

JANUS IS A TWO-HEADED GOD

By Susanne Marie Knight

PROLOGUE

Since the beginning of time, the beings known only as “the Ancients” patrolled the universe. Where they came from -- no one knew. How many were their numbers -- also a mystery. What was their purpose?

Ah, on that question, some could venture a guess.

Some called them angels, backed by divine intervention. Others took a dim view of the Ancients’ activities, cursing their unwelcome interference. Meddlers, mediators, spawns of the devil; the list was as endless as the boundaries of space.

The Ancients cared not for the accolades, nor the opprobrium of other lifeforms. They had a job to do, and one must admit, they did it well.

Entering the familiar star system with a speed that could only be imagined, *She* ignored Sol’s outer planets and sought only the majestic orb of soft blue and white swirls. Her purpose was fixed and her concentration intense. The search did not take long.

Impatient as always, *She* did not wait for her slower companion. *She* hovered over the sparkling world, stopped her forward movement and looked down upon it. If *She’d* had lips, *She* would have smiled. As it was, *She* signaled her pleasure to her companion now gathering up his immense volume to join her.

“I always enjoy returning to the home planet. Nowhere in the cosmos is there as blissful and as comforting a sight as our dear Earth,” *She* said.

“You must confess to bias,” *He* relayed back at her, slightly miffed at her impulsiveness. “Earth was our first endeavor together as a unit.”

He thinly spread his bodiless form above the exosphere -- the outer edges of the planet’s atmosphere. His colorless expanse reached from pole to pole.

She interpreted the gesture as an embrace. Gratified, *She* mingled her molecules with his. “I confess nothing but the truth. The worlds our children have conquered are but poor substitutes for the diversity and beauty of this system.”

Indeed, the solar system boasted many attractions. While not precisely unique the planets were spectacular in their magnificence. Mighty gaseous giants, ringed worlds of dazzling loveliness, and starkly barren slabs of rock. And of course, the jewel in the crown: planet Earth.

A sadness filled her. "How lamentable that those who now comprise the Galactic Core Coalition are unaware of what they had left behind. Mother Earth lies empty but for a few thousand Humans."

Puzzlement invaded his meditations. "Only thousands?" *He* concentrated on the cloud, ocean, and land globe beneath them. "You exaggerate. I sense a million or two."

"Paltry numbers when compared with the Core population!"

A small particle of space debris shot through her essence, only to burn up in the atmosphere below. "Even now I fear that our wandering seeds have lost their way in the vastness and the glory of the universe."

She pulsed with a brilliant white light so at odds with the black velvet backdrop of space. Stars were sparse in this curving arm of the spiral galaxy where Sol was located. Few suns and fewer people. Was it a coincidence that the bulk of Humanity now resided near the center of the galaxy, which blazed with a never-ending incandescence?

Compressing his celestial matter into a vaguely Human-shaped fist, *He* declared, "Indeed, that is the case. We must take steps --"

Although it was impossible for her to laugh, an amused cadence entered her thought patterns.

"Steps? Do you mean a bipedal walk?"

"Frivolous banter will not aid our children! By foul and heinous means the Uortzks are plotting to overpower the Coalition, which will in turn endanger the very existence of this galaxy. Although we cannot directly interfere, it is time for us to provide assistance. Else all we have nurtured these millennia will be for naught."

He was correct. How could *She* be merry when so much was at stake? *She* would make amends.

"Wait for me. I shall return."

Focusing down a golden portion of her being to Earth's surface, *She* scanned the diverse terrain. At first uncertain for whom or for what *She* searched, *She* persisted.

She felt heavy, but then again, *She* was heavy. The pull of Earth upon her infinitesimal mass disturbed the delicate balance of her atomic makeup. No matter. Her mission was urgent, the discomfort would be temporary.

The gleaming cities of steel and glass did not interest her. *She* passed over them. Instead, *She* sought out the wide open plains. Fields of farmlands rich with abundant crops greeted her senses.

Dark, fertile soil radiating earthy aromas made her dizzy with the beneficence of nature.

Yes, this was it. *She* was close to what *She* desired now.

By a hillside the pure sweet notes of a lyre beckoned. *She* instantly recognized the ancient instrument. Swooping down, *She* was rewarded with the vision of a young woman plucking the lyre's strings. The Human's musical voice combined a song of the present with a melody from the past. The song spoke of needs long denied, of goals yet accomplished and of love unfulfilled.

Good. An appreciation for things long since gone and a desire to meld as a unit. Perhaps the female even possessed an understanding of history.

Pleased, *She* enfolded the young woman in her golden rays, showering the Human with affection. The quest was over. The galaxy's salvation would soon be at hand!

The female began to grow restive, unease filtered through the young body. The last thing *She* wanted to do was to alarm the Human. Quickly disengaging from the contact, *She* then spirited up to the farthest reaches of Earth's exosphere. The tedious gravity that had briefly tied her down was now joyfully absent. To celebrate, *She* whirled her being into a tumultuous cyclone.

Patient as always, *He* allowed her this joviality.

"Yes," *She* throbbed through whirlwind gyrations, "as is your habit, you *are* correct, my partner." *She* then joined with him in a blessed reunion. It was good to be as one again. "I agree that the Uortzks must be stopped. It *is* time we provided assistance."

CHAPTER ONE

“Martin Midway McLaren! Of all the crazy...Oh, what am I going to do with you?”

Mart had left home hours ago, so Sam really wasn't expecting an answer. She took one look at her feather-strewn kitchen, changed her mind about entering, then slammed the door on the mess. Not that her kitchen was usually spotless, but chickens running amuck? *Mart, how could you?*

Sam sank down on her haunches, leaned back against the closed door and exhaled slowly. Long, loose tendrils of hair danced around her face. Indecision stayed her movements.

Exasperation with her brother Mart flooded her emotions, but she quickly banished the unkind thoughts. The poor kid suffered from that awful condition. She could never remain angry with him for long. In fact, her initial irritation had already dissolved. Only curiosity remained. Why in blue blazes did he allow his two pet hens, feisty Cluck-Cluck and Henrietta, to literally rule the roost *inside* the house?

Sam glanced at her wristwatch: seven o'clock. Mart wasn't due to unicopter back home for another three hours. She'd have to wait for the answer to that puzzle.

Well, why put off the inevitable? She stood and brushed some travel dirt from her pants. The old saying went, “There was no rest for the weary.” It fit her to a tee. After riding her antique bicycle eight miles to her tedious job at the unicopter factory, Sam was as weary as a one-dollar bill.

She grabbed the porch broom with which to shoo Cluck-Cluck and Henrietta back outside. Some days never seemed to end and today was destined to be one of them.

Lately, Mart seemed more restless than usual. Although he had just reached his twentieth year, because of his disease, he acted more like twelve -- on occasion. And Sam, only twenty-four, felt three times her years. Once in a while the responsibility of looking after him sat heavily on her shoulders. Like tonight. She couldn't blame him when he called her an old fogey. Most evenings all she wanted to do was relax -- maybe play the lyre or read.

But what other pastimes were available in this isolated part of Greater Missouri? Perhaps it was a matter of principle, but she refused to use the televiewer at all. Virtual reality devices made her sick, and even riding in unicopters caused bubbles in her stomach. Technological progress was not always a good thing. Just look at what had happened to their parents...

She sighed. “First things first. I might as well buckle down and get this cleaned.” Anticipating the barnyard smell, she wrinkled her nose, opened the barricade and walked into the kitchen. A tiny white feather, once belonging to Cluck-Cluck, fluttered in the air to greet her. The feather was one of *too* many.

When Mart returned home tonight, he'd better have a darn good reason for taking the chickens in as boarders.

After finishing the Herculean task, Sam didn't have much longer to wait for Mart. To pass the time, she sat on the cement steps in front of her screened-in porch. It was moments like these that she truly appreciated the isolation from town. Only the loud buzzing of cicadas and crisp chirps from crickets kept her company. She never tired of hearing the insects' mysterious communication. Sam felt calm, at peace with herself and the world. Sweet smells of honeysuckle drifted over to her, soothing away her previous agitation.

Thankfully, men and their noisy mechanical toys were asleep. At this hour, nature took over to provide a moonlight symphony. The majestic blackness above demanded her attention, as it always did when the skies were clear. Inclining her head back, she gazed up at the star-sprinkled night. Amazing how the constellations of today in the year 2452 were the same as long ago -- the same as the ones viewed by the people she longed to learn more about: the Greeks and the Romans.

So much had changed since then, while so much remained the same.

A repetitive clamor disturbed the natural quiet. As it grew closer a sudden hurricane whipped the air into a frenzy. Displaced clumps of loose rich soil flew at her. Her long hair flapped wildly about her face and she shielded her eyes from the dirt.

The whirl of engines abruptly stopped. Mart had landed -- out in the fields past their house.

"He remembered!" At long last he finally respected her wishes to set down his unicopter away from the hen house. That was a good sign. Maybe he'd had a day free from any "occurrences."

Peering into the night, she searched for him, but the inky darkness refused to reveal his form. Mart's voice traveled far and arrived before he did. But he wasn't talking to her. Was he speaking to himself?

The strange thing was, she thought she heard someone's reply.

"Mart?" An uneasiness chilled Sam's backbone. "Mart, is that you?" Another realization of just how isolated she was returned. This time, though, she wasn't thanking her lucky stars.

Just then, Mart came into view. But as she was about to give a sigh of relief, someone else also appeared. Someone who, for some reason, set her teeth on edge.

She gulped down hard. *Good heavens, this is the same weird feeling I had three weeks ago when --*

"I *knew* Sam would be sittin' up, waitin' for me. Didn't I tell you? She always treats me like I'm a kid." Mart tried to disguise his youth by deepening his voice.

Mart's companion nodded. Sam could see him distinctly now. The man was a lot older, maybe forty-five or so. Short too, his height only reached two thirds of the way up Mart's gangly six foot two inches. But the stranger's large chest barreled out of proportion to his spindly body. His silver thatch

of hair matched the sheen on his form-fitting clothes. Again, that shouldn't have raised red flags. However, his eyes were completely hidden by a dark shield, surrounding his sockets and giving him a bug-eyed look.

Why wear sun visors in the middle of the night? How could the man see?

Sam grabbed onto the railing and pulled herself up. Just who did Mart bring home on this previously uneventful summer night?

Mart, as usual, had no idea of the frayed state of her nerves. His excitement caused his movements to seem even jumpier than normal.

"Sam, this is cosmic! I know you don't follow the viewer-reports, but hold onto your hat. This news is gonna pierce your ears!"

With obvious disbelief, he turned to the man. "Sam's gotta be the only one in the world who doesn't know about you --"

"Sam?" the man questioned.

The eerie, high pitch of his voice caused her to bite her lip inadvertently. Although she couldn't be certain, she had the impression that he scrutinized every last inch of her...and she wasn't dressed for receiving company. Her flexi-pants were still splattered with dirt and her top bore the wrinkles and creases of the day. Embarrassed, she flushed hotly.

"Sam," the man repeated. "Ach, nae. A male name dinna do justice to such a lass."

He reminded her of a spider -- all arms, legs and chest. And a Scottish spider to boot. She took a step up the stairs.

Nodding rapidly, Mart's spiky hair bobbed in the breeze. "By the comets! How did you know? Her name's Sophia, actually. Sophia Audrey McLaren -- Sam. Isn't my friend somethin', Sam?"

She frowned. Why did Mart have to reveal personal information? The name Sam suited her -- down to Earth, pragmatic and dependable. Sophia was...whimsical.

Yes, your friend is something, she silently agreed. But just what exactly is he?

The man held out his hand. "Sophia. Aye. I'll call the young lass, Sophia. I go by Fredd...Fredd Desilva."

He spelled his name, but after he finished, his hand was still outstretched.

As gingerly as she could, she extended her own hand. At the contact, she looked down at his fingers. The thumb was normal -- short and squatty as everyone's was. But his four fingers were elongated. Close to double the appropriate length.

Even the feel of his rough, callused skin made her own skin tingle in warning. She shivered in the warm, night air.

Oh dear heavens! This man, this Fredd, isn't quite normal. Where on Earth did he come from? He couldn't possibly be an honest to goodness...alien, could he?

The occurrence of aliens visiting the solar system was extremely rare -- even today. But none of the ones she'd read about looked like Fredd.

Once the great migration from Earth ended in 2105, little interaction between the two Human groups had taken place. Part of the non-communication was due to the distances involved. About 30,000 light years separated Earth from the center of the Milky Way galaxy. That was where the Galactic Core Coalition, an alliance between Humans and other life forms, had come into being over three hundred years ago.

Of course, thanks to modern technology and those dangerous wormholes, or "tunnels through space," transmissions could be achieved in a couple of weeks. Quite an accomplishment, really. But at least on the migrators' part, absence from Earth did not make the heart grow fonder. Communiqués had grown fewer and fewer until the Galactic Core Coalition, or the GCC, had become a myth in the minds of most Earthers.

For Sam it did, anyway. After her parents' death en route to a vacation on the moon, Sam wanted nothing to do with techno-babble in any way shape or form. Mart, however, thrived on the stuff.

But here she was, forgetting her manners. "N...Nice to meet you, Fredd. Why don't we go inside?"

By the time the three of them clattered up the steps into the newly cleaned kitchen, Sam had composed herself a tiny bit. She washed her hands, then turned from the sink to look at Mart and the stranger seated at the table. Right now the man seemed normal enough.

"Er, Fredd, would you like something to drink?"

He smiled -- a nice, friendly smile. He still wore his sun visors, though. Hard to get to know a person if his eyes were hidden.

"With appreciation, Sophia, I hunger fer fruit."

Mart leaped up from the table and headed for the pantry. "Certainly, we have a ton of apples 'n whatever. Sam, why don't you sit? I'll get the coffee."

Taking him up on his offer, she let him be the host. It was good to see him behave as an adult. Just as it was good for him to remain calm. Extreme excitement was what triggered the "attacks."

He poured three cups of coffee, meticulously stirred each one, and set the mugs down, along with a plate filled with various kinds of fruit.

Sam curved her fingers around the steaming coffee mug. She'd really let her imagination work overtime concerning Fredd. Up close, his uniformly silver hair didn't seem odd, especially considering the lined and leathery skin on his face. And his fingers weren't *that* long, and his chest didn't puff out so much. Only the visors were out of place, but then again, maybe he was an eccentric.

He studied the dish, then picked up a banana by its stem. "The name fer this?"

Mart laughed, causing his freckles to echo his excitement. "Oh, cosmic! That's a banana, Fredd."

Sam held her tongue. Mart wouldn't take kindly to her warning him not to get keyed up.

The older man nodded. "Ba...nan...a," he said, almost lovingly. "I've heard of Terran bananas."

The banana disappeared as if he had inhaled it. "'Tis nectar of the gods," Fredd said, smacking his thin lips.

Fredd's words sank in. Terra was another name for Earth. *Heavens, he must be an alien!*

She sipped her drink to collect herself. So what if he was? He didn't look so different and she sure didn't want to add the word "xenophobe" to her list of accomplishments.

Tonight *was* a night of oddities. Even the coffee had a peculiar taste.

Mart slapped her on the back, spilling some of the mocha liquid onto her sleeve. "Yeah, you've figured it out, Sam! Fredd's a genuine visitor from the Core. Can you believe it? Ever since he put down at Luna Landin', the news has been blarin' over the televiewer, but you *never* look at it. In fact, I'm surprised there weren't any snoopin' reporters waitin' for us when we touched down."

Her brother ran his hand over his head, spiking up the brown hair even further. "No matter. I guess that's why I was so excited this mornin'. When I left the back door open, the chickens scooted in, then I forgot to let the little devils out. Maybe they didn't cause too much of a mess, huh? Sorry, Sam."

"That's okay." Good thing she'd decided to let her talk about responsibility go the way of the wind. Apologizing for his actions was a maturing step for Mart. Even though she always professed to prefer the old ways, she had to admit Fredd was beginning to fascinate her. So *this* was what visitors from the Core looked like.

"Martin," the man said in his distinctly squeaky voice, "as we previously discussed, I need to speak with yer sibling -- in private."

Sam sat up straight. She wasn't *that* fascinated! "Er, Mart, I --"

"Don't waste any electrons on it, Sam. Fredd's gotta proposition for you. Somethin' that concerns me 'n maybe you, if you want. Promise me you'll hear him out."

She drummed her fingernails against the table's plastic top. Darn the boy. What was he up to? Making deals with...with someone from outside the solar system! But whatever was it about?

You'll never know unless you let the man explain. True. Curiosity won out.

"Okay, but whatever it is, I'm not in the market for other worldly real estate!"

Mart chuckled. "See, Fredd, I told you she has a sense of humor."

Sam finished the rest of her coffee. Definitely something strange here. Mart never sang her praises to anyone.

An awkward pause indicated that Fredd was waiting for Mart to leave. He complied. "Well, I'll be right outside."

The door closed, then Fredd tapped his elongated fingers together, making a pyramid shape. "Martin told me about you, Sophia."

She raised an eyebrow. "Not much to tell."

"Nae, I disagree. You shine beautifully inside and out. This I know. In truth, our meeting dinna come by chance. Fate played a hand."

He leaned across the table, which sent her scooting back in her chair. "You haven't formed an attachment, now have you, lass? I understand you remain legally and emotionally free."

Her mouth dropped. Fate played a hand? Emotionally free as in her love life? Fredd's proposition concerned...marriage? Or whatever the GCC called mating between the sexes. Yikes! She couldn't sit still on that one. Standing, she paced the kitchen's pseudo-marble slated floor.

"Er, Fredd, I really don't know what you're talking about. No matter what my brother told you, matrimony here on Earth isn't something to enter into lightly."

That was certainly true. Ever since she'd turned eighteen she had avoided getting married for one reason or another. Like her commitment to take care of Mart. Anyway, she'd never fallen in love. Ever. Not puppy-love nor the star-crossed lovers type.

She re-cleaned the counter, then the table -- movements to rid herself of her anxiety. "Why would you be interested in marriage?"

Fredd placed his hand atop hers, perhaps to stop her activity. "Nae, nae, not marriage. I just talk. Sophia, you have commendable qualities so rarely found in all the known worlds. Aye, I learned of yer existence even before I left my home. Everything rings true that I heard. Yer internal fires burn deeply and yer long dark hair with ebony eyes bespeak a spirited passion."

"Pardon me?" Beads of perspiration popped up on Sam's lip. She removed her hand from under his,

then backed away. If he wasn't talking about marriage, then *what?*

He smiled again. "No cause for alarm, Sophia. You must pardon me. Let's speak about yer sibling. He has Beta-Siwinski Disease, aye?"

She nodded.

Fredd also stood. His silver head was in no danger of touching the plaster ceiling. "The cure remains elusive fer Terrans, however the Core's main world, Xaspaar, has an antidote fer this condition. With it, Martin can regain his wholeness."

A cure? A cure for Mart? The sun suddenly burst into this long, eternal night. Never again would Mart's senses become overloaded. Never again would his brain essentially shut down, stopping all non-basic functions. For once and for all, he wouldn't lose the ability to speak, move, and see.

This was the most joyous of nights! Tears rushed to her eyes while her heart hammered against the sides of her ribs.

"Fredd, you can make him well? You can cure Beta-Siwinski Disease? Oh, I would be forever grateful! I --"

"On Xaspaar, lass. Martin must return with me to Xaspaar."

It was as if everything came to a crashing halt. In a mid-air, her arm remained frozen. Her eyes refused to blink. All motion ceased as a freeze frame in an ancient cinema production.

"Oh, my heavens." Somehow, she found the words, easing them out in a slow, steady stream. "For Mart to be cured, he has to go...to go with you to the center of the galaxy?"

"Aye."

Fredd might as well have said to go into the realm of angels. The center of the galaxy -- what a fantastical notion. Of course for him, the trip was routine. But for Mart...

She narrowed her eyes. "Why are you offering to do this, Fredd?" In less polite words what she meant was, what was in it for him? What was the price?

He spread out his misshapen hands. "I dinna have the persuasive ways of the Yeamonl to explain. However, facts never lie. My travels led me to Terra in search of..." He shrugged. "'Tis no matter. Mere chance introduced me to yer sibling. Nae, not mere chance but fate. Fate decrees that I assist Martin. I know this as I know my own heart."

Fredd placed the palm of his hand over the left side of his barrel chest.

At least his heart was in the same place as hers, but the identity of the Yeamonl would remain a mystery. Sam had other things on her mind.

“Would you consider accompanying us, Sophia?”

Flattery aside, she was getting a little miffed. “Sorry to disappoint you, Fredd, but I haven’t given my permission for Mart to go with you. And as for me, I like my feet planted on *terra firma*, no pun intended. We barely even know you. How can I allow my brother to traipse across space to a big question mark in the sky?”

The more she thought about the offer, the more outrageous it sounded. How could she take this man’s word that there was indeed a cure for Beta-Siwinski Disease? She stiffened her back. It was much too risky.

The man laughed, which threw her for a loop. His pitch was so high, she worried about the window panes breaking.

“Sophia, your sibling already said aye. I dinna mean this unkindly, but he dinna require your permission. We leave tomorrow.”

Tomorrow? No. No. Fuzzy white dots rapidly appeared before her eyes. She had to sit. If she didn’t, she’d faint. Ever since their parents’ death eight years ago, she’d been taking care of Mart. She couldn’t lose him -- not now. What else was there to live for?

But what if Fredd is telling the truth? Maybe Mart can be cured.

She yawned -- a completely inappropriate response. “Excuse me, Fredd. I don’t know what to do. This is so...sudden.”

And unusual, bizarre, ludicrous -- the list of objections was endless.

Walking over to the window, he looked out at the starry night. “In many cases opportunity knocks only once. You must trust me, Sophia. Yer sibling does. And we both desire fer you to accompany us, however the choice remains yours.”

“If I go...*if*...there’d be arrangements to make. I’d have to notify Mart’s professors, give notice at my job, find homes for the chickens. Things like that. A day isn’t long enough to prepare for such a major...upheaval.”

“The last shuttle to Luna Landing departs at five in the evening. You would have until then.” Fredd’s face betrayed nothing of what he was thinking. Only the eyes could reveal inner revelations.

Her shoulders slumped. “Well, it’s almost twelve midnight, and I’m extremely tired. You’ll have to forgive me if I go to bed. I’ll give you my answer in the morning.”

None of this was real. None of this was happening. Either way, she would lose. Either Mart would be gone for who knew how long, or she’d be uprooted in the worst possible manner. She’d have to say good-bye to everything familiar and journey into the unknown.

She shivered. "Did Mart invite you to spend the night, or is he taking you back...to your hotel?" Or wherever it was that Fredd stayed.

"An invitation here, with yer permission, Sophia."

Sophia. She was beginning to hate the sound of her own name. "Fine, then. I'll let Mart show you to the spare room. Good-night."

After yawning again, she hurried out to the porch. Mart was waiting for her, the light of the moon bouncing off his hair.

Dear, dear Mart. Tears puddled in her eyes. She swallowed her emotion. "Martin, I'm turning in for the night. Why don't you make sure that your guest is comfortable?"

Without words, Mart's widened brown eyes demanded to know what had transpired. Or more specifically, what her response had been.

She hugged him tightly, blinking back the tears. "I...I just can't decide tonight. It's too...too frightening."

Mart submitted to her squeeze and awkwardly patted her on the back. "I understand, Sam. But it's a chance for me to be normal. I *have* to go."

She swiped her eyes. "Yes, well, I guess I'd better get to bed." Although there was no way that she could sleep, not with this quandary heavy on her mind.

Her tears refused to dry. Not wanting Mart to see, she murmured, "G'Night," then rushed off to her bedroom. She pulled off her clothes and slithered underneath the cool sheets of her comfortable bed. Safe, but only temporarily. Tomorrow was destined to bring big unwelcome changes. And there was nothing she could do about it. Her life here was about to become detached from her as cleanly as if seared by a laser.

Of course she would accompany Mart. She'd known that as soon as Fredd mentioned that there was a cure. Yawning again, she closed her eyes and fell into a deep, dreamless and unexpected sleep.

