

G.E.N.I.E. AND THE L.A.M.P.

A short story by STEPH BENNION

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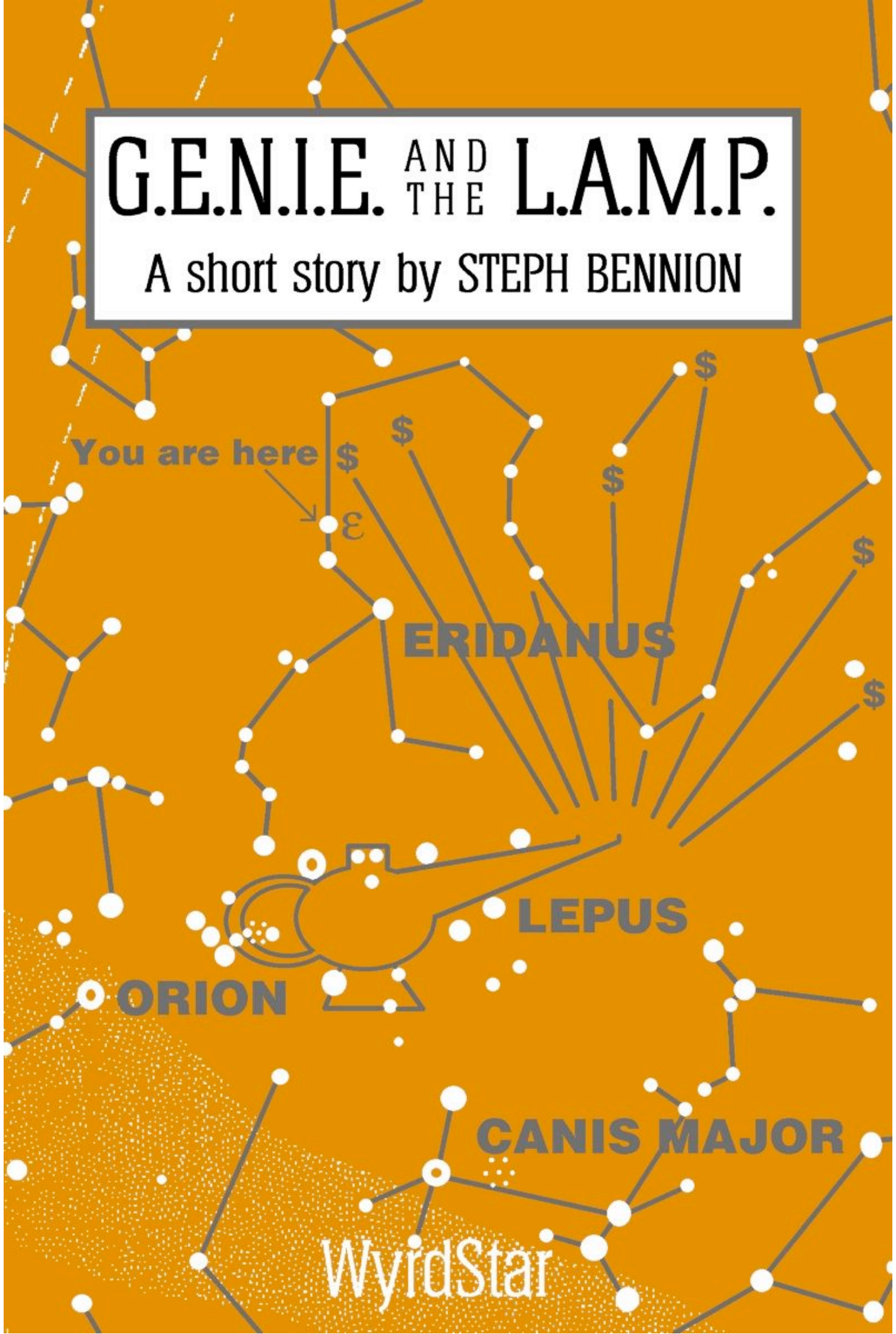
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G.E.N.I.E. And The L.A.M.P.

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

A short story by
Steph Bennion

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G.E.N.I.E. AND THE L.A.M.P.

From the worlds of *Hollow Moon*

Angelos Inari, petty thief and self-professed laziest man in Epsilon Eridani, is offered more money than he's ever seen to steal a top-secret corporation interrogation device. Unfortunately, the mysterious Namtar has no intention of letting Inari keep his wonderful new prize...

ANGELOS INARI, flag-bearer for all lazy youths of Epsilon Eridani, was in love. Hujing, the girl of his dreams, walked past his shack every day, pretty in pink with a fake leather jacket casually slung over her shoulder. It mattered not that she was the sister of a thick-headed muscle man, whose job with the settlement's gang of crooks mostly involved baseball bats and other people's kneecaps. Nor did Inari care that she ignored him, for he knew it was all an act and one day she would stop and declare her infatuation. Until then, he was content to lie on his couch in the shack's ramshackle porch, soak up the sun and dream his days away.

It was December across the five systems, not that it made much difference in the hot and humid tropics of Taotie. Inari had barely closed his eyes when he sensed a shadow fall across his face. A tall figure, wearing a wide-brimmed hat that seemed to deliberately eclipse the sunlight just where he lay, stared at him from the dusty road. Inari scowled and raised his head. He had few pleasures in life and did not take kindly to strangers interrupting his mid-afternoon snooze.

The man moved closer and paused. His face was a blank silhouette in the bright sunshine, but his crisp summer suit and robust bulges of the powered exoskeleton strapped to his legs suggested he was a recent arrival on Taotie. The planet's high gravity, one and a half times that of distant Earth, took some getting used to. The man took another step forward and glanced at the metal and glass lantern, a battered biochemical unit stolen from the mines, which hung from the remains of the porch roof. Inari caught a glimpse of his pale features and saw he was a young man, barely

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in his twenties by Terran reckoning and just a few years older than himself. He looked at his own scruffy overalls and absently moved a hand to cover an embarrassing stain at his crotch.

“Are you perchance the one they call Fat Angie?” remarked the stranger. His voice carried a distinctive Russian lilt. “I am in need of assistance in a somewhat delicate matter.”

Inari shrugged. “Who wants to know?”

“My name is not important,” the man said carefully. “I understand from your compatriots that this young man I seek has a reputation for obtaining items the Que Qiao Corporation would prefer to retain for itself. Equipment held at a local supply depot, to be precise. I have been sent by the Dhusarian Church of Yuanshi,” he added.

“Never heard of it,” said Inari. That was not entirely true, for tales abounded of the weird alien-worshipping cult adopted by Indian settlers on Yuanshi, a moon of the gas giant Shennong. “Talk posh, don’t you?”

“An educated manner opens many doors,” he remarked. “When that fails and a more direct approach is required, I call upon others to do my bidding. Are you the one whom I seek? I am willing to pay handsomely for services rendered.”

Inari scrutinised the stranger and decided he looked harmless enough. More importantly, the man was offering paid work, something Inari had not come across in weeks. He had an irritable mother and his own large stomach to feed. He swung his feet from the couch, shuffled into a sitting position and offered the man a grubby hand. The battered couch creaked alarmingly beneath his weight.

“Angelos Inari,” he said. “Call me Fat Angie again and I’ll smash your face in.”

“Inari?” The man eyed the hand dubiously. “A fox spirit of Japan, I believe.”

“Dad was Japanese,” muttered Inari. His late stepfather had been a mine inspector who got careless, leaving behind an ailing widow and son

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without a credit to their name. Inari's attempts to scrape a living on Taotie ever since rarely ventured on the right side of the law. "He disappeared down a hole. Inari's a good name."

"My name is Namtar," he replied. The man took Inari's offered digits and gave a hesitant shake. "Shall we talk business?"

Inari gestured with a thumb to the shack behind him.

"Inside," he said. "Mum gets annoyed if she's left out."

* * *

Inari's mother was a large, rotund Greek woman in her fifties who, by the time the seventh decade of the twenty-third century came around, had lived on no less than four different worlds and seen off just as many marriages. Inari's father had been husband number two, a optimistic but clueless fellow Greek and ore prospector on Mars, who one day ran off with a young space pilot after admitting he liked boys more than girls. It had been her fourth husband, a sweet Japanese health and safety inspector for the Que Qiao Corporation, who had dragged them both to the Epsilon Eridani system, ten light years from Sol. Her late husband, a devout Christian, had left her with a love of religious festivals, a penchant for silk kimonos and enough debt to remove any chance of leaving Taotie soon.

Inari saw Namtar's face pucker in disgust as he led him inside. His mother sat as always slouched on the sofa, watching a comedy holo vid on an ancient receiver, the sound turned down low. The main living area was crammed with tatty furniture, empty food cartons and discarded clothes. The spiky primeval fern dragged from the jungle, adorned with polished tin cans and sparkly bits of food wrappers, was a poor excuse for a Christmas tree but his mother seemed to like it. Her eyes went wide in panic at the sight of their visitor.

"Who's he?" she shrieked. "The rent's not due till next week!"

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“It ain’t the landlord, mum,” Inari reassured her, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “He’s from a church on Yuanshi. He’s offering me a job.”

“A church lad, eh?” His mother looked impressed. “Lovely!”

“Brother Namtar, at your service,” the man said smoothly, offering his hand. She stared at his outstretched smooth fingers as if he were about to magic a rabbit from thin air. “A humble envoy of Priest Taranis and the Dhusarian Church of Yuanshi. I wish to engage your son in a transaction that should prove mutually beneficial.”

“Engage? My Angelos prefers girls, you know.”

“He doesn’t want to marry me!” Inari retorted. He glanced to Namtar. “Do you?”

“I most assuredly do not!”

“He’s got his eye on young Hujing down the road,” Inari’s mother said mischievously. “She don’t even look at him. Poor Angelos might as well be invisible!”

“Mum!”

“That is not why I am here,” said Namtar. “May I sit?”

Inari shrugged and gestured to the section of sofa not covered in food wrappers or the rolling contours of his mother. Namtar gingerly took a seat, then yelped and grabbed the edge of the sofa in alarm as he was almost swallowed by the sagging upholstery. His scowl deepened upon discovering he had put his hand through a discarded carton of noodles. Inari grinned and retrieved a stool from the corner for himself.

“To business,” Namtar said sourly. He withdrew a white handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped his fingers clean. “You will be familiar with the Que Qiao airstrip on the other side of your sorry excuse for a village. My sources tell me that this will soon be visited by a corporation transport, here to collect what is left of stored equipment. There is an item in the vault I would dearly like to remove before corporation agents do likewise. Inari, I hear you are somewhat of an expert in challenging situations of breaking and entering. Is this true?”

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“That place is abandoned,” said Inari’s mother, before her son had a chance to reply. “There’s nothing there!”

“My reconnaissance suggests security measures are still active,” Namtar replied. “The inference being that items of value remain. The android sentries were easy to spot.”

“It’s them Chinese gangs,” Inari told him. “They thieve what they can and sell it to those prospecting illegally.”

“Ex-miners themselves,” his mother added sadly. “Like the brother of that girl you like. They’re only doing what they can to put bread on the table.”

Inari grinned. “If it ain’t nailed down or got a robot watching, it’s gone.”

“The rumour is that armed security androids are no match for you,” remarked Namtar. “Indeed, you have quite a reputation. If you can get me into the vault, I am prepared to pay handsomely. Enough for you to establish a proper trade. What do you say?”

His mother cackled excitedly. “You’ll do it, Angelos? Think of your poor mama!”

Inari was not so sure. “What’s in there?” he asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

“It is better you do not know,” said Namtar. Inari opened his mouth to protest and was met by a stern stare. “I am willing to pay two thousand credits.”

“Two grand? For bashing a few robots?”

“Bashing?” Namtar raised a quizzical eyebrow. “A technical term, perchance?”

“You’d still need to get through security inside,” Inari added, ignoring the man’s remark. “You got a friendly corporation worker to open the door for us?”

Namtar reached into his pocket, withdrew a small shiny ring and tossed it towards him. Inari fumbled the catch and the ring fell to the floor.

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Picking it up, he saw it had a thick silver band, upon which was mounted a bulbous piece of black glass. The ring slipped easily onto his middle finger. Spotting a dark smudge on the silver, Inari gave the ring a quick rub and was startled to see a flicker of light cross the glass.

“A rather neat AI security pass,” Namtar explained. “Once we venture within range of the Que Qiao network, it will link to their systems and grant us access.”

Inari looked at the smear upon his finger. “Is this blood?”

“The previous owner was reluctant to hand it over,” Namtar confessed. “I believe his actual words were: ‘Over my dead body’. Somewhat prophetic, as it turned out.”

Inari was not listening. The ring captivated him. The shabby near-abandoned mining village in which he lived was slowly regressing to medieval levels of technology. Part of him wondered whether Namtar was his ticket for getting off Taotie for good.

“The price is five thousand,” he said firmly, trying to sound tough. “Two now, and... err... two? Three? The rest when the job’s done.”

“You can’t haggle with the church!” his mother protested. “They’re good people!”

“This is a wicked world,” Namtar said solemnly. “Your son is not to blame for his impertinence. However, my mission here is of the utmost importance and I am authorised to pay whatever it takes. Within reason,” he added quickly, as Inari opened his mouth to speak. He reached into his pocket once more and withdrew a small cloth pouch, which was quickly snatched from his hand by Inari’s mother. “Two thousand, in advance.”

“Two thousand credits!” she cried, peering into the bag. “He’s all yours!”

“Mum!” Inari protested.

“This is more than you’ve ever brought back in your life, you lazy...!”

“It’s a deal,” Inari told Namtar, interrupting hurriedly. “When do we do it?”

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“I shall return at dusk,” he said. He tried to lift himself from the couch but seemed to be stuck. “Tell me, is there a trick to extracting oneself from this accursed perch?”

* * *

As planets go, Taotie was larger than Earth but its days were short, lasting just over sixteen Terran hours. The alien world orbited near the inner edge of Epsilon Eridani’s habitable zone and had the distinction of being the first such planet discovered with oceans and continents, abundant native life and an oxygen-rich atmosphere that did not immediately kill unwary travellers at first breath. Evolution was several million years behind life on Earth and much of Taotie was swathed in primordial forest. Humans could live and work without life support, but the heavy gravity and sweltering jungle took its toll. Most regarded the daily cycle of eight hours sleep and eight awake as a blessing in disguise.

The Que Qiao supply depot lay in a vast clearing within the jungle. The pot-holed track that ran between the depot’s airstrip and the sad collection of huts and equipment sheds of the village continued onwards to vast opencast bauxite mines, though all that remained of operations were a couple of decrepit six-wheeled ore transporters rusting by the roadside. The airstrip was surrounded by a double ring of wire-mesh fences, three metres high and topped with barbed wire, punctuated at intervals by steel sentry towers upon which cameras and automatic plasma gun turrets watched for trouble. The corporation may have ceased mining, but it had not yet abandoned its investment for good.

Night was falling. Inari and Namtar paused at the edge of the clearing and scrutinised the depot ahead. The road from the village ended at a stout gatehouse, where there were more automated gun emplacements and a couple of mobile sentry robots. Beyond the gate, a paved concrete area led to a cluster of low buildings and the white space-traffic control tower at the

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end of the airstrip. Apart from the robots and eerie alien shrieks from the surrounding jungle, there were no signs of life. Away on the horizon, the distant red beacons of Yao Chi's launch ramps rose into the dusk, high enough to be seen fifty kilometres away. The electro-magnetic launch rails at Taotie's main spaceport helped the corporation's heavy freighters build up speed to flee the high gravity, taking the spoils of the world with them.

"We must be cautious," Namtar whispered. "The entire perimeter is guarded by automatic systems. Watch."

He knelt down, scooped a pebble from the road and threw it towards the distant fence. There was a loud bang and a flash of lightning burst from the nearest tower towards the projectile, vaporising it in a puff of smoke. Inari shrugged.

"Anyone can chuck stones," he said.

He calmly strolled towards the first of the abandoned ore trucks and made his way to the steps at the rear. The transporters were little more than huge metal troughs on wheels, with a driver's cabin high at the back that overlooked its cargo like the bridge of an ocean liner. The metal staircase creaked uneasily beneath his weight and the handrail was sticky with grime. Reaching the open cabin, Inari dropped into the seat and hit the power switch. As expected, the truck's nuclear battery was still live. The corporation cared little for decontamination regulations now that their local health and safety inspector had gone.

Inari shoved the gear stick forward, yanked the drive-control lever across and grinned as the truck shuddered into life. A quick tug on the steering wheel straightened his aim, then he was out of the cab, down the steps and leaping from the moving transporter to safety. The truck rumbled onwards, its motors growling in protest at being awoken from their long slumber. Inari staggered to a halt at Namtar's side.

"Think bigger," he told him. "Watch this."

The transporter rolled on. All of a sudden, the two nearest sentry towers opened fire, sending spears of blinding light smashing into the side

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of the lumbering vehicle. Violently shuddering, the truck trundled on towards the gatehouse, its slab-sided hull mottled by a flowery mosaic of glowing steel. Moments later, the robots at the gate started to fire. The truck continued to roll, oblivious to the angry firepower bathing it in heat.

Reaching the gatehouse, the transporter ploughed onwards, ripping the steel barriers from their hinges. Inari watched in glee as the vehicle crunched down upon the robots fighting its advance and crushed them beneath its wheels. The two sentry towers, tracking the truck's progress, released one last barrage of crossfire and promptly blew each other to bits. A sudden hush descended upon the scene.

The gatehouse was in ruins. Thick smoke rose from one of the crumpled robots; the other had been reduced to a trail of twisted components strewn along the road. The transporter had by now reached the runway and attracted the attention of sentry towers on the far side of the depot, drawing their fire. Inari grinned at the look of horror on his colleague's face.

"Astounding," murmured Namtar. "I have never before seen such a display of wanton destruction in the name of petty theft. Is this the reputation others alluded to?"

"What of it?" Inari retorted. "It's results that count."

* * *

The whirring of his colleague's exoskeleton was annoyingly loud in Inari's ears as he hurriedly followed Namtar past the ruined gates towards the control tower. No further armed automatons troubled them on the way, though that did not stop Inari from keeping a wary eye upon the mould-encrusted glass walls of the circular viewing level above. Arriving at the tower, they found the entrance was locked.

"The security pass," Namtar urged him. "We should be within range by now."

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Inari had forgotten about the ring. Raising his hand, he hesitantly swiped the glass as before, then jumped as a fist-sized holographic head appeared above his clenched fingers. The projection was of a pretty Chinese girl, with cropped blue hair and a cheery smile. Inari moved his hand experimentally and the disembodied head twisted and blurred.

“Greetings!” said a sweet voice. “I am Que Qiao Sprite, your Security Protocol Intelligence. How may I assist you today?”

The word ‘SPRITE’ scrolled around the bottom of the floating head as the apparition relayed her name. Inari scratched his own flaky scalp and shrugged.

“By opening this door?” he suggested.

“Biometric data does not match that of the employee to whom this pass is registered,” said the ring’s artificial intelligence. “You will enter and wait while your clearance is checked with central control. Your guest should report to the gatehouse.”

Inari looked to Namtar, who responded with a glare.

“The gatehouse has gone,” Inari told the AI. “He comes with me.”

The projected head froze for a few moments. “I am unable to contact central control to verify your status,” it said. Whoever had programmed it had bequeathed the ability to sound irritable. “Emergency protocols require me to accept your incomplete credentials.”

The door slid open with a hiss. Beyond, interior lights flickered into life for what was probably the first time in months. Just as Inari opened his mouth to reply, he heard a rumble and saw a distant orange flash as the runaway truck was finally blown to pieces by cannon fire. When he looked back at the holographic apparition, the tiny floating head had gone.

“Excellent work,” said Namtar, sounding relieved. A sprinkling of black dust fell silently from the sky. “Come, we must make haste.”

* * *

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Namtar directed Inari along a dusty corridor, into an elevator and down to the basement. The vault below the tower was sealed by a huge circular door that looked stout enough to hold back everything short of a supernova. Inari rubbed a finger across the ring and a projection of a head promptly appeared, just as before. This time it was that of an old Chinese man, with a long drooping moustache and fierce stare.

“Declare your intention!” snapped the ring. “This area is restricted!”

“Open this door,” Inari ordered. He did not like being shouted at, especially by a hologram. “Or I’ll stick you down my own restricted area!”

He moved as if to put his hand and the ring down his trousers. The projection spun angrily.

“This facility has been mothballed,” said the AI. “Vault systems require a code word to reactivate the door control!”

“Code word?” murmured Namtar, perturbed.

“You must state the code word!”

“Open sesame!” declared Inari.

The head disappeared. There was a loud clunk, followed by a muted whirr of actuators and the huge circular hatch slowly swung open. Inari peered into the brightly-lit vault beyond.

“Open sesame?” Namtar remarked hesitantly. “How on Yuanshi did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” Inari confessed. “Mum’s last boyfriend was a guard at this place. I heard him shout it when they were, err... in bed, you know. The walls are very thin in our shack,” he added hastily.

Namtar looked at him in disgust. Inari grinned and stepped into the vault, noticing as he did so that his partner in crime seemed in no hurry to follow. The square, white-walled chamber was lined from floor to ceiling with rows of security lockers, most with hatches hanging open to reveal empty interiors. On a small table stood a strange dark sphere almost half a metre in diameter, encased in a metal frame with a handle and three stubby feet. Inari went straight to the few lockers still closed, pulled a long

crowbar from inside his overalls and got to work prying them open. Namtar, still on the other side of the doorway, irritably gestured towards the object on the table.

“Forget those!” he hissed. “That is the prize we seek!”

“What is it?” asked Inari, glancing with disinterest at the sphere. “Don’t look like much.”

“That, my fat friend, is a Lamp,” Namtar said proudly. “A military-specification Local Ambient Megastructure Projector. Have you never heard of the holoverse?” he asked, as Inari gave him a puzzled look. “That innocuous device projects artificial environments and hypnotic illusions carefully designed to make others suggestible and easily-led. In the right hands, it is a potent tool indeed.”

Inari gave him a look of disdain. “You want that thing for your church?”

“The Lamp has many uses,” Namtar said darkly. “Bring it to me!”

“I want to check the lockers first.”

“We must leave now!”

As he spoke, an alarm sounded somewhere in the building above and harsh red lights began to flash in the corridor and vault. Inari heard a familiar whirring sound and saw the hatch slowly swinging back into place to seal the chamber.

“Hurry!” yelled Namtar. “Grab the Lamp!”

Inari slipped the crowbar into his belt, hurried to the table and picked up the sphere. It was a lot heavier than he expected. A glance to where Namtar furiously beckoned from the corridor, followed by a hasty assessment of his expansive waistline and the shrinking gap, was enough to confirm he would not reach the hatch in time. Inari scowled.

“Wait there,” he said. “I’ll get the ring to open it again.”

“There’s no time,” urged Namtar. “Pass the Lamp through now!”

“Get lost!” Inari retorted. “You ain’t leaving me here.”

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He placed the Lamp on the floor, lifted his hand and gulped. The ring was no longer on his finger. He looked up at the door and Namtar's panic-stricken features beyond.

"The Lamp!" cried Namtar. "Pass it..."

The door sealed with a clunk, cutting off his words. A sudden silence descended upon the vault. Inari cursed and gave the Lamp a hefty kick with his boot. His cavernous stomach, not content with foiling his escape, chose that moment to grumble hungrily.

"Drat," Inari muttered. "I'm going to be late home for dinner."

* * *

Inari was too lazy to panic. A few deft swings of his crowbar dealt with the annoying flashing lights, after which he calmly returned to prising open the last of the lockers in search of valuables. One or two yielded nothing more than rock samples, presumably from the mines, though it was hard to tell if they were valuable. Another held a small bag of jewellery, which promptly went into his pocket. Much to his disappointment, he found nothing to quell his rumbling stomach.

It was not until he returned to the mysterious Lamp that he found the missing ring, which had somehow slipped from his hand and rolled under the table. After mentally kicking himself for not looking properly earlier, Inari returned it to his finger and rubbed the glass. It was with some relief that he greeted the bobbing AI projection of the Chinese man's head.

"Declare your intention," the voice snapped. "This area is restricted!"

"Yes, I know," Inari said wearily. "Open sesame?"

"The vault is in lock-down," the AI retorted. "Security systems report multiple incidents across site. Code word access is suspended until all have been investigated."

"Investigated by who? There's no one here!"

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“A team from Yao Chi is due to arrive in twelve hours time,” said the voice. “Security systems remain on high alert pending their report.”

“I can’t stay here all night!” protested Inari. “Open the damn door!”

“This area is restricted! I am unable to verify your security status.”

“But you opened the door to let me in!”

“Security protocols have changed,” the AI declared.

Inari’s glare became sly. “It was your dodgy system that closed the door. I ain’t outside trying to break in. I’m inside trying to get out!”

“You are inside,” the projection admitted. “Logically, you must have access.”

“Exactly. Run that through your diodes.”

The hologram shimmered. The moustache upon the projected head drooped further.

“Security protocols overridden,” it said forlornly. “Code word access re-enabled.”

“Open sesame?”

The hatch gave a clunk and much to Inari’s relief slowly swung open. He was not in the least bit surprised to find Namtar was nowhere in sight, having presumably run away after abandoning him to his fate. As he hastened from the vault, he came close to leaving the Lamp where it was, then changed his mind and lugged it unceremoniously through the door. The man from Yuanshi still owed him the rest of his money.

* * *

Epsilon Eridani had set and the small village was in darkness by the time Inari reached his home. It was a cool, cloudless night and the sky was ablaze with stars. Many neighbouring shacks were abandoned, but the lights were on behind the windows of the large cabin occupied by the local crime lord and his gang, the walls of which positively trembled with the din of loud music and drunken singing. His beloved Hujing, in her dust-

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smearing pink dress, stood in the open doorway but as usual failed to give him more than a passing glance.

Inari reached the tiny hovel he shared with his mother and immediately saw something was wrong. The front door hung wide open and the shack was in darkness. Leaving the stolen Lamp on the porch, he paused at the door and hesitantly listened for his mother's heavy snores from her room. A hush lay like a blanket upon the gloom.

"Mum?" he called. "Are you there?"

There was no response. Inari reached through the doorway and pressed the light switch on the inside wall, but nothing happened. He hesitantly stepped forward, then paused as his foot crunched upon a discarded food carton. Inari muttered a curse and returned to the porch. His eyes flickered momentarily to the mining lamp hanging from the roof but its chemical fuel cell had given up the ghost weeks ago.

Hujing was watching from the street, swaying slightly as she took periodic gulps from a bottle in her hand. It was the first time she had paid any attention to him. Inari considered asking her for a light, then remembered he had been out thieving without the gang's permission and decided to keep quiet. His gaze fell to the stolen Lamp on the porch floor. Conscious of the woman's curious gaze, he heaved it inside the shack and shut the door.

Inari fumbled his way through the dark to the kitchenette area and felt for the torch his mother kept under the sink. Switching it on, he swung the beam around the room and stared at the dislodged furniture, fallen Christmas decorations and scattered garments littering the floor. The trunk in which his mother kept her best clothes was open and suspiciously empty. The electric meter on the nearby wall had a large gaping slot where the credit key should be. Inari dropped heavily onto the couch and sighed.

"Mum," he growled. "You sold me for two thousand credits!"

He dragged the Lamp towards him and played the torch beam over the spherical shell. After a few moments he found a panel near the bottom

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that flipped open to reveal a single red button. The power indicator next to it winked two green squares. Eager to dispel the cloying darkness, Inari thumbed the switch.

The sound of a loud gong made him jump. All of a sudden the room was filled with the glowing torso and grinning head of a bearded dark-skinned giant, richly dressed in flowing golden robes and jewelled turban. The apparition bulged with muscles, a sight made more surreal by a waist that tapered into nothing to leave its barrel-like chest hovering in mid air. In a panic, Inari yelped and fell from his perch. A cloud of glittering dust rose from the couch, revealing the multiple projection beams rising from the top of the sphere.

“Who the hell are you?” Inari cried.

“I am the Governing Entity for Neural Interrogation Environments,” boomed the apparition. A wave of its arm made the word ‘GENIE’ briefly shimmer before Inari’s eyes. The rich, rounded voice reminded him of the holo-vid voice-over that read the daily casualty lists for the *Gods of Avalon* game show. “Field operations mode, no secure network detected. Please state parameters for interrogation environment.”

Inari clambered back into his seat and rubbed his eyes. “What?”

He gave another shriek as the small glowing head of a Chinese girl bobbed up next his own. The security pass ring given to him by Namtar had unexpectedly come to life, bringing with it the blue-haired sprite from the Que Qiao depot.

“Local network established,” declared the Lamp.

“A genie?” Inari asked nervously, this time to the hologram bobbing above the ring.

“You are not authorised to use the Lamp,” snapped the ring’s AI. “Access denied.”

“Do we have to go through all that again?” moaned Inari. “I just want a bit of light. What’s all this about a genie and a lamp? Sounds like a silly story for kids.”

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“I am unable to verify your credentials,” the ring replied.

Inari looked up at the genie. “What about you?”

“Access granted,” announced the Lamp’s AI. The sprite hovering above the ring scowled and promptly disappeared. “Please state parameters for interrogation environment.”

“What does that mean?”

“Support desk function is disabled,” said the genie. “Would you like to consult the user’s manual?”

The giant’s hands moved in a blur. The projection now held a large printed book, which if it were real could have doubled as a foot stool. The genie let it hover whilst it flicked at random through the pages. Inari rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Is there a product description on page one?” he asked hopefully.

“Governing Entity for Neural Interrogation Environments,” intoned the projection. “Customise a suspect’s surroundings to lure him or her into revealing their crimes. Use the Lamp’s audio-visual mirages to persuade and disorientate. Be the envy of other police states! Genie delivers the sights and sounds to help you interrogate the modern way. Warning: may induce psychosis. Do not use when under the influence of drink or drugs.”

Inari leaned back in the couch and stroked his chin in thought.

“Sights and sounds, eh?” he said at last.

“Please state parameters for interrogation environment.”

“Something bright and cheery,” Inari said slowly. “A house for a rich man.”

“Options include: a throne room, a president’s stateroom, a parliamentarian’s country manor, a sultan’s palace, a summer villa, a royal space yacht, a...”

“Sultan’s palace,” declared Inari.

“Scenario confirmed,” said the genie.

A barrage of beams erupted from the Lamp, bathing the room in rich hues of red and gold. In a blink of an eye the messy shack had gone.

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Holographic projections now masked the walls, ceiling and furniture, overlaying the shabby decor with an amazing display of ornate wall tapestries, thick carpets, plush velvet chairs, marble statues and a sparkling crystal chandelier that somehow hung higher than Inari knew the actual ceiling to be. A hatch opened in the side of the Lamp and out flew a trio of tiny propeller-driven drones, each emitting their own projector beams, the effect of which was to add yet more depth to an already startling spectacle of holographic wizardry. Inari looked around his new palace in awe.

“Wow,” he murmured. “Amazing.”

“Interrogation environment established,” said the genie. “Please state parameters for narrative context and scenario.”

Inari decided to use his brain for once and paused to consider what the AI had said so far. He decided the Lamp was a very clever tool to trick suspects into revealing information; a glorified brain-washing device. He wondered if he himself could be affected.

“This light show is a stage,” he reasoned. “And now I have to choose a play?”

“Hello?” called a voice from behind. “Anyone home?”

Startled, Inari turned to the door, which under the light of the Lamp had somehow become a grand pillared portico draped in silks. A night of incredible discoveries had just taken a new twist. Standing on the threshold was Hujing, the girl of his dreams. As she gazed in disbelief at the scene within the room, a buzzing drone zoomed in and aimed a delicate web of lasers into her eyes. Her expression slipped from confusion to a look of utmost bliss.

“This is beautiful,” she murmured. “A palace for a prince!”

“Please state parameters for narrative context and scenario.”

Inari looked at the genie and grinned. This was turning out to be his best day ever.

“A prince needs a princess,” he declared. “Let’s skip straight to the honeymoon.”

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* * *

Namtar paused outside the shack and stared at the multicoloured lightshow spilling from the open doorway. From where he stood he could see the technological mirage within, the holographic palace being exactly the sort of thing he imagined would amuse Inari. Those in the gutter rarely looked further for inspiration than the fairytale lives of the rich.

A figure appeared at the door. It was the young Chinese woman Namtar had trailed to Inari's shack. A tiny drone buzzed unnoticed in the air before her, plying its lasers into her eyes to maintain the illusion. Not wanting to be caught the same way, Namtar withdrew a pair of polarising sunglasses from his pocket and slipped them on. Inari himself would be immune from the interrogation environment while he wore the security pass ring. The woman looked drugged and somewhat at its mercy.

Looking for inspiration, Namtar smiled. His gaze had found the mining lantern hanging from the remains of the porch roof. Sometimes the old stories were the best.

The woman flopped wearily into the outside couch. As Namtar reached the porch, another drone zoomed out to greet him and indistinct images briefly flickered over the lenses of his glasses as it tried to draw him into the illusion. He batted the drone away.

“Good evening ma'am,” he greeted. “Is this the house of Fat Angie?”

The woman jerked her head towards the door. “Inside,” she said. “Fell asleep on me, he did. My hero!” she added wistfully. “His mother makes him work so hard. He built a palace for her in this grotty hell-hole and says he didn't get one word of thanks!”

Namtar peered through the doorway, feigned a look of surprise and with his right hand pointed at something inside, just out of her sight. The woman, watching closely, turned and stared through the door to see what had distracted him. Namtar's left hand quickly darted to the porch roof,

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unhooked the lantern and moved it behind his back whilst her gaze was diverted. With a shrug, she looked back at her visitor.

“He has certainly been busy,” admitted Namtar.

“He’s a prince!” she declared. “I don’t know why I never realised before!”

“Indeed. I came to return his lamp,” said Namtar. He withdrew his left hand from behind his back and showed her the mining lantern. “The one inside the shack, err... palace belongs to my great aunt and she misses it terribly. Could I have it back, please?”

She frowned and glanced inside. “It’s such a pretty lamp,” she said.

“This one is newly recharged,” Namtar lied, holding up the battered lantern. “The one in there has barely any life left. Out of the kindness in my heart, I offer you a new lamp for old. There’s no need to wake him,” he added hesitantly. “And I am in rush.”

“Yeah, whatever,” she grumbled.

She slipped from the couch and went into the cabin. Moments later she was back, this time carrying the Lamp. The surrounding hallucination quivered and twisted with every wavering step she took, not that she seemed to notice. Namtar looked for the accompanying AI entity he had glimpsed earlier from across the street but the genie had disappeared.

He held out the mining lantern. Much to his relief, she took it without a word and handed over the Lamp. Namtar tried to suppress his triumphant grin.

“Goodnight ma’am,” he said. “Give Fat Angie my regards.”

“Don’t call him that,” she chided him. “He’ll smash your face in!”

Namtar bobbed his head in farewell and stepped from the porch. He was barely halfway across the road when the Lamp promptly shut down, its projector beams fading and its drones zooming home to nest. Behind him rose a sudden piercing scream.

“Where’s the palace gone!” the woman yelled. “Angie, wake up!”

“Wh... What?” yelled Inari, his voice muffled. “Get off me!”

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“You tricked me!” she shrieked. “You little piece of...”

Namtar grinned. Not stopping to listen, he put his head down and ran.

* * *

Inari spent a troubled night alone in the cold, dark shack. The magic Lamp had gone, as too had his mother and his money, leaving him with nothing but the few bits of jewellery stolen from the vault. He had finally won the girl of his dreams, only for her to storm out the very same night. The silver-tongued stranger Namtar was to blame for everything.

He was not renown for being an early riser, but the next day he was out of bed and prowling the street before the sun had properly risen above the surrounding jungle. The only clue he had was that the AI sprite of the ring had unexpectedly sprung into life after he rubbed his stubbly chin to stifle a yawn. The bobbing blue-haired projection confirmed the Lamp had not gone far and was still close enough to maintain a network link.

“Which way?” Inari demanded gruffly. The village was eerily quiet.

“Twenty-two point four metres distant on a bearing of one-three-seven degrees north,” said the ring. “Signal distortion suggests the Lamp is inside a building.”

Inari soon found what he was looking for. Half-hidden in a copse of towering ferns, an old equipment shed stood by the road, battered and forlorn like every other building in the settlement but with a doorway wearing the glint of a suspiciously-new lock. Inari crept close and put an ear to the door. Reassured by the silence, he pulled his trusty crowbar from his belt and effortlessly snapped the lock in two. He grabbed the handle and pulled the door open.

His eyes went wide as two familiar figures emerged from the shadows of the shed. A scowling Namtar had one hand clamped upon the shoulder of his beloved Hujing, the other wrapped around a pistol held to her head. Hujing’s face was streaked with tears. The stolen Lamp, the architect of

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Inari's misery, stood on the rubbish-strewn floor behind them, its glass casing glowing weakly in the gloom.

"Hujing!" cried Inari.

"My thief for hire has returned," Namtar remarked coolly. "Two thousand credits seems overly generous in hindsight. As a precaution, your girlfriend will remain a hostage until I take my leave of this grey-forsaken rock. Your services are no longer required."

"Let her go!" Inari yelled, raising his crowbar. "Or, or..."

Namtar laughed and pointed his gun at Inari. "Or what?"

Inari instinctively ducked and in a rage blindly threw the iron bar at Namtar's head. Somehow it seemed to pass straight through him. A loud clunk was followed by a dreadful metallic groan, then more confusingly by an angry shout from the nearby undergrowth. Inari watched in disbelief as the battered building slowly collapsed in on itself and crunched to the ground. The fateful Lamp rolled from the cloud of dust and came to a halt near his feet. Inari stared in horror at the crumpled remains of the shed.

"No!" he cried.

Not a sound rose from the ruins. Inari ran to the debris and frantically tried to move a fallen girder from the ruins. The steel frame of the building, badly corroded to the extent that a hastily-flung crowbar had dislodged something vital, was not going anywhere under Taotie's fierce gravity. The absence of cries for help as he scabbled for survivors was ominous. Inari sank to his knees and howled in despair. He had killed his beloved.

"Hujing!" he sobbed. "What have I done?"

Away down the road, he heard distant shouts from the gang's cabin. He had not only lost the girl of his dreams, but probably forfeited his own life too. Her fellow gang members had a way of dealing their own justice. Inari grabbed the handle of the fallen Lamp and ran.

* * *

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Inari sat gloomily in his shack, contemplating his fate. The Lamp was in the centre of the room, this time projecting the interior of a cosy log cabin perched on a lonely mountain, complete with a window overlooking a range of snowy peaks. The jewellery stolen from the vault lay in his lap, glittering in the light of the grinning AI.

“What am I to do?” he asked the genie.

“Please state parameters for narrative context,” said the AI, rather unhelpfully.

“A quick getaway to a better life?” Inari asked hopefully.

“That is not one of the listed scenarios.”

Inari heard the thud of boots upon the porch outside and sighed. Hujing’s friends were here sooner than expected. Right on cue, tiny drones slipped from the Lamp’s casing and whirred around the room, ready to dazzle and disorientate the intruders. Inari guessed they would at best only delay the inevitable.

“My prince!” called a familiar voice. “Forgive me!”

“Hujing?” murmured Inari, confused.

The door crashed open and to his amazement in strode his beloved Hujing. Her habitual pink dress and black jacket were now accessorised by silvered sunglasses and a large plasma rifle, the latter slung casually over her shoulder. Inari’s joy at finding her alive made her more radiant than ever. Hastily pocketing the jewellery, he rose from the couch and rushed to greet her. She in turn took a hesitant step towards the genie and the Lamp.

“You’re alive!” he cried.

“Yeah?” she said. “Why shouldn’t I be?”

A second figure bustled into the room, a stout and fierce Chinese woman whom Inari had seen before at the gang’s cabin. She wore oil-smearing overalls, a peaked cap and silver glasses similar to Hujing’s. Inari warily eyed the large wrench in her hand, which she slapped into her palm in the manner of someone spoiling for a fight. The drones buzzed angrily, firing their lasers into their mirrored shades to no effect.

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“Who are you?” he asked.

“That’s my mum,” said Hujing, not entirely convincingly. “I thought that as we’re best mates now, you wouldn’t mind her staying with us for a while. Okay?”

“Staying?” Inari was confused. “Us?”

“You’re my prince!” she declared. “You want me here, don’t you?”

“Who’s Mister Rent-A-Ghost?” asked the older woman, staring warily at the muscle-bound genie. “Is he the magic lamp you told me about?”

“Systems are unable to initiate interrogation scenario!” the genie declared, spinning to face Inari. “Please restrain your prisoners and remove their eyewear!”

“Prisoners?” asked Inari. “They’re friends! Err... I think.”

“Of course we are!” said Hujing. “Best friends!”

The older woman went to the sofa, pushed the empty food cartons from the cushions and sat down. Beckoning to Inari, she patted the space beside her. Inari hesitantly approached, saw Hujing gesturing similarly and cautiously took a seat. The woman greeted him with a smile chequered with shiny gold implants and rotten black teeth.

“You gonna marry her?” she asked. “Hujing’s a classy girl. Beats most men in arm-wrestling and can drink us all under the table. What d’ya say?”

“I, err...” began Inari, somewhat nonplussed.

“Please restrain your prisoners and remove their eyewear!”

“Shut up, genie!” snapped Inari.

“Yeah!” said Hujing. “Shut your face, beardy!”

“Being her mother, I’d expect a dowry,” the older woman continued slyly. “Just a token gift, to remind me of her happiness. Something from here, maybe.”

Puzzled, Inari watched as her gaze wandered over the room, before finally coming to a rest on the metal and glass sphere. She gave him another eerie grin.

“What about that lamp?” she asked. “It’d look lovely back home!”

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“Please restrain your prisoners...!”

“Shut up!” yelled Hujing and her alleged mother in unison.

“The lamp?” asked Inari. He glanced to the genie, then at the fake log cabin masking his dreary abode. He liked its delusions of grandeur. “But...”

The older woman, whom Inari now seriously doubted really was Hujing’s mother, leaned forward and gave him a friendly tap on the head with her wrench. Close up, her breath smelt of rancid meat and stale beer. Inari squirmed and glanced to the door. Hujing had unslung her rifle and held it nonchalantly at her hip. The sinister black barrel pointed his way.

“Oh,” said Inari, his heart sinking. “The lamp.”

“Please restrain...!” began the genie.

“It’s too late for that, my dear,” the older woman said to Inari. “We can do this the easy way, or the hard way.”

Inari gulped. “The hard way?”

“Did I say hard?” she remarked. “Sorry, I meant the messy way.”

Hujing moved forward and raised the barrel of her gun. “We’re taking that lamp.”

Inari opened his mouth to argue and hesitated. The buzzing drones had ceased bothering his unwanted guests and unexpectedly zoomed into the street. A faint sound of shuffling boots upon gravel came from outside.

“Systems are unable to initiate or extend interrogation scenario,” the genie boomed. “Please restrain your new prisoner and remove his eyewear!”

“New prisoner?” murmured Inari. He glanced to the door.

“What’s that thing talking about?” snapped Hujing.

Her accomplice scowled. “There’s someone outside.”

A sudden explosion rocked the shack, wiping away the holographic mirage with a sharp flash of light and cloud of smoke. Inari’s cry of panic was nothing compared to the deafening scream in his ear as the couch lurched and somersaulted across the room. Rotten beams and twisted sheets of metal rained from above amid a barrage of noise.

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Something soft and heavy fell and pinned him to the floor. Terrified, Inari cowered beneath the thunder of bangs and groans as the cabin collapsed around him. A split second later he felt a sharp pain across the back of the head and his world went dark.

* * *

Inari winced and opened his eyes. Everything was blurry and the midday sun above was hot and painfully bright. He was sitting upright against an uneven solid lump, his hands tied behind his back by cables that bit into his wrists, though it was the jagged masonry and twisted lengths of steel upon which he perched that hurt more. Every joint in his body ached and every muscle felt like one huge blackened bruise.

His vision slowly began to clear. Inari gingerly turned his gaze and became aware of a man in a hat standing by the roadside, watching him through mirrored shades.

Inari scowled. Namtar had Hujing's rifle in one hand and the dormant, dust-streaked Lamp in the other. Inari's gaze fell to the portable plasma cannon lying in the gravel at the man's feet. Namtar seemed mildly surprised to find Inari conscious amidst the rubble of his former hovel.

"You!" growled Inari. "I thought you were dead!"

"Likewise," Namtar said calmly. "I assume you refer to the amusing incident in the storage shed. What you thought was myself and your girlfriend was a mere projection," he explained, lifting the Lamp to illustrate. "As I said, this device has many uses. Especially if you take time to read the instructions properly."

"You blew up my house!" protested Inari. "And my girlfriend!"

The uncomfortable lump at his back gave a muffled moan. Inari craned his neck to peer over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of a boot-clad leg emerging from a scrap of tattered pink rags. He gently tugged his bindings and heard another groan.

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“She was never your girlfriend!” Namtar snapped. “She and the other one were after what they could steal, like everyone else on this heathen planet. I did you a favour! I opened your eyes to the evils of this world, be they Que Qiao’s secret weapons or the villainous affairs of thieves. I set you free to create your own destiny! Well, technically not free,” he admitted. “But someone will be along to untie you and your princess shortly.”

Inari muttered a string of obscenities under his breath. Hujing’s occasional twitches and disgruntled murmurs suggested his femme fatale was not seriously hurt. He wondered where her so-called mother was, then caught a glimpse of an ominous pair of smoking boots and shuddered. He heard another groan and winced in pain as a reawakening Hujing tugged on their shared bonds. He glared at Namtar.

“Untie us!” he demanded. “And give me back my lamp!”

“Your lamp?” Namtar gave him a stern look. “It is now the property of the Dhusarian Church of Yuanshi. Do not forget that I hired you to recover it on my behalf.”

“You going to brainwash church folk?”

“How this device will be used is no concern of yours. You need to set your mind to more pressing matters, such as what to say when the authorities arrive. A corporation gunship touched down at the airstrip not half an hour ago.”

“Wha...?” muttered Hujing.

“Que Qiao agents!” exclaimed Inari. “Here?”

“The trail of devastation you left at the depot will keep them occupied for a while,” Namtar reassured him. Depositing the Lamp on the ground, he moved to the edge of the smoking remains of the shack and gave his captives an appraising look. Inari noticed he wore the security pass ring. “Your final service is to stay here and look guilty, so that I may reach the spaceport in peace. Your beloved has quite a criminal record. Don’t look so sad! This is your first Christmas together. They may even let you put tinsel on the bars of your cell.”

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“Don’t let them take me to Feng Du!” cried Inari. Taotie’s island prison colony had a fearsome reputation known throughout the five systems. “Untie me!”

“I know a guard there,” slurred a voice behind him. “Be alright...”

“For you maybe,” muttered Inari.

“A nice boy such as yourself will be out in no time,” said Namtar. “Sweet little Fat Angie!”

Inari frowned and gave a little movement of his head, hinting he wanted to whisper something. Looking puzzled, Namtar plucked the glasses from his eyes, came close and lowered his face to Inari’s own. Inari smiled, then with a sudden venomous movement lunged forward and bit him squarely on the nose. Namtar shrieked and staggered back, giving Inari the opportunity to draw up his leg and launch a boot straight into his face. Namtar gave an anguished yell, lost his balance and fell back into the street.

“Merry Christmas to you too,” Inari said bitterly. “Call me Fat Angie again and I’ll shove that cannon where the sun don’t shine.”

“You fiend!” cried Namtar, sprawled upon the floor. Holding his nose, he grabbed his fallen hat and climbed to his feet, his exoskeleton actuators whining in protest. He shook the dust from his coat. “Your thirst for vengeance is admirable,” he declared, jamming his hat back onto his head. “For a person of dubious hygiene standards, there’s a romantic honesty about your flair for petty violence I find quite invigorating. Such proletariat anarchy is wasted in this grey-forsaken jungle.”

He reached into his pocket, withdrew a knife and calmly tossed it towards Inari’s lap. Inari shrieked as the blade embedded itself into the ground between his legs. Namtar picked up the Lamp.

“Grey-forsaken?” Inari asked hesitantly.

“Aliens,” murmured Hujing. “It’s all rubbish.”

“The mighty alien greys are the light that guides the Dhusarian Church,” Namtar said sternly, giving her a withering look. “Inari, a man of

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your talents would find a place on Yuanshi. Priest Taranis always welcomes new recruits wedded to the cause.”

“You ain’t my type,” Inari snorted.

“Nor you mine,” returned Namtar. “Indeed, I find you positively detestable.”

“What wedding?” moaned Hujing. “Who’s getting married?”

“I think she bashed her head,” said Inari.

“Wouldn’t marry you,” she retorted. “Untie me!”

“I see the arguments have started,” said Namtar. “Just like a proper family Christmas. This is where my story ends and we all try to live happily ever after. Remember, you are free to choose your destiny!” he declared as he started walking away. “Farewell, Inari!”

Inari watched as Namtar strode down the street and out of sight, then looked at the blade quivering centimetres from his crotch. He had been double-crossed by worse. It was not how he imagined ending up with Hujing, who was sure to be mad as hell once her concussion wore off. He wondered if the jewellery from the vault was still in his pocket.

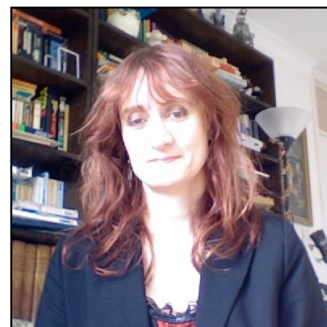
“Well, my princess,” he said. “Here we are, trussed up like turkeys.”

“Get stuffed,” she retorted. “Untie me now!”

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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