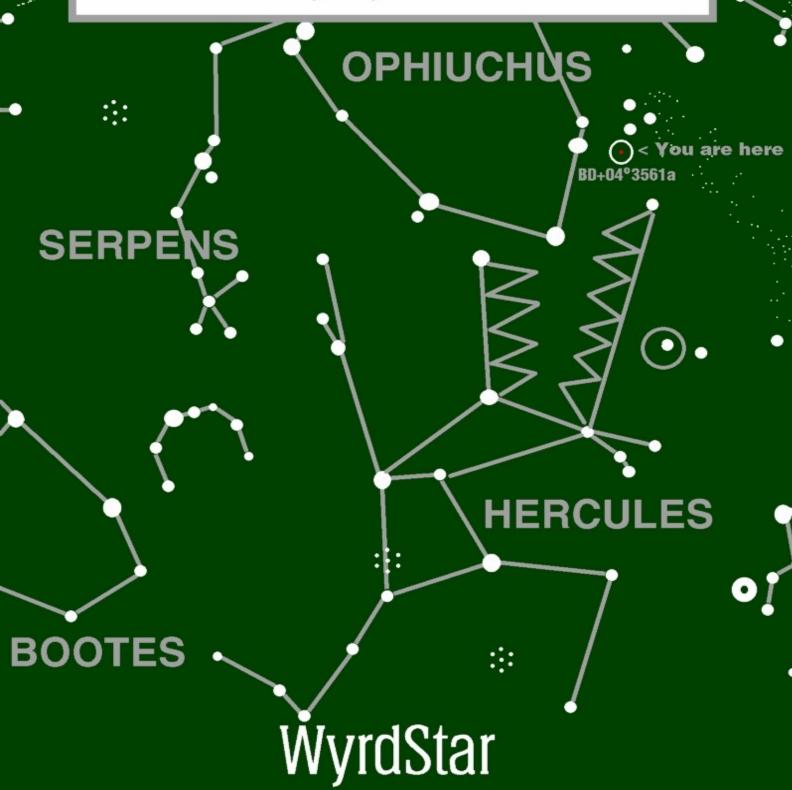
# Merry Christmas Mister Wolf

A short story by STEPH BENNION



# Merry Christmas, Mister Wolf From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

A short story by Steph Bennion

#### WYRDSTAR BOOKS

www.wyrdstar.co.uk

Copyright © Steph Bennion 2012 All rights reserved.

#### WyrdStar edition, license notes

This ebook is distributed free of charge. Please feel free to pass this story on to anyone you think may enjoy reading it. In this instance WyrdStar requires that you neither modify it in any way nor remove the copyright notices at the bottom of the pages.

### WyrdStar publishing history

First published December 2012
Revised December 2016 (layout and endpaper update)
Second edition published November 2017
Revised November 2020 (layout and endpaper update)
Revised March 2025 (editorial refresh, endpaper updates)

Set in 14pt Baskerville by WyrdStar Books.

The right of Steph Bennion to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1998.

This short story is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

This WyrdStar ebook is suitable for science-fiction readers of all ages.

#### From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

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

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

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

It was Maia at the door now. Hestia's inner groan joined that of the door hinges, heralding the arrival of someone intent on disturbing her

solitude. She watched as Maia shuffled moodily into the room, crossed the floor and collapsed into a sofa, blocking Hestia's view of the flickering holographic flames in the fireplace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The newcomer was Lodus, Hestia's portly younger brother, who had a better friendship claim with Xuthus and Maia by virtue that all three played in the Bradbury Heights academy orchestra. Hestia was envious of the orchestra's trips away from Ascension, such as the one a couple of months ago to play at the Epsilon Eridani peace conference. Much to the chagrin of their parents, Hestia had no musical talent at all.

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

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

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

"Our parents!"

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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

Que Qiao planetary headquarters at Bradbury Heights extremely rich. With wealth came arrogance. When a scheme was mooted to recreate an Alpine ski resort at Kirchel, ecological considerations were swiftly forgotten by those with money to burn.

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

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

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

The hush was promptly shattered as a group of raucous young men emerged from the clubhouse, singing at the top of their voices. The song

was *Forever Christmas*, which was currently being played to death on youth music holovid shows due to its sarcastic lyrics and disparaging view of festivities. Janus cringed as he heard their discordant harmonies:

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

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

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

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

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

"I needed that job," complained Janus. "What's wrong with having me in a fat suit and beard? I can dish out tacky rubbish to screaming kids as good as anyone. Who decided it would better to get one of those new fandangle robot Santas?"

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

"It's not right," grumbled Janus. "I should be Santa!"

"Never mind," said Alberich. "Anything to report?"

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

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

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

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

"Fair point. Have you got the one for the wolves? It's not in the safe."

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

broadcast appropriate commands to the slave second wolf, using the short-range transceivers in the robots' spiky metal tails.

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

"All done," grunted Janus.

Alberich smiled. "See you tomorrow."

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

"Patrol! Patrol!" squeaked the elf. "Check the perimeter! Report all intruders!"

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

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

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

"Janus!" he hissed. "The fool!"

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

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

\* \* \*

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

adjust to the green glow of her hair extensions. After a few moments, she felt for the wall and cautiously descended to the bottom step.

"House?" she called. "Lights, please."

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

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

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

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

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

"Perhaps the fuse has gone," suggested Xuthus.

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

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

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

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

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

Upon reaching her bedroom, she gingerly crossed to the window and pulled back the curtains. The street lamps outside were no longer lit. She had not expected to see darkness throughout the resort. Her wristpad was on her bed and she slipped it on, selected the communicator application, then saw the message on the screen and sighed.

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

Xuthus looked pensive. "If life support has failed as well..."

"What?!" Maia screeched, interrupting. "I'm too young and pretty to die!"

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

"I don't like the dark," muttered Lodus.

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

"There's animals out there?" Maia cried, looking fearful. "Big ones?"

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

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

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

had grabbed her favourite red coat, which reached to her knees and had a large hood that kept her head nice and warm.

"That's your coat?" asked Maia. "How quaint!"

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

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

"Come on, little red riding hood," said Xuthus. "Let's go and find granny."

"What?" Hestia shook herself from her reverie. "Yes. It's this way."

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

"That explains the power loss," remarked Xuthus, frowning.

"Are those teeth marks?" Maia asked warily.

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

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

"I'm scared," whined Lodus. His voice trembled.

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

"Wolves?" Maia's eyes went wide. "No one said anything about wolves!"

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

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

"Who's afraid?" rasped the robot. "Of the big bad wolf?"

"I am!" yelled Maia.

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

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

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

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

The wolf gave her a quizzical look.

"Catch!" yelled Hestia.

She threw the stick as hard as she could over the wolf's shoulder. As the robot turned to look, Hestia burst into a frantic sprint. She raced as

fast as she could into the woods, not daring to look behind. As she ran, her red hood flapping wildly at her back, the sound of her pounding footsteps were joined by an ominous galloping clatter that grew louder by the second. The wolf was behind and gaining fast.

\* \* \*

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

"You look like a lumberjack," she remarked.

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

"Stop right there!" snapped Granny Skadi. "I'm talking to you, mister wolf!"

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

"Granny Skadi!" shouted Hestia. "Be careful!"

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

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

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

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

"All the better to hear you with!" declared the wolf.

"This is madness," muttered Hestia.

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

"It's gone mad!" the girl hissed back.

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

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

"What big eyes you have!" she said.

"All the better to see you with!" the wolf replied, after a moment's thought.

"And what big teeth you have, mister wolf!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Run!" yelled Granny, grabbing Hestia's hand.

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

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

Xuthus realised he could no longer hear the thudding footsteps of the wolf above his own heavy heartbeat. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw Maia and Lodus several paces behind, both looking ready to drop. The wolf was nowhere to be seen, but he could hear something crashing through the trees further down the hill. He shivered as a mournful metallic howl drifted across the night air.

"I can't run anymore!" Maia wailed.

"Me neither!" wheezed Lodus.

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

"This way," he urged. "Follow me!"

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

"Get inside!" he yelled, beckoning to his friends. "It's behind you!"

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

"Oh no, it isn't!" Lodus protested.

"Oh yes, it is!" cried Maia.

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

Xuthus shoved them both into the cabin, slammed shut the door and slid the locking bolt across. Maia and Lodus were trying their best to hide

behind both him and each other. Xuthus hurriedly herded them away from the door.

He swept the beam of his torch around the lodge. Their impromptu refuge had evidently not seen any other sort of sweeping in a while, the light revealing a ramshackle living room that contained just a few sticks of furniture and a ragged floor rug, the latter barely visible beneath years of accumulated dirt and dust.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am not a pig!" complained Lodus.

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

"Oh, no I'm not!"

"This is getting surreal," complained Xuthus. "Robots can't blow!"

"This one sucks," moaned Maia. "Big time."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another loud thud sounded, dislodging a worryingly large chunk of fake log cladding. Not only were the logs made of reconstituted wood chips, they were also suffering from a bad case of rot. Another thump followed, more quickly this time. Xuthus, Maia and Lodus watched in horror as the cabin wall disintegrated before their eyes. The wolf paused in its destruction and shoved its steel snout through the hole.

"I'll huff and I'll puff," rasped the robot. "And blow your house down!"

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

"I want my mummy," whimpered Lodus, close to tears.

"I'd settle for a plasma cannon," muttered Xuthus.

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

"Quickly!" he hissed. "Down here!"

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

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

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

"We're trapped!" wailed Maia. "It is most definitely going to eat us!"

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

"It's chewing the floor!" cried Lodus, pointing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lodus nodded in agreement. "I'm scared of everything."

Xuthus pulled a face. Torch in hand, he cautiously ascended the ladder and poked his head through the torn opening. One of the wolves lay on its side, its once-piercing eyes now dark. He swung the torch beam to find the second robot and nearly fell off the steps in fright. The second cyberclone wolf was by the front door, sitting calmly like a house-trained hound from hell. Its eyes still glowed red, but it did not appear to be in any rush to move, though curious grunting sounds came from within.

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

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

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

"What's going on?" asked Maia, who was at the foot of the ladder.

"It's quite safe!" called Granny. "Your friend saved you all!"

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

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

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

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

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

A sudden loud knocking came from the front door. Granny drew back the bolt and pulled it open. In the doorway stood Officer Alberich,

looking frantic and blinking furiously amidst a cascade of fake snow dislodged from the cabin roof. In his hands was a large axe.

"It's taken me an age to find you!" he cried. "Are you all okay?"

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

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

"You fought the wolf?" exclaimed Xuthus.

Hestia nodded. "And the wolf nearly won."

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

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

"Granny knows best," mused Alberich.

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

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

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

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

"I wanted to show everyone that robots are bad!" growled Janus. He was battered and bruised, yet nevertheless defiant. "Only this one reacted badly to the Grimm data rod. Once it saw the children in the woods, there was little I could do to stop it acting out some crazy fairytale. All I planned was to take the wolf to the clubhouse and scare a few folks as they headed home. I would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling kids!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Janus shuddered. "Yuck."

"Nothing wrong with sprouts," Granny retorted.

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

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

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

Hestia grinned. "Merry Christmas, Mister Wolf!"

#### THE END

#### **About the Author**

**Steph Bennion** is a writer, musician and part-time Westminster civil servant, born and bred in the Black Country but now living in Hastings after finally escaping the black hole of London. Her stories are written as a reaction to the dearth of alternative heroes amidst bookshelves swamped by tales of the supernatural, not that there's anything wrong with a bit of fantasy now and again. *Hollow Moon*, the first novel in her space-opera tales of mystery and adventure, was published 2012. *Hollow Worlds*, the final book of the series, was published in 2024.

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

# **HOLLOW WORLDS A novel by Steph Bennion**

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

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

# Available from WyrdStar

# HOLLOW MOON Steph Bennion

Space Opera for young adults (and young at heart)

HOLLOW MOON
PAW-PRINTS OF THE GODS
CITY OF DECEIT
THE AVALON JOB
HOLLOW WORLDS

Short Story Anthologies

TO DANCE AMONGST THE STARS MERRY CHRISTMAS, MISTER WOLF

Short Stories available as free downloads

GENIE And The LAMP
To Dance Amongst The Stars
The Watcher And The Priest
It's A Blunderful Life
The Narcissus Solution
Stealing Christmas
Snakes On A Spaceship

Merry Christmas, Mister Wolf A Wizard, A Sword And A King The Ivory Tower Festival Of The Star The Clockwork Cat Santa Claustrophobia Psyche's Seven

# **Stephanie M Bennion**

THE BATTLES OF HASTINGS
THE LUCK OF THE DEVIL

### Poetry by LALLAFA JELTZ

DEMOCRACY: AN EPITAPH BREXIT: A HAIKU DIARY

# **Short Story Collections (Various Authors)**

WYRD WORLDS II

For news on forthcoming publications, please go to www.wyrdstar.co.uk.