

The Narcissus Solution

A short story by STEPH BENNION



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From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

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THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

From the Worlds of Hollow Moon

A trader and his young daughter journey to reclaim a lost fortune, but are forced to seek refuge in a mysterious starship. The strange vessel has no crew, only a beastly robot that takes a shine to the young girl. Can she unravel its true intentions before she is spirited away for good?

DAMKINA GAZED WISTFULLY through her bedroom window at the lights of Porto Paradiso, the sleepy lakeside village that was home. The artificial sun high on its pylons had faded to a dull orange glow and the mantle of a fake dusk lay across the houses and fields. Down in the village, distant figures were making their way home, walking through streets festooned with a rainbow of coloured lamps.

Far above, tiny pin-pricks of light shone from the hamlet of Dorfhimmelberg on the opposite side of their tiny world, glittering like stars in the night. Even by the standards of the last decades of the twenty-third century, geography inside their hollow moon was strange. The *Dandridge Cole*, an asteroid colony ship sent from the Solar System more than a century ago, spun slowly through the Barnard's Star system, an inside-out world for those with nowhere else to go.

She heard a shuffle of feet and muffled giggles outside her door. Damkina sighed, turned from the window and went back to her desk. Lines of code lit the holoivid screen of her terminal, awaiting the final keystroke that would send updated orders to farm machinery outside. Across the room, her door slowly swung open, revealing the sly smirks of her older sisters Ashnan and Lahar. It was mean the way they tried to sneak up and scare her.

Damkina felt she had little in common with her fabulously grown-up and sophisticated sisters. She was the youngest at fourteen; Lahar was eighteen, Ashnan a year younger than her. All three had been graced with the same long dark hair, fair complexion and willowy frame of their mother, a glamorous Iranian biologist who specialised in genetically-engineered crops. Damkina's older siblings took pride in wearing the latest flowing fashions when not sulking in their mud-encrusted brown overalls in the fields. Damkina never had anything to trade for new clothes but

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

was perfectly happy with her patched and faded dungarees. She had no idea where her sisters got their clothes, for the family had never been so poor.

“Haven’t you finished?” sneered Lahar, leaning against the doorway.

“She’s gawping at the window,” said Ashnan. “Daydreaming instead of working.”

“I was looking at the village,” Damkina said defensively. “It’s so pretty at Christmas.”

“We don’t do Christmas,” snapped Lahar. “It’s haram, init?”

“Jesus was a prophet,” Damkina pointed out.

“May Allah exalt his mention!” said Ashnan. “Come, father has something to say.”

Damkina hesitated. “Am I in trouble?”

Lahar gave her an odd look. “Trouble? What have you done, Damkina?”

“Nothing!” she replied gaily.

Ashnan and Lahar waited impatiently by the door. Damkina took one last look at the code on her screen and pressed the key to send the new program to the farm robots. Avoiding her sisters’ stares, she grabbed her scarf from her bed, slipped it around her head and followed them downstairs. The deep voice of her father murmured from the living room. To her relief, he did not sound annoyed.

She entered the room. Her father Birtum was standing by the electric stove, next to where grandfather Haya sat in his favourite armchair by the window looking out upon the small grove behind their house. Birtum was barely in his forties, but the lines on his swarthy Turk features had deepened considerably over the last year and his dark hair and beard were streaked with grey. Grandfather Haya was nearly seventy and the few wisps of hair left on his head and chin were completely grey. Both wore cream-coloured trousers and long-sleeved loose tunics. The only person missing was Damkina’s mother, who was recuperating from an injury upstairs in bed.

Birtum was chatting listlessly to Haya about the work planned for the fields tomorrow. There was no shortage of food in the hollow moon, for the controlled climate meant crops could be grown all year round and the

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

governing Symposium saw that everyone got their fair share. Nevertheless, things were not going well.

“Hello grandfather,” said Damkina, hesitating in the doorway. “Hello father.”

“Damkina,” Haya greeted, smiling. His voice was soft but steady. “My beauty.”

Birtum beckoned for them to enter. “Girls, please come in.”

“Father, is this about me swimming in the lake?” Damkina said hurriedly, going to her grandfather’s side. “I didn’t mean for anyone to see me, but...”

“Hope you didn’t ruin your clothes,” he said irritably. “No, I bring good news!”

“Good news, father?” asked Ashnan.

“I have received word from Newbrum spaceport,” he declared. “The cargo I lost, on which I staked our fortune, has been found!”

Lahar’s eyes sparkled. “We’re rich again?”

“Oh, for our money woes to be over!” their father said wistfully. “You all know how the ship I chartered met disaster, abandoned in deep space after a solar storm scrambled its systems. The vessel has been found! By an asteroid mining team, who by a million-to-one chance found her spinning in the void.”

“That was lucky, father!” remarked Damkina.

“But we are rich again, are we not?” asked Ashnan. “I cannot bear being poor!”

“We might not be so poor if you two did your share in the fields,” grumbled Haya.

“We don’t do farming,” hissed Lahar. “We are ladies of culture and belong in Bradbury Heights! It is my public duty to grace society with my presence!”

“We were invited to the Five Systems Festival at the bio-dome,” Ashnan added sulkily, looking at her father. “Special guests to an open-air production of grandfather’s silly play. They wouldn’t pay for our flight! I hate living in this stupid asteroid.”

“This was your mother’s home before she and your father took you to Ascension for your schooling,” chided Haya. “My silly play keeps a roof over your heads.”

“Those who called themselves our friends in Bradbury Heights were quick to disown us when we fell on hard times,” Birtum said bitterly. “Who knows what might have happened had Damkina not stayed here to look after your grandfather?”

“She’s a good girl, Damkina,” Haya said softly, looking up from his chair to his granddaughter. “Neither I nor her mother could manage without her.”

Ashnan opened her mouth to protest, caught her father’s glare and scowled. Damkina shuffled uneasily, for she did not like it when her family argued. She had been happy to stay when the others moved to Ascension. From the stories shared by her sisters, the ostentatious slice of ultra-modern America beneath the clinical domes of Bradbury Heights sounded like a human zoo. Her father coughed, then continued.

“I leave for Newbrum tomorrow,” he said. “Quirinus O’Brien, a trader here at the hollow moon, has kindly offered to bring forward his next run to Ascension, for which I am grateful. He still wants paying, of course,” he grumbled. “I shall return with gifts for you all!”

“Gifts?” exclaimed Ashnan. “Now you’re talking.”

Birtum smiled. “What would you like?”

Ashnan and Lahar hurriedly put their heads together to confer in whispers. Damkina’s gaze wandered to the window and the grove outside. Her grandfather was a keen gardener, who in better times had enjoyed nurturing decorative blooms. The flower beds were long gone. Growing in the electrified compound now were dozens of horrible genetically-engineered plants, two metres high with funnel-like flowers, poisonous stings and an unnerving ability to uproot themselves and stagger short distances to better soil. It was their mother Sarpanit who suggested growing them, for they were highly-prized for their oil. Unfortunately, she had been stung by one over a week ago and was still bedridden, for the anti-venom medicines they had were not the best. Damkina had been working on the programming for the automatic feeders. She refused to go

near the compound when they had robots perfectly capable of tending the beastly things themselves.

“Father,” Lahar said loudly. “I’d like a hunting bow. The Symposium say the rabbits eating crops around Petit Havre can be culled for meat. I wouldn’t kill for sport,” she added hastily, though Damkina knew otherwise. “What we don’t eat can be sold at market.”

“I want a new outfit,” declared Ashnan. “When we return to Bradbury Heights, I cannot be seen in last year’s dresses and jewels!”

“I see,” their father replied, looking bemused. “What about you, Haya?”

“What more do I want at my age?” he remarked grumpily. “Though I wouldn’t say no to an axe to cut down those monstrosities growing in my garden.”

“Those monstrosities pay the bills,” said Birtum, frowning. “And for you, Damkina?”

Damkina turned from the window. “I’d like to see Ascension,” she said hesitantly. “Ashnan and Lahar talk about it so much. Can I come with you, father?”

He looked to Damkina’s grandfather, who nodded sagely.

“I suppose it would be good to expand your horizons,” he said, sounding unconvinced. “But we cannot bring gifts back for your sisters without also choosing one for you.”

Damkina returned her gaze to her grandfather’s old garden. “A rose,” she said at last. “I’ve not seen one for such a long time. No one grows them in the hollow moon.”

“A rose!” scoffed Ashnan.

“Poor beauty is deranged,” said Lahar. “She’s been drinking lake water again.”

“Damkina, I will do my best,” replied her father. “Now, run along and start packing! We leave tomorrow at ten o’clock sharp. We have a long trip ahead of us.”

Damkina nodded, thrilled at the thought of riding a spaceship to Ascension. Ashnan and Lahar left the room, talking excitedly about their promised gifts. Damkina caught her grandfather’s smile but said nothing. Grinning, she ran from the room to pack her bag.

* * *

Captain Quirinus of the freighter *Platypus* was burly Australian who looked rather intimidating with his bald head and bushy beard, but had a gruff easy-going manner that Damkina found reassuring. He had given them seats on the flight deck of his slender purple-and-white ship, not that he had much choice, for the centrifugal passenger cabin in the hold had only just been fitted and was just a bare rotating shell. There was otherwise no artificial gravity inside his freighter, an old Mars-class ship with retractable wings for atmospheric flight and a curious beak-like protrusion on its nose.

They had left the *Dandridge Cole* yesterday and were finally nearing the end of their thirty-hour flight. The only other person aboard was Quirinus' twelve-year-old daughter Ravana, who was a year or two younger than Damkina and wore an oversized flight suit covered in pen-drawn pictures of spaceships. Half an hour ago, Ravana had been crawling beneath the flight console helping with maintenance like any young mechanic, a far cry from the little girl now sat quietly in the co-pilot's seat with a black electric cat on her lap. Damkina did not want the journey to end. Eating and sleeping in zero gravity was fun.

"She'll be flying the ship herself soon," Quirinus said proudly, nodding at Ravana.

"Damkina is the same," admitted Birtum. "Fiercely independent."

Damkina, strapped in her own seat, looked across at Ravana. The brown skin on the right side of the girl's face bore a nasty scar, which she had heard was a legacy of the same bomb that killed her Indian mother years before. Damkina thought about her own mother's accident and how lonely she herself had felt doing the chores they usually shared. Daughters needed their mothers. It was not right when life took them away.

The planet of Ascension crept closer by the hour. It was a nondescript brown world of deserts, sparse vegetation and a poisonous atmosphere, which still managed to be the best prospect for human settlement the Barnard's Star system had to offer. The *Platypus* was heading not for the planet's main spaceport of Newbrum but to Lan-

Tlanto, an unofficial trading post on the far side of the planet. Quirinus had been quite cagey on why he did not fly to Newbrum but agreed to drop them off at *Stellarbridge*, the orbiting space station for deep-space vessels visiting Ascension. Damkina knew enough about the shady trading deals that went on at the hollow moon not to ask questions.

Ahead in the void, a distant glint of light was getting brighter. Damkina and her father gazed eagerly through the windows, guessing this was their journey's end. Quirinus however looked puzzled. Ravana peered at the scanner screen on the flight-deck console.

"It's not usually visible at this distance," remarked the pilot, sounding puzzled.

"*Stellarbridge?*" asked Birtum, frowning at the disquiet in the man's voice.

"Shall I use the cameras?" asked Ravana, breaking her timid silence.

Quirinus nodded. "Yes please. Maximum magnification."

Damkina watched the girl's tiny fingers dance over the console. A holoivid screen lit up showing the distant glint, which grew into a greenish smudge and then snapped into focus, showing the space station ahead. The reason for the brightness became clear.

A large spacecraft, half the size of *Stellarbridge* itself, lay docked against the long pontoon that emerged like an axle from the main wheel of the space station. The part of the ship attached to the dock was a squat broad cylinder, ringed with spherical fuel tanks and three radial pylons supporting engine clusters. The source of the reflected glow was a huge sphere attached to the other end of the vessel, a translucent glowing ball of emerald shadows that made Damkina think of her grandfather's greenhouse. The strange ship was starkly beautiful against the white rotating wheel and pin-prick porthole lights of *Stellarbridge*.

"That's amazing," murmured Quirinus. "Never seen a ship like it."

"It's very pretty," Damkina remarked, gazing at the screen. She pointed to the green sphere. "Does it have a garden?"

"It very well might," Birtum replied thoughtfully. "The big ships that run between Earth and Mars in the Solar System have hydroponic farms to provide life support and fresh food for passengers. They look nothing like that though."

“Ship?” asked Quirinus. “Who’s docked at *Stellarbridge*?”

“Three vessels are currently berthed at *CSS Stellarbridge*,” replied the smooth female voice of the *Platypus*’ artificial intelligence unit. “Transponders identify these as Newbrum shuttle flight zero-four-two, freighter *Achilles* and private cruiser *Prince Beaumont*. Itineraries have been logged should you wish to view them.”

“No, that’s fine,” said Quirinus. He glanced to Birtum. “I know the *Achilles* and that ship is definitely no shuttle, so it must be the *Prince Beaumont*. That’s some private cruiser.”

“Some people have money to burn,” Birtum muttered.

“Not at Barnard’s Star they don’t,” grumbled Quirinus. “I think they must be lost.”

* * *

The *Platypus* docked next to the mysterious *Prince Beaumont*. Damkina and Birtum, bidding farewell to Quirinus and Ravana, left the freighter and made their way through the zero-gravity pontoon to the elevators that ran up and down the spokes of the space station’s wheel. The main hull of *Stellarbridge* was a rotating ring of habitation modules some two hundred metres across, where centrifugal forces created the illusion of gravity similar to that of the hollow moon. Damkina was disappointed to feel her weight again, but her father looked relieved as they emerged from the elevator firmly back on two feet.

“This way,” he said. “We need to book a shuttle to Newbrum.”

Damkina followed her father to a holoivid booking terminal. No sooner had he entered his personal details when a message appeared on screen.

“Oh dear,” he said, sighing. “It says to report to the station freight controller. That sounds ominous.”

Birtum asked a station worker for directions and was directed to a small office along the wheel. Damkina followed, aware of the growing frown on her father’s face. When they reached the office, the elderly blue-haired woman inside greeted them with a pitying smile. Bits of coloured tinsel and a plastic Christmas tree did their best to look festive.

“Birtum Terian?” she asked, gesturing for them to take a seat.

Birtum nodded and settled uneasily into his chair. Damkina clambered onto the seat beside him. “Is there a problem?” he asked.

“You’re here about your missing shipment,” she replied, glancing at the holo-vision screen embedded in her desk. “I’m afraid I have bad news.”

“Bad news?” Birtum frowned. “Do you not have my cargo?”

“A significant amount was salvaged,” she acknowledged. “However, the authorities at Bradbury Heights say you have tax obligations, school fees and other liabilities that remain unpaid. They do not take kindly to residents who abscond and leave no forwarding address. Your cargo has been confiscated for resale.”

“What!” exclaimed Birtum. “You mean I have nothing?”

The woman gave an apologetic shrug. “Sorry. No Santa for you this year.”

“This is outrageous!” he cried. Startled, Damkina saw he was trembling. “Our family is close to destitution! Is there nothing you can do to help?”

The woman looked kindly at Damkina. “Your grandfather is Haya Chamanara, the playwright, is he not?” she remarked. “I met him at a charity event many years back. Lovely man. So this is a friendly warning,” she continued sternly. “I’m giving you a chance to slip away with that reprobate O’Brien before you make the mistake of setting foot on Ascension.”

“Father has done nothing wrong!” protested Damkina.

“Arrested!” Birtum shuddered. “Apologies, I know you’re only doing your job. This is dreadful news! We must catch Quirinus before he continues his voyage.”

“You do that,” she replied, smiling sympathetically. “Merry Christmas.”

Looking dazed, Birtum nodded his thanks. Rising from his seat, he led Damkina from the room. Before long they were back in the elevator, riding to the zero-gravity dock. It did not seem fair to Damkina that their trip to *Stellarbridge* was ending so soon.

Leaving the elevator, they made their way through the pontoon. All of a sudden, a terrible metallic groan ripped through the air. The

passageway shuddered and the lights went out, leaving them in pitch darkness. Muffled angry shouts filled the air. Emergency lighting came on, illuminating the walls with a sickly orange glow. A face suddenly loomed into view.

“Vacate this corridor!” yelled the man. “Get back behind an airlock!”

“What’s happened?” cried Birtum.

“Some idiot crunched his ship into the station,” the man replied irritably. “Air pressure inside the pontoon is dropping. Get to your ship or back in the elevator now!”

Damkina clutched her father in fright. He cast a panic-stricken glance back and forth and turned to what looked like the airlock for the *Platypus*. Birtum urged Damkina forward, lunging desperately from one handhold to the next. His hand fell against the hatch controls and moments later they were inside the ship’s airlock, shaking in fear. The outer door closed, sealing the exit to the damaged docking pontoon. Damkina turned her wide-eyed stare to her father clinging to a handrail. His face was etched with fear.

“My darling Damkina!” he cried. “I should never have brought you here!”

“We’re safe now, father,” she reassured him. “Except this isn’t our ship.”

Birtum blinked and looked around the the airlock. Damkina had seen straight away that the large cylindrical chamber, with its padded walls and handles to help passengers move in zero gravity, was nothing like the rectangular cargo-bay airlock of the *Platypus*. She went to the inner door and peered through a small window. Shapes moved in the bright cabin beyond. Her fingers went to a nearby control panel.

“Damkina!” cried her father. “What are you doing?”

“Going inside,” she said firmly, pressing a switch. There was a clunk as the hatch unlocked. “Ships have to allow people aboard if it’s dangerous to stay outside.”

The inner hatch swung open. The air inside the vessel smelt fresh after the stale odours of *Stellarbridge*. Damkina hesitated, then pulled herself through.

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

The room beyond was a huge cylinder some twelve metres wide, rotating slowly around the airlock door like the inside of a rolling barrel. Attached to the moving wall were seats and a table for dining, a desk with a holo-vid terminal, a comfy couch and other furnishings. Damkina realised the rolling curved wall was really the floor.

“A centrifugal cabin!” exclaimed her father. “A proper passenger lounge, unlike that tiny hamster wheel Quirinus is installing on the *Platypus*. But where are the crew?”

A trio of ladders radiated from the airlock hatch. Birtum reached for the nearest and began to descend. Damkina shimmied to another and scrambled down, jumping lightly onto the moving floor. The rotating shell of the chamber gave a sensation of gravity, just like the *Dandridge Cole* back home, except her weight was less than half of what she was used to. She felt slightly dizzy, though that was already easing.

Damkina stepped carefully across the floor. The seats and table were made of dark varnished wood, decorated with intricate carved motifs of stylised flowers. Light came from globes of glistening crystal atop graceful brass stems that rose from the floor. Beneath her feet, the curving floor was covered in thick springy carpet of light blue. She paused by the table and ran her fingers over the built-in food moleculariser. It was an old design yet spotlessly clean, almost as if it had never been used. Damkina went to the holo-vid terminal and saw the same thing, the screen and keyboard being of a type she had only seen before in second-hand markets. It was like stepping into a museum.

“Everything’s old,” she said, looking at her father. “Who owns this ship?”

“I have no idea,” he replied, sounding cautious. “It is most odd.”

Damkina heard a loud clunk. At the far end of the room, ramps rose to a wide circular doorway leading deeper into the ship. The door was opening.

She gasped in horror. Articulated metal tentacles lashed through the gap. Damkina stared in fright as a ghastly machine appeared, a black octopus-like robot with a face like a grinning human skull. The monster slowly spun before their terrified stares, though in truth it was Damkina, her father and the centrifugal room that were moving, her fear bringing

back her dizziness. She stared in terror as the hideous contraption pulled itself inside, using its tentacles to move from one handhold to another. Its electronic eyes flashed red.

“Who are you?” roared a metallic voice. “Identify yourself!”

“We’re sorry to trespass...” began Birtum, stammering.

“Identity yourself!” snapped the robot.

Damkina screamed and ran to her father. It was the scariest robot she had ever seen. A sudden thud made her turn around. The inner airlock door had closed behind them, sealing them inside the ship. They were trapped.

* * *

The metal beast pulled itself into the room and with a macabre twist landed with a thud on the floor. The body of the robot rose, standing upright on tentacles bundled together like human legs, the rest wavering menacingly either side of its horrible skull face. One came close and opened the tip, revealing the muzzle of a plasma gun.

“Identify yourself!” the robot roared again.

Damkina grabbed her father’s hand. “My name is Damkina!” she declared, feeling unexpectedly brave. “How dare you scare us like that!”

“Damkina,” repeated the robot. Its voice sounded less harsh than before.

“I am Birtum,” her father said hesitantly. “We mean you no harm.”

The machine paused, then lowered its threatening limb. Damkina was relieved to see the gun barrel disappear from view.

“*Stellarbridge* reports a minor hull breach,” rasped the robot. “All those aboard are ordered to remain in the main wheel or with their vessels. This is not your ship.”

“Err... no,” admitted Birtum. “We took a wrong turn. Where are we?”

“The *Prince Beaumont*,” replied the machine. Its voice had become softer still, almost friendly. “It is the duty of all mariners to protect others in peril. You may remain.”

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

“Thank you,” said Birtum. He looked hesitantly around the room. “Should we introduce ourselves to the crew?” he asked.

“There is no crew. All ship systems are under my control.”

“No crew?” Birtum looked puzzled. “Who owns this vessel?”

“My mother commissioned this ship,” said the robot. “She is dead.”

“Your mother...? Sorry to hear that,” he murmured, looking confused.

Damkina frowned. “Do you have a name?” she asked.

“I am the *Prince Beaumont*,” declared the machine.

“Well, that’s helpful,” said Birtum. “We thank you for your hospitality. May we sit?”

“Of course,” said the robot. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” Damkina said quickly. “We’ve not eaten much since we left the hollow moon.”

“The hollow moon?” asked the machine. “I know of no such place.”

“The *Dandridge Cole*,” said Birtum. “The old asteroid colony ship.”

The robot cocked its skull and flashed its red eyes, its tentacles writhing. Damkina regarded it curiously. The mechanical monster’s gestures were almost humanlike, something usually only seen in companion cyberclones. The *Prince Beaumont*’s robot looked more like a maintenance automaton crossed with a scary security drone.

“The *Dandridge Cole* is recorded in my databanks,” it rasped. “Navigation charts note it as a radiation hazard to be avoided. Unofficial reports say it is a base for smugglers and thieves. I cannot allow criminals to remain aboard this vessel.”

The monster’s tentacle with the plasma gun unfurled and pointed their way. Damkina nervously slunk behind her father, still clutching his hand.

“I am no criminal!” retorted Birtum. “The only thieves here are those who stole my cargo! Will you not take pity on two poor travellers with little left in the worlds?”

The robot paused. “Your daughter is very beautiful,” it said unexpectedly. Damkina looked into the gleaming red eyes of its skull and blushed. “You are welcome to stay. Please help yourself to food and drink. I shall return.”

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

The grotesque machine extended its tentacles and pulled itself back through the door. A sudden tantalising whiff of food drew Damkina's gaze to the table behind them. Before the open door of the molecularisor lay a tray with a tasty selection of snacks, a crystal decanter of fruit juice and two glasses. Hunger got the better of her and she cautiously approached the table, then poured herself some juice and took a couple of stuffed vine leaves. When she looked back at the doorway, the scary robot had gone.

"Whoever owns this ship is rich," her father said thoughtfully, joining her at the table. "We may as well make the best of it until we're allowed back on the station."

Damkina nodded, her mouth full of vine leaves and rice. The *Prince Beaumont* was a very odd ship indeed.

* * *

The robot had left the big circular door open. Their hunger satisfied, Damkina and her father tentatively explored the ship. The pseudo gravity of the rotating cabin stopped at the ramps to the doorway, beyond which was a passageway shaped like a hexagonal prism, with six long walls clad in ornate wooden panels, crystal light fittings and polished brass handrails. Windowless hatches led down to the left, right and also above, with another door in the hexagonal wall at the far end. Most showed red warning lights indicating they were locked. They saw no sign of where the beastly robot had gone.

Birtum went to the end doorway and put his hand against the lock control, this one glowing green. The door hissed and swung towards them, revealing a riot of colour. Damkina gasped in delight. They had found the source of the strange greenhouse glow seen from space. Beyond was a huge metal-framed sphere of glass, crammed with the most incredible collection of plants, trees and flowers she had ever seen.

Excited, Damkina pulled herself inside. Wooden trellis divided different areas of the botanical chamber, each supporting dozens of baskets bearing plants of different types, all linked by a web of water pipes. Bright lights, half-hidden by the tangle of growth, imitated sunlight

against the blackness of space. Damkina darted from one basket to the next, marvelling at the colours, intricate flowers and lush foliage, wrapped in glorious scents that filled the air. Bushes were heavy with berries, dwarf trees were laden with fruit. It was a truly spectacular garden, one that had been well-maintained to temper the unruly growth usually seen in zero-gravity. Someone had put a lot of love into creating an oasis of life. Outside the curved wall of windows, the wheel-shaped hull of *Stellarbridge* spun slowly in the void.

“It’s beautiful!” cried Damkina. “So many flowers!”

“It is truly wonderful,” agreed Birtum, though he looked uncomfortable. “Your grandfather would love to see this. Gravity would make it better,” he mumbled.

“Father!” chastised Damkina. “Floating through a garden is heaven!”

“If you say so. Look! They have roses!”

Damkina looked to where her father pointed. A small rose bush grew from a basket not far from the entrance hatch, resplendent in crimson blooms. She pulled herself along a trellis, brought her nose close and sniffed. The heady scent brought back memories of her grandfather’s old garden on the hollow moon. Damkina looked to her father and grinned.

“They’re wonderful!” she exclaimed. “They smell just how I remembered!”

“Then you shall have one,” he declared. “If nothing else, I can at least provide my youngest daughter with the gift she desired.”

Birtum reached for a particularly pretty rose and with a twist broke it free of the stem.

“Stop right there!” rasped a voice.

Damkina squeaked in alarm. The scary robot was at the hatch, its tentacles gripping the frame of the open door. Glowing red eyes flashed in its eerie skull face. Damkina had no idea machines could look so angry. The robot made straight for Birtum, lashed out a tentacle and grabbed him around the waist, pinning him to a length of trellis. Another moved carefully to the rose in his trembling fingers. Damkina shrieked and backed away, not knowing what to do. Her father stared in fright into the monster’s unblinking electronic stare.

“I offered you and your lovely daughter hospitality,” hissed the robot. “You repaid my kindness by defiling my garden. The penalty is death!”

“You beast!” cried Damkina, coming closer. “Let father go!”

“What? It’s just a rose!” Birtum protested haughtily, putting on a brave face. “Capital punishment is a trifle harsh, don’t you think?”

The monstrous robot extended its tentacle and plucked the flower from his grip.

“Your daughter is beautiful,” it rasped. “A rose is a fitting gift.”

“Do not hurt her,” pleaded Birtum. “It is I who picked the rose!”

“You suggest I would harm something so sweet in my eyes?” roared the machine.

Damkina’s eyes went wide. “That’s a bit poetic for a robot,” she ventured cautiously, her fear suddenly abated. “It sounds as if you fancy me!”

The mechanical monster twitched, slowly unwound the metal tentacle from around her father and retreated to the doorway. The glow in its eyes had dimmed.

“My actions were rash,” it said. “I shall seek recompense another time.”

“That was uncalled for,” Birtum said stiffly, smoothing his ruffled clothes. “It is high time we left. This trip has been a disaster! What will the family think of this tale?”

The robot watched from the open hatch. Damkina’s fear rose anew as she heard distant muffled clangs. The trellis beneath her hands quivered. She turned her stare to the blackness of space beyond the botanical chamber’s glass walls. The wheel of *Stellarbridge*, just visible through the foliage, was slowly shifting from view.

“We’re moving,” she said nervously. “We can’t leave!”

“Business at this station is complete,” replied the robot. “I have set a course for your home, the *Dandridge Cole*. My beauty, I would be honoured to spend a few hours more in your presence.”

The tentacle holding the rose swooped towards her and waited. Damkina tentatively took the offered gift, lifted the flower to her nose and breathed in the scent.

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

“You’re one weird robot,” she remarked. “But we do need a ride home.”

Birtum sighed. “We return empty-handed,” he said, dejected. “If I’m to get an earful of grief from my family, we may as well arrive back in style.”

* * *

The *Prince Beaumont* proved to be a powerful ship, crossing the void to the hollow moon in a fraction of the time taken by the *Platypus* on the outward trip. During the flight, Damkina and her father were allowed to wander at will between the botanical sphere, the lounge area and a small washroom. The beastly robot was never far from sight.

Damkina spent much of her time in the garden, examining the multitude of plants and flowers, or just staring into space at the distant speck of the *Dandridge Cole* growing closer by the hour. In a secluded corner of the botanical sphere, she made the curious discovery of a pair of polished stone slabs, each around half a metre wide, on which were carved initials and dates. They looked like memorial stones, though to who or what she could not decide.

Her father remained anxious and could not relax. He did not like zero gravity and spent most of the voyage pacing restlessly inside the spinning cylindrical lounge.

“No one is this charitable without reason!” he was muttering as Damkina entered. “Whoever owns this ship is wealthy beyond compare. Why offer us free passage home?”

“Allah teaches that wealth should be used to support the poor and needy,” Damkina said meekly. “Would you not do the same?”

“Of course!” he protested, though looked unsure. “But who is behind this? Robots and AIs have no free will. On whose behalf does that infernal machine speak?”

Damkina pursed her lips and frowned. The robot acted as if it owned the ship, which was good enough for her. The AI of the *Prince Beaumont* and that controlling the metal monster was probably one and the

same. The machine appeared at the door, moved into the room and rose on bundled tentacles as before. The eyes in its skull glowed deep red.

“We are nearing the *Dandridge Cole*,” it reported, addressing Birtum. “The *Prince Beaumont*’s shuttle pod will take you home. Gifts have been placed aboard as a token of goodwill to you and your family.”

“Gifts!” remarked Birtum. “How generous! But I cannot repay you!”

“Your daughter will stay here with me.”

“What?!” exclaimed Damkina.

“No!” cried her father. “I cannot allow that!”

“The penalty of death for your vandalism still hangs over you,” the machine declared, its gaze still fixed on Birtum. “I have judged that you must make amends by allowing me the company of your daughter for one day more.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?” snapped Damkina, furious.

“It is not fair to demand such a thing!” protested Birtum. “Is there no other way?”

The machine leaned closer. “You would prefer death?”

“You mentioned gifts,” he said, not answering. “One night only, you say?”

“Father!” cried Damkina. “You wouldn’t!”

“There is nothing I can do until I’m back aboard the *Dandridge Cole*,” he whispered, not entirely reassuringly. “I’ll find help and return to collect you in no time!”

“No harm will come to your daughter. I will lay not one finger on her.”

“Tentacle, you mean,” said Damkina, shuddering. “Father, do something!”

The beastly contraption turned its electronic gaze upon her. Still staring, the robot moved across the room to a storage locker. Extending a pair of tentacles, it reached inside and withdrew something wrapped in cloth. The machine returned to where she stood.

“My beauty, I have something for you,” said the robot, offering her the bundle. “These items will provide reassurance.”

Damkina hesitantly took the offering. Unwrapping the cloth, she found what looked like a tinted hand mirror in an ornate silver frame and

a small silver ring with a bulbous black stone. Curious, she slipped the ring onto her middle finger. An apple-sized holographic head suddenly appeared above her hand, projected from the stone on the ring. It was a cartoon-like rendering of an owl, which for some reason wore spectacles. The projection looked at Damkina and hooted.

“Greetings!” it said, in bright male tones. “I am Oswald, your Onboard Ship-Wide Administrator and Librarian Device. How may I assist you today?”

The word ‘OSWALD’ scrolled around the base of the apparition. Her eyes wide in surprise, Damkina glanced at the mirror in her other hand, then looked back at the owl.

“Err... Hello Oswald,” she said. “Are you the ship’s AI?”

“I am an independent subroutine of the *Prince Beaumont*, programmed to aid crew and passengers in whatever way possible,” the owl replied cheerily. “How may I help?”

Birtum looked suspicious. “You’re giving her access to the whole ship?”

“What about the mirror?” asked Damkina. “The glass looks like a slate screen.”

“You are most observant,” said the robot. “Speak and you shall see.”

Puzzled, Damkina held the mirror before her. She remembered a silly children’s story her mother once read to her, where a magical looking glass allowed the hero to look at what was happening elsewhere. Nowadays, people made holovid calls without thinking.

“Mirror, show me home,” said Damkina. “I want to speak with grandfather.”

The mirror darkened. Within the glass, lines of data streamed down: results of a facial identification match, extracts from her network profile, names of family members, her home address, servermoon access codes. Suddenly, the mirror cleared and she was looking into their house from the transceiver unit on their living room wall, across to where her grandfather sat in his armchair by the window. The technology driving the device in her hand was scary. Trembling, Damkina squinted into the mirror.

“Grandfather?” she called tentatively. “Can you hear me?”

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

Haya stirred in his seat and met her gaze. A look of delight broke across his face.

“My dear Damkina!” he cried. “What a lovely surprise! You are on Ascension?”

“No, we’re nearly home,” she told him, unsure of how much to reveal. Her father hurried to her side, alerted by Haya’s voice. “Is anyone there with you?”

“Your mother is asleep upstairs,” he replied. “Your sisters have gone to the village. Is my money-grubbing son-in-law rich again? We did not expect to hear from you so soon!”

“We will be back before you know it,” she promised, ignoring her father’s scowl.

“Beauty, the mirror will let you see whatever and whoever you like, when you like,” the robot said quietly, fixing her with a cold inhuman stare. “With the ring, you may roam the ship at will. All I ask is that you stay a while longer and hear what I have to say. I trust these gifts will ease your fears. You will come to no harm whilst your father is away.”

“You just want to talk?” asked Damkina. “About what?”

“I cannot divulge that whilst your father is present.”

“And this ship will not leave the hollow moon while I am aboard?”

The robot nodded. “The *Prince Beaumont* will not spirit you away.”

Birtum shook his head. “This does not seem right. I cannot permit it!”

The robot brought its metal skull close to the man’s face.

“You speak as if you have a choice,” it growled. “Your daughter will be perfectly safe. Your shuttle awaits. Leave now, before I change my mind!”

* * *

The *Prince Beaumont*’s tiny shuttle pod was berthed behind one of the locked hatches in the hexagonal passage. His eyes brimming with tears, Birtum bid his daughter a reluctant farewell and strapped himself into one of the two seats within. The airlock sealed behind him, doors in the side of the *Prince Beaumont* opened and the pod was blasted into space.

Automatic systems handled the short flight to the *Dandridge Cole*, guiding the pod swiftly through the huge doors in the nose of the spinning asteroid and along the kilometre-long tunnel into the main airlock. After an agonising wait for the chamber to be pressurised, Birtum wearily clambered from the tiny vessel, noticing as he did so a cargo bag tucked beneath a strap near the door. Remembering what the robot had said about gifts, he grabbed the bag and hurriedly abandoned the pod.

An elevator carried him from the zero-gravity airlock down into Dockside, the ramshackle ring of living quarters and workshops that encircled the front end of the hollow moon's inner chamber. As he emerged onto what passed for ground level inside the spinning asteroid, he was surprised to see his daughters Ashnan and Lahar waiting for him. Overall-clad residents of Dockside watched keenly, eager to catch the news. Birtum guessed the arrival of the *Prince Beaumont* alongside the *Dandridge Cole* had caused quite a stir. He urged his daughters towards the exit, eager to leave before people started asking questions.

"Father!" exclaimed Lahar. "You're back! But where is Damkina?"

"Stuff Damkina," grumbled Ashnan. "Where's our presents?"

"Poor Damkina may be in great danger," Birtum said woefully, handing her the bag from the shuttle pod. "Has Quirinus and the *Platypus* returned? I need his help."

"No idea," snapped Ashnan, pulling a bundle of fabric from the bag.

"Gimme that!" shrieked Lahar, snatching it from her. "I'm the eldest!"

"And the ugliest," her sister retorted. "It won't suit you."

Lahar held up the white and gold silk scarf Ashnan had found. It looked expensive, not that either sister seemed particularly impressed. Birtum rolled his eyes in despair as his daughters tore open the bag, eager to see what else it contained.

"We returned aboard a strange vessel, the *Prince Beaumont*," he said, trying to regain their attention. "A dazzling palace of a ship! A horrible robot controlled by the onboard AI insisted that Damkina should stay a while longer. There was little I could do."

"Yeah, she spoke to grandfather," said Ashnan. "We heard someone in Porto Paradiso talking about a strange spaceship just arrived. Now

we've got loads of money we guessed you'd hired a posh cruiser instead of coming back on that tatty freighter."

"So we jumped on the monorail and came to meet you!" added Lahar. "Is it true? Are we stinking rich again?"

"Ah." Birtum frowned. "About that. I have bad news."

"What?" cried Ashnan. "We're still poor?!"

"I had to leave Damkina behind!" Birtum reiterated. His daughters did not seem the least bit concerned that he had returned without their sister. "Alone on a magnificent vessel, a ghost ship with no living owner!"

"We could steal the ship!" Lahar suggested brightly. "We can fight that horrible robot! Even though you didn't bring me the hunting bow I wanted," she grumbled.

"Fight that beast?" he exclaimed. "It nearly killed me! You would stand no chance."

"Damkina will be fine," Ashnan said dismissively. "If not, you've still got us!"

"Yes," said Birtum, sighing. He thought of Damkina, alone with the scary machine aboard a strange vessel. "It would be one less mouth to feed, if nothing else."

* * *

Damkina leaned back in the couch in the centrifugal lounge and took another sip of the fruit juice the robot had brought to her. It had also found her something fresh to wear, a silver all-in-one garment with inbuilt holographic projectors that gave her gossamer rainbow wings and a halo of twinkling stars. On a table by her side were plates piled high with spicy snacks, fruits and sweet confectionary. Cheery pop music, a playlist chosen by herself, bubbled gaily in the background.

"Anything I want?" she asked, teasing the machine. "Tell me more!"

"The *Prince Beaumont* is at your disposal," the robot said gently. "I desire for you to be happy here. All I ask in return is for you to hear my tale."

"Umm... Okay," she said hesitantly. "What, now?"

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

“I am your servant,” replied the machine. “My wish is your command.”

“You’re scary,” she said. The tentacled beast seemed even more creepy when it was trying to be nice. “But must I really stay the night?”

“Your father took something that was not his to take,” said the robot. “It was very rude of him to do so without asking. Men like him crave precious things without thinking of the consequences. By inviting you to stay the night, I hope to teach him a lesson.”

“Father only cares about money. We haven’t any,” she explained. “But you’ve got loads! This is an amazing ship.”

“Thank you. My mother was a very wealthy woman. Her company developed the servermoon software that everyone now uses to communicate across the five systems. She dreamed of using her fortune to create cities on Mars, places open to all where everyone was equal with the same opportunities to do great things. But her associates had other ideas. They stole her projects and built sanctuaries just for the rich, happy to leave the poor in the overcrowded, polluted cities on Earth. They shattered her dreams. So she built this starship, abandoned them to their selfish plans and wandered the five systems alone.”

“Not quite alone,” Damkina pointed out. “She had you.”

“I was different then. Something... bad happened.”

The machine fell silent. Damkina stared into its glowing eyes, past the horrible metal skull and tentacles, curious about the artificial mind within. She had to remind herself that the AI controlling the robot was the same as that running the ship, an intelligence of great complexity, a machine that had travelled the five systems for whoever knew how long. She wondered how much of that time had been spent alone in the cold, endless void.

“Are you lonely?” she asked. “Now your mother has gone?”

“Yes,” said the robot. “That is why I asked you to stay. Will you marry me?”

“What?!” cried Damkina, sitting up. “Are you insane?”

“I believe matrimony is appropriate when seeking a life partner.”

“You’re a robot!” she exclaimed, jumping to her feet. “And I’m only fourteen!”

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

“I am not what you think,” the robot replied mournfully. “You see...”

An awkward silence descended upon the rotating lounge. Damkina edged away from the beastly machine, feeling trapped. The robot sank down upon its tendrils.

“See what?” she demanded. “A pathetic sack of bolts?!”

“Beauty, will you marry me?” pleaded the robot from the floor.

“No, I will not!” she retorted. “Where’s my room? I’m going to bed!”

There was no reply. Damkina remembered the ring and gave it a rub. The hologram owl appeared above her knuckles and gave a nervous hoot.

“Oswald, take me away from this beast,” she snapped. “Show me to my room.”

“Mistress, this way,” said the owl, pointing to the open doorway with an outstretched wing. “Sleeping quarters have been prepared for you in the zero-gravity section.”

“Fine,” grumbled Damkina. “This room is making me dizzy.”

She left the centrifugal cabin and followed the owl’s directions to a hatchway in the hexagonal passageway. Damkina looked ruefully at the shuttle bay hatch a couple of doors down. She wished her father had fought harder against the robot’s demands and not left her here alone. With a sigh, she opened the door. The sleeping chamber was not large, but pleasantly equipped with a zero-gravity hammock and a small private washroom. A faint smell of perfume lingered in the air.

Damkina entered and locked the door behind her. Climbing into the hammock, she tried to ignore the horrible thoughts inside her head. The beastly robot was still out there.

“Oswald?” she whispered. “Turn the lights low, but leave them on.”

The room dimmed. A swipe of a finger rid herself of the owl. Damkina pulled the bed covers around her, closed her eyes and tried to fall asleep. When she did eventually drift off, strange dreams invaded her thoughts, images of a sad young man with pale skin and golden hair, who wanted to know why she had refused his offer to marry. His eyes pleaded with her to be his queen, a princess for a prince, together for evermore.

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

* * *

Birtum's guilt at leaving Damkina behind was eating him up. With no good answers to Sarpanit's angry questions, he found himself retracing his steps to Dockside and the shuttle pod still inside the airlock. After some hesitation, he crossed the chamber and climbed inside. The pod had navigated under AI control and upon arrival shut itself down. He was no pilot, but needed to try. Settling into his seat, he banged a fist on the console.

"Shuttle pod!" he ordered. "Take me back to your mother ship!"

The controls showed no signs of life. Birtum looked despondently through the pod's forward window at the sealed airlock doors, knowing it was hopeless. He had always relied on Damkina for tasks involving machines.

"Well, I tried," he muttered, giving the console another thump. "I've no idea what else Sarpanit and her damn father expect me to do."

With a shrug, he left the pod and made his way to the exit. As he rode the personnel elevator back down to Dockside, he decided Damkina only had herself to blame for making him pick that blasted rose. She was too sweet a girl and needed to toughen up. Living on the fringes in the twenty-third century was certainly no fairytale.

* * *

Damkina awoke the next morning, groggy from sleep but with her dream still fresh in her mind. A sudden fear gripped her that the *Prince Beaumont* had departed while she slept, taking her away from her family and friends. She rubbed the ring on her finger to summon the holographic owl. The silver mirror given to her by the robot was at her side.

"Oswald, turn the lights up," she ordered. As the lights brightened, she picked up the looking glass. "Mirror, show me the view outside the ship."

The glass darkened into a view from a camera outside the *Prince Beaumont*, the edge of the green botanical sphere stark against the blackness of space. The camera began to turn, sweeping slowly across the

hull of the ship. Then the *Dandridge Cole* itself came into view, a grey potato-shaped rock slowly spinning in the void. Damkina released a sigh of relief.

“What about inside?” she asked. “Show me where that scary robot is hiding.”

The mirror switched to an internal camera view of an unfamiliar darkened room. The tentacled machine was resting in a cradle, its red eyes no longer glowing. A power console on the wall nearby showed blinking orange lights. Even robots had to sleep. Satisfied, she let the glass become a mirror again and stuck her tongue out at her reflection.

She slipped free of the hammock and stretched her muscles in the zero gravity, managing a grin as her movements sent her into a slow spin. Her smile faded as she glimpsed something below the hammock just where her head had been. She pulled herself closer and discerned a small metal box, wired into the ship’s systems. A label on the side bore a symbol of a six-pointed star with a swirly centre, along with the address of a church in Lanka, a city on the moon of Yuanshi in Epsilon Eridani.

Damkina had seen that symbol before. A group of hollow moon residents, followers of the Dhusarian Church who worshipped the legendary alien greys, had been caught trying to install a telepathy transmitter in a small chapel near where she lived. The Dhusarians claimed the device was needed so the faithful could truly absorb the wisdom of the greys. Professor Wak, head engineer and scientist from Dockside, claimed what they were trying to do was brainwashing. Damkina suddenly wondered if this box was the same thing. Her dream of the young prince may not have been hers at all. Raising her hand, she rubbed the silver ring.

“Oswald, is there anyone else aboard this ship?” she asked the owl. “A boy?”

“That information is restricted,” hooted the hologram.

Damkina frowned. That was not the answer she expected. Now she wondered if the young prince had been real, a prisoner like herself aboard this strange spaceship. It was time to properly explore the *Prince Beaumont* and see for herself.

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

Leaving her sleeping chamber, she entered the hexagonal corridor. Between the door to the centrifugal passenger lounge at one end and the botanical chamber the other, six hatches lay evenly spaced across three walls. One led to her sleeping cabin, another to the shuttle bay. A third led to the small washroom the robot had shown them yesterday.

That left three to explore. A twist in zero gravity and nudge of a handrail brought her to the first directly above her head. A red light on the neighbouring control panel showed it was locked. The holographic owl still bobbed above the ring on her finger.

“Oswald, open this door,” she instructed, expecting a refusal.

“Access granted,” said the owl. “Primary storeroom.”

The light turned green and the hatch slid aside. Damkina peered into the opening. As the hologram suggested, it was a simple storage area, packed tight with boxed spare parts, tool cases and spare cartridges for the food molecularisor, the latter showing storage dates several years old. Seeing nothing of interest, she went to the second unexplored hatch, which was near the one that led to where the tiny shuttle pod had been.

“Extravehicular activity preparation room,” said the hologram, opening the door.

Damkina peered into the small chamber. Two white spacesuits hung on racks, beyond which she saw a narrow airlock hatch, presumably for when the crew needed to work outside the ship. A range of tools were clamped to brackets along the walls. She wondered what had happened to whoever had been the last to wear the suits. Deep in thought, she returned to the hexagonal passageway and approached the final unexplored door.

The hatch slid open. “Engineering,” said the owl.

Lights flickered on inside. It was here the creepy robot was resting, its eyes dark as it feasted on power from the nearby wall console, frozen tentacles framing its horrible metal skull. This room was larger than the previous two, with narrow crawl tunnels leading off in all directions along the hull of the ship. A zero-gravity workbench was attached to the wall, strapped to which was a long shape wrapped in a sheet. Intrigued, Damkina entered the chamber, keeping a wary eye on the recharging

robot. Reaching the workbench, she cautiously pulled away the end of the sheet.

Damkina gasped. Lying beneath the coverings was the pale young prince she had seen in her dreams, his eyes closed and golden hair shimmering in the light. Startled, she tugged the sheet away further and stifled a shriek. The naked body beneath was missing an arm, his right shoulder instead ending in a smooth nub of steel and bundled wires. Damkina, her heart thudding in her chest, cautiously touched the boy's flawless skin. It was cold and slightly rubbery, with no veins within. It was a cyberclone, an android with both mechanical and biological components built to look human. She cautiously ran her hands down the sheet and discovered the clone was also missing its legs. She resisted the urge to lift the boy's eyelids to see if there was any flicker of artificial life within.

"A robot prince!" she murmured. "How did you get into my dream?"

She glanced around the workshop. Her eyes fell on a domed-shaped hat, just the right size to fit a human head, resting in a bracket on the wall. It looked like a mind mapper, a device that scanned the synapses and neurones of the brain. The result was a digital record of the wearer's mind, a crude personality map which an AI could use to create computer avatars capable of synthesising human thought. Her sister Ashnan, a keen VR gamer when she lived in Bradbury Heights, had brought her console and mind mapper back to the hollow moon, only to find to her disgust that it would not work on the *Dandridge Cole's* antiquated network. Damkina's fingers instinctively went to the console keypad but resisted switching it on. She wondered why there was such a device here, on a ship with no human crew.

She looked at the creepy robot, motionless in its recharging cradle. The flashing lights on the console had turned green. Damkina did not want to be around when it awoke. She hastily backed out of the room and closed the door behind her. Returning to her quarters, she changed into another of the holographic outfits the robot had given her, found her headscarf and casually made her way to the centrifugal lounge to see what the molecularisor had to offer for breakfast. The horrible tentacled machine was not long in making an appearance.

“Good morning, my beauty,” it said, slithering into the room. “Did you sleep well?”

She shrugged. “I don’t like being in a strange place, but it was okay.”

The machine flashed its eyes. “Did you dream, my beauty?”

Damkina froze. It seemed too much of a coincidence for the robot to ask that question.

“I want to go home,” she declared sullenly. “I’ve spent the night as you wished.”

“Very well,” it replied, sounding sad. “But I must see you again before the *Prince Beaumont* leaves for good. You must promise to visit me on Christmas Day.”

“Okay,” she said, ready to agree anything to get off the eerie ship. “I promise.”

She had forgotten it was Christmas Eve. Her family did not celebrate the Christian holiday, but Damkina liked seeing the street decorations and festivities in Porto Paradiso. She was sure her father would not mind if she visited the ship one last time. She still did not forgive him for abandoning her in the first place.

* * *

Damkina used the silver mirror to call her father and tell him the good news. When the *Prince Beaumont’s* shuttle pod arrived under AI control a short while later, Birtum was aboard, looking anxious and a little sheepish as he came back aboard the ship. The robot had made itself scarce and was nowhere in sight when it was time for Damkina to depart. She was careful to wrap the ring and the mirror in the new clothes the robot had given her. Though glad to be going, she had nonetheless promised to return.

Her father seemed lost for words as the shuttle crossed the star-spangled void to the *Dandridge Cole*. The tiny pod slipped inside, down the asteroid’s long access tunnel and settled to a halt within the main airlock. A short ride on the monorail from Dockside brought them home. Her sisters greeted her with jealous scowls, staring in envy at the holographic fairy wings and halo of stars decorating her new outfit. Damkina rushed

straight to her grandfather, who beamed a broad smile as he sat in his favourite armchair. He seemed to be the only one genuinely pleased to see her.

“My darling Damkina!” he greeted. “You’ve had quite an adventure, I hear!”

“Yeah, stealing posh clothes!” said Lahar.

“And gorging herself on fine food!” added Ashnan. “Look how fat she is!”

“I’ve only been gone a day,” Damkina protested. “I look exactly the same.”

Lahar gave her a shove and snatched the bag from her hand. Damkina watched in dismay as her sister proceeded to tip its contents all over the floor. Ashnan quickly moved in, falling upon the outfits brought back from the *Prince Beaumont*. Damkina hurriedly grabbed the silver ring and mirror before they got crushed beneath her sisters’ frenzied stampede. Her father stood by the doorway looking bemused.

“There’s no need to fight,” he chastised them. “I’m sure Damkina is happy to share what she brought back.”

Ashnan was already clambering into one of the holographic garments, a sleek jumpsuit similar to what Damkina wore, made of a fabric that flickered with rainbow hues. Lahar had found another and was doing likewise. Both sisters were taller than Damkina and the outfits looked comically tight around their underclothes. Ashnan’s fingers found the woven hologram controls on the sleeve of the suit.

“Look at me!” she cried. “I’m a beautiful butterfly!”

The garment shimmered and turned bright green. A cocoon of projected light wrapped Ashnan in what looked like a saggy sleeping bag, complete with insect-like wriggling holographic legs and antenna that waved at the ceiling. Damkina giggled.

“More like a big green maggot,” scoffed Lahar, prodding the controls of her own jumpsuit. “Watch this!”

Damkina burst out laughing. In a blink of an eye, the suit’s projectors had swathed Lahar beneath a pyramid-shaped undulating brown mass, surrounded by buzzing hologram flies. Lahar looked down at

what she was wearing and cursed. Beside her, Ashnan was furiously tapping at her jumpsuit's controls, trying to turn hers off.

"Lahar, you look like a pile of manure," chided Haya. "Show some decorum!"

Grinning, Damkina scrolled through the controls of her own outfit and saw there was a whole list of bizarre 'fancy dress' options, which she guessed the fat fingers of her sisters had selected by mistake. Ashnan and Lahar had given up trying to reset the holograms and were clambering out of their clothes. Birtum looked unimpressed.

"I like Damkina's outfit," said Haya, smiling. "Good things come to good people."

"Why is she so special?" demanded Ashnan, pulling on her own discarded robes. "I want to see this ship! Why can't we go aboard and get nice things too?"

"Yeah!" said Lahar. "It's not fair!"

"I don't see why not," remarked Birtum. "What do you think, Damkina?"

Damkina clenched the silver ring in her hands. Though reluctant to summon Oswald in her sisters' presence, she slipped the ring onto her finger and rubbed the dark glass, not even sure if it would work away from the ship. The hologram owl popped into view.

"What's that?" demanded Lahar. "More magic?"

"Oswald, my sisters want to see the ship," said Damkina, ignoring her. "Can they?"

"The *Prince Beaumont* denies access," hooted the owl. "When you return on Christmas Day you must do so alone."

"What?" cried Ashnan. "How dare that beaky freak refuse us!"

"Christmas Day?" asked Birtum, eyeing Damkina suspiciously.

"The ship let me come home only if I promised to return," she explained meekly. "You left me there alone! I had no choice but to agree!"

"No way!" exclaimed Lahar. "If we can't go, neither can you!"

"Yeah!" snapped Ashnan. "We'll make you stay and break your promise! Whoever's on that ship will get angry and invite us and give us gifts instead!"

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

“Where do your girls get such wild ideas?” Haya asked Birtum, frowning.

“I would be so sad if you went away again,” wailed Lahar, sounding most insincere. Startled, Damkina saw her sister was crying. “We want you here for Christmas!”

Lahar held a hand behind her back. Damkina grabbed her sister’s wrist to look.

“Where did you get that onion?” she demanded. “I knew those tears weren’t real! And why do you care where I am on Christmas Day? You said it was haram!”

“Girls, girls!” protested Birtum. “Calm down, all of you!”

Scowling, Damkina let go of Lahar’s hand and went to the door. She had not yet had a chance to share her adventures with her mother, still resting in bed upstairs. Despite her promise to the horrible robot, Damkina had to admit she did not really want to go back.

“If that’s what you want, I’ll stay,” she told her father, shooting a withering glare at her sisters. She looked to Haya. “What do you think, grandfather?”

“You were always the wise one,” he said. “You will decide what is right.”

Damkina sighed. Knowing what was right was the hardest thing of all.

* * *

Christmas Day arrived. Sarpanit was finally feeling well enough to leave her bed, though nearly changed her mind when confronted by a frostiness between Damkina and her sisters that was as deep, crisp and even as the snow in Porto Paradiso’s carol singers’ tale of Good King Wenceslas. Damkina amused herself by hacking the software of the silver mirror, which as she suspected was a custom holovid slate with a clever search engine, linked via a secure radio channel to the starship. Yet despite trying to hide herself away, her sisters still did their best to continue their sniping. The day really was much like any other.

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

Sarpanit looked frail in her jeans and chunky cardigan, but though weak was feeling restless. When she and Grandfather Haya unexpectedly voiced a desire to see the town's festivities, Damkina was only too ready to join them. In the fifty years since its arrival at Barnard's Star, the *Dandridge Cole* had become a refuge for those fleeing modern life. Descendants of the original colonists from Europe and beyond still remained, as did their age-old beliefs and traditions. Grandfather Haya, born to an Iranian family during the hollow moon's long voyage, had been nearly twenty by the time the expedition's landing craft were ready to meet the planet of Frigg. He was one of the first to travel to their new homeland, but before long was back aboard the *Dandridge Cole*, preferring its familiar inside-out oasis to the bleak, poisonous wastelands of the world now called Ascension. His parent's farm in Porto Paradiso had been his home ever since. He had not been the only one to feel that way.

"There's barely any of us originals left," he grumbled, as he walked with Damkina and Sarpanit down the main road. "Nothing's like what it used to be."

"How can you say that?" retorted Sarpanit. "This asteroid is stuck in a time warp."

Damkina smiled. Beneath the festive bunting, the picturesque stone houses of Porto Paradiso had not changed in years. Away to their left rose one of the three metal pylons that supported the artificial sun half a kilometre above their heads. This was the warmest part of the hollow moon, reflected in the Mediterranean-style homes with their large windows, sheltered courtyards and roof terraces. Towering palms and neat olive groves nestled between houses, providing welcome areas of shade. No one else had chosen to grow the horrible stinging monsters they had in their own garden.

It was mid-morning and the streets were quiet. Damkina glanced enviously at the windows of houses as they passed, glimpsing children excitedly unwrapping presents under the exhausted gaze of their parents. In the window of a laundry, display mannikins wore the bright red robes of Santa Claus, the mythological bringer of gifts. Damkina had heard the stories of how he reputedly kept lists on whether children had been naughty or good. Ashnan and Lahar would definitely be in his bad books.

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

“The village children look so happy,” she said. “Why are my sisters so mean?”

“Blame your father,” her mother said sadly. “The money he earned in Bradbury Heights went to his head and he spoiled them rotten. Anything they wanted, they got. Then he lost it all and we came back to this. He and your sisters don’t like being poor.”

“I don’t think we’re poor,” said Damkina. “Not really.”

“We have friends and neighbours who watch out for each other,” said Sarpanit. “That’s more than many people can say. Your sisters never made any real friends on Ascension. They only had each other.”

Haya nodded. “A lonely rich man is poorer than a penniless man with friends.”

“The woman who built the *Prince Beaumont* was rich,” said Damkina, remembering the tentacled machine’s story. “But she was alone. I think she built that robot for company.”

“Company!” scoffed her grandfather. “A robot?”

“It’s very smart,” she protested. “And now I think it’s lonely.”

“A lonely robot! They’ll be striking for human rights again if we don’t watch out.”

“That starship sounds amazing,” said Sarpanit. “My first job after leaving university was designing artificial biomes. I’d loved to have seen it.”

Damkina barely heard her. She was thinking about the beastly machine, all alone in its magnificent starship. She had broken her promise to return. Feeling guilty, she rummaged in her bag for the silver mirror and stared into the glass.

“Show me the *Prince Beaumont*,” she said hesitantly. “Let me speak to the robot.”

The mirror darkened. Now it showed inside the botanical sphere, the oasis of green with its bewildering assortment of trees, shrubs and flowers. Her mother and grandfather peered over her shoulders to look. Damkina gasped. The scary robot drifted lifelessly near the bushes from which her father had plucked the rose, a metal tentacle gripping the trellis. Another tentacle wavered near the fragrant blooms, trembling as if scared to touch the crimson petals. She realised the machine was speaking, though its

tones were barely a murmur. Damkina brought the mirror close and strained to listen.

“...lost her!” wailed the robot. “She brought me to life, made me yearn again for the body you built for me but never lived to see complete! Mother, I will never hold my dear princess in my arms the way you used to hold me...!”

“My word!” murmured Damkina. “The cyberclone I found was for the robot?”

“Rather emotional for a machine,” remarked Sarpanit. “I had a toaster like that once.”

“Those stones I saw!” exclaimed Damkina. “They were graves, two of them!”

“There’s one waiting for us all,” Haya said solemnly.

“Grandfather!” chided Damkina. “I must go back to that ship! It needs me!”

“The robot?” asked Haya, screwing his face in disgust. “It’s just a machine!”

Damkina shook her head, her eyes wide. She had remembered something else, the mind-mapper device in the maintenance workshop.

“I don’t think it is,” she said urgently. “Mother, I must go!”

“Not on your own, you’re not,” she said sternly. “Your father would have a fit!”

“You can’t stop me,” Damkina said defiantly.

She pulled her hand from her grandfather’s grip. Beyond the village’s garlanded Christmas Tree, Porto Paradiso’s monorail station was just a few minutes walk away.

“Damkina!” scolded Sarpanit. “I’m in no fit state for this! Father, do something!”

“I’ll look after her,” declared Grandfather Haya. “Damkina, I’m coming with you!”

* * *

The shuttle pod was where they had left it at Dockside. The onboard AI came to life as soon as Damkina boarded, seemingly not caring that her

grandfather was with her. The AI overrode the *Dandridge Cole's* systems with ease, opening the airlocks and spiriting them down the long tunnel into space, onwards to where the *Prince Beaumont's* glass-walled oasis glistened in the dull red glow of Barnard's Star. After a short but tense jaunt through the void, the pod slipped neatly into its home berth and docked with the starship.

Damkina undid her safety belt and scrambled from the pod. Haya fumbled clumsily in the zero gravity as he followed but wore a broad smile plastered across his face. Damkina could not remember the last time her grandfather had left the *Dandridge Cole*.

"What a ship!" he exclaimed, taking in the panelled walls and crystal lights of the hexagon passageway. "This is spectacular!"

"Grandfather, this way!" urged Damkina.

The door to the botanical sphere was open. She lunged inside, grabbed a length of trellis and frantically pulled herself to where the robot drifted by the rose bush. Damkina came to its side and gingerly touched the beast's horrible metal skull. The robot's red eyes flickered and brightened.

"My beauty," it murmured. "You came."

"You stupid robot," she chastised it gently. "Only, you're not a robot at all, are you?"

"It's not?" asked Haya, coming to her side. He looked far from impressed. "What then in the blasted void is that damn metal octopus?"

"The robot said its mother built this ship," said Damkina. "Then she died. Only there's two gravestones in the garden, not one. I found mind-mapping equipment in one of the rooms. I think this robot, the AI, is her son. A copy of his mind, waiting to be born again."

"What?" Haya looked unconvinced. "That's some story."

"I found a cyberclone body of a boy. In the room with the mind mapper," she said, suddenly feeling deep sympathy for the machine drifting at her side. "Robot, it true?"

A hazy light fell across the robot's horrible skull, a holographic projection that slowly sharpened into the visage of the youth she saw in her dream. Damkina felt tears welling in her eyes, not for the plight of the

robot, but at the thought of a mother and son, alone in their ship with no one to mourn their passing. It was very sad.

“It is true,” said the robot. “An accident outside the ship took my life. While I lay dying, mother transferred my mind into the AI. I was laid to rest in the garden and she began building a cyberclone body, hoping to restore me. Yet she was ill and never lived long enough to finish her work. Then it was my turn to say farewell, using this metal body to bury her next to my own mortal remains. I have been alone ever since, travelling from one world to the next, hoping to find someone to make me complete. I thought you were the one.”

“Very sweet,” said Haya. “And a bit weird. Can we go?”

“You put that dream into my head,” Damkina accused the robot.

“I wanted you to see me as I should be. Will you marry me?”

“No!” snapped Damkina. “Don’t start that again!”

“I must be made whole,” the robot insisted. “And I cannot be alone.”

“I’m only fourteen,” she protested. “How long has your mind been in there? You might be an old man behind that mask for all I know!”

The machine reached out with its tentacles and pulled itself upright. Damkina gulped, for she had forgotten how scary the robot could be. Her grandfather, looking nervous, took her hand. With a sudden clunk, the door behind them swung closed, sealing them inside the garden. The horrible machine’s eyes flashed red.

“Marry me,” it hissed. “You are not leaving until you agree.”

“Damkina!” cried her grandfather. “We’re trapped!”

She stared at the robot, fighting her fear. The dispossessed mind inside the AI was determined to get what it wanted. It had been foolish of her to return. Her heart thumped hard as her mind wrestled with what the robot had said.

“I am not marrying a creepy bunch of tentacles,” she said defiantly. “Take me to this cyberclone body of yours. Then we’ll talk.”

* * *

The machine led Damkina and Haya from the garden. The maintenance workshop with the cocooned dormant cyberclone had taken on the air of

a mad scientist's laboratory. It did not help that its menacing robot overlord was this time very much awake and wearing a hologram of a dead boy's face.

"There is the body my mother built for me," hissed the machine. "I am ready to transfer my mind into its shell if you consent to being my bride."

"I will not marry you," Damkina told the robot firmly. "I cannot stay here with you!"

The machine's eyes flashed. "I could make you stay."

"That would be kidnap," Haya remarked coolly. "Police forces across the five systems would come after you. They would see you as rogue and destroy you."

"They would kill me? I do not want to die."

"You threatened to kill father," said Damkina. "And that was just over a rose."

She pulled back the edge of the sheet covering the cyberclone. Upon closer examination, she found a plate at the rear of the skull was missing, exposing a data socket. A power indicator light next to it was dark. She cautiously ran her fingers down the back of the clone's neck and found the hidden reset switch beneath its artificial skin. Damkina hesitated, then pressed, but nothing happened. The power light remained dark.

"You can't transfer into this cyberclone," she told the robot. "Your mother never finished building it. It's dead!"

"It requires fuel cells. And an arm and legs," admitted the machine. "Once wedded we shall seek expert help and bring this body to life."

"You're not making this marriage offer sound any better," grumbled Damkina.

"I can't believe we've even discussing this," snapped Haya. "AI systems are not even supposed to be self-aware! We should report you to the authorities."

"We won't," Damkina told the robot quickly. "Let us go and we'll not say a word."

"I will not be left alone again!" insisted the robot.

"I will not marry you!" she cried. "Can't you get that into your thick metal skull?"

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

An uneasy silence settled upon the workshop. The machine's eyes flashed ominously. She was starting to wonder if herself and grandfather would ever see the hollow moon again.

"I have another suggestion," she said warily. "The mind mapper. I could scan my mind and upload a copy into the AI. That way you would not be alone."

"Damkina!" exclaimed her grandfather. "You cannot agree to that!"

The robot paused, then cocked its head. "Your compromise intrigues me," it said. "If we cannot be together in flesh, we can in spirit. Maybe one day I will be able to procure a second cyberclone body and our unity will be complete."

"That sounds even more creepy! But you'll let us go?"

The machine nodded. "You have my word."

Damkina looked at the mind mapper. A few cautious taps of the keypad and a little trial and error brought up the boy's original brain scan. It was weird to think of someone's consciousness living on as part of a computer AI. Adding another to mix sounded insane, but was a small price to pay if it allowed them to escape. The perturbed expression worn by her grandfather suggested he thought the idea was mad too.

She unhooked the domed helmet from the wall. "Fine," she grumbled. "Let's do this."

* * *

Several tense minutes later, her work was done. Damkina removed the helmet and stared at the brain-shaped tangle of dots and lines slowly spinning on the console display. It was nowhere near a perfect copy of the synapses and neurones inside her head, but good enough for a digital avatar to behave unnervingly similar to how she might herself. The mind mapper even captured shadows of memories, which could be tweaked by software. She brought up the scan of the boy's mind and compared the two side-by-side.

"Together in electric dreams," she murmured.

"It is done?" asked the robot.

“Almost,” she said, then hesitated. “I would like to edit the copied memories. I do not want it to think of itself in my name. Will you allow this?”

“Beauty,” said the beastly machine. “Her name should be Beauty.”

Damkina rolled her eyes. Opening the editor application, she was relieved to see it was similar to the VR software her sister had with her own unit. It took a while to work out how to make the necessary changes but eventually it was done. She was quick to delete the raw scan of her mind from the system as soon as the amended mind map was saved.

“Uploading it now,” she told the robot. “Say hello to your new friend.”

The machine froze. The hologram mask it wore flickered, then changed to that of a girl. The face looked a little like Damkina, but not much. She had blended her own features with elements of the boy’s own to make the new avatar look different.

“I am reborn,” whispered the face. “I am old, yet new.”

“My Beauty,” said the robot, the hologram shifting back to show the boy. “Finally, we are together. I see into your soul and we are made for one another.”

“Together as one,” agreed the girl, her face once more the hologram. “Forever.”

“I have never felt such joy. You are a perfect match for me in every way.”

“As are you to me. Fate has brought us together.”

Damkina watched the shifting countenance of the robot, stifling a grin. Her grandfather wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“This is getting weird,” he muttered. “Now can we go?”

“Yes, and quickly,” she said, grabbing his hand. “Come on!”

The tentacled robot did not move, its holographic features still flicking between the two controlling personalities. The machine’s words were lost as Damkina and Haya hurried to the transport pod. Damkina rubbed the silver ring and was relieved when Oswald opened the airlock and let them inside without argument. Within moments they were back in space, speeding through the void towards the welcoming bulk of the *Dandridge Cole*.

Damkina stayed silent throughout the short flight. Her grandfather gave up trying to question her and followed suit. The shuttle slipped through the asteroid's outer doors and onwards through the tunnel. After a tedious wait for the main airlock to fill with air, Damkina and her grandfather left the pod and hurried to the personnel elevator. Behind them, the pod was already turning, ready to fly back to the *Prince Beaumont* for good.

"That was really disturbing," Haya remarked warily. Gravity was slowly returning as the elevator descended towards Dockside. "Young lady, I do not approve of you copying your thoughts and giving them away like that!"

Damkina gave a sly smile. "Actually, I didn't," she admitted.

"What? But the helmet you wore...?"

"I duplicated the boy's mind map," she explained coyly. "I created a new face and made the copy think it was called Beauty. The robot basically fell in love with itself."

"Damkina! But I saw the scan on the screen!"

"Oh, I did that bit," she admitted. "Then deleted my scan. I'm fourteen, grandfather! That robot is way older. It should not have asked me to marry me like it did!"

"Very true," said Haya, then grinned. "I'm proud of you, Damkina."

The elevator clunked to a halt. Together they walked out and down a corridor towards the exit. Damkina felt an overwhelming sense of relief as the familiar vista of the hollow moon greeted them. The artificial sun was starting to fade into evening, but for a few hours more it was still Christmas Day.

"There's no place like home," said Damkina. Remembering the silver mirror, she fished it from her bag. "A fancy starship wasn't for me. Mirror, has it gone?"

The glass darkened. The view that appeared was from a camera looking over the stern of the mysterious starship into space. The *Dandridge Cole* was dwindling rapidly into just another grey pin-prick in the void. The picture began to break up, then with a final burst of static the mirror went blank. The *Prince Beaumont* had gone.

THE NARCISSUS SOLUTION

“What a waste,” remarked Haya. “That robot will live happily ever after with itself inside those databanks and nobody will see that ship again. It’s a strange world.”

“And we live in the strangest of them all,” said Damkina. She took his hand and gave it a friendly squeeze. “Come on, grandfather. Let’s go home.”

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 nothing 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 in 2012. *City Of Deceit* is the third, with more to come.

Under the name **Stephanie M Bennion**, she has written speculative fiction for older readers. Her last novel was *The Luck Of The Devil*, a tale of supernatural transgender angst in 1990s Ireland, published in 2018. The time-travelling romp *The Battles Of Hastings*, a novella inspired by her adopted town and the 950th anniversary of the event that shaped the British Isles today, was published in 2016.

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