

To Dance Amongst The Stars

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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To Dance Amongst The Stars

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

A short story by
Steph Bennion

WYRDSTAR BOOKS

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TO DANCE AMONGST THE STARS

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

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 room 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 sat. The room was filled with electric howls and wails, emanating from the musicians strutting their stuff on the huge holo-vid screen dominating the room. “Along with father, mother and everyone else who matters in Lanka, so don’t get any ideas about being special!”

Peisonoe was Thelxiepeia’s twin and 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 both 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,” murmured the grey-haired Indian woman who had followed Thelxiepeia through the door. In her hands was a tray containing the sisters’ afternoon tea.

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

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“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!”

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

“How dare you answer back!”

Yaksha shrugged. “I was only 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 onto a table and left the room. Once she was out of sight, 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 notably did not suffer from the near-constant rainfall that blighted Lanka. The Maharaja therefore used Kubera as a way of rewarding officials, allowing them to live in luxury for as long as they remained in his favour. Minister Lingam, his wife Aglaope and daughters Thelxiepeia and Peisonoe had been in residence just over six months, considerably longer than most.

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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 and was always willing to step in to resolve domestic issues with the same keen interest as he would handle problems of state. His wife and daughters however were snobby, mean-spirited individuals who in 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 to do it for her, 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 at the palace for just over a year as a public servant, a status that meant she was owned by the state. Slavery was supposed to be illegal throughout the five systems, but Maharaja Kashyap had simply redefined the concept based on his own ideas about what was right for Yuanshi.

"Sorry to startle you, my dear," said 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 just the images in her mind, having been implanted with a cranium microchip when she was a child. "Those girls make me so mad!"

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

"Their mere presence is enough," snarled Yaksha, dabbing 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 away from Kubera tomorrow night, so we can look forward to a bit of 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!"

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“Our American friends like to remind us poor heathens of the wonders of Christianity at least 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.” Ganesa sighed wistfully. “Dancing! That does sound fun.”

“Fancy a chance to meet your Prince Charming?”

“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 when 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 returned to her duties, all too aware the young woman was becoming unhappier by the day. With a sigh, Yaksha turned away and idly glanced to 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

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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 as they shook hands. His Russian accent made Ganesa 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.”

“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 now placed upon 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 beeping 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

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in Ayodhya who owes me a favour. In a week or so 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 those 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.”

Yaksha withdrew the flat plastic sheet from the envelope and held it in the palm of her hand. Moments later 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 in a high piping voice. “The Ambassador and his staff wish you a merry Christmas and cordially invite 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

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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, even 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 staring sullenly 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!”

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 through the back door, the one they 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 just beginning to dawn upon her. For the first time in her life she was free to go wherever she wished. 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.

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“I will hear of no such thing!” retorted Yaksha, 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 the layers of lace scarves and oversized jewellery was a short dress striped in a terrible mishmash of pinks, an outfit that 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 seen a skinny model wear the exact same outfit on the holo-vid show *Galactic Catwalk* just 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?” she asked.

“Do you like it?”

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

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* * *

“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 small 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 curved side panels so that it 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 in a pumpkin!”

“There must be a way to make it look less like an overblown vegetable. 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 orange side panels an experimental pull but it held firm. Looking closer, she saw the spherical fuselage and doors had side windows that had been sealed with painted panels, which after a few tugs proved easier to remove. Minutes later she and Yaksha had opened six rounded apertures in the upper half of the pumpkin, three either side, which was almost enough to suggest something quite different to a giant vegetable.

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

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“Like gold?” suggested Yaksha, pointing to the pile of paint tins in the corner of the garage. “A 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, a floor-length gold sheath dress with spaghetti straps that she 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 clearly was not the case.

“Her ladyship’s misguided dress sense is your gain,” said Yaksha, handing Ganesa the dress. “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 a whirring sound 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.”

Somewhat bemused, Ganesa scrutinised the images in her mind’s eye representing the various functions of her implant. A new one had appeared, shaped like the silhouette of a shoe. Upon giving the icon a tentative mental

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prod, it metamorphosed into a sequence 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 own realisation that she had not felt this optimistic in a long while. Just then Yaksha’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 monocyce. 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 plastic 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 the mouse to a dumbstruck Ganesa.

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

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* * *

The box-shaped Ministerial aircar settled to a halt within the embassy grounds, in a roar of turbines that drowned 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 demonstration at the main gate while they waited for an embassy footman to greet them.

The sun that was Epsilon Eridani had slipped below the horizon just a few hours ago but 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 thin blue crescent of Yuanshi's neighbouring moon of Daode was clearly visible 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 provided Lanka, Ayodhya and other settlements with their own protective environment. Nevertheless, the atmosphere remained perilously thin and although the air had a high oxygen content to compensate, most people still clung on to their emergency respirators to counter the occasional shortages of breath.

“When are they going to give us proper air?” gasped Thelxiepeia. Her own oxygen mask was decorated with a haphazard pattern 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 and 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

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to the Maharaja, he wore his military dress uniform of maroon and gold, topped by a crimson-plumed hat. His wife Aglaope had gone for a ball gown in deep blue velvet, her dark hair piled high and framed by a silver tiara. She had fortunately also 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 on a short hop to 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 into the distance, Lingam and his family began to make out the calls and chants uttered by the protestors, who 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 attract little support as 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

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from alone in thinking the Dhusarians were a few baubles short of a Christmas tree.

An android footman in traditional butler livery now 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, peering ahead through the open doorway at the bright lights and cheerful decorations that framed the buzzing gathering of socialites. Many 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 literally decked the hall with bows of home-grown holly, along with paper chains, tinsel, huge silver stars and anything else they could find that looked vaguely festive. Four huge holographic chandeliers hung below 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*, leaving robot butlers to wind their way through the throng distributing refreshments.

"The Ambassador's wine cellar is legendary," Lingam told his wife as they descended the short staircase leading to 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.

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

Thelxiepeia pulled a face, then was lost in the crowd as her sister pulled her towards the dance floor, eager to flutter her eyelashes at the young men present.

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Lingam made his way to where the Ambassador himself was standing, but made little progress through the crowd of people 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.”

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, but 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 the 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 muttered. “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, most of whom 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

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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. He was a smooth operator for one so young, but 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!"

* * *

The Dhusarian protestors at the gate fell silent as the gold coach trundled slowly towards them, mesmerised by the way the carriage's pair of ghostly white steeds bobbed disconcertingly in the gentle 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 now pulling to a halt on the drive. The gold paint was already starting flake, revealing a horrible orange tint beneath. The unicorns pulling the carriage were an impressive touch but its android eyes saw through the hologram projection and was puzzled by the makeshift arrangement of the mice-shaped projector units, taped onto what looked like fishing rods 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 and I'm going to the one place that'll be crawling with government officials!"

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“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.

“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 and 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

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attention spans of children, not for being paraded halfway across the city on a single charge.

As the footman led her towards the embassy, she used her implant to mentally adjust the height of her heels until she was happy with the result. The gold dress swished dramatically around her slim form. Yaksha had done wonders with Ganesa's hair and make-up, transforming her from a poor down-trodden kitchen servant to 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, that had it been made by a human probably would 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. They had just been announced and were now bouncing lightly down the stairs towards the waiting frivolities, heads held high as if they owned the world. Ganesa mused it was quite possible that 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!"

Ganesa felt a hundred eyes upon her as she gingerly made her way down the short flight of steps into the hall. She had never seen so many people together in one place and her senses were soon overwhelmed by the sights, sounds and smells of the scene before her. She was momentarily startled to see 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 quickly moved away from the foot of the stairs.

"Stunning girl," murmured Lingam.

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“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 towards the buffet table, feeling that at the very least she needed a glass of wine in her hand. Her eyes were continually drawn to the centre of the hall and the couples dancing to the sound of the orchestra, which to her amazement was not coming from a concealed holovid unit but instead from an ensemble of real-life musicians in the far 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, she 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.

“They say it’s Lord Consus,” Thelxiepeia told her. “Father said the Consus he knows is a smelly old man who has no friends, so we’re thinking this 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!”

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“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, he’s 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 quite believe it. “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 and as he moved from one dance partner to another Ganesa thought there was a faint flash of a 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 to finish her drink, jump into her pumpkin and head out of town.

“Lady Consus!” came 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.

Plucking the glass out of her hand, he tossed it recklessly over his shoulder and pulled her into the throng of dancers, barely blinking an eye as the glass shattered noisily against the wall behind. Ganesa’s attempts to

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resist were half-hearted at best and her indignation at the man's arrogant manner soon 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 pushed her gently away, lifted their linked hands and twisted his body in one fluid motion, then drew her towards him as she pirouetted into his arms. Ganesa beamed back at him, 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, but kept 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 disappeared in somewhat mysterious circumstances and to avoid an official investigation I was brought in to assume his place."

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“You’re owned by 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 watch the 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 now 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 frown. Before Hanuman could make a quip about her having too much to drink, she slipped out of his grasp and fell heavily to the floor with a muted 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

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dancer. She found herself sat at the centre of an ever-widening circle of bemused guests, while one of her shoes lay across the floor. Hanuman stood sheepishly at her side, offering 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 shock of the cruel and abrupt way her fleeting fairytale had come to an end. The 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 up once more and soon the dance floor was moving again.

“Strange girl,” muttered 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, having lost sight of Ganesa as she ran away into the night. With a sigh, he shuffled wearily over to a nearby butler robot 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.

* * *

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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 and it had taken Yaksha more than an hour to collect the scattered crumpled clothing that had been discarded and trampled underfoot in their frenzy to prepare for the ball.

Ganesa looked up as Yaksha took the seat next to where she 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 with nowhere else to go had walked barefoot for an hour to get back to Kubera.

“I blew it,” she said, sighing.

“Namtar said he’d arranged for someone to keep an eye on you,” Yaksha told Ganesa. “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,” Yaksha said, 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 all convinced he’s the young heir of Lord Consus.”

“Oh my word,” murmured Ganesa. “But those shoes will fit anyone! Poor man.”

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“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.”

* * *

A short while later, Yaksha was busy in Kubera’s main banqueting hall, preparing the room to receive their guest. The hall 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 remained deliberately barefoot, for 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 the way of Yaksha, who was laying the table for breakfast. 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 slowly backed away. Moments later, it 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 for him. 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!”

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“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 onto 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?” asked Aglaope, 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 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.

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“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 noise of the sisters’ on-going squabble. She ignored Hanuman’s question and instead activated the communicator on her wristpad.

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

Hanuman blinked, thoroughly confused. “I am?”

“Would you like some tea?” she asked, 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 lunged sideways in a frantic bid to escape, falling 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. The young woman frowned as she caught sight of the twins trying to scratch each other’s eyes out, for she was not in the mood for breaking up fights. Hanuman popped his head over the edge of the table and glared 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 told him and grabbed his hand.

Moments later they were dashing along the passage towards the servants’ quarters, leaving the commotion in the hall far behind. They did not stop running until they reached the kitchen, pausing only for Ganesa to

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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.”

“Funny girl. Do we have a deal?”

Ganesa held out her hand. “Deal.”

Hanuman took her hand and shook it solemnly.

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

THE END

About the Author

Steph Bennion is a writer, occasional musician and part-time civil servant, born in the Black Country, who after spending too many years in the big bad city of London now lives in Hastings. Her science-fiction stories are written as a reaction to the dearth of alternative heroes within bookshelves swamped by tales of the supernatural. For every aspiring vampire or wizard, the world needs an astrophysicist, an engineer or at the very least someone who can make the trains run on time.



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