. “That could work.”

“I’ll get a maintenance robot onto it straight away. It would match your dress.”

“Dress? What dress?”

“Follow me!” replied Yaksha, clearly enjoying her fairy godmother role.

Back in the kitchen, she produced her next surprise. The gown was a floor-length gold sheath number with spaghetti straps, which Yaksha had liberated from Aglaope’s wardrobe. The mother of the twins had a similar slim build to Ganesa, which only added to the mystery as to why her daughters had turned out the way they had. The gold dress was one Aglaope had bought under the delusion that she could carry the look of someone twenty years younger, only to be subsequently relegated to the back of the closet when the harsh reality of the bedroom mirror revealed this was clearly not the case.

“Her ladyship’s misguided dress sense is your gain,” said Yaksha, handing Ganesa the gown. “I took a pair of shoes as well. They’re quite old and I don’t think there’s much power left to work the adjusting mechanism, but they should do for tonight.”

She presented Ganesa with what looked like glass slippers, but which on closer inspection proved to be made of a crystal-like clear plastic. Ganesa prised off one of her work boots and gingerly placed a foot into the cavernous shoe. She heard a click, then whirring noises as the shoe contracted to fit her foot perfectly.

“Fantastic!” she declared. “Pity they’re not heels.”

“They can be,” Yaksha told her. “You can adjust the settings via your implant.”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Somewhat bemused, Ganesa closed her eyes and scrutinised the application icons projected into her mind's eye by her implant. A new one had appeared, shaped like a silver stiletto shoe. She gave the image a tentative mental prod, which promptly metamorphosed into a list of control settings just as Yaksha had promised. Activating the one to extend the heel nearly made her fall over. Ganesa had forgotten she was only wearing one shoe.

“Whoops!” she said, grinning. “Where has this stuff been all my life?”

“In the hands of the privileged few,” Yaksha replied tartly.

Ganesa held the gold dress to her chest and swished from left to right, trying to imagine how she would look. Yaksha smiled, reflecting the young woman's realisation that maybe there were reasons to be optimistic after all. Just then, the older woman's wristpad beeped. The ladies of the household were calling for her assistance.

“I have to go,” she told Ganesa. “When I return, we'll see how the robot has got on with the monocycle. Hopefully it should look a little less like a pumpkin by now.”

“A pumpkin coach! It's a pity the Maharaja's horses all dropped dead,” said Ganesa. The prized steeds had fallen ill after breaking free and eating their way through a crop of native deggdra. The drink made from the berries was not called Dead Horse Gin for nothing. “A horse and carriage would be a real fairytale touch.”

“Horses!” exclaimed Yaksha. “I nearly forgot!”

Reaching into a pocket, she produced a couple of oversized toy mice. After handing one to Ganesa, she held the other in her palm and twisted its left ear. The kitchen was promptly swamped by the pink holographic glow of a giant cartoon hippopotamus, one inexplicably wearing a tutu and slowly pirouetting on its hind legs.

“It's a holographic toy,” Yaksha explained. “There's a box full of them in the old nursery. Try twiddling the ears to see if there's a setting for a horse.”

She switched off the hologram and handed her mouse to a dumbstruck Ganesa.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“Incredible,” the young woman murmured. “Now this really feels like a fairytale.”

\* \* \*

The box-shaped Ministerial aircar settled to a halt in the embassy grounds, drowning in a roar of turbines the sound of festivities drifting from the stark white building at the top of the drive. Minister Lingam, his wife and daughters stepped into the cool night air, trying their best to ignore the small crowd of demonstrators at the main gate. It was taking far too long for an embassy footman to come and greet them.

The sun that was Epsilon Eridani had slipped below the horizon just a few hours ago. Nights were long on Yuanshi, lasting a full two and half Terran days as the moon moved in its orbit around the gas giant Shennong. For once it was not raining and the sky was clear, with the thin blue crescent of Yuanshi’s neighbouring moon of Daode shining bright amidst the star-speckled panorama. The terraforming of Yuanshi had only recently reached the point where it was safe to remove the domes that had once cocooned Lanka, Ayodhya and other settlements in their own protective environment. Nevertheless, the atmosphere remained perilously thin; although the air had a high oxygen content to compensate, most people still carried emergency respirators to counter occasional shortages of breath.

“When are they going to give us proper air?” gasped Thelxiepeia. Her own oxygen mask was decorated with a haphazard mosaic of shiny stick-on stars.

“I know!” cried Peisonoe. “How can they expect people to live on this crappy rock!”

“Girls!” exclaimed Aglaope. “You know the Ambassador cannot abide bad language!”

Minister Lingam bit his lip. He kept to himself the thought that his plump daughters already breathed in more than their fair share of the manufactured atmosphere. As was the formality for a high-ranking advisor to the Maharaja, he wore his military dress uniform of maroon and gold, topped by a crimson-plumed hat. His wife Aglaope had gone

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

for a ball gown in deep blue velvet, her dark hair piled high and framed by a silver tiara. Wisely, she had stepped in to direct what her daughters should wear. Both had abandoned their original choices and now wore matching gowns of dark green.

Behind, the aircar lifted away towards the allocated parking zone, their driver purposely sweeping low over the heads of the demonstrators as he left. As the noise of its turbines faded, Lingam and his family began to make out the calls and chants uttered by the protestors. Without warning, they suddenly broke into song:

*“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!”*

“Nutters!” muttered Aglaope, pulling her shawl tight around her shoulders.

“They believe the Star of Bethlehem was some kind of spaceship,” Lingam observed drily. “A most curious religion. They have a priest called Taranis who has far too much influence in the Maharaja’s court for my liking.”

Like most religions, the Dhusarian Church had its fair share of converts who believed they had a duty to force their beliefs upon others. This latest demonstration was against the embassy’s celebration of Christmas, though as a protest it was doomed to win favour. Yuanshi was predominately populated by Indians of Hindu faith, unflappable in the knowledge that their gods had been around longer than those of anyone else. The embassy’s evangelical Christian staff were less forgiving, but far from alone in thinking the Dhusarians were a few baubles short of a Christmas tree.

An android footman in traditional butler livery approached the waiting party and proceeded to lead them up the drive. Moments later, they were standing on the threshold of the social event of the season, excitedly peering through the open doorway at the bright lights and



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

cheerful decorations framing the buzzing gathering of socialites. Many people had travelled to Yuanshi's second city especially for the occasion.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" announced the footman. "I give you Minister Lingam, his good wife Aglaope and daughters Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe!"

The Ambassador's staff had liberally decked the ballroom hall with bows of home-grown holly, along with paper chains, tinsel, huge silver stars and anything else they could find that looked festive. Four huge holographic chandeliers hung from the ceiling, the light from their ghostly candles illuminating a scene seething with everyone who was anyone in Lanka. Those not hovering by the buffet table were dancing sedately to the sound of an unseen orchestra playing the second movement of Bantoff's *Shennong Concerto*. Robot butlers wound their way through the throng distributing refreshments.

"The Ambassador's wine cellar is legendary," Lingam told his wife, taking her arm as they crossed the threshold into the hall.

"All this food!" cried Thelxiepeia. "Yuanshi lobster, thunderworms, everything!"

"Look at the people!" murmured Peisonoe. Her eyes were upon a dashing young Indian man, who was whirling around the dance floor like the cosmic Koothan out to destroy a weary universe. "Lovely, lovely people..."

"You two go and have fun," said Aglaope. "But no alcohol!"

Thelxiepeia pulled a face. In a blink they were lost in the crowd as her sister propelled her towards the dance floor, eager to flutter her eyelashes at the young men present.

Lingam dutifully made his way to where the Ambassador himself was standing. To his annoyance, they found themselves in a queue with other guests equally eager to introduce themselves. As he and his wife awaited their turn, the young Indian man they had seen earlier swept past, earnestly engaged in conversation with an elderly matriarch well-known in the Maharaja's court.

"Prospecting on Taotie?" she was saying, clearly smitten. "For gold?"

"Gold, silver, diamonds," the man said casually. "Just a hobby, of course."

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Lingam looked at his wife and rolled his eyes in mock disdain. He was a little taken aback that she seemed genuinely impressed. The Epsilon Eridani system's Earth-like planet of Taotie had been claimed exclusively by the Que Qiao Corporation on behalf of the Chinese government. This had not stopped innumerable adventurers making illegal landings hoping to make their fortunes on the resource-rich world.

"He has a holographic invite!" whispered Aglaope.

Lingam regarded the man with renewed interest. He looked to be in his early twenties by Terran reckoning, his youthful features adorned with a neat goatee and shoulder-length hair cut in the latest fashion. He wore a green tunic, leather leggings and thigh-length boots in a style known as buccaneer fashion, complete with a plasma pistol wedged under his belt. Next to his holstered gun was a plastic rectangle Lingam recognised as a much-prized holographic herald, an honour he had long sought but never received.

"Damn young upstart!" he grumbled. "Who does he think he is?"

"He's obviously someone," his wife pointed out. "He wouldn't be here otherwise."

Lingam watched as the young man moved around the room, switching from one partner to the next. Those he danced with he recognised as elderly widows belonging to the exclusive Yuanshi clique that were the last surviving original colonists from Earth. By the time the man came around again he was with another elderly dame, dancing at half tempo in recognition of his partner's great age.

"I had to kill him, of course," the man was saying. "Anyone who speaks to my mother like that cannot hope to get away with it."

"You are a naughty boy!" giggled his lady friend.

"In more ways than one!" he replied, giving her a wink.

Shaking his head sadly, Lingam watched them dance slowly away. The mysterious guest was a smooth operator for one so young. On the other hand, fresh-faced pretenders out to relieve old ladies of their late husband's wealth were hardly anything new.

"Isn't he wonderful!" Aglaope sighed, her eyes shining as her gaze followed the man around the room. "We have got to introduce him to the girls!"

## THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

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The Dhusarian protestors at the gate fell silent as the gold coach trundled towards them, mesmerised by the carriage's ghostly white steeds bobbing disconcertingly in the night breeze. The robot footman moved to greet the passenger and then paused, its artificial-intelligence unit frantically searching its data banks for anything resembling the contraption pulling to a halt on the drive. The gold paint was already starting flake, revealing a horrible orange tint beneath. The pair of unicorns pulling the carriage were an impressive touch. Android eyes saw through the hologram projection, inwardly despairing at the makeshift arrangement of mice-shaped projector units taped onto what looked like fishing rods, which in turn were jammed through the front of the giant pumpkin fuselage.

"This is crazy," muttered Ganesa, looking through the side window towards the brightly lit embassy. "I'm technically a public servant on the run, about to enter the one place that'll be crawling with government officials!"

"Don't back down now!" exclaimed the voice in her head. Ganesa had used her implant's inbuilt communicator to stay in contact with Yaksha during her journey through the city streets. "I have a feeling the gods are with you tonight."

"Our gods would not be seen dead at a Christmas party," Ganesa pointed out.

"Ganesa!"

"Alright, I'm going!" she retorted.

Ganesa had to admit that her teenage rebellious streak was secretly looking forward to infiltrating a gathering of the elite. Feeling defiant, she switched off her headcom with a deft mental prod and leaned across to give the door a shove.

Without warning, the door was pulled open from the outside. Before she could stop herself from falling, Ganesa found herself sprawled upon the ground, caught out by the unexpected act of chivalry. She looked up into the emotionless stare of the robot footman and hurriedly clambered to her feet, brushing bits of gravel from her borrowed dress.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“I’m not drunk,” she said defensively.

The footman scanned the holographic herald in her hand and bowed deeply.

“Mademoiselle will find his Lordship has already arrived,” the robot intoned. “Please follow me. I will introduce you to the other esteemed guests.”

“Great!” chirped Ganesa, wondering who the butler was referring to. “What about my pumpkin-mobile? Can I leave it there?”

“We will arrange for your vehicle to be taken to secure parking.”

“Watch the fishing rods,” she warned. “I got a hook caught in my dress earlier.”

She gave her strange carriage one last rueful look, just in time to see the unicorns flicker and fade away, destroying the fairytale illusion. Modern technology was wonderful but holographic toys were designed for the short attention spans of children, not for being paraded halfway across the city on a single charge.

As the footman led Ganesa towards the embassy, she used her implant to mentally adjust her heels until she was happy with the height. The gold dress swished dramatically around her slim form. Yaksha had done wonders with her hair and make-up, transforming Ganesa from a poor down-trodden kitchen servant into a teenage party queen.

“How do you wish to be announced, mademoiselle?” asked the robot.

“Call me Aphrodite,” Ganesa replied, feeling confident.

The footman responded with a blank look, which had it been made by a human would probably have involved a raised eyebrow.

A party of Chinese delegates from Taotie were at the door, easily identifiable by their unnaturally stunted physique after too many years living on the high-gravity world. Having been announced, they were bouncing lightly down the stairs towards the waiting frivolities, heads held high as if they owned the world. Ganesa mused it was quite possible they did. She had often wondered why Shennong and its moons had kept their Chinese names, despite being predominately Indian.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” announced the robot. “I give you Lady Aphrodite!”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Ganesa felt a hundred eyes upon her as she gingerly entered the ballroom. She had never seen so many people together in one place, her senses overwhelmed by the sights, sounds and smells of the scene before her. She was momentarily startled to see Minister Lingam and Aglaope watching her from just a few metres away, then relaxed as it became clear they had failed to recognise her out of her work clothes. Her discomfort at being the centre of attention was brief, for the next guests were already being announced. Ganesa caught Lingam's and his wife's exchange as she immersed herself in the party.

"Stunning girl," murmured Lingam.

"I have a dress just like that," said Aglaope, shuddering at the memory of her reflection in the mirror. "Now where did that nice young man get to?"

Ganesa headed for the buffet table, feeling that at the very least she needed a glass of wine in her hand. Her eyes were drawn to the centre of the hall and the couples dancing to the music of the orchestra, which to her amazement was not coming from a concealed holoivid unit but instead from an ensemble of real-life musicians in the corner of the room. She was captivated by several of the young women on the floor, mesmerised by the way they composed themselves in the rhythm of the dance. They had competition in the shape of one young Indian man, who was moving through the gathering like joy personified, skipping lightly with whoever came his way. Out of everything she had seen tonight, it was the music and dance that stirred her passion. She regarded the dancers with hopeful eyes, willing someone to come along and sweep her off her feet.

"Out of your league," sniffed a voice beside her.

Ganesa glanced over her shoulder and froze as she saw Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe standing far too close for comfort. Her moment of panic quickly subsided when it became clear that, like their parents, they had obviously not paid enough attention to her at Kubera to recognise her now. Feeling brave, Ganesa grabbed a glass of wine from a passing butler's tray and swivelled on her heels to face the rotund twins.

"Who is that man?" she asked. "He dances like an angel."

"Or a demon!" sniggered Thelxiepeia.

"He can lead me into temptation, any time!" quipped Peisonoe.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“They say he’s Lord Consus,” Thelxiepeia told her. “Father said the Consus he knows is a smelly old man who has no friends. We’re thinking that hunky man might be a son we didn’t know about who has inherited the title.”

“We’ve heard he’s rich!” said her sister. “And a bit of a bad boy!”

“Lord Consus?” mused Ganesa, thinking about what the mysterious Namtar had said regarding the late owner of her own holographic invite. “I wonder…”

“No chance,” retorted Peisonoe. “As I said, out of your league.”

Ganesa shrugged. “He’s not my type.”

“Good!” Thelxiepeia declared, though there was a wary look in her eyes suggesting she did not believe her. “Look, he’s coming closer! He must have noticed us by now!”

Ganesa smiled and stepped away, thinking that the so-called Lord would have to be blind not to spot the excited twins eagerly trying to attract his attention. The young man was indeed coming closer. As he moved from one dance partner to another, Ganesa thought there was a flash of a conspiratorial smile as their gazes momentarily met. With a sigh, she turned away, deciding she was not cut out for such social occasions. Yaksha had been unusually determined that Ganesa should be here, yet all she could now think of doing was finish her drink, jump into her pumpkin and head out of town.

“Lady Consus!” called a voice. “I thought you’d never arrive!”

Ganesa looked up from her drink into the eyes of the young dancer. He was holding her ticket, having surreptitiously slipped it from her grasp. Behind him, she saw the scowling faces of Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe, once again spurned by their prince.

“Are you talking to me?” she asked warily.

“Indeed I am, my dear Aphrodite,” he replied, giving her a sly wink. “This ticket is reserved for Lord Consus’ companion, is it not?”

“You are not Lord Consus,” Ganesa retorted, snatching back the invitation.

“Nor, I suspect, are you really Lady Aphrodite,” he replied with a grin.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Plucking the glass from her hand, he tossed it recklessly over his shoulder. He pulled her into the throng of dancers, barely blinking an eye as the glass shattered noisily against the wall behind. Ganesa's attempts to resist were half-hearted at best. Her indignation at the man's arrogant manner faded as she gave way to the lure of the dance. Before long they were whirling gently through the crowd, the man's graceful moves hampered somewhat by Ganesa's shy attempts to follow.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed. Her heel had come down on the toe of his boot.

"I'm out of practice," she confessed. "Sorry about that."

He gently pushed her away, lifted their linked hands and twisted his body in one fluid motion. Ganesa gaily pirouetted as he drew her back into his arms. She returned his playful grin, thoroughly enjoying herself.

"See?" he said, as they continued to move. "We make a lovely couple."

"You're really not my type," she replied. "Sorry."

"Oh, I don't know. We could go far, you and me."

"I don't even know who you are!" she said. "I heard Lord Consus was dead."

"Is he? Never met the man. He has a wonderful taste in companions, however."

"I am not his companion! I err... borrowed the ticket to come here."

"So did I!" he exclaimed. "What a coincidence!"

"You still haven't told me your name!"

The man came to a halt and bowed low, generating a barrage of mutterings from neighbouring couples as they were forced to dance around them.

"My name is Hanuman," he declared. "Space captain extraordinaire."

"Modest too," she noted, smiling. "My name is Ganesa."

"Ganesa?" he remarked. "Isn't he some sort of elephant god?"

"Speak for yourself, monkey man!" she teased. Hanuman held out his hand to continue the dance, keeping a quizzical eye upon her as they glided back into the rhythm. "Ganesa was the name of another of Lingam's public servants at Kubera," she explained. "Apparently he

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

disappeared in somewhat mysterious circumstances. To avoid an official investigation, I was brought in to assume his place.”

“You’re owned by Minister Lingam?”

“Not anymore. My fairy godmother released me from my bond.”

“You mix with some very strange people.”

“Whatever you say, Lord Consus.”

Hanuman laughed. Their dancing became more fluent as Ganesa found her feet, even as she wondered why her partner had not yet tired of her and moved on to his next conquest. More and more eyes were upon them as Hanuman’s many admirers realised their chance had gone. Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe were positively fuming.

“You’re an amazing woman,” Hanuman said at last. “Come away with me.”

“I told you, you’re really not my type!”

There was something in her voice that made Hanuman pause. It seemed he had been so captivated by her refreshing sincerity that he had failed to register the lack of tension, coy glances or subliminal signals he was undoubtedly used to from those out for something more. Ganesa decided he really should have picked up on the way her own eyes kept wandering to swaying hips of the other girls on the dance floor.

“Oh,” Hanuman said at last, blushing. “I see.”

“Sorry about that. You are rather cute, but...”

“...Not your type,” finished Hanuman. “Yes, I get it.”

They danced on, each lost in their own thoughts. All of a sudden, Ganesa began to wobble, then lurched unsteadily upon her feet, her face creased with an annoyed scowl. Before Hanuman could make a quip about her having too much to drink, she slipped from his grasp and fell heavily to the floor with a shriek.

“Damn shoes!” she exclaimed loudly, rubbing her ankle. “I bet a man invented these crappy stupid things. The bloody adjusting mechanism has failed!”

Ganesa fell silent. The orchestra had reached the end of the piece. The hall was as quiet as the grave as everyone turned to stare at the fallen dancer. She found herself sat at the centre of an ever-widening circle of



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

bemused guests, alone except for her bemused dance partner and errant malfunctioning shoe. Hanuman sheepishly offered her his hand.

“Young lady!” roared a voice. “We do not tolerate language of that sort!”

Ganesa looked up at Hanuman with tears in her eyes, hurt not by the fall but by the cruel and abrupt way her fleeting fairytale had come to an end. The fleeting panic that had rooted her to the spot suddenly released its grip and she scrambled to her feet, not wanting to see who had chastised her. With one last woeful look at Hanuman, she kicked off her other shoe and ran for the door, desperate to flee the party. For a split second, no one else moved. The last thing she saw was Hanuman, staring dejectedly after her.

\* \* \*

Hanuman grabbed the fallen shoes and ran after her. The orchestra started another waltz, ending the awkward hush. The dance floor was soon moving once more.

“Strange girl,” remarked Lingam. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“Stunning, you said,” his wife replied frostily.

A short while later, the crestfallen figure of Hanuman came back through the door, still clutching the shoes. It seemed he had lost sight of Ganesa as she ran away into the night. With a sigh, he shuffled wearily to a robot butler and placed the shoes on its empty tray.

“Dead Horse Gin?” he asked hopefully.

Just then, he felt a tap on his shoulder. A double shadow loomed large at his feet. As he turned, his blood ran cold.

“Would you like to dance, mister?” chimed Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe.

\* \* \*

Yaksha slammed shut the door of the washing machine. Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe had gone through their entire wardrobe trying to find something to wear last night. It had taken Yaksha more than an hour to collect the

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

twins' scattered crumpled clothing, discarded and trampled underfoot in their frenzy to prepare for the ball.

Ganesa brooded at the kitchen table, her feet in a bowl of warm water. Upon leaving the embassy, she had been unable to find where the embassy robots had parked her pumpkin-shaped monocycle and had nowhere else to go. She had walked barefoot for an hour to get back to the Palace of Kubera.

"I blew it," she said, sighing dejectedly.

"Namtar said he'd arranged for someone to keep an eye on you," said Yaksha, taking the seat next to her. "I had no idea he was planning to set you up like that! He spoke highly of Hanuman, which probably means the man's a rogue. Young and a bit too full of himself?"

"He made that dance floor his own," Ganesa said wistfully. "I feel bad for embarrassing him like that."

"Never mind," said Yaksha, patting her head in a thoroughly condescending manner. "You can apologise later. He should be here soon."

"What!?" exclaimed Ganesa. "Hanuman's coming here?"

"It's all rather romantic," Yaksha said dreamily. "Aglaope saw him clutching your discarded footwear and it reminded her of that old folk story. What was it?"

"Cinderella?"

"That's the one. So she's invited Hanuman back here on the pretence that she knows who the shoes belong to. Really, she's hoping to partner him off to one of those dreadful daughters of hers. They're convinced he's the young heir of Lord Consus."

"Oh my word," groaned Ganesa. "Those shoes will fit anyone! Poor man."

"Don't worry about him," said Yaksha. "You need to get out of here before they realise the mysterious stranger at the ball was you. I suggest you pack your bags and get ready to leave. With any luck, you'll be in Ayodhya before it gets light."

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### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

A short while later, Yaksha was busy in Kubera's main banqueting hall, laying the table for breakfast and preparing the room to receive their guest. It was one of the few rooms in Kubera where the walls were exposed to reveal the opaque glass bricks that gave the Crystal Palace its name. The gold-hued mirrored surface reflected the light of the holographic chandeliers, filling the room with a muted cascade of rainbows.

Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe were seated sullenly at the table. Both were barefoot, eager to play their part in their mother's fairytale. Neither was willing to give way to the other when faced with the chance of marriage to a lord of the realm. Aglaope drifted irritably around the room, impatient for Hanuman's arrival and continually getting in Yaksha's way. It had not gone unnoticed that the Minister had excused himself from what he regarded as a load of nonsense and retired to his study for the day.

"A visitor has arrived," intoned the butler robot, presenting itself at the door.

"Bring him in!" exclaimed Aglaope.

The robot nodded and backed away. Moments later, the butler returned with a young man in tow, one who seemed a little bemused by his surroundings and obviously unaware of what his host had in store. Yaksha gave the man an appraising stare and nodded approvingly. Hanuman was exactly the sort of refined ruffian she had expected.

"Lord Consus!" greeted Aglaope. "So glad you could make it!"

"You did say you knew where to find Gan... Lady Aphrodite," said Hanuman, hungrily eyeing the breakfast spread. Without waiting to be invited, he dropped the bag he carried to the floor, sat down at the table and began helping himself to food. "Have you got anything stronger than tea?"

"At this time of day?" Aglaope remarked disapprovingly.

"Tea is fine," Hanuman said hastily.

"Did you bring the shoes?" she prompted, watching with ill-concealed disgust as her daughters broke rank and began to feast on the prepared breakfast. Hanuman at least had a little grace when it came to

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

eating. “I believe we can identify the mysterious Lady Aphrodite through quite a simple test.”

“You mean that Cinderella crap?” asked Hanuman. “I’ll know her when I see her.”

“Humour me,” growled Aglaope, fixing him with a steely stare.

“Yes, I’ve brought the shoes!” he replied testily. Reaching down, he picked up his bag and dumped it unceremoniously onto the table. “What’s the rush?”

“Give me those!” screeched Thelxiepeia.

She lunged across the table to grab the bag, but her sister was quicker still. Before her mother could intervene, Peisonoe had pulled out the shoes and slotted them onto her feet. She triumphantly jumped up onto her chair to show everyone the results.

“They fit!” she shrieked. “The shoes fit!”

“Of course they do,” retorted Hanuman, demolishing the last of the scrambled egg. “They self-adjust to fit anyone. Those shoes would fit an elephant.”

“I can marry Lord Consus!” declared Peisonoe.

“Wait one moment,” protested Hanuman. “No one said anything about marriage!”

“Give me those shoes!” said Thelxiepeia.

“Girls!” cried Aglaope. “Stop this nonsense!”

“What is going on here?” Hanuman asked Yaksha, who had arrived with a teapot.

Yaksha lowered the pot to the table and gave him a wink, something which disturbed him even more than the growing din of the twins’ ongoing squabble. Ignoring Hanuman’s question, she activated the communicator on her wristpad.

“Can you come to the banqueting hall, my dear?” called Yaksha, speaking into her device. “Our guest is in need of a fresh change of clothes.”

Hanuman blinked, thoroughly confused. “I am?”

“Would you like some tea?” she remarked, picking up the pot.

Before he realised what was happening, Yaksha was pouring steaming brew down the front of his tunic. He promptly gave a shriek and

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

lunged sideways in a frantic bid to escape. Hanuman fell off his chair with a loud crash.

“What the hell are you doing?!” he yelled from the floor. “You’re insane!”

“The shoes are mine!” cried Thelxiepeia.

“They’re mine!” retorted Peisonoe.

“Did you call for me?” asked Ganesa, who had appeared at the door.

Frowning, she tried to ignore the sight of the twins trying to scratch each other’s eyes out. She was not in the mood for breaking up fights. Hanuman popped his head over the edge of the table, glaring at Yaksha with a mixture of bewilderment and horror.

“Go with her!” urged Yaksha, shoving him towards the door. “Quickly!”

“Ganesa!” cried Hanuman. “You’re part of this madhouse?”

“Not for much longer!” she declared, grabbing his hand.

Moments later they were dashing along the passage towards the servants’ quarters, leaving the commotion in the hall behind. They did not stop running until they reached the kitchen, pausing only for Ganesa to grab a prepared bag of provisions and her own personal effects. Together they stepped out of the back door into the long Yuanshi night.

“My hero!” joked Hanuman. “I can’t help feeling that you saved me from a fate worse than death. Also that this rescue should have been the other way round.”

“This is the twenty-third century!” declared Ganesa. “If there is such thing as a fairytale of space captains and kitchen slaves, does it matter who rescues who?”

Hanuman grinned. “My offer still stands,” he said. “Come with me.”

“Why me?” she asked, frowning. “I have nothing to offer you.”

“But think what I can offer you!” he exclaimed. “A position as first mate on a genuine spaceship! Okay, it’s a tatty old shuttle that has more rust than heat shield, but I have my eye on an old military freighter that’s coming up for auction soon.”

“First mate, eh?”

“We could go far, you and me!” he declared.

“Just not all the way.”

## THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“Funny girl. Do we have a deal?”

Ganesa held out her hand. “Deal.”

Hanuman took her palm and shook it solemnly.

“Here’s to happy ever after,” he declared. “And dancing amongst the stars!”

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## Merry Christmas, Mister Wolf

*Christmas at the exclusive ski resort of Kirchel was a tedious affair. But the robot security wolves that patrolled the dome at night were rejects from the brutal Gods of Avalon game show...*

HESTIA PEERED THROUGH THE CRACK in the curtains, watching as three sets of parents walked briskly down the path and away into the night. The tender glow of street lamps embraced the neighbouring log cabins nestling amongst the trees, slumbering sweetly beneath a soft coating of machine-generated snow. It was a picture-perfect view, a scene that at night was as exquisite as any secluded ski resort in the Swiss Alps. In reality it was as fake as a politician's smile. The landscape of Kirchel, on the planet of Ascension in the Barnard's Star system, was an attempt to recreate a slice of Earth on a planet where nature had long ago settled for something a lot less fussy. At the moment however the illusion was sublime. From Hestia's vantage point at the upstairs window, the darkness had all but masked the steel and glass dome shielding the small outpost from the harsh environment outside.

Hearing a noise behind her, she turned and saw the door to her room swing open. For reasons Hestia had yet to fathom, her parents had this year invited family friends to join them for Christmas at the cabin. Hestia and her brother Lodus had found themselves in the company of Xuthus and Maia, a boy and girl they knew from the academy. When Hestia was younger she had hated the tedious routine of spending every winter break at her family's winter lodge. This Christmas, she had been more than willing to leave behind what had been a particularly horrible year of exams, social angst and endless bad hair days. It had come as an unwelcome surprise to find she would be sharing her holiday with classmates she did not know very well and was not sure she would ever get to like, especially after listening to Maia's moaning during the thousand-kilometre skybus ride to the resort.

It was Maia at the door now. Hestia's inner groan joined that of the door hinges, heralding the arrival of someone intent on disturbing her solitude. She watched as Maia shuffled moodily into the room, crossed the

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

floor and collapsed into a sofa, blocking Hestia's view of the flickering holographic flames in the fireplace.

"They've gone," Hestia informed her. "We have the cabin to ourselves!"

"Whoopee," muttered Maia. She had tied back her voluminous blond hair and changed her clothes for the third time since their arrival that day. Her latest ensemble in green and silver made her fake tan look more orange than ever. "I wish..."

The rest of her sentence was lost as Xuthus, a tall handsome youth who annoyingly excelled at just about everything at school, shoved his way through the doorway like a grizzly bear with a headache. His bronzed youthful features were creased in annoyance.

"Who's been in my room?" he complained.

Hestia blushed, as she always did in his presence. Like most fifteen-year-old girls at school, Hestia had a secret crush on Xuthus, nurtured ever since she started at the academy in their home city of Bradbury Heights. Despite them both being in the same class, she knew Xuthus would never have acknowledged her presence if their parents had not been good friends. Their respective fathers had known each other since college in Berkeley, California. Both now worked at the same pharmaceutical laboratory on Ascension, alongside all the other bronzed, happy and extremely wealthy people of Bradbury Heights. Hestia herself was a pale, stocky girl who for years was resigned to fading into the background, but her confidence was growing. Her parents had finally allowed her to have bioelectric fibre-optic extensions woven into her hair. Hestia's mousy tresses were currently streaked with red, not that anyone cared.

"Well?" demanded Xuthus. "Has someone been sleeping in my room?"

"Your room?" asked Maia. "What about my room? It looks like an elephant has been jumping up and down on the bed."

"And who's been sleeping in my room?" exclaimed a voice from the door.

The newcomer was Lodus, Hestia's portly younger brother, who had a better friendship claim with Xuthus and Maia by virtue that all three



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

played in the Bradbury Heights academy orchestra. Hestia was envious of the orchestra's trips away from Ascension, such as the one a couple of months ago to play at the Epsilon Eridani peace conference. Much to the chagrin of their parents, Hestia had no musical talent at all.

"I thought you were downstairs, getting us doughnuts," Xuthus said irritably. Lodus had come through the door empty-handed. Hestia saw the sugar around her brother's mouth and the guilty look upon his face and guessed the rest.

"I said they've gone," she repeated, wondering if anyone was listening.

"The doughnuts?" asked Maia. "Lodus, you pig!"

"Our parents!"

"Leaving us stuck here," Maia complained. "I'm old enough to go to the clubhouse!"

"No, you're not," Xuthus told her, with a smugness that suggested he could have gone if he wanted, though he was no older than Maia.

"So who has been sleeping in all the beds?" asked Lodus, confused.

"No one," Hestia said defiantly. "It wasn't very nice the way you kept throwing out my stuff no matter which room I picked. This is our family's cabin and you've grabbed all the best rooms! You three are horrible. I'll jump on your beds if I want to!"

\* \* \*

Ascension was on few tourist trails in the late twenty-third century. The planet was a bleak, hostile place with a largely poisonous atmosphere, a world that had little going for it other than the weird native flora and fauna that flourished in the Tatrill Sea and deep canyons of the Eden Ravines. The small scientific-research station at Kirchel, high in the New Malverns mountains, had been established by the Que Qiao Corporation to examine the strange bacteria that thrived in the cracked rocks of the snow-capped peaks. Findings at Kirchel and elsewhere on Ascension had led to lucrative medical applications, which in turn had made many at the Que Qiao planetary headquarters at Bradbury Heights extremely rich. With wealth came arrogance. When a scheme was mooted to recreate an

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Alpine ski resort at Kirchel, ecological considerations were swiftly forgotten by those with money to burn.

The original research station, a relic of early missions to Barnard's Star, was a small concrete dome barely a hundred metres wide with few concessions to comfort. The ski resort next door revelled in a stark contrast of ambition. Kirchel lay beneath a dome of steel and glass, which at a kilometre wide was as large as Ascension's capital city and spaceport of Newbrum. Inside the new dome, the terrain had been landscaped in the manner of a picturesque mountain valley, complete with cascading streams fed by melt-water from the snow-capped slopes outside. Hardy fast-growing conifers had been imported from Earth at stupendous expense, albeit not in sufficient numbers to create the desired forest ambience. Holographic trees filled the gaps until new saplings could be grown from seed.

Older dwellings within the resort were made of concrete, sculpted and coloured to look like log cabins. Wealthier residents had recently started importing the genuine article from Scandinavia, making Kirchel's simple wooden houses some of the most expensive real estate in the five systems. The resort's actual ski slopes lay outside the dome. Notoriously treacherous, they were regarded as the ultimate thrill for winter sports fanatics, even before the need to wear a pressure suit and oxygen mask was taken into consideration. Kirchel was for the rich; its ski slopes were for the insane.

Officer Janus, a bored middle-aged security guard on patrol in the sleepy resort, was nearing the end of his evening shift. Nothing much ever happened in Kirchel and it had long been the practice to leave the night watch in the hands of sentry robots. Pausing near a small stone footbridge at the foot of the valley, he looked back at the darkened cabins nestling amongst the trees. Other than the gurgle of the stream, the rustle of trees in the breeze from life-support air vents and murmur of music from the nearby clubhouse, all was quiet.

The hush was promptly shattered as a group of raucous young men emerged from the clubhouse, singing at the top of their voices. The song was *Forever Christmas*, which was currently being played to death on

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

youth music holo-vid shows due to its sarcastic lyrics and disparaging view of festivities. Janus cringed as he heard their discordant harmonies:

*“Fingers bleed from decking halls with holly,  
Sleigh-bell tinnitus leaves me melancholy,  
You see joy, but all I see is folly,  
I thought this was the season to be jolly!”*

Janus scowled and continued over the bridge to the security cabin near the entrance to the resort. The song fitted his mood, for what he hated even more than his job was seeing or hearing other people having a much better time than himself. Nine years ago almost to this very night, he had been involved in some proper fun and action, hunting royalist rebels on the Epsilon Eridani moon of Yuanshi sixteen light-years away.

His colleague, the burly ex-policeman Officer Alberich, was waiting for him outside the open doors of the robot maintenance shed at the rear of the cabin. Inside the shed, the two cyberclone wolves were already on their feet, their heads lowered as they patiently awaited their orders. The mechanical beasts, each standing nearly two metres high, had originally been built for *Gods of Avalon* holo-vid broadcasts, then sold off when an audience vote dismissed them as far too tame for the blood-thirsty and sadistic fantasy game show. The wolves were an old design with a cramped cockpit in the torso for an operator, but had since been modified to run autonomously with the help of artificial intelligence circuits. With the right programming they were as docile as a pet rabbit, but there was no denying that the huge robot creatures, with glowing red eyes and a coat of rusty steel needles in place of fur, had an appearance that was not far short of terrifying.

Janus gave Alberich a nod as he trod wearily towards the shed. His hand slipped into his jacket pocket and felt for one of the two data rods he had been holding onto all day.

“Why the glum face?” asked Alberich. Janus had slipped back into a scowl. “You’re not still mad over losing the Santa Clause gig, are you?”

“I needed that job,” complained Janus. “What’s wrong with having me in a fat suit and beard? I can dish out tacky rubbish to screaming kids

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

as good as anyone. Who decided it would better to get one of those new fandangle robot Santas?”

“All the resorts and malls have them now,” Alberich pointed out. “Christmas is a time of peace, joy and frantic shopping. Stores have their shareholders profits to think about. An android in a fat suit works non-stop for no pay.”

“It’s not right,” grumbled Janus. “I should be Santa!”

“Never mind,” said Alberich. “Anything to report?”

Janus did not expect any sympathy, for he knew Alberich had heard the rumours regarding his portrayal of the seasonal jolly fat man. He could not deny that he was rather fond of having young mothers sit on his lap. Nor did he care that his smutty innuendos had warped many a child’s notion of Father Christmas.

“Quiet as a grave,” Janus replied. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a data rod, a thin plastic tube a few centimetres long that nonetheless could store six months’ worth of holoivid broadcasts. “Grimm’s Fairytales, as promised. My little one is into dinosaurs now.”

“Much appreciated,” said Alberich, graciously taking the rod. He glanced up to the light glowing at the first floor window of the security office cabin. “My daughter has a new electric elf that acts out whatever story you plug in. Do you think there was ever a time when parents read proper story books to their kids?”

Janus gave him a withering look. “No one asked you to buy that robot.”

“Fair point. Have you got the one for the wolves? It’s not in the safe.”

Janus nodded. He put his hand into his pocket once more and extracted a second data rod, near identical to the first. As per procedure, he held it up before Alberich so that his colleague could verify the large ‘G’ for ‘guard’ written upon it in marker pen, then stepped to the nearest robot, lifted the wolf’s right ear and slipped the rod into the aperture beneath. The angular snout of this wolf was white, signifying it was the master control unit. After digesting the orders on the rod, it would broadcast appropriate commands to the slave second wolf, using the short-range transceivers in the robots’ spiky metal tails.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

The eyes of the first wolf flashed twice. Lurching into motion, the robot trotted outside to begin its nightly patrol. Moments later, the second wolf received its orders and followed suite.

“All done,” grunted Janus.

Alberich smiled. “See you tomorrow.”

Janus gave a half-hearted wave, turned his back on his colleague and trudged towards the entrance of the tunnel that linked the resort dome with the original research station. It was there, in less salubrious concrete surroundings, that he had his own quarters. He hated every squalid square centimetre of his lodgings almost as much as his job.

\* \* \*

Officer Alberich watched as the robot wolves trotted calmly into the night. Satisfied all was well, he made his way to the nearby cabin, which as the higher-ranking security officer was his to call home whilst on duty in Kirchel. As he stepped through the door, he never noticed the distant shadow that was Janus, who had chosen that moment to double back into the gloom to run after the departing wolves.

Alberich entered the warm embrace of his home. His wife was busy in the kitchen, loading nutrient cartridges into the food molecularisor. He went upstairs to where his six-year-old daughter was waiting for her father to put her to bed.

“I have some fairytales for your elf,” he said, showing her the data rod. “Would you like to hear a story before you go to sleep?”

His daughter nodded. Shuffling across her bed, she plucked the tiny gnome-like automaton from where it sat on the edge of a toy box. Alberich removed the figure’s pointy hat, dropped the data rod into the hole beneath, then replaced the hat. He stood the elf upon her bed, whereupon the tiny humanoid robot came to life and started marching up and down on top of the covers, a performance that made his little girl laugh.

“Patrol! Patrol!” squeaked the elf. “Check the perimeter! Report all intruders!”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“This is a funny story, daddy,” his daughter remarked. She frowned as the elf marched off the end of the bed and crashed to the floor. “I don’t like it very much.”

“Hmm...” murmured Alberich. The elf’s hat had fallen off as it fell. He retrieved the twitching figure and withdrew the data rod.

His blood ran cold as he caught sight of a faint and almost-obliterated letter ‘G’ on the side of the rod. He slotted the data rod into his wristpad, tapped the screen to read the file summary and with a sinking heart realised what had happened. Janus had marked his own rod with a ‘G’, possibly for ‘Grimm’, but somehow the same legend had been scrubbed from the sentry robot’s rod. The question of whether it had been a genuine accident or not would have to wait. His immediate concern was that there were two giant mechanical wolves roaming the resort with their artificial brains filled with fairytales.

“Janus!” he hissed. “The fool!”

His daughter, her eyes wide, frowned at his muttered outburst. After reassuring her with a hug and a promise to return with a proper story, Alberich slipped from her room, brought up Janus’ contact details on his wristpad and opened the communicator channel. Moments later, the worried expression of his colleague appeared on the wristpad’s tiny screen. It was difficult to tell where Janus was, but by the way the picture lurched he guessed the man was in some sort of vehicle.

“Get back here now!” Alberich snapped. “Christmas has been cancelled!”

\* \* \*

Hestia was halfway down the stairs, wondering if she could get rid of the others by suggesting a game of hide and seek where she would do little of the latter, when the stairwell was suddenly plunged into darkness. Her first thought was that the others were playing a trick on her, but no sound of giggling reached her ears. Trying not to panic, she waited for her eyes to adjust to the green glow of her hair extensions. After a few moments, she felt for the wall and cautiously descended to the bottom step.

“House?” she called. “Lights, please.”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

There was no response from the building's AI unit. Shuffling onwards, Hestia saw the lights had gone out throughout the lodge. When she reached the open door to the kitchen, she realised the touch-screen display on the food molecularisor had also gone dark. The silence was equally eerie, for the familiar hum of the ventilation system no longer broke the hush.

Hestia twitched nervously as she heard a squeak of floorboards, then shrieked as a hand appeared out of the gloom and grabbed her shoulder. Moments later, the beam of a torch appeared, revealing Xuthus' leering grin.

"You scared the life out of me!" Hestia protested.

"What's happened to the lights?" Maia asked fearfully, as she loomed into view behind Xuthus. Hestia saw her reaching to clutch the boy's arm. "Why did we come to this horrid place? It's cold and dark and creepy and light-years from anywhere!"

"Thanks," muttered Hestia. She was none too fond of the cabin herself, but it belonged to her parents and she would not take criticism from others. "I didn't ask you to come!"

"Perhaps the fuse has gone," suggested Xuthus.

"You don't even know what that means!" Maia retorted.

Hestia jumped again as a bulky shadow appeared in the nearby doorway. Lodus stepped into the torch beam and wiped a smear of pizza topping from his face.

"What's happened?" he asked. "It's gone dark."

"You don't say," muttered Hestia, then saw her brother's worried frown. "I'll call father. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

Xuthus refused to give up his torch. Leaving the others at the kitchen door, Hestia had to make do with the glow of her fibre-optic hair extensions, now bright blue, to light the way as she returned upstairs to search for her wristpad. The cloying darkness was unlike anything she had experienced before, forcing her again to use her hands to feel the way.

Upon reaching her bedroom, she gingerly crossed to the window and pulled back the curtains. The street lamps outside were no longer lit. She had not expected to see darkness throughout the resort. Her wristpad was

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

on her bed and she slipped it on, selected the communicator application, then saw the message on the screen and sighed.

“There’s no network,” she revealed, upon rejoining the others. “I can’t see any lights outside, either. It looks like the whole dome has lost power.”

Xuthus looked pensive. “If life support has failed as well...”

“What?!” Maia screeched, interrupting. “I’m too young and pretty to die!”

“Modest too,” observed Xuthus. “Don’t worry! The air in the dome will last hours, days even. I reckon we should head for the clubhouse or the research station. I don’t really want to sit here in this boring black hole until our parents get back.”

“I don’t like the dark,” muttered Lodus.

“I’m sure the feeling is mutual,” Hestia reassured him. “Granny Skadi’s cabin is not far away and she’ll know what to do. She’s the park warden,” she added, secretly pleased that her suggestion had left both Xuthus and Maia looking somewhat confused. “She looks after the plants and trees, feeds the animals, that sort of thing.”

“There’s animals out there?” Maia cried, looking fearful. “Big ones?”

“Hopefully,” mused Hestia, her fingers having instinctively leapt to her ears. Maia’s loud exclamations at close quarters were becoming painful.

“If they’re hungry they’ll want something bigger to chew,” Xuthus reassured Maia. He punctuated his observation with a slap to Lodus’ belly, earning a hurt stare in return.

With the help of Xuthus’ torch, they found their winter coats and were soon ready to venture outside. Hestia retrieved an emergency lantern from a cupboard beneath the stairs, which was a lot brighter than Xuthus’ torch but barely had enough gas left in its fuel cell for half an hour’s use. As they gathered at the front door of the cabin, Hestia noticed Maia was giving her a strange stare. The other three had chosen to wear their academy flight suits and matching thermal jackets. Hestia herself had grabbed her favourite red coat, which reached to her knees and had a large hood that kept her head nice and warm.

“That’s your coat?” asked Maia. “How quaint!”



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Hestia gave her a withering look, pushed open the door and stepped into the cold night air. As she paused to take in the fake wintry vista of the resort, her eyes were drawn to the steel and glass dome above. Free from the glare of artificial light, the stars blazed brighter than she had ever seen before. It was an awe-inspiring sight.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

“Come on, little red riding hood,” said Xuthus. “Let’s go and find granny.”

“What?” Hestia shook herself from her reverie. “Yes. It’s this way.”

Lantern in hand, she led her friends down the path, past the dark neighbouring cabins and onto the narrow gravel lane that ran the length of the valley. She hesitated beside a metre-high green box, perturbed by the sight of the crumpled metal doors that lay forlorn on the ground. A mass of broken cables spilled from the opening. The box itself was scarred by a myriad of fresh scratches and dents.

“That explains the power loss,” remarked Xuthus, frowning.

“Are those teeth marks?” Maia asked warily.

“Left by a huge bear,” Xuthus told her. “Or a girl-eating tiger!”

His grin faltered as a sudden metallic howl broke the silence of the surrounding forest. The dreadful noise echoed around the dome, followed by the unmistakable sound of something large crashing through undergrowth. Holding the lantern high, Hestia peered into the shadows beneath the trees. Lodus sidled closer and took her other hand in his own. Beside her, Xuthus whimpered in pain as Maia clutched him for reassurance, digging her manicured fingernails into his arm.

“I’m scared,” whined Lodus. His voice trembled.

“It’s just one of the sentry wolves,” Hestia said hesitantly. After seeing the ravaged junction box, she was not so sure. “They won’t hurt you.”

“Wolves?” Maia’s eyes went wide. “No one said anything about wolves!”

The crashing noise came nearer and stopped. All of a sudden, a huge dark shape with glowing red eyes leapt from the woods ahead and skidded to a halt on the lane. Maia shrieked as the robot wolf stepped closer and fixed them with a steely glare.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

A second wolf erupted from the trees behind the first. Hestia released a startled yelp and drew Lodus close. She had never seen the sentry robots act this way before. The first wolf opened its jaws wide, revealing an astonishing array of dagger-like teeth. The awful sound that emerged was not the dreadful howl they were expecting.

“Who’s afraid?” rasped the robot. “Of the big bad wolf?”

“I am!” yelled Maia.

As quick as a flash, she spun on her heels and ran up the lane, pulling a startled Xuthus behind her. In his panic to follow, Lodus broke free of Hestia and accidentally shoved her into the wrecked junction box, leaving his sister shouting obscenities as she fought to untangle herself from the wiring. Scrambling free, Hestia leapt to her feet and tried to run, only to be abruptly yanked to a halt from behind. Her coat was impaled on a jagged piece of twisted metal. Hestia screamed and dived for cover as the first wolf leapt past in pursuit of her fleeing friends. The second wolf slowly stalked closer, regarding her with a cold electronic stare.

“Good doggy,” whispered Hestia. Still cowering, her fingers feverishly worked to unhook her coat from where it was snagged. “Not a big bad wolf at all, are you?”

The wolf did not move. Hestia wondered if she had addled its AI brain. The concept of ‘good doggy’ was undoubtedly quite alien to what had been designed as a huge automated terror machine. As she slowly regained her feet for the second time, her fingers closed on a short length of branch that had fallen from a nearby tree. It was far too small to use as a weapon. Suddenly, she had an idea.

“Nice doggy want to chase the stick?” she asked, waving it tentatively.

The wolf gave her a quizzical look.

“Catch!” yelled Hestia.

She threw the stick as hard as she could over the wolf’s shoulder. As the robot turned to look, Hestia burst into a frantic sprint. She raced as fast as she could into the woods, not daring to look behind. As she ran, her red hood flapping wildly at her back, the sound of her pounding footsteps were joined by an ominous galloping clatter that grew louder by the second. The wolf was behind and gaining fast.

## THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

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Officer Alberich grimaced and decided he could wait no more. Almost twenty minutes had passed since he had ordered Janus back to the security cabin, but his colleague had not returned. His wife stood behind him in the doorway, looking perturbed. Her husband had accessorised his usual officer's uniform with a very large axe.

“You look like a lumberjack,” she remarked.

“On Avalon, lumberjacks do sterling work as Emergency Deactivation Operatives,” Alberich retorted, then hefted the axe. “Have you seen *Gods of Avalon*? When those monster cyberclones run amok, something sharp and heavy is the best tool an officer can have!”

\* \* \*

Hestia dashed through the trees as fast as her feet would carry her, conscious of the wolf hard on her heels. Somewhat bizarrely, the robot's corrupted programming had made it forget how to tell the difference between holographic trees and the real thing. The wolf was far faster than she was, but its current predilection for lunging into real trees and crashing to a halt meant that the furious pounding of her own little legs was enough to keep her one step ahead of the robot's snapping jaws.

Park warden ‘Granny’ Esmeralda Skadi lived on the other side of the miniature forest in a small chalet near the dome wall. For reasons best kept to herself, her cabin was as far away as possible from the main cluster of ski lodges along the lane. As Hestia approached, she saw the light of a lantern shining behind the closed curtains. She jumped as a crunch and a howl behind her signalled that the pursuing wolf had once again found a tree.

“Granny!” yelled Hestia. “Help me! The wolves have gone mad!”

A curtain flickered, then to Hestia's relief the front door swung open. There stood a tiny old woman in a nightgown, her face creased with annoyance as she stepped onto the porch, her lantern held high. In her other hand was a large frying pan.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“Stop right there!” snapped Granny Skadi. “I’m talking to you, mister wolf!”

Both the robot and a panic-stricken Hestia had slid to a halt. The warden’s voice was surprisingly strong. Her eyes burned bright beneath her shock of grey hair.

“Granny Skadi!” shouted Hestia. “Be careful!”

The robot wolf lowered its head and pawed the ground, as if suddenly unsure of what to do. The bizarre tableau of a huge wolf, herself in a red hood, an old woman and a cottage in the dark woods made Hestia think of the scary fairytales told to her when she was little. The thought would have frightened her a lot more had she been aware of the Grimm-inspired algorithms building up inside the cyberclone’s brain. Granny stepped forward and gave a threatening wave of the frying pan.

“My word,” she exclaimed, addressing the wolf. “What big ears you have!”

“What?” cried Hestia, as she scrambled onto the cabin’s porch. Her instinct had been to hide behind the warden, but the diminutive woman only came up to the girl’s chin.

The wolf paused. Hestia could almost see it running through possible scenarios, in the manner of a chess computer coming in for the kill. When the robot finally spoke, its voice was a raspy high-pitched burr.

“All the better to hear you with!” declared the wolf.

“This is madness,” muttered Hestia.

“That’s the slave unit,” Granny whispered. “It’s having to communicate back to the master unit before replying, which may give us a bit of time. What happened to it?”

“It’s gone mad!” the girl hissed back.

“I was hoping for a bit more information than that,” the woman retorted crossly.

The robot wolf stepped forward and thrashed its metal tail, decapitating one of Granny’s prize rose bushes in the process. She waved the frying pan again.

“What big eyes you have!” she said.

“All the better to see you with!” the wolf replied, after a moment’s thought.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“And what big teeth you have, mister wolf!”

This time, the automaton was even quicker. “All the better to eat you with!”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” murmured Hestia. She glanced to the warden. As a way of bringing down a savage sentry robot, she wondered if there was anything more to Granny’s strategy than trying to talk it to death.

“And what bad breath you have, mister wolf!” cried the old woman.

The wolf paused for what seemed an age, then cocked its head.

“Bad breath does not compute,” the cyberclone declared. “All the better to hear what you eat. All the better to eat what you see. Wolf sees Granny and Red Riding Hood. Wolf eats Granny and Red Riding Hood!”

The robot opened its jaws and leapt towards the figures in the doorway.

“Run!” yelled Granny, grabbing Hestia’s hand.

Hestia yelped as the woman dragged her away. A split second later, she felt a gust of air across the back of her neck as the wolf’s outstretched metal claws whistled close to her luminous locks. The robot could not turn in time and crashed into the porch, narrowly missing its prey and Hestia and Granny dashed to safety along the path to the rear of the cabin. Before Hestia had time to draw breath, the old woman yanked her around the corner and out of the wolf’s sight.

The mechanical wolf thrashed itself free from the shattered remains of the porch and circled the cabin, howling as it went. Moments later the forest rang with a couple of screams, another howl, then a loud metallic clang as a frying pan bounced off something hard. A cloud of snow fluttered up from behind the cabin and all was still.

\* \* \*

Xthus realised he could no longer hear the thudding footsteps of the wolf above his own heavy heartbeat. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw Maia and Lodus several paces behind, both looking ready to drop. The wolf was nowhere to be seen, but he could hear something

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

crashing through the trees further down the hill. He shivered as a mournful metallic howl drifted across the night air.

“I can’t run anymore!” Maia wailed.

“Me neither!” wheezed Lodus.

Xuthus slowed to a halt and waited for them to catch up. As he scanned the woodland for signs of their pursuer, he spied a small ski lodge tucked away not far up the hill.

“This way,” he urged. “Follow me!”

He ran ahead to the cabin and rapped loudly on the door. When there was no reply, he went to a window and peered inside. There were no signs of life. As Maia and Lodus staggered wearily up to the porch, Xuthus returned to the door and tried the handle, fully expecting it to be locked. To his surprise, the door yielded to his touch and swung open with an eerie screech. Turning to the others, Xuthus froze as he saw the crazed cyberclone wolf emerge from the trees and bound towards them.

“Get inside!” he yelled, beckoning to his friends. “It’s behind you!”

Lodus gave a cry of alarm, drowning the loud crunch as the wolf ran into a non-holographic tree and fell to the ground. Xuthus saw him exchange a look of fear with Maia and as one they spun around to face their pursuer. The robot was nowhere in sight.

“Oh no, it isn’t!” Lodus protested.

“Oh yes, it is!” cried Maia.

Xuthus stared in horror as the wolf rose from the undergrowth and clambered back to its feet. Its white snout was now severely dented, which if anything made the robot look even more insane. Maia shrieked and pushed past Lodus in her mad scramble for the door. The younger boy stood rigid with fear before the approaching wolf.

Xuthus shoved them both into the cabin, slammed shut the door and slid the locking bolt across. Maia and Lodus were trying their best to hide behind both him and each other. Xuthus hurriedly herded them away from the door.

He swept the beam of his torch around the lodge. Their impromptu refuge had evidently not seen any other sort of sweeping in a while, the light revealing a ramshackle living room that contained just a few sticks of

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

furniture and a ragged floor rug, the latter barely visible beneath years of accumulated dirt and dust.

Outside, the wolf thudded against the door and gave another metallic howl. Xuthus hurried to a doorway at the back of the room. He had barely turned the handle when he was pushed aside by a frantic Maia and Lodus. The door smacked him in the nose as they yanked it open in their rush to get into the room beyond. Xuthus cursed, rubbed his throbbing nose and angrily stomped after them.

Beyond the door was a rickety veranda, which looked out across a garden that even though was piled high with machine-generated snow still looked unkempt and overgrown. Maia cast a dubious eye at their surroundings and frowned. There was no glass at the veranda windows and the walls were insubstantial wicker panels made of strips of bamboo.

“Why is that thing chasing us?” whined Lodus, sounding fearful.

“Santa sent it check up on you,” Xuthus said irritably. The younger boy’s wailing was getting on his nerves. “He clearly thinks you’ve been way too naughty this year.”

“A house made of sticks,” muttered Maia, giving the bamboo a disparaging kick. “I’m sure that will save us from the big bad wolf.”

As if to confirm her doubts, the garden fence suddenly exploded into kindling. Horrified, they watched as the sentry robot smashed its way into the garden and crunched to a halt. The wolf lifted its glowing red stare to the three nervous faces at the open veranda window. Patches of its spiny metallic fur had been hammered flat where it had run headlong into far too many trees.

“Little pigs, little pigs, let me in,” the wolf snarled. There was an odd human-like quality to its synthesised voice that Xuthus had not noticed before. He could have sworn the machine sounded out of breath. “Or I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down!”

“I am not a pig!” complained Lodus.

Maia rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Oh, yes you are.”

“Oh, no I’m not!”

“This is getting surreal,” complained Xuthus. “Robots can’t blow!”

“This one sucks,” moaned Maia. “Big time.”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

She shrieked as the robot jumped forward, rose upon its hind legs and calmly dug the claws of its huge forepaws into the bamboo walls either side of the window. The sound of splintering wicker was joined by a piercing scream as Lodus fled back into the derelict living room. A split second later, it was Xuthus' and Maia's turn to run as the veranda wall shuddered and gave way under the hefty weight of the wolf.

"It's coming to get us!" shrieked Maia.

Xuthus pulled her into the other room, slammed the door shut and threw the locking bolt. The shack shuddered as the robot crashed heavily into the veranda beyond. Xuthus and Maia hurried to join Lodus huddled in fright in the corner of the room. Outside, the clatter of claws gave way to an almighty bang as something big, angry and wolf-shaped rammed the door. Xuthus turned the beam of his torch towards the sound, wondering fearfully whether the heat quivering from their bodies could be detected by sensors inside the robot's metal skull. Just then, another metallic howl drifted upon the air, this time from further away.

"The other wolf!" exclaimed Maia, her eyes wide.

"It's eaten Hestia!" wailed Lodus. "And now it's coming for me!"

"Nothing has that big an appetite," snapped Xuthus. They all knew it was long past the time for jokes. "Besides, these cabins are made of concrete."

He jumped as a fresh bang from outside shattered the nervous hush within the room. Seconds later there was another thud, then the ominous cracking of splintering wood. Xuthus gasped and swung the torch beam towards a glimmer of red to the right of the door. There was a large crack in the wall he was sure had not been there before. His fears were confirmed at the sound of a third thump. The crack widened, revealing the glint of a robot eye.

"Most cabins are concrete," he murmured wearily. Maia stared at him, her face a picture of dismay. "Trust us to pick one made of crappy chipboard."

Another loud thud sounded, dislodging a worryingly large chunk of fake log cladding. Not only were the logs made of reconstituted wood chips, they were also suffering from a bad case of rot. Another thump followed, more quickly this time. Xuthus, Maia and Lodus watched in



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

horror as the cabin wall disintegrated before their eyes. The wolf paused in its destruction and shoved its steel snout through the hole.

“I’ll huff and I’ll puff,” rasped the robot. “And blow your house down!”

“Blow it down?” cried Maia. “Come at us like a tornado, more like!”

“I want my mummy,” whimpered Lodus, close to tears.

“I’d settle for a plasma cannon,” muttered Xuthus.

He swung the torch beam towards the front door. He was just about to suggest another bout of running away when the light fell upon what looked like a trap door in the floor, its outline barely visible through the dust and grime. As the battering of the wall continued anew, Xuthus scuttled across the grubby rug to the hatch and grabbed hold of the handle. The door lifted easily, revealing a dark and dingy brick-lined cellar below.

“Quickly!” he hissed. “Down here!”

Maia and Lodus hurriedly scrambled to follow Xuthus down the ladder into the cellar. There was a sudden loud groan as several metres of fake log finally yielded to the robot’s attack. The wall near the front door collapsed in a heap, sending a cloud of dust billowing across the room. The red glare of the robot emerged from the haze.

Lodus was last to reach the trap door. He was barely through the hatch when the wolf lunged forward and smashed the trap door from its hinges. In a panic, Lodus let go of the ladder and fell onto Maia, adding her own yells to his shrieks as they tumbled down the steps and crashed into Xuthus. In the room above, the wolf poked its head through the opening, bared its teeth and assaulted their ears once more with its horrible metallic howl.

“Little pigs, little pigs, let me in!” roared the cyberclone. “Or I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down!”

“We’re trapped!” wailed Maia. “It is most definitely going to eat us!”

“It’s okay,” said Xuthus, despite all evidence to the contrary. “That thing’s too big to get through the hatch.”

“It’s chewing the floor!” cried Lodus, pointing.

Xuthus and Maia recoiled in terror as chunks of floorboards began to rain down into the cellar. As they watched, the robot wolf opened its

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

jaws and attacked the edge of the trap door opening again, seemingly intent on making a hole big enough to get through. Xuthus ran the beam of the torch around the walls, desperately seeking another way out. There was nothing but bare brick and an astonishing array of spider webs. As Maia had keenly observed, they were trapped. He hoped the rest of what she said would not prove so prophetic.

A different howl shook the air. To their dismay, the head of the other wolf suddenly appeared over the shoulder of the first. Xuthus, Maia and Lodus cowered in terror as the second cyberclone beast opened its jaws to join the attack.

The second wolf unexpectedly lunged sideways and grabbed the first by the throat. A chorus of metallic shrieks erupted from above, then both robots crashed back out of sight, accompanied a deafening bang that dislodged a shower of grime from the cellar ceiling. Xuthus, Maia and Lodus stared panic-stricken up towards the dreadful rumbles and nerve-jangling grind of steel in the room above. Their screams shrilled in unison as the two wolves crashed past the opening, locked in fierce combat.

A split second later, the cabin filled with a piercing flash of light and a bang. Xuthus winced, wondering how on Ascension lightning had struck the shack. There was a pause, a heavy thud, followed by a muffled yet all-too human groan. An unexpected hush settled upon the cabin. A strong smell of ozone and burning insulation drifted into the cellar.

“What happened?” whispered Maia, shaking. “Have they eaten each other?”

Xuthus went to the ladder, then hesitated. “Why is it always me who goes first?”

“I’ve already made a mess of my hair tonight,” Maia said fiercely. “Going near metal wolves with big teeth won’t help matters. And Lodus is a coward.”

Lodus nodded in agreement. “I’m scared of everything.”

Xuthus pulled a face. Torch in hand, he cautiously ascended the ladder and poked his head through the torn opening. One of the wolves lay on its side, its once-piercing eyes now dark. He swung the torch beam to find the second robot and nearly fell off the steps in fright. The second cyberclone wolf was by the front door, sitting calmly like a house-trained

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

hound from hell. Its eyes still glowed red, but it did not appear to be in any rush to move, though curious grunting sounds came from within.

He heard a noise from the veranda. Xuthus stifled a shout as a squat figure carrying a lantern stepped through the shattered remains of the wall. The voice that followed was the most welcome sound he had heard in his life.

“Would you like a hand, my dear?” asked the woman with the lamp.

“Granny Skadi?” he cried. The newcomer was dressed in not much more than a nightgown but somehow Xuthus knew it was the warden. “Be careful of the wolves!”

“What’s going on?” asked Maia, who was at the foot of the ladder.

“It’s quite safe!” called Granny. “Your friend saved you all!”

“Friend?” asked Xuthus. He could not take his eyes off the seated wolf. “You mean that thing was trying to be friendly?”

Taking Granny’s offered hand, Xuthus climbed through the shattered hatchway and into the room. Behind him, Maia and Lodus cautiously began to follow. A new sound from the second wolf made him jump. Granny swung her lantern towards the seated robot.

Xuthus stared nervously as a hatch opened in the creature’s back. Two hands appeared from within, wearily pulling their owner from the robot’s cramped cabin. Xuthus’ eyes went wide as the iridescent locks, then the face of the cyberclone’s operator came into view. Behind him, Maia gasped in surprise.

“Hestia!” cried Xuthus. “What are you doing in there?”

“Saving your necks,” Hestia declared. Looking exhausted, she clambered from the wolf’s back and down to the floor. “No need to thank me all at once,” she added, finding her revelation had been met by a stunned silence.

A sudden loud knocking came from the front door. Granny drew back the bolt and pulled it open. In the doorway stood Officer Alberich, looking frantic and blinking furiously amidst a cascade of fake snow dislodged from the cabin roof. In his hands was a large axe.

“It’s taken me an age to find you!” he cried. “Are you all okay?”

“My hair is ruined!” complained Maia. “What sort of a resort is this?”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“Everyone is fine,” Granny Skadi reassured him. She frowned as a low groan issued from the defeated fallen wolf. “Well, nearly everyone. The young girl here may have got a bit carried away in wolf-to-wolf combat.”

“You fought the wolf?” exclaimed Xuthus.

Hestia nodded. “And the wolf nearly won.”

Alberich was astounded. “How did you manage to control that thing?”

“Granny whacked it with a frying pan and broke its transceiver,” Hestia explained, pointing to the twisted stump at the rear of the second robot that had once been its tail. “We switched off the AI circuits and I volunteered to sit inside and control it. Granny said the only thing strong enough to stop the first wolf was another one.”

“Granny knows best,” mused Alberich.

“A nasty case of bad programming,” declared Granny, as the officer stepped towards the first cyberclone. “Never trusted those things.”

“Others think just the same,” Alberich replied. “But no. They have so many inbuilt safety systems it should be near impossible for one to run amok, unless...”

Leaving his sentence unfinished, Alberich knelt beside the back of the fallen robot and released the hatch. A chorus of gasps rose from the gathered watchers as the light from Granny’s lantern fell upon the face of security guard Janus, lying scrunched inside the wolf’s cramped cockpit. Janus raised a hand to shield his eyes from the glare, then reluctantly pulled himself from the wolf’s torso. He could not have looked more guilty than if he had ran out of the Louvre with a crowbar in one hand and the Mona Lisa under his arm.

“You swapped the data rods on purpose!” cried Alberich, shaking his head in disbelief. “Is this some sort of petty revenge for having your Santa costume confiscated?”

“I wanted to show everyone that robots are bad!” growled Janus. He was battered and bruised, yet nevertheless defiant. “Only this one reacted badly to the Grimm data rod. Once it saw the children in the woods, there was little I could do to stop it acting out some crazy fairytale. All I planned was to take the wolf to the clubhouse and scare a few folks as

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

they headed home. I would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling kids!"

"No, you wouldn't," said Granny. "You're an idiot."

"Santa?" remarked Hestia. "Is it really you who dresses up in a fat suit and beard every Christmas to scare the little ones?"

"Not this year," grumbled Janus. "I've been given the sack."

"Santa's sack?" suggested Maia and giggled.

"I thought Father Christmas had reindeer," said Lodus, looking at the wolves.

"They've replaced him with a robot," Alberich explained. "One that doesn't leer at young women or threaten to confiscate presents from naughty children."

Maia gave Janus a wary look. "You're the one my mother warned me of."

"A robot Santa?" mused Xuthus. "Very Christmassy."

"Almost as festive as the synthetic roast turkey they serve in Newbrum's police cells," Alberich told Janus severely. He retrieved a pair of handcuffs from his jacket pocket as he spoke. "I hear you get loads and loads of sprouts."

Janus shuddered. "Yuck."

"Nothing wrong with sprouts," Granny retorted.

"All in all, quite a shaggy dog story," remarked Alberich. "My daughter will appreciate a good tale like this from her old man."

"Glad to be of service," Janus muttered sarcastically.

"Your last good deed as Santa," said Xuthus, smiling.

Hestia grinned. "Merry Christmas, Mister Wolf!"

\* \* \*

## **It's A Blunderful Life**

*A reluctant outlaw, fleeing armed agents, meets a mysterious stranger on a bridge. Can she really hope to convince him that life is worth living by showing him the greatest blunders of his life?*

FENRIS RAN THROUGH THE NIGHT like a quick brown fox, desperate to flee the pangram's awakened dogs of war. Dashing through the palace gates, he arrived at the lake and was halfway across the bridge before his wheezing gasps finally brought him to a staggering halt. The thin atmosphere of the terraformed moon of Yuanshi made sprinting difficult for even the hardest of athletes, which he most definitely was not. The fear of capture aside, the anticipated agony of the plasma rifle shot with his name on it was no match for the very real pain of his poor pounding heart and aching lungs.

A weary glance over his shoulder was not reassuring. The searchlights of the pursuing agents remained far too close for comfort, but for the moment he could run no more. Exhausted, Fenris leaned against the parapet railing, conscious of how loud his laboured breaths sounded above the quiet waters below.

Maharaja Kashyap was dead. The city of Ayodhya had fallen to the security forces of the Que Qiao Corporation. Fenris, who had worked hard to become a trusted figure in the Maharaja's court, now found himself amongst those labelled dangerous revolutionaries on the wrong side of martial law. This was one Christmas Eve he would not forget.

"Is this how it ends?" he groaned. "Hunted down like a common criminal?"

The slender suspension bridge that linked the lake's island park to the surrounding city was a foolish place to stop. The exposed roadway offered no cover but darkness to hide him from the agents swarming the Palace of Sumitra on the island behind. Much of the electricity grid had been cut across Ayodhya. All Fenris had to light his way was the pale blue glow of Daode, the sister moon of Yuanshi, currently low upon the western horizon. His shimmering reflection in the lake invited him to cast aside his worries for the cool calm of the watery depths. The pale bearded

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

face that stared back painted a mournful portrait. His torn tunic and dishevelled hair framed a visage not unlike that of a ghostly tramp.

A sudden grey blur jolted him from his reverie. Fenris scowled as a small tabby cat darted from nowhere and jumped over his feet, leaping metres at a time in Yuanshi's low gravity. He turned to watch its progress along the bridge and to his surprise saw instead a tall, slim woman standing just a few paces away. Her long dark tresses and floor-length silver and black fur coat twitched in the breeze, embellishing smooth olive-skinned features that were singularly unruffled by the sound of distant gunfire. Her quizzical look and sly smile hinted of playful mischief. Her eyes betrayed an awareness far greater than that suggested by her youthful demeanour.

Fenris took a step forward, then paused. The woman bore neither the attitude nor the attire of the Que Qiao agents currently securing the palace, nor was she anyone he recognised from Kashyap's court. When the stranger showed no signs of speaking, Fenris shuffled uneasily towards her and offered a nervous cough.

"Are you here to arrest me?" he asked, eyeing her cautiously. "From Que Qiao?"

The woman smiled and shook her head.

"From the Church? Have the faithful taken up arms as the Maharaja hoped?"

Again, she responded merely with a slow shake of her head.

"There's a surprise," Fenris muttered. He decided the woman was not about to shoot him, so tried a different tack. "Did you see the cat? That damn moggy near scared the life out of me. I wish they would not jump out like that."

"The Egyptians once worshipped cats," the woman said sadly, breaking her silence. Her soft voice possessed a degree of idle menace that made Fenris think of a caged tiger, one bored of being pampered and quite ready to casually eat its keeper. "Long before your time, of course. They were happy days."

"Their slaves may have disagreed," he suggested warily.

"Slaves need gods most of all," she replied. "You should know that."

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Fenris frowned. He thought about his own commitment to the Dhusarian Church, which looked to the legendary alien greys of Epsilon Eridani for spiritual enlightenment. In these closing decades of the twenty-third century, there the similarity ended. While cats were a very real presence in ancient Egypt, few outside of the Church truly believed that humanoid aliens existed for real, even here in the uncharted wilds of Yuanshi.

He returned his stare to the watery depths of the lake, the beckoning tranquillity of oblivion below. Perhaps it was no coincidence that the strange woman had arrived amid his morbid contemplations. Holier-than-thou charity workers of all denominations would be mobilising throughout Ayodhya to help mop up the mess left by the corporation's action, but the personal touch often gave way to the next best thing. Fenris had heard the rumour about why cameras and hologram projectors were installed on bridges, high buildings and other popular suicide spots but until now had not believed it.

"Are you from the Samaritans?" he asked. "One of their counsellor holograms?"

The woman shrugged. "Were you about to jump?"

"It's either that or spend the rest of my life in Feng Du," he replied. The thought of a one-way ticket to the grim penal colony on Taotie was the reason Fenris knew he should be running from Que Qiao agents right now, but there was something about the woman that held him to the spot. "Are you here to convince me otherwise?"

The woman gave a wry grin, but came no closer.

Fenris gave her a quizzical frown. "Do you have a name?"

"A great many."

"Such as?"

"In the past I have gone by the name of Athene."

"So now even holograms are named after ancient gods?"

The woman smiled. "If you like."

"For a Samaritan counsellor, you are a projection of remarkably few words," Fenris said irritably. "Are you not here to persuade me that I have a wonderful life? That whatever the trials and tribulations that come my way, it's better to live to fight another day?"



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Athene considered this. “A good Samaritan probably would do all that,” she agreed. “On the whole, they were the nicest people in the world as long as the conversation stayed away from religion and the Jerusalem construction industry. No, I think you should jump.”

“What?”

“I’ve been studying you for a while,” she purred impishly, taking a step closer. “Watching to see if you have been bad or good, just like that young upstart Saint Nicholas. In your case, it seems whatever you do ends badly. I’ve come to the conclusion that you should end it all now and save history from an even more tedious fate.”

“That’s horrible!” cried Fenris. “What sort of a counsellor are you?”

“The best,” she declared. “I deal in the truth, not feeble reassurances.”

Fenris gave her a hurt look, then went back to his frown.

“This must be a joke,” he grumbled. “Some spotty-faced urchin has hacked into the Samaritans’ hologram network and is having a good laugh at my expense, no doubt from his safe-and-sound bedroom on the other side of town. Very droll.”

“Wrong. Do you want to see your best blunders or not?” she asked. “You’re never far from a camera, Fenris my dear. Your whole life is on record, as is everyone else’s on this moon. Except for the Maharani’s,” she mused. “Unusually devious, that one.”

Fenris gave a hollow laugh, then caught the woman’s look of impatience and warily edged away, conscious that he was supposed to be fleeing for his life. Suddenly, a shaft of light shone down from the nearest bridge stanchion, making him pause. Fenris stared in amazement as the beam swiftly widened to reveal a holographic projection much sharper and clearer than any three-dimensional holovid he had ever seen before. Shimmering before him was a scene he recognised as a corridor within a space station, the floor and ceiling curving up and out of sight in a way only seen in the huge wheel-like constructions that served as orbital docks at many worlds. The grey-walled corridor was punctuated on both sides by a series of oblong doors. As he watched, two young boys emerged from a doorway on the left and ran down the corridor, laughing as they went.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Fenris realised he was looking at himself from twenty years ago. He was so surprised he forgot there was a battle raging half a kilometre away.

“That’s *Armstrong Orbital*,” he murmured. “We were stranded there for days, waiting for the crew to fix a problem on the ship bringing us to Yuanshi from Earth.”

“A mere trick of the light,” Athene said dismissively. “Shall I begin?”

“I really should be going,” Fenris remarked nervously. “I’m sure you mean well, but there’s agents with guns out there who most certainly do not.”

“They can wait,” said Athene, then clicked her fingers.

\* \* \*

*...They can wait she said and the space station is so bright like looking into a bubble and suddenly everything is clear as day and it all comes back to me as I see myself so small but running fast as I chase the other boy down the corridor. He is my friend from the spaceship and we are playing hide and seek and it is Jormungand my brother who is hiding but the curving passageway goes on forever and there are so many places he could be only look the boy has stopped and is now banging on a door and pointing through the round window and laughing. It is an airlock and my friend has pressed the buttons and is giggling but it is not funny because I see Jormungand inside panicking and thumping the locked door as his face turns white then red as the airlock warning lights flash on and off and on again and my friend is smiling thinking it is a joke like the bullies do at school but Jormungand is shouting and the horrible siren drowns out his words and his eyes are wide in terror. My nasty friend stops laughing and suddenly runs away because he is scared of what he has done and knows Jormungand is going to float into space and die but I stay behind and pull the lever to open the door only nothing happens and my brother is thumping the window but also now clutching his throat and he is crying ever so much. I have seen the space-station crew work the airlock controls and think I know what to do and press the buttons again and again but get it wrong then have one last try and hear a clunk as I finally get it right. Suddenly there are no more flashing lights and I pull*

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

*the lever again and this time the door opens and Jormungand falls through into the passageway onto the floor. He is curled up tight and crying like a baby but it is okay because he is out and he not going to die...*

\* \* \*

Fenris blinked. The image of the space station froze and then faded. He had been so immersed in the vision from the past that several moments went by before he remembered his predicament. Slightly stunned, he shifted his gaze to that of the woman, who was regarding him with a particularly smug expression. It was then he noticed how quiet it had become. The marauding Que Qiao agents back at the palace appeared to be taking a break.

“That was incredible,” he murmured. “It felt like I was watching myself for real.”

“You rescued your brother from certain death! How marvellously heroic.”

“I opened the airlock just in time,” he said, hearing the sadness in his voice. Many of his memories of Jormungand were painful. “He was plagued by terrible headaches for the rest of his life and never quite the same again. Father often lamented how Jormungand changed that day, straight from being a happy little boy to an angry young man.”

“Fascinating,” said Athene, faking a yawn. “This is about you, not your brother. I wanted to show you how useless your contribution to humankind has been.”

“I saved his life!” protested Fenris, confused.

“You know as well as I do how that panned out,” she retorted.

“What was my contribution supposed to be?” he demanded. “I have neither influence nor resources. What about someone like Maharani Uma, who has both at her disposal yet cares only for herself and her son? She will probably spend longer choosing what to wear for the funeral than in actual mourning for her dead husband!”

Athene looked shocked. “A tad harsh!”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“Since when did automated holograms become so judgemental?” remarked Fenris, increasingly agitated. “Especially one supposedly programmed to stop me from hurling myself off this bridge?”

“You haven’t the courage,” she snapped. “Shall we see part two?”

Fenris jumped as a beam of light abruptly appeared as before. The projection swiftly widened, unveiling a remarkably detailed view of a bustling hospital ward. Before he could protest, Athene gave him a wink and snapped her fingers once again.

\* \* \*

*...Shall we see part two she asked but I should really be running from the agents yet the vision in the bubble is so bright and I’m in Lanka hospital and there’s wounded people everywhere and I remember this is the night of the massacre at Aranya Pass. Volunteers broke the curfew to go with Que Qiao medical workers to bring supplies into Lanka but were ambushed by rebel fighters and Maharaja Kashyap is very angry as it was his own Captain Kartikeya who opened fire as he thought it was a troop convoy of armed Que Qiao agents. The tiny hospital is filled with the dead and the wounded and the priest Taranis is here with the Maharaja and I’m trying to find them both but the screams and shouts and stench of blood and bile makes me feel ill. Nurse Jizo asks me to help her move one of the dead onto a trolley as she needs the bed to treat survivors only there is a little Indian girl by the bed crying her eyes out and Jizo is quite cruel and pushes her away so we can get to the long cold shape beneath the sheet. The girl is no more than three or four Earth years old but was with the volunteers when they were attacked and her little brown face and arm are burned and covered in blood and she is crying so much yet so brave when Jizo jabs the tweezers into her wound to pull the twisted shrapnel from her arm. I start to push the trolley away then hear Jizo ask the girl for her name and she replies Ravana O’Brien at which the nurse looks at her in horror and says Ravana is a Hindu demon and no one would call a little girl by such a terrible name. Then I remember Taranis once told me a Dhusarian prophecy about the future king of Lanka and a boy called Ravana who would grow up to drive Que*

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

*Qiao from Yuanshi but that was just a silly story and this Ravana is not a boy but a little girl. I tell this to Jizo though part of me thinks I should have kept quiet for the little girl's sake yet another part knows I should tell Taranis and the Maharaja when I find them but the priest tells many tales and no one these days really believes in prophecies and things like that. I push the trolley to the morgue and return to help another nurse and when I finally find Taranis I do not want to look foolish and so do not tell him about the poor little Indian girl called Ravana...*

\* \* \*

The vision faded. Fenris gently reeled as reality reasserted itself, bringing him back to the bridge with a bump. Athene had not moved from her spot near the parapet. Turning away in disgust, Fenris gazed down to contemplate his shimmering reflection once more. Given the circumstances, the woman's air of self-satisfaction seemed grossly inappropriate.

"The battle of Aranya Pass," she remarked. "Not your finest hour."

"A most unfortunate episode," Fenris admitted. "Kartikeya thought he was firing upon a Que Qiao armoured security convoy. Taranis wanted him court-martialled, but the Maharaja had lost so many officers he insisted the young idiot stay in post. Believe it or not, he's Major Kartikeya now. Though only because his more gifted contemporaries accepted the amnesty offered by Que Qiao and switched sides."

"What about you?" the woman asked. "Have you no ambition?"

"My loyalty was always to Taranis."

"Not to the Maharaja and his beloved wife?"

Fenris almost smiled as he thought of Maharani Uma being forced to flee her comfy palace. "Don't talk to me about that self-seeking, gold-digging, arrogant piece of..."

"Did the priest not abandon you all in your hour of need?" interrupted Athene.

Fenris paused. "The Church was there when I needed it," he said slowly.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

He caught the bemused look Athene gave him and turned away. This was not the first time he had found himself fearful and in despair with nowhere else to go. Years before, Fenris had found salvation after being welcomed with open arms into the fledgling Dhusarian Church of Yuanshi. Since that fateful day, he had devoted all his energies to the Church. His star had quickly risen, until he was rewarded with the trust of Taranis himself. By then the priest had ingratiated himself with the self-proclaimed Maharaja and for a while Fenris had walked with him, along the increasingly corrupted corridors of power.

“You don’t strike me as a very spiritual person,” Athene suggested. “I sense you were uncomfortable with the fantasy of a prophecy in the context of a religion that to most people is more like science fiction. What happened to the little girl? Did you change your mind, live up to your declaration of loyalty and tell Taranis you’d found his demon king?”

Fenris shook his head. “Nurse Jizo got there first. You are right to call it a fantasy. I later discovered Taranis had engineered the so-called prophecy from the start. He had found a young couple expecting their first child and persuaded the mother to let him be there at the birth, where he surprised them all by giving the baby the name of Ravana. Unfortunately, he was unaware his newborn demon king was actually a girl and the parents were too scared to tell him. It was too late by then anyway. Taranis had already ordered the child’s name to be recorded on the Que Qiao citizen database.”

“Ouch,” muttered Athene. “So the poor kid is stuck with the name.”

“Somehow, Taranis did not learn the truth until that fateful night. He was not best pleased,” Fenris said moodily. “Jizo was rewarded with a special position within the Church. The body on the trolley was the girl’s mother. It was not a good day all round.”

“What about the father? Are he and the girl still on Yuanshi?”

“The last I heard was he had moved on from flying crop-dusting sky clippers and become a freelancer with a second-hand freighter,” Fenris told her. “They don’t need to hide anymore, of course. Taranis seems to have disappeared for good this time.”

“Which brings me back to my point. He abandoned you in your hour of need!”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Fenris frowned. He knew some did see it that way, for the rebellion had struggled to maintain momentum in the priest's absence. Maharaja Kashyap and his ambitions for self-rule had long been a thorn in the side of Que Qiao's operations on the moons of Shennong. Priest Taranis, the architect of the Maharaja's bid for an independent Yuanshi, had taken a ship in search of the greys' home world and disappeared, leaving a void quickly filled by sycophantic officials interested only in lining their own pockets. The moon had riches both sides were willing to fight for; in hindsight, it was clear that years of bitter politics had been no more than a smokescreen whilst both parties prepared for war. Even so, Fenris was shocked that the corporation had resorted to assassination. As he mused over this latest development, he became aware that Athene was watching him eagerly.

"Time for one more revelation?" she asked. "I'm finding this fascinating!"

"Are you mad? People are trying to kill me!"

Athene looked downcast. "I thought we had the making of a real relationship here."

"Yes, but..."

"It is not your day to die," she said crossly and snapped her fingers once more.

\* \* \*

*...Not my day to die she said and I really hope that is the case as Que Qiao agents carry plasma rifles like the ones the Chinese army have that can kill a neomammoth with a single shot. My brother had a thing for guns and weapons and in the bright bubble I can see Jormungand at the farm in Anjayaneya with father's hunting electrolance and he is really happy as he has met a girl and quit agricultural college and decided on a career with Que Qiao security forces instead. Father is really angry as he wants to retire to Moldova and hand the family farm to my brother and I am worried as Jormungand does not have the right temperament to be a good security agent as when he gets angry he gets violent and is the last person to be given a gun. I wanted to travel the five systems but now*

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

*father asks me to take my brother's place and run the farm instead and father is so tired and needs to retire but I hate terraforming and farming and I am a bit scared of all the weird native wildlife and it is all so different to what I am used to back in Ayodhya. Father tells me I have to take over otherwise his workers will be destitute and he wants the farm to stay in the family earning credits so he and mother can have a happy retirement and in the end I could not say no. The bright bubble jumps and I am still at the farm only it is a year later and Jormungand is dead and father and mother have gone back to Earth and I tried so hard to make it work but there was no money as my brother was in debt and had mortgaged the farm without telling anyone. Que Qiao is confiscating everyone's land in Anjayaneya and I have ended up homeless and without hope just like all the workers and I am sorry father for losing everything you worked for and for not being there in Moldova at the end when mother and then you passed away...*

\* \* \*

The vision faded. Fenris quivered in muted anger as he met Athene's cool stare. The woman was scrutinising him keenly for his reaction, much like a scientist who had just given a laboratory rat a treat of botulism-flavoured cheese. She seemed to take sadistic pleasure from inflicting his life's worse moments upon him.

"That was underhand," he said grimly. "I have no idea how you obtained that footage, but you really know how to twist the knife. Yes, I admit it. I am a failure! I gave up my one dream of travelling the worlds and for what? I lost the farm and all my family are dead."

"Now you're feeling sorry for yourself."

"Other people have it all!" growled Fenris, speaking with a venom that surprised even him. "I'm sorry to talk about the Maharani again, but Kashyap has been dead barely an hour and she has already disowned the court and her royalist supporters in the Dhusarian Church. She is happy to let Yuanshi suffer. I have played by the rules, tried to be loyal and look where it has got me! Halfway across this bridge with Que Qiao



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Corporation troops advancing on both sides! I should throw myself in the lake. I wish I'd never been born!"

"Finally!" cried Athene. Hand on hip, she wagged a finger of her other before his downcast gaze. "We get to the petulant cry of the hopeless! Do you really mean what you say? Would you care to know what the world would be like, had you not been born?"

Fenris thought about this, then nodded. "Yes!" he said defiantly. "I would!"

"You will not like it."

"How could the world possibly be any worse without me in it?"

"That's just the point," she said. "It isn't any worse. It is better."

"What?!"

"A lot better," she added, with another annoying smile.

"You really know how to lift a man's spirits," Fenris grumbled.

He was not a violent man, but was perilously close to the point where he could quite cheerfully strangle the mysterious stranger. Yet something was not quite right. He glanced back in the direction of the palace, wondering why the raging sounds of battle remained suspiciously absent. With a start, he saw that the searchlight beams had stopped moving. Part of him was ready to believe he had already jumped or been shot from afar and that the conversation on the bridge was no more than a death's-door hallucination. He was just about to ask if this was true when Athene offered a question of her own.

"What happened to Jormungand?"

"My brother?" Fenris gave her a suspicious look. "Why?"

"His fate was entwined with your own," she reminded him. "You know where I'm going with this so you may as well play along."

"He enlisted as a security agent within days of leaving college," he told her, though suspected Athene already knew the story. "On his first outing, his unit was sent to intercept a ship suspected of delivering weapons to the Maharaja. The operation did not go as planned and as the ship's crew fled, Jormungand went berserk. He gunned down dozens of innocent bystanders as he went in pursuit, before being shot dead by his own commanding officer who in a panic did not know what else to do. The autopsy on my brother suggested a freak brain aneurysm was

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

somehow to blame. We all knew Jormungand had not been right ever since that incident in the airlock.”

“You have a talent for understatement.”

“The corporation was dismissive of the whole affair,” Fenris said bitterly. “Taranis led the Maharaja’s campaign to make Que Qiao pay compensation to families who had lost loved ones. To his credit, he extended that to my parents, who were quite distraught. Some say that was the beginning of the rift between Kashyap and Que Qiao.”

“It did little to improve the situation,” admitted Athene. “The woman who shot your brother was a good officer, who in a different time-line was destined for a long but ultimately uneventful career. Her life instead fell apart and she returned to Earth to lobby for tighter gun controls, then ironically got herself shot after sneaking into the White House with a petition to outlaw private armies. Your childhood heroics saved your brother’s worthless life, but destroyed those of many others.”

“You’re making this up. Different time-lines? What rubbish!”

“As I said, a world without Fenris is one much improved,” she declared, taunting him. “What about the second vision? You had three choices: tell Taranis about the little girl, trust your own instincts and say nothing, or do something really indecisive and let Nurse Jizo take the credit instead. You took the one path that encouraged the nurse to leave her post. Shall I tell you what happened?”

“I have a feeling you are going to whether I like it or not.”

“When the girl’s father heard you’d spilled the beans, he made sure they got out of that hospital as soon as they could. Nurse Jizo joined Taranis in his unsuccessful search for the girl and was not on the ward when Minister Lingam was brought in with serious head wounds. His family had been out at the theatre, but got caught up in the riots that erupted across Lanka when people heard about what happened to the medical convoy.”

“So what if Jizo was not there?” remarked Fenris. “Other medics were around. Jizo never struck me as much of a nurse anyway. She had some very peculiar habits.”

“You’re being too polite. She was under investigation for certain irregularities at the time,” Athene told him. “Yet no one else was free to

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

treat Lingam straight away and he died. He was the last of the Maharaja's cabinet with any true diplomatic talent. It's your fault the royalist forces today are in the hands of idiots like Commander Kartikeya."

"Commander?" Fenris asked. Her accusation both annoyed and confused him. "It's Major Kartikeya, not Commander."

"Whoops! I'm looking too far ahead."

"Kartikeya becomes a commander?!" he asked, incredulous.

"We're getting off the point!" she snapped. "What I'm saying is once again you only served to make matters worse. Nurse Jizo also never faced her medical standards board. Her reward for tipping off Taranis was to tour the five systems as a missionary for his Church. I believe you always wanted to travel."

"You really know how to rub it in," muttered Fenris. "The girl and her father got away though. Is that a good thing or not?"

"That depends," Athene purred mischievously. She gave him a cryptic smile. "It has presented an opportunity upon which you have yet to make a judgement."

"What about the third thing you showed me?" he asked irritably. "Father's farm in Anjayaneya. In some other make-believe reality of yours, did Jormungand not walk out on it and is instead now the best farmer in Epsilon Eridani?"

"And thus not end up killing all those people?" remarked Athene. "He was not farmer material. Actually, it's far simpler. You should have refused to take it on yourself. The farm would have fallen into disrepair and returned to jungle by the time Que Qiao moved in."

"How is that so different?"

"You ran the business rather well," she said. "Your father's farm was in such a good condition when Que Qiao confiscated it that the land now produces some of the best thunderworm egg yields for the corporation. You know what egg is, don't you?"

"The mood drug? Que Qiao aren't drug barons."

"Oh, how naive you are!"

"Possession of egg is a serious crime!" protested Fenris. "Que Qiao comes down really hard on anyone caught in possession of the stuff."

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Admittedly, I heard rumours that agents had planted egg on certain members of the Maharaja's court to get them sent to Feng Du, but... oh. I see."

Athene smiled. Fenris became aware he could once again hear distant gunshots and shouts from the agents ransacking Sumitra. As he looked towards the wavering searchlight beams back at the palace, it was clear some were coming his way. He returned his wretched gaze to the mysterious stranger and sighed.

"A life of blunders," he said. "I am incapable of doing good."

"True," Athene agreed. "By your own standards, you have made bad things worse. But how do you define good or bad? They are mere philosophical viewpoints."

Fenris frowned. "I don't understand. Shall I jump?"

"Do you want to?"

"I thought you were here to enlighten me," he chastised her, turning to contemplate the dark lake once more. "To show me the way."

Athene smiled. "It's simply a matter of readjusting your moral compass."

"What?" asked Fenris, turning back to face her. "But..."

The mysterious woman had gone. Fenris blinked as he caught a glimpse of a cat-like silver flash leaping away into the shadows.

"Good riddance," he muttered uneasily.

Athene's impromptu counselling, if it could be described as such, had been an unsettling experience but weirdly effective. As Fenris gave one last disconcerted glance at the cold waters of the lake, he realised with renewed bitterness that he was in too much of a bad mood to jump. Athene's cruel analysis of his life, not to mention her abrupt disappearance, had annoyed him no end. He was suddenly filled with the desire to live. It was the only way he could be sure to inflict his misery upon others.

He suddenly spied a figure approaching from the Ayodhya end of the bridge. Fenris quelled a pang of panic as he recognised the young Indian man as a servant from the late Maharaja's court. The man was gesticulating wildly, beckoning him to follow.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“Readjust my moral compass!” Fenris muttered. “The parable of the bad Samaritan!”

\* \* \*

Fenris swiftly made his way to where the man awaited. Together they slunk away into the darkness of the wooded parkland, just in time to avoid the torch beams of the pursuing black-clad agents on the far side of the bridge. Fenris’ new companion, gibbering incoherently, jumped in terror every time he heard gunshot, but did not pause once as he led the way up a tree-lined track to where a small six-wheeled transport was waiting. Fenris recognised the vehicle as an old lunar-class personnel carrier of a type used by early Yuanshi colonists. The barrel-shaped hull of this particular transport wore polished wooden side panels and a highly ostentatious roof pennant displaying the royal crest.

His guide quickly hustled Fenris through the hatch of the vehicle into the darkened interior, barely giving him a chance to catch his breath. As Fenris fumbled to orientate himself in the gloom, the hatch closed behind him. The transport’s interior lights suddenly came on, revealing that he had inadvertently been trying to sit on someone’s lap. Muttering an apology, Fenris shuffled around to face the other occupants of the transport.

His gaze met that of a fierce yet petite and incredibly beautiful young Indian woman, dressed in a traditional saree of red and gold. Next to her was a sleeping child, a young Indian boy no more than four Terran years old. Fenris gulped and nervously fell upon his knees.

“Maharani Uma!” he stammered, lowering his gaze. “Forgive me! I did not intend to sit on your royal presence!”

“Who is this person?” the Maharani snapped sternly, addressing her question to the servant who had brought Fenris to the vehicle. Her measured tones cut through the sudden tension like a knife dipped in honey.

“Introduce yourself!” the man hissed to Fenris.

“My name is Fenris, Maharani,” he replied, lifting his gaze to offer a nervous smile. “I am employed by your esteemed court.”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“In what capacity?”

“Political Analyst,” he said. “I probe the Que Qiao citizen database for information. I am willing and able to serve you in any capacity you see fit.”

“That remains to be seen,” she replied frostily. “My driver saw you on the bridge and believed you to be of higher standing than you so obviously are. Regrettably, I am in no position to be choosy. We are leaving Yuanshi tonight. You are to arrange transport and a safe haven for myself and my son.”

“You need my help?”

“Driver!” snapped Maharani, ignoring Fenris’ question. “To the spaceport!”

The man nodded and slipped through a curtain to the control cabin at the front of the vehicle. Moments later, the transport gave a lurch and started back along the track towards the road. Fenris risked a peek through the blinds at the side window. He smiled grimly as the transport was briefly serenaded by a volley of plasma fire from startled Que Qiao agents.

Once on the road they were soon speeding away, the vehicle’s electric engine moaning softly. Releasing the blind, Fenris settled into the luxurious velvet upholstery and regarded Maharani Uma carefully. The young Raja Surya, the little boy dozing next to her, had presumably inherited the Yuanshi throne now his father was dead. Fenris was rankled by the effortless way his mother had taken charge. Yet while he often chided people like her for being selfish, his encounter with Athene had left him wondering whether that was the only way to survive now he was an enemy of the state.

Maharani Uma gave him an expectant look. Fenris remembered he had been ordered to find a way off the moon. He had left his wristpad behind at the palace, fearing agents could track the signal, but right now being able to access the network would be helpful. Raja Surya awoke from his slumber with a yawn, rubbed his eyes and then frowned, fixing the unfamiliar stranger with a wary stare that made Fenris squirm.

“What’s the matter?” the Maharani asked Fenris. “Must you fidget like that?”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“Maharani, do you perchance have a wristpad, slate or anything of that ilk that I may use?” Fenris asked. “If I am to secure you a ship, I need to make enquiries.”

“Enquiries?”

“I have contacts at space-traffic control,” he replied. It was a lie, but Fenris was sure he could find a royalist sympathiser at Ayodhya spaceport who would talk to him.

“Surya,” said the Maharani gently, turning to her son. “Would you lend your wristpad to this man so he can help us?”

Surya looked up at his mother, unclasped the device from his tiny wrist and hesitantly offered it to Fenris, who took it with a gracious nod. The touch-screen device was of the latest design able to link to cranium implants, the latter having been made mandatory some years ago by the Que Qiao administration for all children born in the Epsilon Eridani system. Fenris wondered if the Raja had been included in the implantation programme.

“Well?” asked the Maharani.

Fenris flinched before her piercing stare. With a few deft taps on the wristpad, he found the contact details for Ayodhya spaceport and called the enquiry desk. The woman who appeared on the tiny screen had no good news to impart. Yuanshi’s main spaceport was swarming with Que Qiao agents and in the process of being shut down. Fortunately, she was eager to do her bit for the rebellion.

“Try Lanka,” the woman said hurriedly. “I overheard an agent say the spaceport is still in royalist hands. Space-traffic control shows a shuttle and a couple of freighters queuing for fuel and getting ready to leave.”

“Freighters?” asked Fenris, trying not to sound too hopeful. “Which ones?”

“The *Waukheon* and the *Platypus*,” she said. “No flight plans have been filed.”

Fenris gave a sly smile. “Try to persuade them not to fly off before we get there.”

The woman promised to do what she could and broke the connection. Fenris leaned back in his seat and reflected on his sudden change of luck, for he recognised the name of one of the ships. Athene

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

had been right; fate had presented an opportunity that was now there for the taking. He looked at the Maharani and did his best to meet her cold questioning gaze.

“Driver!” he called, his eyes still on Maharani Uma. “We need to go instead to Lanka spaceport. Ayodhya is closed.”

The Maharani glared at him. “My man is not yours to command.”

“Is this really the time to argue about protocol?” Fenris asked coolly.

“Be careful with that attitude,” she growled. “Driver! Lanka spaceport, at once!”

\* \* \*

Yuanshi’s second city was on the other side of the moon’s largest island continent and a good four-hour drive from Ayodhya. The weather turned foul as soon as the road began to sweep down from the central highlands, the rain splattering ever heavier against the transport’s windows as they neared the slumbering city. Terraforming had allowed the protective domes shielding early settlements to be removed some years before, but the buildings of Lanka still huddled together like rabbits suspicious of the open hutch door and the promise of freedom.

“Are we there yet?” asked Surya, waking from yet another doze.

The Maharani pulled her son close. “Very nearly.”

Using the young Raja’s wristpad, Fenris had managed to contact the royalist administration in Lanka to inform them of the Maharani’s imminent arrival, but remained unsure of what to expect. The spaceport was on the outskirts of Lanka, thus saving them from having to travel into the city itself and it was not long before the transport was ploughing through a sea of mud towards the small terminal building at the head of the runway. Parked outside the neighbouring warehouse was a long purple and white Mars-class freighter, its cargo door open and biplane wings extended for take-off. Fenris saw a man in the glare of the warehouse lights, supervising the serpentine pipes of the refuelling gantry linked to the ship’s hull. The only other vessel in sight was a small orbital shuttle and Fenris guessed the other freighter had left. The first glimmer



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

of dawn was breaking upon the moon's eastern horizon and the rain was finally easing. The long Yuanshi night was coming to an end.

"The *Platypus*," remarked the Maharani. She was looking at the freighter.

"How do you know?" asked Fenris.

"An educated guess. Rather appropriate, do you not think?"

Fenris smiled. The purple and white spacecraft had a curious flat projection extending from the nose of its cylindrical hull, which together with four sets of squat landing gear did make the ship look somewhat like the strange aquatic mammal of antipodean Earth.

"The pilot is Australian," Fenris told her, as if that explained everything. "An old acquaintance of Priest Taranis, though I doubt you find that a reassurance."

The Maharani raised a finely manicured eyebrow but said nothing. Skirting the runway, their transport headed towards the terminal building and halted outside the doors. The terminal was in darkness. As the sound of the transport's cooling fans faded into silence, an elderly Indian man scuttled from the shadows and came to meet them. The driver reappeared from the cockpit and opened the hatch to let in the cool night air.

"Take this," the Maharani whispered to Fenris.

Startled, Fenris took the offered plasma pistol. He suppressed a gleeful grin as he slipped the gun into his tunic pocket. Eager to stretch his legs, he did not hesitate when the Maharani indicated for him to exit first.

A few spots of drizzle still fell, but the sky was clearing to reveal an occasional glimpse of starlight. Fenris went to greet the approaching figure, conscious of the soft tap of heels upon asphalt as the others followed from the transport. Ignoring him, the old man instead reverentially bowed before the Maharani and Surya.

"Maharani Uma!" the man cried, his voice thin and wavering. "I am relieved to find you and the young Raja safe! These are dreadful times, truly dreadful!"

"We are not safe yet," she replied tersely.

The old man bowed, looking anxious. Beckoning to the Maharani and her entourage, he hastened towards the warehouse and the berthed freighter. The man at the refuelling gantry cut a distinctive figure with his

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

hairless head and bushy beard. His fierce stare of suspicion as he wiped his hands upon his dirty blue overalls was enough for Fenris to reach into his pocket for the reassuring lump of the gun. A shadow moved in the doorway of the ship's cargo bay. Fenris gave a sly smirk as he saw the figure of a young Indian girl.

"This is Quirinus," the old man said. "Captain of the freighter *Platypus*."

The Maharani nodded and faced the pilot with a determined look.

"Captain Quirinus, I require safe passage from Yuanshi," she said. "Your ship appears to be the only option left open to me. Rest assured I will pay you well for your trouble."

Quirinus frowned. "And you are?" he asked, in a dismissive Australian drawl.

"This is Maharani Uma and her son, Raja Surya, heir to the Yuanshi throne!" snapped Fenris. "How dare you adopt such an insolent tone!"

"So you're Maharani Uma, eh?" Quirinus gave a mocking bow. "I'm deeply honoured by your majestic presence. The answer is no."

"I'm afraid we cannot take no for an answer," the Maharani said coolly.

"You may well be used to getting your own way, but things have changed," the pilot retorted. He waved a hand towards the darkened terminal building. "Your loyal subjects have bravely abandoned the spaceport. If I don't leave soon, we'll be running for orbit with a gunship on our tail. Ferrying outlaws is not going to help my situation one bit."

"Outlaws?" retorted Fenris.

"Haven't you heard?" Quirinus gave a wry smile. "Que Qiao has declared martial law on Yuanshi. There's arrest warrants out for everyone connected with Kashyap's court."

"The news channels are portraying you all as terrorists!" the old man added, almost gleefully. "Terrible, terrible times!"

"Which makes it even more vital that we leave this moon far behind!" declared Fenris. Seeing Quirinus frown, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the gun. "Now!"

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

Quirinus looked down at the pistol aimed at his chest and rolled his eyes in disbelief. “There really is no need for that,” he said wearily.

“Daddy!” cried a voice. “What’s happening?”

The dark-haired girl had left the ship’s cargo bay and was trotting towards them, hugging a wriggling ball of fur to her chest as if for reassurance. As she stared fearfully at the pistol aimed at her father, Fenris saw the ugly scars on the side of her face and on her right arm, the latter visible where she had rolled back the sleeves of her adult-sized flight suit. He recalled the wounded little girl in Athene’s vision and gave a grim smile.

“Ravana,” Fenris said. “Your daddy is going to fly us away from here.”

“You named your daughter after the Ramayana demon king?” asked Maharani Uma, eyeing Quirinus with surprise. “Or does it mean something else back in Sydney?”

“I’m from Perth,” Quirinus said irritably, as his daughter came to his side. “And it’s pronounced Ravana,” he added, elongating and softening the trailing vowels of her name to rebuke Fenris for his own harsh staccato pronunciation.

“Her name? It’s a long story,” remarked Fenris, his smile becoming sly. The black bundle carried by Ravana had unexpectedly resolved into a cat, reminding him of his strange encounter with Athene, though the stiff-limbed posture of the creature in the girl’s arms suggested it was no more than an electric pet. “One I am sure Captain Quirinus would not care to share at this juncture. Evidence of fraternisation with the deposed regime may well lead to himself and his daughter earning arrest warrants of their own.”

“It’s not nice to point guns at people,” remarked Ravana, staring wide-eyed at the pistol in Fenris’ hand. “Are you a policeman?”

“He is my security officer,” the Maharani said. Fenris blinked in surprise. “This heavy-handed approach is regretful, but it is imperative that you take myself and my son away from Yuanshi to somewhere safe. I am prepared to pay whatever it takes.”

“Security officer?” murmured Fenris.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“I am in need of one,” she replied quietly. “Your predecessor revealed himself to be an undercover tax inspector. I had him shot.”

“This is no world for children,” hissed the old man. “Not safe! Not safe!”

“I agree,” said Quirinus. He looked down to his daughter. “Ravana, go back to the ship and tell the computer to start pre-launch checks. Wait for me on the flight deck. Okay?”

Ravana nodded and ran back to the cargo bay door. Quirinus faced Maharani Uma with a look of resignation in his eyes.

“Fifty thousand credits will buy you safe passage out of this system,” he said. “For all the luck I’ve had trying to make it as an independent trader, I may as well be a taxi service for political exiles.”

“Fifty thousand!” exclaimed Fenris. “That’s daylight robbery!”

“As opposed to armed hijacking, you mean?” remarked Quirinus.

“Your terms are acceptable,” the Maharani replied. “You will take us four, plus my transport. That vehicle contains all I have left in the world and I am not prepared to leave it behind,” she added sternly, seeing Quirinus about to protest.

“That old thing?” he exclaimed. “It won’t fit in the cargo bay!”

“I’m sure it will,” Fenris said coolly, wagging the gun.

“Take it back to the museum where it belongs!”

“The vehicle has retractable suspension,” the driver suggested, seeing the freighter pilot look doubtful. “It is designed to be carried on ships such as yours.”

Quirinus sighed and looked towards the cargo bay door of the *Platypus*. Fenris followed his gaze and saw that unlike many other freighters, the ship had not yet succumbed to the common modification of a separate passenger cabin in the hold. He could almost see the pilot considering the transport as somewhere to accommodate them during the voyage. Quirinus did not strike Fenris as someone who would gladly let strangers to roam his ship.

The Maharani was speaking in urgent hushed tones with the old man who had greeted them at the spaceport. As Fenris turned to listen, he saw her press a small cloth bag into the man’s hand. With a curt nod, he hurried away into the night.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“I have given him sufficient funds to convince the local Que Qiao officials to delay any action on their part,” she informed Quirinus. “A detachment of my husband’s loyal militia are stationed at the local temple. They will barricade the spaceport access road and watch for security agents. The temple bell will be our cue to leave. Shall we board?”

“You seem to have thought of everything,” Quirinus grumbled.

“Driver!” the Maharani called. “Load the transport.”

The driver nodded and hastened back to where the transport was parked. The rain began to fall in earnest once more, leading Maharani Uma and Surya to head for the shelter of the warehouse. Fenris directed Quirinus to follow, enjoying the thrill of pleasure as the pilot scowled at his waggle of the gun, glancing towards the *Platypus* and the anxious face of his daughter at the flight-deck window. The refuelling gantry had disconnected and was slowly retreating across the apron to leave the way clear for departure. The sound of it clanging to a halt was replaced by the distant peal of a bell, drifting sombrely upon the dawn.

“That was quick,” murmured Fenris, as they reached the warehouse.

“What’s that noise?” asked Surya.

“That is the bell to tell us it is time to leave,” said the Maharani, hugging the Raja close. “My little angel has found his wings to fly from here.”

“My wings,” muttered Quirinus glumly. “I thought Christmas was a time for giving, not taking. Peace and goodwill to all and rubbish like that.”

“Merry Christmas,” Fenris said sarcastically.

“Maybe it is,” said the Maharani and whispered something in his ear.

Fenris grinned. Just then, a beam of light shone down from the ceiling of the warehouse. He jumped as a hologram of a young man unexpectedly appeared before him. The monochrome image flickered badly, but the youth’s clean-cut features, cheerful smile and Samaritans-branded shirt were clearly discernable, as was the hologram’s apparent focus upon himself. Surya took one look at the apparition and shrieked.

“I am so sorry I’m late!” the hologram announced gaily. “Samaritans, at your service. We saw you on the bridge earlier, but it has

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

been a very busy night and our systems have only just caught up with you. I'm glad to see you did not jump after all!"

"Jump?" enquired the Maharani. "Is that why you were on the bridge?"

"Samaritans?" asked Quirinus, sounding bemused.

"I don't understand," Fenris said weakly. "I've already met one of your..."

He paused. In a dark corner of the warehouse, out of sight of everyone but himself, he saw the familiar figure of Athene leaning casually against a wall. The woman caught his gaze, blew him a kiss and then in a blink of an eye was gone. Fenris watched as a grey cat-shaped blur leapt away across the runway and into the gloom. He was mildly surprised to find himself untroubled by the revelation that he had absolutely no idea who the mysterious stranger was. In a way, his bad Samaritan had become a guiding angel.

"No more blunders," he murmured.

"I'm sorry?" asked the projection, puzzled.

"Go away," said Fenris. "Life is wonderful. I don't need you."

"Fine," snapped the hologram. "Merry Christmas to you, too!"

The projector beam faded, leaving Fenris trying his best to ignore the curious stares of the others. Nearby, the *Platypus* lurched upon its landing gear as the transport reached the top of the loading ramp and slipped through the cargo bay door.

"Christmas is a funny time of year," Maharani Uma said cautiously. "Do Dhusarians celebrate the occasion? I recall Taranis regaling the court with a rather fanciful story about three wise men and a spaceship that looked like a star."

"Bearing gifts to travel afar," mused Fenris. He contemplated the pistol in his hand and waggled it towards the bemused pilot. "Where do you plan to take us?"

"I know a place," Quirinus said warily. "An old asteroid colony ship in the Barnard's Star system. It's been taken over by independent settlers, so there's no Que Qiao or any other government to worry your highness. The locals call it the hollow moon."

"Running away to the Runaway Star?" remarked Fenris.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“Sounds wonderful,” said the Maharani, with a resigned sigh.

Fenris thought about the twist of fate that had brought him here, in the company of the surviving members of the Yuanshi royal family. More so, of the Maharani’s whispered revelation that they were fleeing into exile with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, a hijacked freighter and an old transport containing the entire gold reserves of Yuanshi.

“A new life,” he said, smiling wryly. “I have my Merry Christmas, after all.”

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## **Epilogue: Dancing in the City of Deceit**

*In CITY OF DECEIT, rebel leader Maharani Uma and her son Surya have returned from exile in an attempt to end Yuanshi's civil war. Hanuman and Ganesa, mercenaries for hire, find themselves on a mission to Earth...*

HANUMAN AND GANESA stood at the door to the Savoy Hotel ballroom, absorbing the scene before them. Several hours had passed since their jaunt south of the river. Surya and Zotz, worn out by their adventure, were dozing in Maharani Uma's suite in the nearby Adelphi, next door to where the Maharani, Yaksha and Namtar were quietly discussing their day in UN politics. Inari was wandering the streets in search of food. Hanuman and Ganesa, with the help of Surya's cyberclone back at the hotel, had a mission of their own.

The grand environs of the Savoy thronged with Que Qiao officials eager for a respite from tedious business lunches and endless meetings. Holographic chandeliers hovered over a scene of utmost opulence, from the immaculate butler-class androids, ornate dining furniture and well-stocked bar to the suave and sophisticated guests themselves. On the far side of the room, past tables piled high with an amazing variety of food and drink, guests danced to a slow waltz played by a string quartet. The human musicians, Hanuman noted, wore an intense look of concentration no android could hope to match.

"Amazing," murmured Ganesa. "A disgusting parade of wealth and privilege, but still amazing. Why don't we get invited to more parties like this?"

"Because you tell rich people how disgusting and privileged they are?" Hanuman suggested. "By the way, you look a million credits tonight."

Ganesa beamed. She wore a floor-length ensemble in emerald and silver, accessorised by light facial make-up and hair bundled up in a fashionable gravity-defying style. Her gown had miniature holographic projectors woven into the fabric, programmed to display a swirl of gossamer butterflies around her and faint angel wings at her back, all



### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

shimmering with an ethereal beauty. No one would guess that her matching clutch purse concealed half a dozen bead-sized audio surveillance bugs, ready for an encounter with Jaggarneth. Hanuman too had spruced himself up and wore a tailored dark blue suit and white tunic, the latter with a collar that came perilously close to his ears. He had even made an effort to shave.

“It makes a change not to be clomping around in boots,” she admitted, flashing him a view of her silver heels. “You’re not too shabby yourself! If you don’t watch out, you’ll be tripping over some poor woman swooning at your feet.”

“Now you’re getting jealous,” Hanuman said solemnly. Yaksha, who had hired their outfits for the night, had assured him it was the latest London look but he felt incredibly uncomfortable out of his usual clothes. “If you see anyone you fancy, I promise not to whisk her away. Shall we dance?”

Ganesa offered him her arm. “Captain Hanuman, I thought you’d never ask!”

“Don’t get too cosy. We’re here to spy on Jaggarneth, remember.”

He led her through the throng towards the dance floor. The attire worn by other guests varied considerably, from sharp simple suits to the flamboyant costume of one lithe young man that seemed to be no more than a body stocking masked by a dizzying multicolour collage of holographic plumage. Aside from this young peacock, most men in the room were on the corpulent side, their attendant women invariably skinny. Nearly everyone wore the smooth countenances of those not unfamiliar with cosmetic surgery.

Hanuman reserved his surprise for those who sported cranium AI implants with data rods protruding from external sockets, identifiable by a flash of silver behind their right ear. The devices common on Yuanshi, like the microchip Ganesa had inside her head due to Que Qiao’s childhood implantation laws, relied on wristpads and other hardware to expand their capabilities. Hanuman’s own brain remained implant-free, which was just the way he liked it.

“Freaky,” he murmured.

“Hey,” said Ganesa. “Let’s dance.”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

She pulled him into a clear space on the floor, put a hand to his shoulder, another to his waist and drew him into the waltz. The rhythm came easily. Hanuman nodded politely in response to the appreciative glances of an elderly couple dancing beside them.

“This takes me back,” he said. “I loved dancing when I was younger.”

“Remember how we met?” asked Ganesa. “The American Embassy’s Christmas Ball? Namtar provided stolen invitations for us then, as I recall. I was but a poor kitchen slave, seeking a taste of the high life. You were a dashing buccaneer, out to seduce rich widows of their inheritance. You led me astray, Captain Hanuman.”

“I taught you to pilot a space freighter,” he said with a grin. “How high a life did you want? I showed you the worlds! Okay, it came with a life of smuggling, petty crime and working for people branded as terrorists, but it’s not all bad. Does it matter that we’re here to spy on a man who has probably seen our faces on arrest warrants?”

Ganesa smiled. They danced a while, gliding amidst a swirl of holographic butterflies. Hanuman saw she too was scanning the other guests in search of their quarry. His thoughts however kept going back to their strange trip with Aurora to meet her people, outcasts who were unlikely to ever see the inside of the Savoy, yet willing to welcome Raja Surya as one of their own. The journey back by boat had been far less traumatic than the tube ride.

“Do you think what Ceridwen told us is true?” Ganesa asked suddenly. Her mind evidently was on the same thing. “The corporation gets accused of a lot by people like us, but I never had Que Qiao down as child snatchers.”

“Hard to say,” he said, frowning. “It can’t be good for kiddies to live in a place like that. It may be they’re being taken away by well-meaning charity workers. The big global companies often dabble in social services to get government contracts. There’s always two sides to a story,” he added, wondering who he was trying to convince.

Ganesa gave him a questioning look. “You’re worried about them.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I’d like to head over there again. Unfortunately, we’re tasked with flying the young Raja back to Lanka.”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“It doesn’t need both of us to do that,” Ganesa pointed out. “I’m happy to take Surya if you want to play detective across the river. Besides, we can’t leave Zotz in big bad London on his own. The Maharani’s too busy to keep an eye on him. It would not be good for his mother to arrive and find him alone; or worse, that we’ve dragged him off to Lanka.”

Hanuman nodded, then stiffened. Governor Jaggarneth, looking pompous in a gaudy maroon evening suit, had entered the ballroom from one of the hotel’s private reception rooms. With him was a tall, blond-haired woman, wearing a more subtle shimmering trouser suit in pale pink, along with an Indian woman in a cream-coloured strapless jumpsuit with matching shoulder bag. They were accompanied by two men in innocuous dark outfits typical of Que Qiao security agents. Ganesa turned her head and scowled.

“Smarmy git,” she muttered. “Who’s that with him? She looks a bit like Uma.”

“Maybe Jaggarneth secretly has the hots for the Maharani and is dating a lookalike,” remarked Hanuman, grinning. “They’re heading for the bar. Be careful! We don’t want to make him wonder if he’s seen us before, so try not to catch his eye. If you’re lucky, you might still get a chance to throw a drink in his face.”

“You’d have to buy me one first,” she hinted. “Not that I’d waste it on him.”

Hanuman grinned. “Are you ready to plant the bugs?”

She nodded and patted her purse. “Let’s go play secret agents.”

They slipped through the crowd towards the vision of polished oak and brass that was the bar. It was a measure of the Savoy’s reputation that the bartender was not an android or hologram but a young fair-haired man in a smart uniform, standing proudly before the beer pumps, bottles and racks of glasses as if he owned the hotel itself. Hanuman and Ganesa found a spot next to the two dark-suited men, beyond whom stood Jaggarneth and his female companions. Hanuman glanced to his side and saw Ganesa’s fingers move quickly to an agent’s jacket pocket. Her other hand snapped shut her purse.

“I got them both,” she whispered. “Can I have that drink now?”

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“Not until you get a bug on the others,” he murmured. “Especially Jaggarneth.”

Ganesa sighed. “Fine. Make sure there’s one waiting when I get back.”

She slipped away and edged through the milling guests towards Jaggarneth and his companions. Hanuman tried to make out what the agents next to him were saying, but the background music and chatter made it hard to snatch more than a few words. The bartender moved along the bar and bobbed his head in greeting. His eyes held a strange golden sheen.

“Dead Horse Gin, please,” said Hanuman. “And the same for my friend.”

“Of course, Mister Yakamoto,” he replied. “Would you like ice?”

Hanuman shook his head. He guessed the bartender used network-enabled lenses, which were a popular alternative to visors or retina-linked implants but not yet robust enough to be popular amongst those who travelled the five systems. The bottle of Dead Horse Gin in the young man’s hand was made of sterner stuff and carried an Ayodhya brand label. Across the room, Ganesa was picking her way back through the gathered guests.

“Your drinks, sir,” the bartender said, depositing two glasses before him.

“Thank you,” said Hanuman. He picked up his drink and took a long sip, then almost spat it out again upon seeing the bar charges flash up on his wristpad screen. The cost of the drinks could have bought them an extra couple of nights at their hotel.

“I’ve trained you well,” remarked Ganesa, coming to his side. She picked up her glass and took a cautious sniff. “I didn’t know you could get Dead Horse Gin on Earth.”

“Imported,” Hanuman told her. “In gold-plated rockets fuelled by the tears of unicorns if the price is anything to go by. How did you get on?”

“I slipped a bug into Jaggarneth’s pocket,” she said. “I couldn’t get close to blondie, but managed to plant one in her friend’s handbag, who

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

interestingly enough I caught moaning about the Maharani. And using a lot of Hindi swear words. They must have met.”

“Uma never mentioned her. Will the bugs do the trick?”

“Possibly not. Surya’s cyberclone is feeding a monitor signal back to my implant. At the moment there’s too much noise to make out what they’re saying.”

“So let’s do this the old-fashioned way,” Hanuman murmured. Jaggarneth, snorting at a private joke, had stepped away from the bar, trailed by one of the agents. “Wait here.”

Ignoring Ganesa’s perturbed frown, he left to shadow the two men. Jaggarneth and the agent crossed the room and exited through a discrete doorway. Hanuman trailed them into a small wood-panelled lobby just in time to see them enter another door marked with a sign for unisex toilet facilities. He waited until both men were inside and then followed.

“Welcome,” purred the door, smoothly sliding open.

Hanuman rolled his eyes and shoved a hand against the brass speaker grill to muffle the synthesized voice. Beyond, the room was a vision in gleaming marble. Two of the eight toilet cubicles were occupied and faint voices rose from within. Hanuman slunk into an adjacent empty cubicle, closed the door and put an ear to the dividing wall.

“Can you believe that Laverna?” came the familiar voice of Jaggarneth, speaking from the cubicle furthest away. “Blasted Dhusarians infecting Que Qiao! Unbelievable.”

“Aye, but what of the rest? It’s like some holovid space opera,” said the other man, who spoke with a distinctive regional accent. “Perkunas at Falsafah getting a dreadnought of his own, eh? He’ll show those dumb freaky spiders a thing or two!”

“The UN is making us orbit through asteroids just to start the countdown for a ship to Tau Ceti,” Jaggarneth retorted. There was a pause and a tinkle of running water. “They don’t know of Perkunas’ orders for Yuanshi. We’ll leap the launch codes soon enough.”

“More than a dozen being fitted out at Mercury, eh?”

“Three are close enough to completion to be operational,” the governor snarled. “They’ll be casting shadows over Lanka soon enough! That blasted Kartikeya has been a plasma bolt in my hull for too long. It’s

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

time to stir the kraken-eat-kraken sea! We're sending one to seize Uma's stash at Barnard's Star on the way."

"A dreadnought armada," remarked his colleague. "The UN will be fuming!"

"Too bad," growled Jaggarneth. "I'm going to wipe those rebel scum off the face of that moon, once and for all!"

Hanuman stifled a gasp of surprise. Jaggarneth had seemingly reached the end of his tether with Maharani Uma and her royalist rebellion. Of all the things he expected to hear, a declaration of all-out war was not even in the top five. He had to warn her fast.

Moving quietly, he slipped from the cubicle and stole across the floor. The door to the lobby, which earlier had opened automatically at his approach, remained closed.

"Thank you for using these facilities," said the door.

"Shush!" hissed Hanuman, putting a hand to the speaker. "Open up!"

"For the consideration and well-being of others, customers are invited to wash their hands before exiting this facility," the electronic voice continued, slightly louder. "Fully automated hand basins are situated behind you on the right."

"Open the door, you damn piece of..."

Hanuman froze. Behind him came the sound of boots shuffling through cubicle doors. He heard Jaggarneth mutter something to his colleague, then suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder. The voice of the agent rasped loudly in his ear.

"Hey, you!" he exclaimed. "You're not with the London office!"

"Biologically tailored cleansing gels and creams are available from the dispensers," the door continued. Its metallic tones had become stern. "Customers who choose not to partake of this service can opt for disinfection upon exit."

"Who is he?" demanded Jaggarneth. "Tonight is supposed to be Que Qiao only!"

Hanuman slowly turned and stared into the unsmiling features of Jaggarneth and his colleague. The governor's glare fell into an annoyed grimace.

### THREE TALES FOR CHRISTMAS

“I never forget a face,” snarled Jaggarneth. “He’s with Uma! One of Kartikeya’s rabble, sent to spy on us, no doubt. What have you to say for yourself?”

“Governor!” greeted Hanuman, sounding more confident than he felt. “We’re all friends on Yuanshi now. Please, allow me to shake your hand! Just let me freshen up first.”

“What was that?” asked the agent, confused.

“Door,” called Hanuman. “Disinfect upon exit, please.”

The doorway promptly filled with a sweet-smelling green mist. Hanuman raised a hand to his eyes, reached behind with his other and felt the door slide open. Jaggarneth and the agent, caught by surprise, erupted into fits of coughing. Hanuman yelped as someone grabbed his arm and pulled him through into the lobby. Amidst a sudden flurry of holographic butterflies, a small brown fist lashed out over his shoulder and smacked the spluttering agent square in the jaw, sending him tumbling.

“Come on!” yelled Ganesa, still holding his arm. “We need to go!”

“Thank you for your custom,” the door announced.

Ganesa dragged Hanuman across the lobby, through a set of unfamiliar doors and into the main reception area. Moments later they were outside on the Strand, racing past bemused ambling pedestrians in their haste to escape. Dusk had fallen and the glow of advertisement holograms lit the street. A rumble of thunder heralded fresh spots of rain.

“You punched an agent!” Hanuman exclaimed.

“I heard everything,” she said, tapping her head. Hanuman remembered her link to the bugs in the men’s pockets. “These parties are more degenerate than I thought.”

“This is bad,” he said. His heart raced. “Dreadnoughts? This means war!”

\* \* \*

*READ THE HOLLOW MOON SERIES NOW!*

## 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 anything 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 2012. *Hollow Worlds*, the final book of the series, was published in 2024.

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.

## HOLLOW WORLDS A novel by Steph Bennion

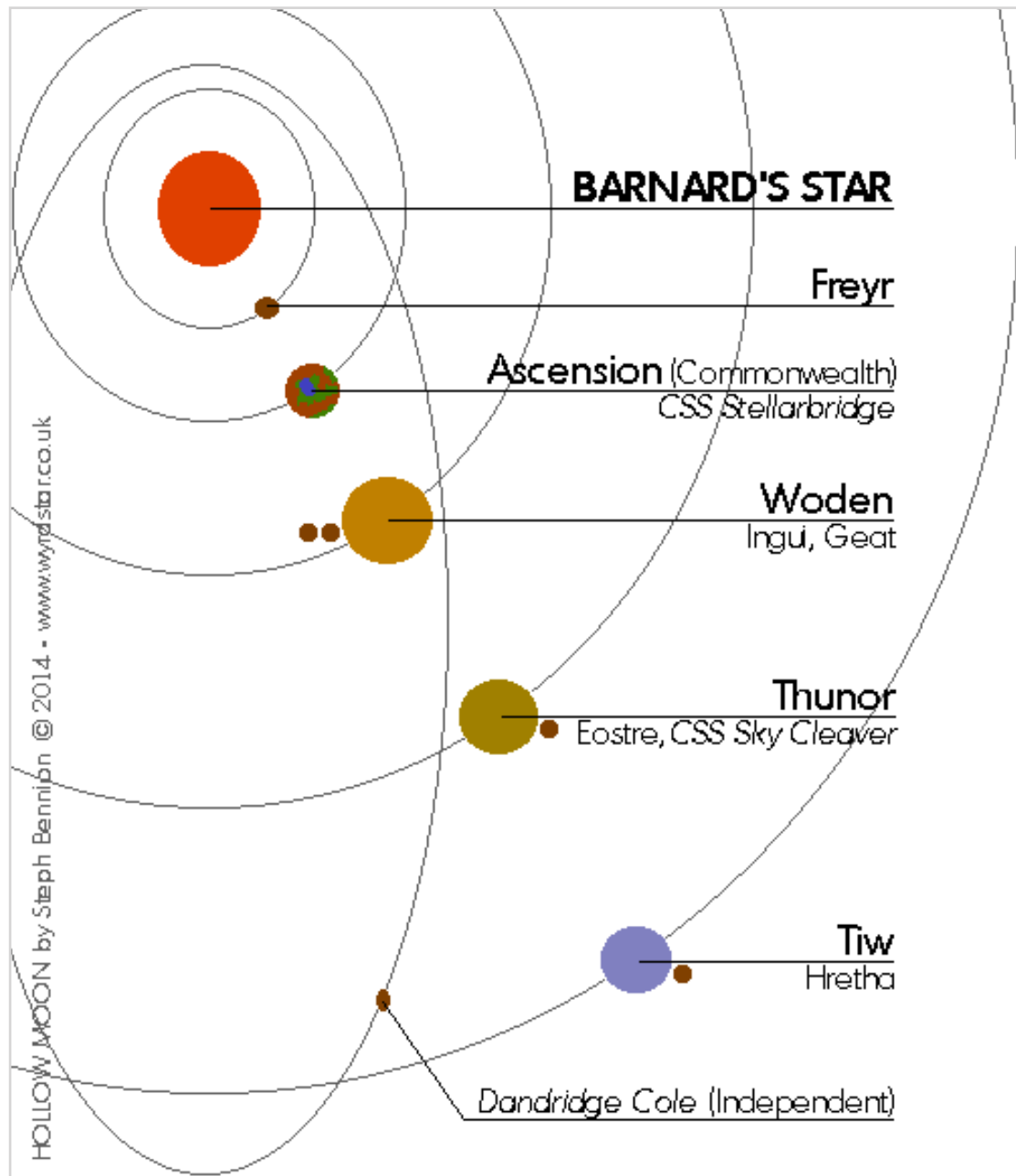
**Dyson trees, biological skyships, space dreadnoughts, alien greys: the five systems are not big enough for this final adventure!** Ravana O'Brien, Detective Ostara Lee, annoying young crew-mate Artorius and their disgruntled sabre-toothed robot are marooned a very long way from home. An extra-dimensional labyrinth of hollow worlds, the lair of ancient omnipotent tricksters, homicidal giant spiders, mysterious alien greys and the insular descendants of lost colonists who believe the Earth is no more.

Priest Taranis is reaping his twisted destiny with a new apprentice at his side. Ravana's father and friends are scouring the five systems and beyond for answers. Space dreadnoughts and incompetent mercenaries are on manoeuvres as the fledging Terran Federation slides towards civil war. In the shadows of a hollow moon, a scheming would-be god prepares the last roll of dice to seal humankind's fate. Can Ravana and crew find their way home and save the day?



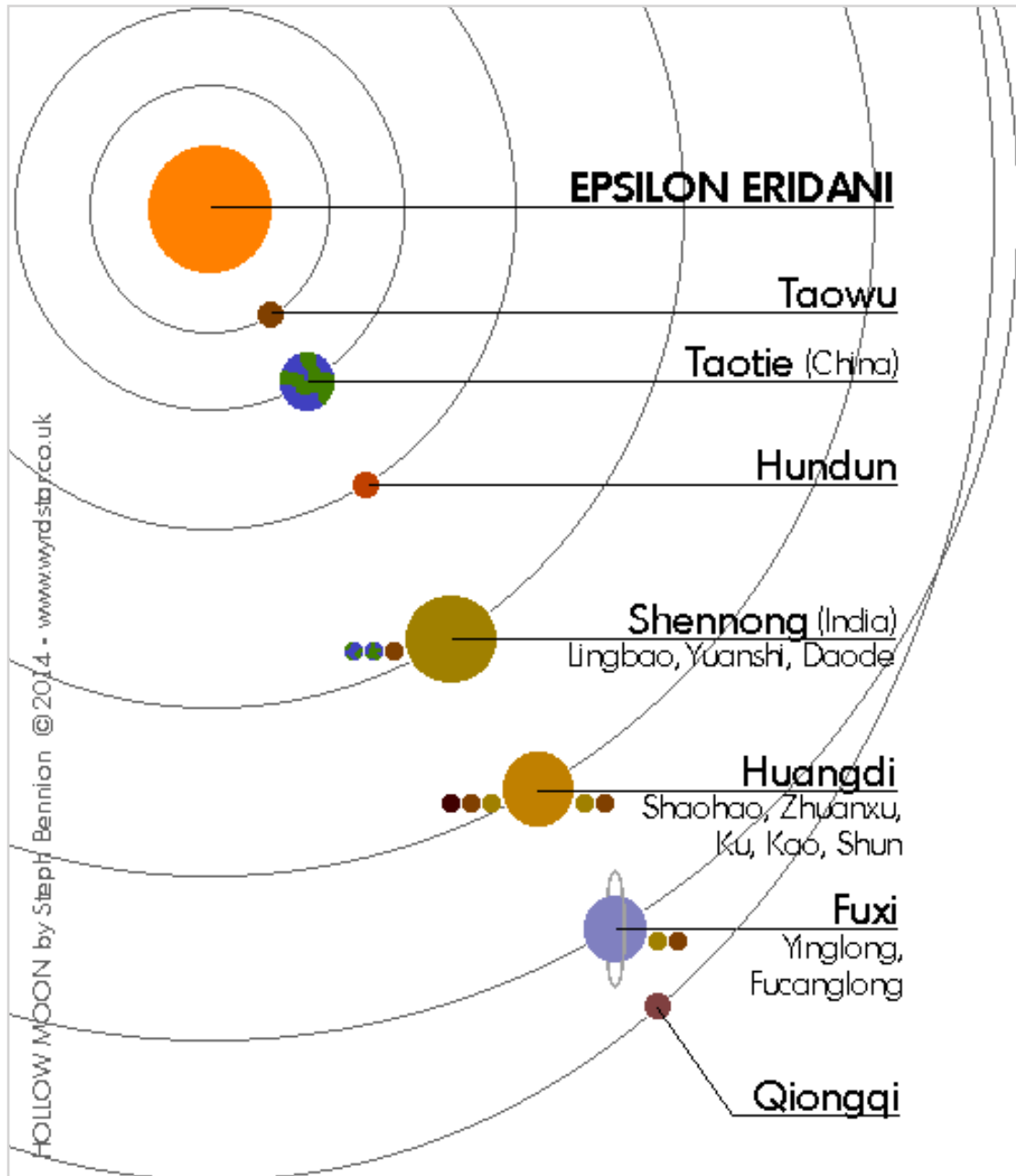
## Illustration: Barnard's Star system

*Circa 2280CE. M4Ve star, approximately six light years from Sol.*



## Illustration: Epsilon Eridani system

*Circa 2280CE. K2V star, approximately ten light years from Sol.*



## **Excerpt from *Hollow Moon***

### **Chapter One: Falling Down the End of the World**

*Nine years after IT'S A BLUNDERFUL LIFE, intrepid young heroine Ravana O'Brien finds herself on an incredible planet-hopping adventure into the shady world of politics, music and rebellion...!*

RAVANA REACHED for the next hand-hold and pulled herself higher, annoyed beyond belief at how easily she had once again let her wayward electric cat lure her into an idiotic predicament. The cliff was scarily high; below her was a ten-storey drop to a rocky shelf left by a previous collapse, which itself formed the top of a nasty slope of rubble that tumbled a further three hundred metres to the ground. Her right leg was doubled up with her knee against her chest, the toe of her boot wedged in a crevice just centimetres wide. Her other foot was at full stretch and precariously poised upon a narrow ledge that seemed to be the last decent foothold to the shallow cave above.

“Daddy wouldn’t buy me a bow-wow,” she muttered tunelessly, inadvertently adding her father’s Australian twang to the Indian tones inherited from her mother. It was an odd combination at the best of times, which this definitely was not. “Why didn’t he buy me a bow-wow? I’ve got a stupid cat, that’s acting like a...”

She cursed as her foot slipped and sent a cascade of rock fragments rattling down the cliff. Trying not to panic, Ravana forced herself higher. She gave a brief grimace of triumph as her head finally appeared above the floor of the cave.

Something small and furry slunk from the rocky shadows and greeted her with a pathetic meow. Ravana blew out of the corner of her mouth to dislodge an annoying strand of hair and glared at the cat with ill-concealed contempt.

“Electric pets are not supposed to lure their humans into risking life and limb!” she scolded, feeling a headache coming on. “What do you say to that, cat?”

The black bundle of fur looked at her and meowed again. With one last determined effort, Ravana heaved herself into the shallow cave and

sat back against the cliff wall, breathing heavily. She was no athlete and her slim body was not used to this sort of strenuous exercise. Her sweat felt clammy upon the scar on the side of her face and her weak right arm ached badly. Trembling, the cat jumped onto her lap, its pitiful whining subsiding as she stroked its fake fur. It was impossible to stay mad at it for long, even if Ravana did often wish the cat had an 'off' switch. Yet even electric pets had rights these days.

She had first discovered the shallow cave just weeks before; or rather, her cat had found it after a previous solo wander cross-country. This was the second time it had homed in on this almost inaccessible cliff-side perch. Whatever it was that lured her cat to this place was also making it act very oddly. She had never seen her pet so agitated.

The cave was roughly a third of the way up the huge, partially collapsed cliff face at the end of the inside-out world that was the colony starship *Dandridge Cole*. From this high vantage point the whole interior of the hollow moon lay before her. It was a world hewn deep inside a spinning asteroid: a vast cylindrical chamber five kilometres long and a kilometre wide, where the fields and trees and stone buildings clung limpet-like to the curving rocky walls. The position of the sun was the strangest thing of all, for at this height she was almost level with the tiny yet immensely bright golden globe that sat suspended between three radial pylons at the centre of the long cavern. The air was clear and looking down she could see the tops of the trees dotting nearby grazing land, a view that became increasingly dizzy as she followed the foot of the cliff with her gaze until finally she was staring straight up. Directly above her, nestled against the cliff face on the far side, was the Maharani's palace, a place strictly off-limits to people like herself.

Ravana's gaze lingered upon the distant palace. Her perspective shifted and now she was looking down upon the house and gardens, to where a movement in the grounds had caught her eye. Two figures were making their way towards the main building; even from this distance, she was struck by the curious way they moved. With a start, she realised they were wearing what looked like lightweight spacesuits, albeit without helmets. This was unusual enough within the hollow moon but more so there. It was said that the Maharani had exiled herself from the modern

world for good and looked down upon the space-age trappings of the twenty-third century as she would something nasty on the sole of her shoe.

Ravana frowned, wondering how her own life had ended up like this, where watching two distant strangers had become the height of excitement and adventure.

“Two spacemen,” she told her purring cat. “I wonder what they’re doing? And why am I asking you? You only care about leading me astray!”

\* \* \*

Unaware they were being watched, the two spacesuit-clad figures continued their furtive progress through the palace grounds. Their faces were pale and haggard, betraying a world-weariness echoed by their patched grey survival suits.

Inari, the shorter and fatter of the two, moved with a clumsy and hesitant air of bemusement. He was aware his slow progress annoyed his colleague, who had crept ahead through the secluded gardens with a sly, cat-like confidence, only to double back again upon finding Inari had fallen behind. The palace ahead was an impressive building of carved stone, wooden verandas and domed turrets. Inari stopped to stare, though it was something else entirely that captivated his attention.

“Hey, Namtar!” he called. He gave a noisy sniff, wiped his nose with a hand and used his sticky digits to tap the taller man on the shoulder. “Funny, huh?”

With a sigh, Namtar turned to look at what his accomplice had found so amusing. One of the Maharani’s gardeners, unhappy with his lot, had planted the flower beds so that a rude word was spelt out in scarlet blooms.

“My dear Inari, could you please keep your feeble utterances to a minimum?” Namtar hissed irritably. Like his colleague he spoke English, albeit with a cultured Russian accent rather than Inari’s coarse Greek tones. Neither man sounded entirely trustworthy. “It would greatly aid

our illicit enterprise if you could endeavour to concentrate what few brain cells you own upon the task in hand!”

“Just looking,” Inari mumbled. “This place is weird.”

“It is as comfortable as any burrow could hope to be,” said Namtar, urging Inari forward. “Perhaps you do not recall the squalid conditions we tolerated in Lanka before the dome was removed. That this strange hollow moon has succeeded as an independent colony more than makes up for superficial shortcomings, though I admit as a place of exile it is a somewhat eccentric choice, given the Maharani’s rather exuberant tastes.”

Inari frowned as he deciphered the lengthy sentence, wondering which bit he was expected to comment on. “I thought this was a Commonwealth system,” he said at last.

“This rock has fortuitously escaped the attentions of the government on Ascension,” Namtar told him. “Breathe this air, my friend, for it is the same sweet taste of freedom we are fighting for on Yuanshi! Today, you and I bring liberation one step closer.”

“Smells funny to me,” Inari observed, wrinkling his nose. “If you ask me, living on all these different worlds is making people loopy.”

“Colonising the five systems has not changed humanity one iota,” Namtar snapped tartly. “It merely brought us new lands to fight over, new populations to enslave and new arenas in which to spread the same old lies and deceit.”

“Speak for yourself!” Inari snorted.

“I do,” Namtar replied coolly.

\* \* \*

Ravana knew she should be heading home. Sitting on the cave ledge high above the palace, her gaze was reluctant to leave the mysterious distant spacemen. She heard the flutter of wings and felt the furry lump in her lap twitch. Startled, she turned to see a large white gull staring at her from where it had landed on the far side of the cave. Its wings rested stiffly at its side and there was something unnatural about the way its head moved.

There were real birds which flew the skies of the hollow moon but this was not one of them.

“Go away!” she said, waving a hand irritably.

The gull regarded her solemnly. “I am friend! Require assistance?”

The squawk had a definite metallic ring. Ravana wondered just how much assistance a robot gull could hope to provide. The bird turned to warily eye her electric cat.

“Are you spying on me?” she demanded defensively. “I am sixteen, you know. I don’t need my father’s permission every time I leave Docksider.”

The gull replied with a blank mechanical gaze that did little to help Ravana’s growing unease. Spacemen and talking birds aside, she had got herself into a tricky situation. What passed for gravity within the hollow moon, the result of the centrifugal force generated by the *Dandridge Cole* spinning on its axis, was barely half that of Earth but enough to make falling down the cliff an extremely painful, if not terminal experience. The pleasant sensation of feeling her weight ebb away as she climbed had lost its appeal, for it meant going back down the cliff and into higher gravity was much harder than climbing up. The descent would only get more complicated with an irritable cat.

Her headache was getting worse. Ignoring the stare of the electric bird, she lifted her pet from her lap, rose to her feet and peered over the cave ledge. She was not looking forward to the climb back down. She had done it before and lived to tell the tale, but that did not stop her inwardly cursing her cat for making her have to do it again.

“Require assistance?” the gull asked again.

Ravana wondered if it was some sort of automated surveillance device. Robot guards were not in the habit of declaring friendship. A new thought popped into her mind.

“A flying sentinel,” she mused. “Zotz? Is that you?”

“Affirmative!” the gull confirmed. “Bird syntax limited. Require assistance?”

Ravana smiled. Fifteen-year-old Zotz was the only friend she had close to her own age in Docksider and was a wizard at building gadgets. She knew he had a crush on her and could imagine him putting together

something like this gull to follow her around. It was a sweet thing to do, but a little weird.

“It’s nice of you to offer,” Ravana admitted, looking down at the vertical obstacle course between her and the ground below. “But unless your feathered avatar has a ladder tucked under its wing I don’t think you can.”

The gull, or Zotz, considered this. “Ladder not found in inventory.”

“A jetpack?” she suggested, hopefully.

“Jetpack not fou...”

“Yeah, yeah, I guessed,” said Ravana. She wondered whether to ask it about the strange spacemen. Her cat had evidently decided the winged robot was worth further investigation and was licking its lips. “All I want is an easy way off this cliff.”

“Proceed upwards to ground,” the bird told her.

“I want to go down, not up! Have you flipped your diodes?”

It was not easy for a robot bird to look disdainful but the gull somehow managed it. Puzzled, Ravana looked up at the landscape curving high above her head. It was then she noticed a rough flight of steps cut into the cliff, leading up from the palace gardens; steps that therefore from her perspective led down towards her cave. It dawned on her that the carved footholds must have originally spanned the entire diameter of the cliff, right across the end of the cavern, only a rock slide had taken away the section below where she now stood. The vertical flight reached the ground on the opposite side of the hollow moon to where she had parked the monocycle, but she was ready to accept a long walk in exchange for an easy descent. Meanwhile, her wayward pet had seemingly concluded the cave had one electric creature too many and was flexing its talons ready to pounce.

“I’m not allowed to enter the palace grounds,” she said doubtfully, not that this would stop her. The constraints of the hollow moon were frustrating and her solitary wanderings to counter boredom became longer by the day. “Well, so they say.”

The gull was otherwise engaged, trying to avoid the attentions of her cat. Ravana was suddenly intrigued, not only by the prospect of discovering where the mysterious spacemen had come from, but also of



experiencing the zone of zero gravity she knew she would find less than two hundred metres up from where she perched. Having proper steps to follow back to the ground was a bonus. Being arrested by the Maharani's palace guards when she got there less so. On the plus side, her headache had eased a little.

A strangled squawk made her jump in alarm. She looked just in time to see her pet claw a chunk out of the gull's scrawny neck, leaving the poor bird's head hanging loosely from an extraordinary collection of coloured wires and tubes. For a machine, the gull was surprisingly messy inside. Green hydraulic fluid bubbled from its neck and pooled upon the floor, seeping away into a large mould-covered crack in the cave wall. Unperturbed, her electric cat had cornered the damaged bird, growling with a mechanical vigour not unlike the waste disposal unit in the communal kitchens back home.

“Reboot me!” burred the gull.

“Bad kitty!” scolded Ravana. Feeling guilty, she reached for the gull and tried in vain to wedge its head back into position. “Sorry about that, Zotz.”

With a resigned sigh, she separated her cat from the mutilated gull. Ravana scooped her pet under an arm and went to where the stone steps passed the cave entrance. Taking a deep breath, she gingerly began a one-handed ascent of the cliff.

It was more like climbing a ladder than negotiating a flight of stairs, but even with a wriggling fur ball of electronics to contend with it was easier than she anticipated. The pseudo-gravity of the hollow moon lessened with every step and soon she was almost flying up the cliff, the mystery of the spacemen forgotten. After a particularly vigorous leap, Ravana found herself drifting to a halt in mid air, an arm's length from the rock face. She had reached the exact centre of the cliff, on the imaginary axis upon which the hollow moon spun. She was finally weightless.

Ravana had been in free-fall before on space flights, but floating above the concave countryside of the hollow moon was a whole new experience. Wedging her boots in the gap between two steps, she found she could float horizontally outwards from the cliff. The tiny sun was now

above, with the distant trees and houses rising on all sides, layered around the inside of a vast cylinder of rock. The change in orientation was made yet more disconcerting when she spied the distant shapes of people as they moved within the *Dandridge Cole*, looking like slow-motion ants scurrying around a huge drainpipe.

As an experiment she put herself into a slow spin and tried to visualise the asteroid rotating on its axis as it drifted around Barnard's Star. Her cat, not liking zero gravity at all, showed its annoyance with a flex of diamond-tipped talons, pretty to look at but extremely sharp. Ravana was just pulling herself back towards the steps when her electric pet, mistaking the cliff for a floor, dug its claws into her arm and made a sudden leap for freedom.

“Ow!” cried Ravana, caught by surprise.

The cat released an electric howl, bounced off the stone steps and flew back towards her face with claws outstretched. In a panic, she raised her hands and twisted away, then yelped as her feet slipped from where they were wedged. Ravana tried desperately to hook a foot back under a step but it was too late. Her pet landed on her shoulder with a heavy jolt. To her horror, the momentum of the cat's leap suddenly had them reeling away from the cliff.

Ravana shrieked. With another strangled cry, she frantically thrashed her arms as if trying to save herself from drowning. Her pet, driven by self-preservation circuits, scrambled down her body and dug its claws into her thigh. Just when Ravana thought things could not get any worse, she saw the steps start to slip by and realised the flying cat had knocked them beyond the zero-gravity point. Slowly but surely, centrifugal forces were drawing them back to the ground.

“Blasted cat!” she screamed.

“Require assistance?” came a cracked voice.

With a surprised yelp, Ravana stopped trying to swim in thin air. She looked up and to her amazement saw the mangled remains of Zotz's sentry gull hovering above her. The whole centre section of the bird's body spun horizontally so that its outstretched wings acted as helicopter blades, with tail feathers whirling as a control rotor. Above the humming

aerofoils, the bird's head hung skewed from its broken neck. Its beady electronic eyes glowed defiantly.

In different circumstances Ravana would have been fascinated by what she recognised as one of Zotz's typically bizarre designs. Now she just screamed and made a panic-stricken grab for the gull's legs. The spin of the hollow moon had gripped her and the cat with a vengeance. They were already drifting rapidly past another cliff-side cave in an accelerating plummet towards the palace. Above her, the gull's wings whirred frantically as it fought in vain to stay airborne. There was little the mechanical bird could do.

"Help me!" screamed Ravana.

The cliff became a blur. The Coriolis effect of the spinning world was pulling them down in a curve towards a copse of weeping willows. Ravana stared in terror as the gull finally broke free, shooting away like a missile into a flower bed, creating a sad punctuation mark that somehow made the rude horticulture even more obscene. With a final, anguished shriek, she plunged through the leafy canopy, her arms flailing wildly in a desperate attempt to break her fall. Moments later she ricocheted off a branch towards a hitherto-unnoticed garden pond and splash-landed with a loud squelch. The small pool, it transpired, consisted almost entirely of evil-smelling mud.

Ravana slowly lifted herself out of the mire, her hands clutching what was left of the gull's spindly legs. For a while she could do nothing but stand trembling knee-deep in the pond. The hollow moon's low pseudo-gravity had saved her from serious injury; not only had it kept her from falling too fast, but had also encouraged freakishly tall trees to grow just where she needed them to cushion her fall. She was battered, bruised and covered from head to toe in grey slime but otherwise amazingly unhurt, though her headache had returned worse than ever. Ravana assumed the large blob of mud clinging to her leg was her cat.

"Excitement and adventure," she muttered. "I should be careful what I wish for."

Suddenly, she froze. The space-suited figures were just metres away, lurking near the palace on the far side of a small lawn. There was no way they had not seen her.

\* \* \*

“What the hell was that?” exclaimed Inari.

Startled, he stumbled to a halt and scanned his surroundings for the source of the disturbance. He and Namtar had reached a manicured stretch of grass beyond the trees and arrived at a secluded veranda at the side of the palace, out of sight of the main entrance.

“To what do you refer?” snapped Namtar.

Inari frowned, having been reprimanded several times already for his lack of haste. “Didn’t you hear it?” he asked. “There was a scream, then a splash!”

“I dare say it was nothing more than a duck.”

“What planet are you from? Ducks don’t sound like that!”

Namtar clouted Inari across the head with the scanner device in his hand.

“Does it matter what it was?” he replied impatiently. “Much as I relish the opportunity to stand here and debate what hypothetical exotic fauna may or may not reside in this antique habitat, the palace guard will not be distracted for long and we have a job to do. May we proceed with the task in hand without further ado?”

“Could be a wart hog,” Inari said sullenly. “They make strange noises.”

“Takes one to know one, my fat friend. Our entry, if you please?”

Namtar pointed to a nearby sash window below the low veranda roof. Inari mumbled something underneath his breath, unhooked a lever from his belt and moved across to attack the wooden frame. After more muttering and a fair bit of grunting, there was a sound of splintering wood and the window was open.

“There you go,” he said to Namtar. The room beyond was in darkness.

“After you,” insisted Namtar, eyeing the opening warily.

Inari shrugged, grabbed hold of the window frame and pulled himself inside. Namtar quickly followed, albeit more carefully than his clumsy spacesuit-clad comrade ahead.

\* \* \*

The men disappeared from view. Ravana tossed aside what was left of the gull and waded from the pond as quietly as she could. She wondered why the spacesuit-clad strangers had failed to spot her, then realised that being covered in mud was excellent camouflage for hiding in a garden. Neither man was anyone she knew from the hollow moon. The space agency shoulder patch upon their spacesuits too was unfamiliar, though she recognised the national flag of India in the corner of the design.

“Burglars!” murmured Ravana, intrigued despite her thudding headache.

She scraped the mud from the touch-screen of her wristpad and activated the communicator, wondering what the protocol was for one trespasser reporting on others. Her dilemma was resolved when she saw the network symbol flashing, indicating there was something nearby interfering with the signal. She was on her own.

There was a soft thud as her cat let go of her leg and dropped to the ground. Deep in thought, Ravana reached to stroke its fur, looked at the walking mud ball and changed her mind. The cat responded with a belch and trotted towards the nearby flower beds. Ravana suspected a real cat would have at least tried to clean itself before going for a stroll.

It was then she heard a distant yell, a cry for help. It was the voice of a child.

The two men reappeared at the window. They had someone with them, a dark-haired Indian boy dressed in matching tunic and trousers of expensive fabric. The boy was struggling to escape the men’s grip and to her horror Ravana saw he had a gag across his mouth and his ankles and wrists were bound with cords. Startled, she watched as the tall man produced something from his pocket and spray-painted a symbol on the wall next to the window. He and his comrade quickly moved away from the palace, carrying their frantically squirming burden between them. Their voices came across loud and clear.

“Find him easy, you said!” grumbled the fat man, clearly out of breath. “Your tracker device tried to lead us back to the garden!”

“A mere technical glitch, no more,” his colleague said dismissively. “The path of faith has not led us astray and we have collected who we sought.”

Still struggling, the boy somehow loosened his gag and suddenly screamed.

“Help!” he cried in terror. “I’m being kidnapped!”

“Be quiet!” hissed the taller man. Halting, he nonchalantly cuffed the boy around the head and refastened the gag, then hooked his hands once more under the boy’s wriggling shoulders. “Children just do not know how to behave in polite company.”

“He’s a right fidget. When I hit people they usually calm down.”

“We have been tasked to return our cargo in pristine condition. I fear our own deliverance into sanctity may be withheld if we deliver damaged goods.”

“I’d only hit him gentle, like.”

“I sincerely doubt you truly appreciate the meaning of the word ‘gentle’.”

“Yes I do,” retorted the fat man. “My mum bought me a dictionary for my birthday and I’ve read as far as ‘halibut’. Go on, ask me what a halibut is.”

The men moved on and the response was lost to Ravana’s ears. Alarmed at their treatment of the young boy, she watched nervously from her hiding place as they headed towards the wall surrounding the palace grounds. Her headache was gone, as if the pain had been a needle suddenly plucked free from her brain, yet she was left with a less-than-steel resolve to spring into action. There was no way she could tackle the two men alone, but she was determined to find out what they were up to before she went for help.

“Don’t be a scaredy-cat!” she muttered. “No offence,” she added, seeing her electric pet look up from its systematic destruction of a pretty display of blooms.

Keeping herself hidden, she crept nearer and saw that between the men and the wall was a very strange object indeed. It was some sort of vehicle, a horizontal yellow cylinder as high as a man and three times as long. One end tapered to a cone of bright silver, the other was flat with a

recessed hatch. A series of horizontal spiked tracks ran along its rusty hull; between two of these, faded black letters spelt out the legend, 'ASTROMOLE'.

Ahead, the men had reached the machine. Ravana scurried towards them, keeping low behind an ornate garden shrubbery until she was as close as she dared. Her heart pounding, she peered around the edge of a convenient bush. The kidnappers were bundling their captive through the open hatch of the machine.

The taller man paused to look around the palace grounds, then followed his comrade and the boy inside. The hatch clanged shut behind them. There was a muffled shout, then the door swung open again and he leapt out again, his face creased in disgust.

"You vile man!" he cried, fanning a hand frantically before his nose. "That truly is the height of bad manners, especially in such an enclosed space! What have you been eating?"

After a few moments of frenetic waving, he climbed back inside and pulled the hatch closed once more. With a mechanical roar, the Astromole jerked into motion and began to crawl across the ground, cone-end forwards, propelled by the spiked tracks clattering along the side of its cylindrical hull. Startled, Ravana emerged from behind the bush and watched as the machine moved slowly towards a small statue-lined courtyard near the main gates. There was no sign of the palace guard or anyone else whom she could alert. Not knowing what else to do, she started in pursuit of the disappearing vehicle.

The courtyard lay between the blank stares of moss-covered stone elephants, one at each corner and standing three metres high. All four faced a large ragged hole torn through the central paving. It was towards this hole the rusty yellow machine now headed, its nose cone spinning like a high-speed drill. Still following, Ravana retreated to hide behind an empty wooden cart at the edge of the courtyard. She looked out again just as the Astromole reached the edge of the pit and tipped itself into the hole.

"They're digging their way out!" she murmured in surprise.

She had never seen anything like it in her life. The machine tilted further, then began to sink into the ground, the whirring tracks throwing

chunks of rock into the air behind. In a matter of seconds it had descended from sight, leaving nothing but the rubble-strewn courtyard in its wake.

Ravana emerged from behind the cart and hesitantly approached the edge of the pit. Awestruck, she peered inside and caught a glimpse of the rear of the Astromole, slipping into the gloom of the curving tunnel. It fitted its burrow so neatly she realised the vehicle must have cut the shaft earlier to get into the palace grounds in the first place. Now very scared, she backed away from the pit. The machine had made so much noise she was sure the Maharani's guards should have been alerted by now, but there was still no one else in sight. Although apprehensive about approaching the palace, it was the right thing to do.

Ravana took a few steps towards the house and paused. The hush that had descended felt unnatural, making her more nervous than ever. As if to reassure herself she had not imagined it, she glanced back at the shattered courtyard, then shivered as a sudden chill wind swept through the grounds. The climate within the hollow moon was carefully controlled and it was rare to feel anything more than a gentle breeze.

The wind quickly gathered strength. Startled, she saw a flurry of leaves, twigs and other garden detritus being drawn towards the hole in the centre of the courtyard. Her panic rising, she scrambled back to her refuge behind the wagon and watched wide-eyed as the debris swirled ever faster into the ragged pit like water down a drain. The wind grew more ferocious still. Now the branches of the nearby trees too were bending towards the hole, creaking with an agonising sense of foreboding.

Ravana stared at the pit. It seemed incredible, yet she knew what was happening. Somehow, the rocky shell of the asteroid colony ship had been breached. The hollow moon's air was being sucked into space before her very eyes.

The canvas fastened across the back of the cart rose like a sail in the wind, jolting the wagon forward against the wooden chock holding one of its wheels. As the canvas rose, she spied a coil of rope lying in the back. Ravana yelped as a disturbed huntsman spider dropped from the canvas onto her sleeve, scuttled down her arm and ran for cover. Cursing, she made a grab for the rope before a plan had fully formed in her head.



Rope in hand, she secured one end to a sturdy part of the cart, then scrambled across to loop the other around the neck of the nearest stone elephant, tying it tight. By now it was becoming difficult to stand upright in the wind. Crawling back to the wagon, she kicked away the wheel chock, reached for the lever next to the driver's seat and released the brake.

The cart leapt across the courtyard, its canvas flapping like a kite sailing a storm. The rope tightened and the wagon shuddered to a halt at the edge of the pit. Buffeted by the wind, Ravana tried to crawl to the edge of the courtyard and safety, but to her horror her fingers could not grip the paving slabs. Slowly but surely, as the air was sucked away, she was being dragged backwards across the ground towards the gaping hole.

The rushing air was heavy with grit that seared painfully against her skin. Ravana closed her eyes and waited for the final gust that would send her flying down the shaft to her doom. The wailing of the wind was deafening. Through her mounting terror, she still found time to curse her electric cat for landing her in this mess in the first place.

Just when she thought her plan had failed, she heard the sound of grating stone as the nearby elephant began to topple from its plinth. On the other end of the rope, the cart leapt forward and was instantly sucked into the pit, dragging the huge statue behind. Ravana, her eyes tightly closed, sadly missed the awesome spectacle of several tonnes of stone elephant flying across the courtyard as if it weighed no more than a feather. The statue flew towards the pit and then, with an almighty crunch, jammed itself neatly into the hole.

Suddenly, the wind was no more, leaving nothing but the distant wail of a siren to break the silence. Ravana cautiously opened her eyes. Standing before where she lay was her cat, looking suspiciously clean and holding the remains of the sentry gull in its mouth.

"After today, you are definitely grounded," she muttered. She sat up and started pulling leaves from her hair. "Your recharging privileges have been revoked."

The cat shifted its electric gaze to the source of the shadow over her shoulder. Ravana wearily climbed to her feet and turned to see two Indian men standing at the edge of the courtyard, both dressed in the dark suits

of the palace guard. One was looking despondently at the stone elephant, wedged comically in the hole in the middle of the ruined paving with its legs in the air. The other pointed a handgun in her direction.

“I expected a better reception than this,” Ravana remarked wearily. “After all, it’s not every day someone gets to save the world with an elephant.”

\* \* \*

The guards took Ravana through the palace grounds to the guard house, a squat and utilitarian building attached to the palace by a covered walkway. There they led her into a small, sparsely furnished room and stood silently over her for what seemed an age. When she tried to tell the guards what she had witnessed she was steadfastly ignored, though was given a bowl of perfumed water and a soft towel to wash the mud from her hands and face.

The open door at the other end of the walkway offered a tantalising glimpse of the elaborate yet old-fashioned decor of the palace, which in Ravana’s eyes was well-suited to the household of a woman who used the archaic Indian title of Maharani. No one knew much about the palace’s reclusive inhabitants. It was rumoured that the Maharani’s staff were forbidden to speak of the outside world or mix with the other residents of the *Dandridge Cole*. The only thing Ravana knew for certain was that the Maharani and her retinue were fellow exiles from the Epsilon Eridani system, who had come to the hollow moon around the same time as herself and her father, back when Ravana had been just seven years old.

Finally, another man entered. He was tall and pale-skinned, with dark hair and a neatly trimmed goatee beard. He wore a smart uniform in green with gold piping; by the way the first two guards silently deferred to him, Ravana guessed he was their superior. Initially ignoring her, the newcomer placed the small flat case and antique paper-leafed book he carried on a desk by the window. Only then did he turn to greet Ravana.

“My name is Fenris,” he said, by way of an introduction. He spoke perfect English, with an accent suggesting he was of Terran Eastern European origin. His brusque manner was that of someone who was

clearly not having a good day. “I am Maharani Uma’s chief of staff and head of security here at the palace.”

“I’m Ravana,” she said urgently. “There were two men...”

“Ravana,” mused Fenris, interrupting. “An unusual name, I must say. The Maharani does not take kindly to trespassers,” he said sternly, sidestepping her unfinished sentence. “Yet we mean you no harm. I trust my men have not mistreated you.”

Ravana saw he was looking at the scar on her face. She turned away, discomfited yet also puzzled by how calm he seemed considering what had just happened. Fenris saw her unease and beckoned to her to take a seat by the desk, then dismissed the guards.

He sat down in the chair opposite. She watched his hand momentarily go to the book, a grey leather-bound volume inscribed with the words *Isa-Sastra*, as if seeking reassurance. Reaching for his case, he opened the lid and turned it slightly to hide its contents from Ravana’s sight. He was not quite quick enough, allowing her to glimpse what looked like a small holoivid screen within. At the top of the case lid there was a small hole, now facing her way, which she suspected was a camera lens.

“The guards are good men but not great at conversation,” he said. Ravana smiled nervously, then thought better of it when she saw that Fenris’ own expression remained entirely humourless. “Regrettably, they were a little slow to react to the rather unpleasant incident we had here today. Maybe you saw something of it yourself?”

Ravana nodded vigorously. She was just about to launch into her story when Fenris put a finger to his lips, then cocked his head slightly as if listening to something. She noticed he wore a small earpiece, adding weight to her suspicions that he was recording their conversation. Rising from his seat, he walked to the door and beckoned to someone beyond.

A slim Indian boy stepped into the room, dressed in a long green robe that reached to the floor. To Ravana’s surprise, she instantly recognised him as the squirming youth she had seen being carried off by the two spacesuit-clad men.

“It can’t be!” she exclaimed. “You were taken away in the Astromole. I saw you!”

The boy bowed deeply. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, miss.”

Ravana stared at him. The voice was perfectly modulated and strangely emotionless.

“Ravana, this is Raja Surya,” Fenris told her. “The Raja is the Maharani’s only child and the sole heir to the royal seat of Yuanshi.”

Ravana looked confused. “But...”

“Actually, I have misled you,” Fenris confided. “This is the Raja’s clone.”

“What?”

The boy bowed again. “I am Cyberclone Surya,” he said. “Here to serve in his place.”

“A cyberclone?” Ravana was dumbstruck. Momentarily forgetting what she had seen earlier, she looked closer. The boy’s expression had an odd inscrutable smoothness that reminded her of the humanoid test pilot robots she had once seen at Lan-Tlanto spaceport. “I thought the Maharani didn’t like advanced technology,” she said wonderingly. “You can’t get much more advanced than a cyberclone.”

Fenris looked at her oddly. “I wanted to test if you recognised the boy, which clearly you do. Your reaction to the clone is curious. I was under the impression that the residents of this asteroid were, dare I say it, a little backward?”

“I am training to be an astro-engineer and a pilot like my father!” retorted Ravana, deeply offended. Now she knew she was looking at an android, she recognised the perfect symmetry of features that separated machines from flesh-and-blood humans. “I’ve never seen a cyberclone in real life before. Not that they are real life, if you know what I mean. It’s an amazing piece of work.”

She fell silent as she caught Fenris’ expression. His inadvertent insult was partly true, for a fair few of the long-term residents of the *Dandridge Cole* needed no encouragement to shun technological luxuries and were perfectly happy to live like simple farming folk.

“Your father is a pilot?” asked Fenris, as if testing her. “With his own ship?”

Ravana nodded. “The *Platypus*,” she said proudly, having chosen the name herself. “He’s flown in all five systems. Now I’m older he lets me go with him.”

“Ah yes,” Fenris mused. “The delivery man. But we are getting off the point. The Raja is missing. There are signs of a forced entry to his chambers and the mark of a rebel faction has been found on the wall by his window. My men are even now scouring the palace grounds and beyond. As yet there is no sign of either the Raja or his abductors.”

Ravana glanced towards the clone standing silently at Fenris’ side. She recalled that months ago her father had made a large and rather mysterious delivery to the palace, which had included what he thought were cyberclones in their coffin-like crates. The boy’s blank stare was more than a little disconcerting. Sensing that the clone’s presence was stifling conversation, Fenris signalled for the fake Raja to leave.

“I saw two men,” Ravana began, as the cyberclone closed the door. She was pleased to see that her electric pet had found its way into the palace and homed in on her, slinking furtively between the legs of the clone as it left. Speaking hesitantly, but reassured by the comforting weight of the cat clambering onto her lap, she related how she had come to be in the palace grounds and what she had seen. Fenris remained stony-faced as she related how the men and their captive escaped in the Astromole, but raised a surprised eyebrow as Ravana described how she had plugged the hole with the ornamental elephant. By the time she finished her tale, he was looking at her in a new light, her mud-splattered clothes now telling a very different story.

“Two men, you say?” he asked. “Wearing spacesuits?”

Ravana nodded. “They didn’t have their helmets with them, though.”

“And they escaped into a hole in the ground,” Fenris murmured. “My men have tried to move the statue but it appears to be stuck fast.”

“There must be a vacuum on the other side,” Ravana told him. “At first I thought they had bored a hole right through to the other side, but...” She tailed off, for something had been puzzling her about that particular incident.

“But what?”

“There’s a lot of rock between us and space and the machine wasn’t moving that fast,” she said. “The wind started rushing through far too soon after it left. Plus, the hole was already there before the machine disappeared inside.”

“It is a mystery,” Fenris admitted. Ravana wondered if he was thinking of the spacesuits the men were wearing, which to her suggested the kidnappers and the Raja were no longer on the *Dandridge Cole*. “Alas, your observations would mean nothing to my men. My own knowledge of the geography of this hollow moon is no doubt inferior to yours.”

He looked expectantly at Ravana, though she was unsure why. For several long moments neither of them spoke. On her lap, her cat suddenly belched and regurgitated the head and a mass of slimy rubber tubes that had once belonged to the gull. Electric cat vomit did not mix well with dried evil-smelling mud.

“Professor Wak may be able to help,” suggested Ravana, eager to break the silence.

“Who?” Fenris sounded irritated.

Ravana frowned. Professor Wak, the father of her friend Zotz, was the scientist in charge of keeping life-support and other systems of the *Dandridge Cole* in full working order, making him a familiar sight within the hollow moon. She had assumed from Fenris’ educated manner that he knew almost as much about their world as she did. Now she wondered if the restrictions the Maharani placed upon her household were more severe than she imagined.

“Professor Wak teaches my physics and engineering classes,” she told him. “He has his quarters near ours at Dockside. He knows the hollow moon like the back of his hand.”

“Is that so?”

Ravana nodded, inwardly cringing at her use of that particular metaphor. Professor Wak was notoriously absent-minded and had an artificial left hand as a result of losing a glove while conducting repairs outside the main airlock. In space, thanks to the wonders of helmet intercoms, everyone had heard him scream. She had learned many new and interesting expletives that day.

## HOLLOW MOON

Fenris put a hand to his earpiece again, looking thoughtful. “I need to confer with the Maharani,” he told her, standing up as he spoke. “If you would care to wait here a little longer, I will arrange for someone to take you home.”

“There’s no need,” Ravana interjected. “I can make my own way back.”

Fenris glanced at the holo-vid screen in the case before him. Curious, Ravana leaned across to peek. Her eyes went wide as she glimpsed a haggard and twisted face, heavy with anger, staring from within. Somehow, she knew the watcher on the screen was contemplating the consequences of her tale. Fenris bore the look of someone chastised and under orders to put it right.

“Please,” he implored softly, closing the lid of his case. “I insist.”

\* \* \*

The Maharani’s private transport was an aged lunar-class personnel carrier, the barrel-shaped hull of which had been modified with polished wooden side panels, a luxurious velvet-trimmed interior and a roof pennant displaying the royal crest. The transport’s six wheels were each as tall as Ravana herself and shod with large hoops of spring wire. It was a machine designed for bounding across the rocks of airless moons and not one ideally suited to carrying exiled royalty through the bowels of a colony ship.

Ravana sat between Fenris and the driver in the cockpit at the front of the transport. A palace servant had given her a clean set of overalls to wear, which were already starting to tear under the restless claws of the cat sprawled across her lap. The Maharani rode in the main passenger compartment behind, barely visible through the heavy gauze screen that separated the cockpit from the rest of the vehicle. Her attendants had done their utmost to keep the Maharani hidden from view and Ravana had caught just the briefest glimpse of a petite figure swathed in a traditional Indian saree of red and gold.

The transport bustled through the palace gates at a brisk running pace, its wire wheels absorbing the worst of the bumps as it bounced

along the rough concrete tracks that passed for roads within the hollow moon. Before long they reached Petit Havre, one of four tiny hamlets that together housed the four-hundred strong population of the *Dandridge Cole*. This was the French quarter, a tight-knit farming community who when not working the fields seemed to spend all day sitting outside the café in the village square, drinking coffee and freely engaging in conversation with anyone who happened to pass by. The gaily painted houses were built of stone and looked as old as the hollow moon itself. Today, the appearance of the Maharani's transport was creating quite a stir.

"This thing must be thirty years old," Ravana remarked, looking around the cockpit.

"This is the vehicle in which the Maharani, the Raja and those loyal to her made our escape almost ten years ago," Fenris told her. His lofty, slightly exasperated tone was like that of a teacher reminding a pupil of what they should already know. "We loaded it with supplies, commandeered a ship and left our world to its fate."

"What were you escaping from?"

"Those who wanted Yuanshi for themselves," Fenris replied bitterly. "The Maharaja, Surya's father, had been murdered by those who did not see a place for the Raja's family or the Dhusarian Church in their plans."

Ravana remembered little of the troubles on the distant moon, but knew she too had ended up in the Barnard's Star system because her father's ship had been hijacked in similar circumstances. Her father had dropped the odd cryptic remark hinting that the incident that had left his wife dead and a young Ravana scarred for life had also been a result of the ongoing civil war. It was not something he often talked about.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her pet going into an electronic choking fit. As she held it in her arms, the cat sat up, arched its back and coughed up a jumbled mess of wires, half an electric motor and a wad of plastic feathers.

"Bad kitty," scolded Ravana. "That will teach you to eat that poor defenceless bird."

Fenris looked annoyed. "Does it do that a lot?"



“It never used to,” she admitted. “Unfortunately, over the last few weeks it has started to eat the strangest things. Electrical items, mainly.”

The transport by now had left Petit Havre behind. Through the windscreen, Ravana saw they were approaching the halfway point and about to pass the base of one of the three huge pylons that held the sun in the centre of the cavern. Near the bottom of the pylon was parked a familiar blue hovertruck. Professor Wak himself, ginger-haired and clad in stained overalls, was looking up at the pylon and scratching his head. Ravana’s father had mentioned that the scientist was looking into a puzzling power drain affecting the hollow moon’s systems. Dusk was upon them and squinting upwards she saw the artificial sun was starting to fade into darkness. The cycle of night and day within the *Dandridge Cole* was synchronised to Terran cycles, not that many of the hollow moon’s inhabitants remembered days and nights on Earth. So too were the hollow moon’s calendar and clocks, for the local date and time were exactly the same as European Central Time back on Earth.

During the day it was markedly warmer in this region of the hollow moon. Here was the hamlet of Porto Paradiso, home to Spanish, Greek and Italian families, who had given the area a distinct Mediterranean air. The bubbling stream that ran the length of the hollow moon had here been widened into a shallow lake, around which picturesque stone houses had been built, most with sun terraces. Of all the villages, this was Ravana’s favourite. She had spent many a sunny day swimming in the warm waters of the lake, though her weak arm left her with a tendency to swim in circles.

Ahead lay a patchwork quilt of farmland and irrigation ditches, the vast concave fields of wheat overshadowed only by the elevated track of one of the three monorail trains that ran the length of the cavern. The sheep, cattle, wallabies and other creatures roaming distant pasture were descended from animals born on Earth, though selective breeding and the low pseudo-gravity had created freakish-looking beasts twice the size of their Terran ancestors. Ravana had once spent an entertaining few hours at the lakeside watching a wallaby joey being rescued from where it had crashed through a second-storey window of a house.

The next settlement lay on the other side of the cavern and so was actually above them as the transport continued along the road. The sprawling hamlet of Dorfhimmelberg was home mainly to families of German and Eastern European origin. As Ravana looked up through the windscreen, she could already see distant lights shining at the windows of the houses far above, which once the sunlight had completely faded would continue to sparkle like stars in the night. Even this late in the day there were a few people in birdsuits gliding high near the zero-gravity point, mingling with the real birds flocking home to their roosts. Soon the air would be empty save for the fluttering shadows of the bats and flying foxes. Curiously enough, one of the distant soaring figures now gliding home had chosen a bat-like design for their own distinctive scarlet birdsuit.

Ahead, the great circular wall at the end of the hollow moon grew nearer. Here was the community of Dockside, an unruly mishmash of concrete, stone and rusting steel architecture crammed tight against the cliff face, stretching right around for over three kilometres to completely encircle the hollow moon. Dockside was populated almost entirely by the engineers, mechanics, merchants and families who supported the fragile economy of the *Dandridge Cole*, trading black-market goods and technology services with the many unofficial colonists in the Barnard's Star system and beyond.

“Home sweet home,” Ravana murmured.

Right on cue, a beep from her wristpad alerted her to a new message from her father, asking why she had not turned up to her music class that afternoon. She had genuinely forgotten about her cornet lesson. She had no idea how her father would react to her arriving back home in such style. Ravana hoped he would not be angry with her for straying into the palace grounds.

The road they were on ran diagonally across open farmland, which created the illusion that the end of the cavern was slowly rotating to meet their approach. The Dockside building ahead was one of two maintenance bays for the small fleet of spacecraft serving the *Dandridge Cole*. Half a kilometre above, in the centre of the cliff, was the huge circular steel door of the main airlock. Ravana had never known this to

be opened; instead, there were elevators inside the maintenance bays to take ships up through the cliff into the asteroid's huge airlock. A group of Dockside residents had congregated outside the workshop entrance to watch as the Maharani's transport drew near.

"There appears to be quite a reception for us," Fenris observed irritably.

The transport pulled to a halt a short distance from the gathered crowd. Fenris opened the hatch beside where he sat and motioned for Ravana to follow him outside. As she stepped to the ground, she saw her father making his way to the front, his familiar bushy beard and shiny bald head as welcome a sight as his broad smile. Ignoring Fenris, Ravana ran over and hugged him tightly, letting the familiar smell of grease and hydraulic fluid from her father's overalls fill her nostrils. Next to him was the tousled and ginger-haired Zotz, his pale face streaked with dirt, who had slipped through the small crowd to join them. He wore a long bathrobe, underneath which Ravana was convinced she glimpsed the elasticated body of a birdsuit. As usual, his shoe laces were undone.

"Sorry about your robot bird, Zotz," Ravana apologised, seeing a remote-control unit dangling from his hand.

Zotz grinned. "That's okay," he said shyly. "I hope it helped."

"Ravana!" exclaimed her father. His distinctive Australian drawl sliced through the murmurs of those around him. "Who have you brought back with you?"

The Maharani stepped from the personnel carrier as he spoke, flanked by two female attendants dressed in red sarees of a plainer design. A faint tinkle of jewellery accompanied her as she moved; her wrists were liberally decked in gold bangles and she wore a chain headpiece displaying a red stone in the centre of her forehead. Momentarily pausing, she turned and took small but purposeful steps towards Ravana and her father.

She moved with a grace that was the antithesis of the usual bounding walk most people adopted in the low pseudo-gravity of the hollow moon. As Fenris himself stepped forward, the Maharani put out a hand to stop him, making it clear he was not wanted. Her gaze had not once left that of Ravana's father.

## HOLLOW MOON

The Maharani was beautiful. Ravana gazed in awe upon her heart-shaped features, her dark eyes and glowing caramel skin framed by a cascade of jet-black hair, then turned her stare to the floor, her hand moving to touch the scar upon her own face. Her father put an arm around her waist and gave a comforting squeeze. Ravana glanced up to flash him a smile. With a start, she saw he was regarding the Maharani with an expression that was unexpectedly cold and unwelcoming.

“Well, well,” her father said, his tone sarcastic. “If it isn’t Maharani Uma, the mighty exiled drama queen of Yuanshi herself.”

The Maharani calmly met his stare, unabashed.

“We meet again, my dear Quirinus,” she purred, her voice laden with silken tones. “As before, I regret it is an act of war that has caused our paths to cross.”

“War?” Quirinus snorted in disbelief. “Here on the *Dandridge Cole*?”

“Indeed,” replied the Maharani. “And once again, I need your help.”

\* \* \*

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