

TWILIGHT OF THE GODS



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JON DE BURGH MILLER

A D V E N T U R E S

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and
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Bernice Summerfield originally created by Paul Cornell

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CLOUDS ACROSS THE MOON

Irving Braxiatel stood in the desert and waited for the rains to come. A hot, dry wind swept his dark thin hair down over his face, and he brushed it out of his eyes as he stared into the night sky, umbrella rolled up in one hand. The other hand reached into the pocket of his grey linen waistcoat, produced a silver pocket watch and flicked it open with a practised motion. Braxiatel looked at the watch — only seconds to go. He replaced it in its pocket, and unfurled his umbrella, counting down the seconds. Three, two, one . . . right on cue, clouds began to time-lapse across the sky, a white candyfloss condensing into a thick blackness that swallowed the stars. The wind became colder and sharper, the breeze before an oncoming storm. Irving Braxiatel smiled, and raised the umbrella into his sky, as the rain began to fall for the first time in centuries. His sky, his desert, his world. He had asked for rain, and it had come. Precision weather-control systems were so pricey that most independent, moderately populated worlds couldn't afford them.

But Irving Braxiatel had more money than most governments, the money to control storms and buy planets. Born a mere lord, he had grown up to make decisions most cultures left in the lap of the gods. Braxiatel had met some gods in his time, and he didn't like them much. That sort of power was

much safer in his hands than theirs. He smiled to himself as, under the cover of his umbrella, he wandered through his self-summoned cloudburst, watching the sand dampen and solidify. Nutrients, seeds and other elements had been sown by robots over the previous weeks, and over the weeks to come the rain and the sunlight would help them grow, making a barren planetoid won in a card game into a green and pleasant land. A land fit for dreaming spires and panelled libraries, marble statues and lavish gardens. The Braxiatel Collection, a haven for all that was good, for books and art and learning. Braxiatel's own dreams made beautiful reality. A world all of his own.

Presently, he headed for the Mansionhouse, part of his replication of the Palace of Versailles. One day there would be a lake here, a summerhouse there, a Garden of Whispers . . . Perfection.

Braxiatel shook the rain off his umbrella as he entered the Mansionhouse by the huge main door. Fat droplets of water splashed over the marble floor.

'Bit wet out,' said Emile Mars-Smith, who was waiting for Braxiatel in the hallway.

'Yes. Novel, isn't it?' replied Braxiatel. 'I can't wait until we get to do snow.'

He hung the umbrella on a hat stand, and turned to look at his assistant. Emile had put back on a bit of the weight he had lost during his period of possession by a malignant god some time before, but had in no sense reverted to the chubby, slightly irritating boy he had once been. His experience had left him noticeably older – a little old beyond his years, in fact – and with a kind of confidence about him. It was as if nothing life could throw at him could compare to the horrors he had already endured, which in his case was probably a fair enough assessment. Braxiatel recognized potential when he saw it, and snapped up this new-model Emile for his organization as soon as he had come out of convalescence. As Irving Braxiatel made an increasing presence on the galactic stage, Emile was the man who kept

things running, organizing appointments and passing on messages.

'So, when do I leave?' asked Braxiatel.

'They reckon the conference will take place within the next month,' Emile replied. 'Plenty of time for you to brief whoever you send into the Dellahan situation, but not long enough for you to actually go with them. The negotiation team want you to be on standby to get over to Vremnya as soon as the generals give the go-ahead.'

'Perfect,' said Braxiatel. 'That gives me a week or so to watch my new grass grow.'

The conference in question was intended to broker a peace deal on the planet Vremnya, a world with complex cultural divisions which had recently collapsed into bitter war. Vremnya's shaky civilization had been pushed over the edge by the outbreaks of religious wars that had plagued the sector ever since a group of so-called 'gods' took over the once peaceful planet of Dellah. Braxiatel had lived on Dellah, had been there when the fanatics took over, and would not see Vremnya fall that far. If he had to go there in person, use his power and money to get a settlement, then so be it. In the meantime there was the question of Dellah itself. But then that was all in hand.

'How is the prepping of the ship going?' he asked Emile.

'Fine,' said Emile. 'The Berkeley team who put it together in the first place sent detailed instructions, and they call about twenty times a day warning us about this and that. They're obsessed with the idea we might break their new toy, or cause some kind of dimensional rupture.'

'Well, let's just say I'm glad I don't have to pilot the thing,' said Braxiatel. 'Speaking of which, which of our friends elected to join this mission?'

Emile punched buttons on a palmtop organizer.

'Apparently Benny, Chris and Clarence agreed as soon as they were contacted,' read Emile. 'That boring mercenary guy sent us an obscene reply, and has refused our calls ever since, but I don't think anyone's going to be too bothered that

he's not around. Jason Kane procrastinated as usual, but eventually agreed.' He switched off the little computer. 'Well, four out of five isn't bad.'

Chris Cwej and the artificially constructed, angel-shaped being known as Clarence had been in the same star system when the call came, and so had ended up travelling together. They had chartered a modest but expensive long-haul ship with enough on-board AI to cope with most of the journey unaided. This had allowed the two passengers to retire to the vid lounge for most of the journey, where they could relax and continue Clarence's education in the ways of human culture.

Chris Cwej, former Adjudicator and sometime agent of higher powers, had once been tall, blond and handsome. After a particularly radical bit of reconstruction he was now short and broad with receding, dark hair. Once he would have devoured junk food by the tonne, but the demands of his new body denied him this luxury. He sat in an armchair, half-heartedly eating muesli yoghurt while jealously admiring his companion's pizza.

Clarence bit into the hot pizza appreciatively. While eating was not a strict necessity for him – Clarence being an artificial construct housing the crippled intelligence of a defunct sentient spaceship – he was trying to experience life as a human whenever possible. The creation of a race of super-advanced beings – rivals of Chris's former employers – Clarence was trying to distance himself from those lofty heights.

Besides, pizza tasted nice.

In an effort to make his angelic form less conspicuous, Clarence had recently obtained a red cloak large enough to cover his wings when necessary. With the threat of a return to Dellah he had also reluctantly invested in a weapon: a golden sword which hung from his belt. If nothing else, it scared the hell out of most people.

Munching away, the Adjudicator and the angel watched the vidscreen. Chris had assured Clarence that what they

were watching was a fiction, a fantasy of the wildest kind. But it all seemed rather obvious and predictable to Clarence.

'How long did this show run for?' he asked Chris.

Chris frowned. 'About thirty-odd years, I think.'

'And is it all like this? Just people being captured and escaping, a lot of running around and an explosion at the end?'

'Pretty much. Why do you ask?'

Clarence shrugged. 'Just wondered if they ever did anything interesting, that's all.'

Chris shook his head. 'Not really. But it's better than watching cookery shows.'

'S'pose,' agreed Clarence. 'Cookery shows suck.'

Chris laughed. 'Too right. You know what?'

'What?'

'You're starting to sound like a regular guy. Welcome to the land of the only partially extraordinary.'

'Yes,' agreed Clarence smugly. 'I suppose I'm getting used to this.' Watching stupid vid shows, eating pizza; it wasn't as if he was just going through the motions of it all: he was living it, being part of the everyday world. He would always be unique, one of a kind, but at least he no longer felt alone. He slumped in his chair, took another bite of pizza. At last, he thought happily, he had got himself a life.

The cargo vessel *Nervous Norvin* was already on its way to KS-159, carrying enough equipment to build a small town. Which was exactly the point. Braxiatel was paying the sort of fees that very rich and careful people pay to keep their valuables intact in transit, so the captain could hardly refuse a polite request to carry a passenger too.

So Professor Bernice Summerfield, former holder of the Edward Watkinson Chair at St Oscar's University on Dellah, found herself quartered in the pleasant, functional crew area of the ship. She spent much of the uneventful trip doing crossword puzzles and other intelligence tests, a form of mental physiotherapy intended to help her recovery from a

recent brain condition. She spent the rest of the time listening to music, doodling in her diary and generally mooching around.

It was while wandering back and forth in her small cabin, tunelessly singing along to the Foundations, that she caught a glance of something disturbing in the mirror above her wash basin. She hastily lunged over to switch on the shaving light.

A flick of silver hair was emerging in her fringe. It was building into a streak. She was turning into a badger. She had occasionally found the odd grey hair over the previous few years, but this was the first sustained burst of greyness she had suffered. Of course, she had been through a lot of stress recently – the destruction of St Oscar's, her almost terminal illness, the loss of her memories – which could explain the sudden streak of steel in her otherwise youthfully dark hair. But premature ageing was ageing nonetheless, in spite of the unusual cause. First buying that coat, now *this*.

She looked closer at her face under the harsh neon. Her skin seemed pale and transparent, like old parchment. She'd been punched in the face, whacked on the head, thrown through windows and generally had the crap kicked out of her over the last few years, so her whole face was covered in the kind of small nicks and scars that had hardly seemed worth the regen on their own, but had certainly managed to mount up. Exposure to extreme weather and hostile environments, often with days or weeks between moisturizing, had left her with a weathered and blotchy complexion. Constant tension had caused fine lines and wrinkles to cut through her already abused skin.

'I need a face mask,' she told her reflection. 'One I can wear for a decade or two.'

Another ship headed for KS-159, this time from the Proxi-man Chain. A slim vessel with no life support, it moved at a speed that would shake most living organisms apart. This ship was also on autopilot, but with an AI fixed in place with

masking tape, a battered paperback stuffed underneath to keep it upright. Once this vessel had broken through the atmosphere of KS-159 it would break up, letting its cargo float down to the desert surface on a parachute.

That cargo was a suspended-animation lifepod containing a scruffy humanoid of dubious habits. In a deep cryogenic sleep, Jason Kane, ex-husband of Bernice Summerfield and the galaxy's premier author of xenophiliac pornography, happily dreamt of electric gerbils.

Benny stood at the top of the ship's loading ramp, breathing the air of KS-159. Crate-carrying robots zigzagged around her, unloading the ship's cargo. There was a tang of moisture in the air, presumably a result of Brax's terraforming project. Other evidence of his great schemes was clear to see: prefabricated warehouses dotted the landscape, and scaffolding showed where more permanent structures were beginning to sprout. As she admired the landscape, a small skimmer jerked to a halt at the bottom of the loading ramp, and a familiar figure leapt out. He wore khakis and boots, and strode up the ramp in a businesslike manner, which Benny found rather surprising.

'Hi, Benny,' said Emile, giving her a hug. Benny always remembered him as the least tactile of people, and was stunned by how self-assured he seemed, how comfortable within himself.

'Emile!' she replied in shock, eagerly hugging him back. 'You look so grown up. What happened to you?'

'What, apart from an alien parasite in the brain?' replied Emile, pointing his fingers at his head like a gun, rolling his eyes and sticking his tongue out. 'But then, you know what *that's* like.'

'Don't I just!' said Benny. 'So, where's Brax? I thought he was going to meet me in person, the stuffy sod.'

'Helping to dig Jason out of a sand dune, I'm afraid,' said Emile, helping Benny load her bags into the skimmer. 'Chris and Clarence are out there too.'

'They're better people than me, then,' said Benny. 'I'd be tempted to bury him deeper.'

The site of Jason's crash-landing was not far from the Mansionhouse, so Emile took Benny's bags and left her to make her own way back. The sun was setting as Benny walked across the dunes, and she was inescapably reminded of archaeological digs she had been on before. She saw a familiar, rake-thin figure in a grey suit directing the actions of two other men, one of whom had wings. Oddly, while Benny had long since accustomed herself to Clarence being an angel, she still hadn't got used to Chris being a dark-haired fat guy. Chris and Clarence were busy shovelling sand away from a partially submerged atmosphere capsule, while Braxiatel looked on. Although outsiders might mistake this for laziness, Benny just knew that Braxiatel had no practical skills at all. He would probably end up knocking himself out with the shovel.

'Good team you've got there,' said Benny. 'If I ever get around to buying a house, then I'll borrow them to do the garden.'

'Thanks for that,' said Chris, deadpan.

'It will be a pleasure,' said Clarence, who clearly hadn't realized Benny was joking.

Her, have a house, settle down? That wasn't the kind of decision, the kind of commitment, she was willing to make just yet. She was still young, in spite of hair colour to the contrary.

'How are you, Benny?' asked Braxiatel. 'How did the job hunting go?'

Benny pulled a face. 'Horrid. No one wants an archaeology professor whose last university was razed to the ground. For some reason they think this constitutes bad luck.' She decided to change the subject. 'So, what happened to my useless ex? Your security do the decent thing and blast him out of the sky?'

'Not quite,' said Braxiatel. 'He came out of suspension to

find his internal systems crashed. We have –' he flipped open a pocket watch and checked it '– a couple of hours to open this can up before there's any serious threat to his life. Ninety minutes if we want to avoid brain damage. I'm reckoning we'll get him out in, oh, about six minutes' time.'

'Brain damage?' said Benny. 'Bit late to worry about that.' Damn Jason. Although they had plenty of time to get him out, and they had been in far more potentially lethal situations in the past, it would be just like him to die in a really dumb way like this, killed by buying a cheap second-hand spaceship. Besides, Jason wasn't allowed to die: he would leave such a gap in her life. Apart from anything else, who would she have to prove wrong?

'Hatch clear,' said Chris, and he and Clarence stepped out of the way.

'Shall we?' said Braxiatel, gesturing for Bernice to take a look. Together, they dropped into the space their friends had cleared around the capsule's hatch.

'Numeric keypad,' said Braxiatel, brushing dust away with a pale silk hankie. 'Accessible by a four-figure code. We don't have the time to go through all the possibilities, and I left my decrypting kit on Dellah.' He turned to Benny. 'Any ideas?'

'Just one,' said Benny, pushing past Braxiatel to get to the keypad. She made a silent prayer that Jason was still as predictable, as juvenile and as crass as ever. Judging by his latest book there was little chance that had changed. She tapped in a six, a nine, another six and another nine. Braxiatel raised an eyebrow. 'My husband has a very lowbrow sense of humour,' she said apologetically.

To their relief the hatch clicked open with a hydraulic hiss, and in a cloud of cryogenic gas Jason Kane pushed his way out, falling into the sand in a coughing, spluttering mess. Even in the rapidly fading dusk light, he squinted myopically.

'Buried alive,' croaked Jason. He raised a hand limply, as if he could barely raise his voice, and wanted to make a moving last request. Benny leant forward, straining to hear. 'Buried,

choking, darkness,' he muttered, barely audible. 'Bit like . . . our marriage.'

As Jason burst into a fit of coughing laughter, Benny stood up and kicked him hard.

'Bastard,' she said. 'Last time I save your life,' she added.

Braxiatel was busy examining the capsule. 'This must be an antique,' he said. 'How long have you had it?'

'About a week,' said Jason, pulling himself up. 'It was all I could get through my channels. The Proximan Chain isn't the most salubrious of places, and they ask so many questions if you buy over the counter.'

'Questions you don't want to answer,' said Benny wearily, rolling her eyes. 'Whatever, Jason, whatever.' She turned to her friends. 'Shall we wait for him to work up the energy to walk back, or shall we just get your little friends to drag him?'

Braxiatel, Chris, Clarence, Jason and Benny returned to the main house, updating each other on the events of the last few weeks. It seemed that their attempts to go out and find themselves, to spend some quality time on their own, had all proved fairly boring. Apart from Braxiatel, who had managed to do a staggering number of improbable things since they had last all been together.

When they arrived back at the house Clarence and Chris led the way, heading directly for the kitchen. They quickly raided the place for cornflakes and milk.

'Bit late in the day for that, isn't it?' said Benny, looking out of the window into the early-evening shade.

'Space lag,' said Clarence. 'Our body clocks are wrong thanks to Chris "temporal genius" Cwej here miscalculating what time it would be when we got here.'

Chris raised his hands in a 'So, sue me!' gesture, his mouth too full of cereal to speak.

'Getting bolshy in his old age, isn't he?' said Benny, indicating Clarence.

Chris gave an apologetic shrug, indicating this was his fault as well.

'Chris has taught me the key to humanity,' said Clarence smugly.

'Love?' suggested Benny hopefully.

'No, sarcasm,' replied Clarence.

'Even better,' enthused Benny. 'Something I really understand.'

While they had been bitching, Braxiatel had been fussing over the work surface, and had produced a large pot of coffee in a ridiculously short time. He neatly set mugs out for everyone, and poured. Coffee in hand, they then sat around the table in a difficult silence. Benny was fascinated, watching Braxiatel put his friends at their ease with coffee and biscuits, ever the perfect host. That was part of the reason the rest of them had opted to leave KS-159 for a while: Braxiatel's dream planet was just *too* nice, too perfect. It was easy to spend weeks on end doing very little, every day a Sunday afternoon. Their departure had been an attempt to break with routine, Jason pursuing his business interests, Benny chasing a job, Clarence trying to lead a human life and Chris . . . pursuing whatever agenda Chris pursued these days.

'So, why are we here?' Jason said suddenly. 'I left important business to come here.'

'Subtle and selfless as ever, I see,' said Benny acidly.

'Well, if we waited for you to finish analysing everyone's body posture, speech patterns, eyebrow movements, use of the word "custard" and so on we'd be here for hours before we got to the bloody point.'

'Good God!' exclaimed Braxiatel, turning to Chris and Clarence. 'I'd forgotten they were always like this. Please, pay attention!'

Benny and Jason, suitably chastened, lapsed back into silently glaring at each other.

'I believe Jason asked a question,' said Braxiatel patiently. 'One I never got a chance to answer.'

Benny and Jason shuffled in their seats, embarrassed, but they stayed quiet.

'Thank you,' said Braxiatel. 'Jason asked why you were all

here. Well, as you can probably guess, I, in association with some people on Earth, have found a solution to the Dellah problem. It isn't nice and it isn't going to be easy, but it could save humanity from being trapped in the middle of a war between your lot —' he pointed to Chris '— your lot —' he pointed to Clarence '— and the gods, a war that would result in the sterilization of this sector.'

Benny opened her mouth, but Braxiatel silenced her with a glance.

'That solution is something that will be explained to you tomorrow, after you're all rested and ready to learn. For now, though, I'll explain the current situation on Dellah, as far as my sources can ascertain. It seems there has been a certain amount of conflict among the gods . . .'

THE LAND OF THE GODS

The Devoted had been waiting for seven days and seven nights. They had been waiting through seven storms, and seven of them had died of hunger. But still they waited. Because when a person believes in something with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their being, then the waiting becomes part of the experience. The experience of belonging. The Devoted had fled the land of the heathen, where the vengeful deities had begun unjustly punishing their faithful children. They had trekked for weeks and weeks, until finally they had found a place where they could rest, recuperate, and prepare to retake their homeland. It was one of the most peaceful places on Dellah, a holy area known as the Valley of the Defeated. Apparently a great war had once been fought there, but that was long ago. As soon as the Children of Maa'lon had arrived at the place, they had renamed it the Valley of the Devoted. They swore that there would never again be fighting on such sacred ground. It was an oath that would prove difficult to keep.

Cepachi San, a recent convert to the Children of Maa'lon, had been placed on guard at a ridge that overlooked most of the valley and the paths leading towards it. Cepachi stared down the path leading from the ridge to the settlement, and wondered how much longer they would be able to enjoy the peace. It had been a week now since they had arrived at the

valley. A week since everyone had been able to relax for the first time in ages. It had also been a week since Maa'lon had left His Children on their own. The One True God had ordered them to stay at the camp until He returned from eliminating the infidel army that had been spotted across the valley, an army that threatened the peaceful existence His Children enjoyed. The weather had been harsh, and food supplies were scarce, but the Children had stayed because that was what was expected of them. They were obedient, but that did not stop them feeling uneasy at His absence. As Cepachi stared into the icy mist, he could not help straining his eyes, just in case he might spot the distant figure of his god returning.

If there was one thing that being with Maa'lon had taught the Children, it was that it was at all times necessary to keep up their faith. And this they did with vigour. They had fasted and prayed regularly since His departure, but Maa'lon had still not returned. Maa'lon had told them that He would return within two days, and, although it was blasphemous to entertain such a thought, Cepachi could not help fearing that something terrible had happened to the god. He cursed himself for being so unfaithful, and swore that he would never reveal his blasphemy to the others. The other Children had little respect for him as it was, what with his being the youngest soldier in Maa'lon's army – barely an adult by most people's standards – and there was no way he was going to let them string him up for disobedience. Nevertheless, he could not shake the feeling that perhaps someone should go out and look for Maa'lon, just to make sure He had not been harmed by any of the infidel.

The young man shivered as a cold breeze slinked through his hair. In the daytime, the sandy valley teemed with plant life and was baked in the rays of the sun, but during the night an icy cold front swept over the area. Cepachi said a quick prayer to Maa'lon, apologizing for his blasphemy, and asked the god to return to them soon.

Cepachi's meditation was interrupted by the noise of foot-