

# **The Lonely Station**

Number two in the *Wrong Universe* series of short stories

by John Bullock

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This part of space is familiar.

Familiar to some, at least.

This part of space has a small, yellow star, orbited by seven planets and an asteroid belt, and those who found this part of space familiar might think that something is missing.

In a region where something that might be missing might have been, if it were missing, a small, space craft is drifting aimlessly. The craft is the *Parker*, a state of the art vessel designed to travel *outside* of the constraints of the Universe, reach hitherto unreachable places, and pioneer human space travel.

Presently, it was stranded in an unknown Universe.

Shan Tempest, captain of the *Parker*, stood before the large viewing window, and radiated indignation. She felt, deep down, that this whole situation was rather unfair. On the surface, however, she just felt angry. Overlaid across the viewing window, a large image of a disc shaped object casually rotated about its central axis. On the disc face that Shan had understandably labelled “top,” were, unmistakably, the many continents of Earth.

'How is that possible?' Shan snapped.

The luxuriously carpeted bridge remained silent. The crew, on their first mission together, were unsure how to deal with the captain, and unanimously and silently voted to let someone else do it. That someone ended up being the ship's computer, VIVA.

'If it is at all possible, captain, it must exist somewhere,' said VIVA in kindly synthetic tones.

'It's flat,' said Shan, feeling that VIVA had rather missed the point, 'it's Earth, and it's flat.'

'Actually, captain, we don't know for certain *what* it is, yet,' said a voice that belonged to Hugo Smelt, who immediately wished it hadn't.

Shan blamed Hugo for the current predicament most of all. She felt, rather strongly, that he could have made more of an effort to fully prepare her for the side effects of using his breakthrough method of space travel, *The Punch Drive*.

Shan wheeled around, lowering her icy gaze on the professor. Hugo, almost a foot shorter than the captain, and possessing just enough raw muscle power as was necessary to operate a coffee machine, shrank back in his seat.

'What do you mean, we don't know what it is?' said the captain quietly.

VIVA, detecting the professor's increased heart rate and deeming him unfit to comply, provided the answer. 'The last punch was more of a drain on the ship's power than expected, I am still bringing some systems back online.'

'How does that change the fact that I am looking at what I imagine Earth would look like after a galactic game of space-hoppers, using Jupiter as the hopper?'

'I have been unable to properly scan the object, it could be - ' VIVA was cut off. She was about to explain how, in space, distances can be difficult to judge. She was going to explain how the human mind interprets visual signals, and how it can sometimes cause problems when the human mind has insufficient data. She was going to explain all of this, until something happened that rendered her explanation unnecessary. She was going to explain all of this, when the disc shaped Earth crashed into *The Parker*.

It made a *plink* sound.

Tressius Flog, the message keeper, felt like he was having a heart attack. He had spent the last fifty years of his life alone on a forgotten outpost of the Terran Empire, and he had loved every minute of it.

Most people would probably have gone insane in his position, but not Tressius. He spent his time working his way through a thousand years worth of literature, centuries of video and the occasional game of Bounce the Ball Against the Wall, and it suited him just fine. In the early days, there *had* been voices, but Tressius' bloody-minded refusal to acknowledge them had eventually won out, and they had given up. He liked the quiet life.

It is not surprising, then, that he was less than pleased at this strange space-craft popping into existence, right in his orbital path!

Tressius had been watching a reality show from nearly twelve decades ago when the ship had appeared, and had been unable to reach the control room – a place he hadn't been for the better part of a quarter century – quick enough to avoid a collision.

The control room was at the top of Mount Everest, the highest point on the station. From up here, a person could see all of the continents of Earth, lovingly recreated in miniature with painstaking accuracy. Tressius' eyes fixed on the on the foreign ship, just past New Zealand,

and glared with as much intensity as they could manage. Then he sat down, clutching his aching chest.

The ship was unlike anything he had ever seen. The data from initial scans revealed it to be ludicrously out of date, technology-wise. The engine's were inefficient, the life-support system's archaic. The only redeeming factor about the ship was it's appearance, all sleek metal and curving lines. It was the sort of ship you might expect the emperor of an evil galactic empire to buy when his mid-life crisis hit. Fortunately, it was also quite small, and didn't appear to have done any severe damage to the station.

He dug through the various storage lockers, and found a pair of binoculars. They were old, too, and had probably lost any power they had decades ago, but lenses were still there. He looked across the world, straight into the space-craft's large viewing window, and saw a very, very angry woman.

'I tried to explain,' VIVA said reproachfully, 'we had no reference other than visual, I could not tell whether the object was very large and distant, or very small and in close proximity.'

'We have the scanners back,' said Perry.

'It is approximately six times larger than the *Parker*, captain,' added Cherry.

'It's bloody big enough,' Carl said, a little hysterically, 'I think I need a change of underwear!'

'Fine,' said the captain, '*what* is it?'

'It appears to be some kind of space station,' VIVA said, 'it is following the same orbital path that the Earth should be following.'

The silence that followed was the silence of many people replaying what they have just heard in the privacy of their own heads, and not liking it any more the second time around.

'*Should?*' Shan asked.

'I beg your pardon,' VIVA asked innocently.

'You said it is following the same orbital path that the Earth *should* be following. What orbital path *is* the Earth following?'

'I do not have enough information to answer that question.'

'What are you lacking, VIVA?' Shan pushed.

'The Earth,' said VIVA, simply.

More silence, of a very pregnant nature.

'You're missing the Earth?' Carl asked nervously, gradually losing an internal battle with the urge to go find a bottle of whiskey and hide in it.

'The solar system is missing the Earth,' VIVA corrected, feeling that the blame for such a thing should not be misplaced at this early juncture.

'Any idea where it is?' Shan asked pointedly.

'No,' said VIVA.

'So,' Shan said, slowly reaching boiling point, 'to sum up, we are stranded in a foreign Universe, we don't have enough power to use the Punch drive again, and there is no Earth on which we might land.

'That would be an accurate assessment of the situation,' VIVA said.

'Captain,' said the voice of Perry, the male half of the know-it-all twins, 'we are receiving a communication from the station.'

'Play it.'

The voice of an elderly man filled the room. 'You stupid buggers, You've cracked Australia!' the voice seemed to take a moment to compose itself, and then continued, 'I suppose you're going to want to come aboard, you can dock at China,' and the communication cut off abruptly.

'Dock at China?' said a bemused Shan.

'Docking clamps appears to be raising from China, captain,' Cherry said.

Shan felt the eyes of her crew boring into the back of her head, and exhaled theatrically. 'Fine,' she said, 'we have nothing better to do.'

The *Parker* set down on China, and covered all of Mongolia and a large chunk of Russia in the process. The surface of the miniature disc-Earth was open to the vacuum of space, but various observation bubbles protruded from many different points across the disc. The crew entered one such bubble through the docking tunnel, where an elderly man was waiting for them.

'Think that was clever, did you?' said the apparition, 'pinging into existence right in front of me like that?'

'I'm sorry?' said Shan, a little taken aback. She boarded the station fully prepared to be mad at whoever was aboard, she had not expected to be lambasted by a balding old man with a walking stick!

'Colonists, is it? Ship that out of date, you must be colonists,' said the old man, 'my names Tressius, I'm the message keeper.'

'Keeper of what message?' Carl asked, resisting the urge to take a pull from the hip-flask that he had concealed in his flight jacket.

'The message I am about to give you,' said Tressius shortly, 'assuming you lot keep quiet long enough for me to give it to you!' Tressius coughed magisterially, and closed his eyes as though he was about to recite a holy verse to his congregation. 'Earth has moved, sorry for any inconvenience.'

Shan, feeling that something was expected of her, was the first to break the silence that followed. 'I'm sorry, did you say *moved*?'

'Yes,' said Tressius.

'He did,' agreed Perry and Cherry in unison.

'Moved?' Shan repeated, 'as in, gone?'

'It really wasn't that complicated a message,' Tressius said, raising an eyebrow at what he assumed was a woman made delirious from prolonged space travel.

'Excuse me,' Hugo said, edging past the captain, 'you said we must be colonists, why did you think that?'

'Your ship,' replied Tressius, 'old, out of date craft like that? Haven't seen one since before Earth left. How you kept it in such good condition is a mystery to me, though. Near-light speed travel, was it?'

'Out of date?' snorted Hugo, 'The *Parker* is state of the art!'

'Maybe sixty years ago,' laughed Tressius. 'Thing's have moved on since you got shipped out to Pluto, or wherever it was they sent you.'

'We were sent to Alpha Centauri,' said Shan, trying to get a foothold in the conversation.

Tressius whistled like plumber quoting a small job. 'Back early, aren't you?'

'Well, that's rather the point,' said Hugo.

'Excuse me, Tressius,' Perry interrupted, before the captain had chance to say anything else, 'have you heard of the *Punch Drive*?'

Tressius sniffed absently. 'Don't listen to that new electro-pop rubbish.'

'Will you permit us access to your computers, Message Keeper?' Cherry asked. 'We have been away a long time and wish to know what has happened in our absence.'

'S'ppose so,' Tressius said, somewhat reluctantly, 'follow me.'

The trip to the residential sector of the station involved a short ride on a monorail, taking them underneath most of Asia, all of Europe and some of the Atlantic ocean in less than ten minutes. The residential sector consisted of a large foyer, a number of deserted shops, and a hundred or so empty living quarters. Tressius pointed Perry and Cherry to a disused public information terminal and wandered off, muttering something about 'turning the power on.'

'What are you thinking?' Shan asked Perry and Cherry, once Tressius was out of sight.

'That this Universe never developed anything like the Punch Drive, captain,' Cherry answered solemnly.

The terminal flickered into life, sluggishly, and Perry immediately began tapping away at the screen. Cherry joined him, and Shan turned her attention to Professor Hugo Smelt, who began to back away automatically.

'What do we need to make your Punch Drive run?' she asked.

'Uhm, power, just plain old electricity. Lot's of it,' added Hugo uncomfortably, 'you really didn't read *any* of my notes?'

'And how far can we travel on conventional engines?'

'Perhaps as far as Neptune, captain,' said Perry.

'But it would be a long ride, captain,' added Cherry.

'So we set course for the asteroid belt and see if we can dig up something to power the ship?'

'That won't work, captain,' Carl said, wishing somebody else could have delivered the news, 'we're not set up for mining or refining.'

Shan threw her hands up in exasperation, 'OK, so what're our options?'

'Spend the next five years building a mining rig from bits of this station?' suggested Carl.

'Find out which gods are worshipped in this Universe and prey to them,' said Hugo, collapsing onto the floor with his back against a wall and hiding his face in his hands.

'Captain, I think we've found something,' said Perry from the terminal, 'could you come and look at this, Professor?'

Hugo got sluggishly to his feet and slouched over to the twins, who had loaded up some technical schematics on the terminal screen. Hugo's eyes widened as he read the notes.

'Care to share with the group?' Shan said, a little impatiently.

'Humanity in this Universe is *far* more advanced than our own!' Hugo blurted in amazement, 'that would explain why the old man thought our ship was out of date; compared to the technology they've developed here, our ship *is* nearly a century out of date. Except for the Punch Drive,' he added proudly, 'they don't appear to have made *that* magnificent –'

'Does any of this help us, Hugo?' Shan interrupted.

'Well, yes,' said the Professor sullenly, 'they've developed a way of generating stupendous amounts of power for great lengths of time with no need for constant refuelling.'

'That's impossible,' scoffed Carl.

'The core holds a singularity,' Hugo said, stepping away from the screen so that Carl could see the wonder of the twins' discovery for himself.'

'You want us to carry a black hole around in the belly of the ship using technology we don't understand?' asked Shan.

'We understand it, captain, being able to hold a small black hole is something we could have done with *our* technology. The amazing thing that humanity in this universe has accomplished, is *creating* a small black hole in the first place!'

'They have three singularity core's, captain,' Carl said, spinning around, 'this station barely uses enough juice to suck one of these baby's dry, you don't reckon the old man'd miss one, do you?'

'You lot aren't colonists, are you?' came the voice of Tressius from the mouth of the corridor that he had left through.

'No,' Shan said eventually, noting the strange look on the old mans face, 'we're not. We are the test crew for the first –'

'Talkin' all quiet, thinkin' I couldn't hear you. You're after my station!'

'No, we – ' Shan tried, but was interrupted by Tressius, who had gone very red in the face.

'You're pirates, here to pillage my station!' Tressius said, his eyes widening with the realisation. 'I 'eard you talkin' about technology, expensive stuff, at that.'

'We're not pirates – ' Shan started, but to no avail.

'You can't fool me!' Tressius snapped, pulling out a gun from the depths of his ill-fitting overalls. 'Nobody move!' Tressius limped away from the corridor, trying to keep as many people in front of the gun at once, subsequently looking like the worlds worst gun slinger in the process. Where did you come from? There hasn't been another ship in this part of the system for nearly half a century, pickings gettin' slim out by Jupiter, are they?'

'Tressius, we are *not* – ' Shan tried again.

'Just thought you could jet back to the old *Earth Station* and see what was left? I don't think so.' Tressius gestured towards the corridor with the gun. 'Walk,' he said in a voice that was clearly meant to be menacing, but coming from Tressius, sounded more whiny. Still, it was a whiny voice with a gun. The crew of the *Parker* walked.

There *were* pirates inhabiting the outer regions of the solar system, and, by total coincidence, they *were* heading for the *Earth Station*.

While Earth had jumped ship, leaving the solar system without a fully habitable planet to speak of, a number of colonies, stations and outposts had remained in the outer solar system. A good deal of them were as shocked as anyone to find that the Earth had left, rather like a teenager arriving home from a school trip to find the locks changed and their parents gone, but they got on with life, trading amongst themselves and generally showing that they didn't even *need* stupid Earth anyway.

Of course, where there are ships carrying valuable cargo across lawless wastes, there are pirates.

Gradually, the pirates had eaten away at the economy of the outer solar system, and gained a great deal of If You Can't Beat Them Join Them pirates. Over the past decade, the piratical population of the outer solar system grew to over 90% of the whole. Unfortunately, when

you're a pirate, being a majority can become a disadvantage when there are more people stealing than there are people being stolen from.

Lipton the Prat, captain of the *Swarthy Spaceboat*, had decided to set out on a mission to the inner solar system, much to the amusement of his peers. “A two year journey,” they had said, “through the asteroid belt, just to catch a few rays in the warmer part of the solar system? You're mad!” but Lipton felt perfectly sane.

Very few ships had travelled back to the inner solar system since Earth's departure, for there was little there, just a molten rock, and high pressure volcano farm, and Mars, which had become unfashionable centuries ago, after it had been claimed by Jehovah's Witnesses and, briefly, spawned a small fleet of planet-to-planet evangelists. Mars had long since been deserted, but public perception is hard to shake, especially when it's perceived to be carrying pamphlets.

Lipton had decided that, as nobody had really looked for it, there was probably something of value to be had, and he would be the one to have it!

Everyone knew about the beacon that had been left behind when Earth vacated the system. It was a message for any ships returning from long voyages outside of the solar system, to tell them why their planet was gone. What everyone didn't know, was the fact that this beacon was actually a manned space station. The beacon had long since stopped transmitting its message indiscriminately, and those in the outer solar system who were inclined to think about these kinds of things, just assumed that the beacon had failed, perhaps collided with an old satellite or rogue meteorite.

The *Swarthy Spaceboat* had picked up an energy signal some time after passing Mars' orbit, and was currently tracking it down. The signal was coming from the location where the Earth would have been, if it were still there, so Lipton naturally assumed it to be a space-craft looking for the big blue ball that no longer was.

As his ship coasted into visual range, and *Earth Station* came into view, Lipton smiled a smile that put the top of his head in danger of falling off.

'What is it?' growled a large, muscular man beside Lipton, who went by the name of Gruff.

Gruff was the *Swarthy Spaceboat's* first mate, or as close to a first mate as was possible on a ship of lying, deceitful thieves. Gruff was not the smartest of men, indeed, when compared to whole spectrum of known life, including bacteria and plants, Gruff might struggle to make

the top sixty percent, but he was powerful, and that counted for a lot when promotional opportunities were literally something your subordinates would kill for.

It was generally believed, among the crew of the *Swarthy Spaceboat*, that Lipton was only captain because Gruff allowed him to be. Gruff could have taken the ship, had he wanted it, but he seemed content to be second in command, and Lipton was more than happy to be in charge. Besides, he had the brains (relatively speaking) and the killer instinct of a good pirate captain.

'That, my dear Gruff,' said Lipton, staring greedily at the viewing window, 'is a full blown space station. A fancy one at that,' he added.

Shan stood on what she considered to be very much the *wrong* side of a holding cell's shield wall. The rest of her crew were slumped around the cell in varying states of worry and annoyance. Carl had given up the surreptitiousness he had previously employed when drinking from his hip flask.

'You're not listening to me,' Shan said, a little desperately.

'Oh yes I am!' Tressius chortled, 'I just don't *believe* you.'

'We are *not* pirates!'

'That's just what a pirate would say, if they were caught.'

Shan gave up, and concentrated on finding a way out that didn't require the cooperation of the stubborn old man with the gun. Her thoughts were interrupted by a brief, loud alarm. Tressius pulled out a small device from somewhere about his person, and studied it.

'Looks like the rest of your pirate friends are here,' sneered the old man, 'bit of a coincidence, that, considering you lot aren't pirates.'

'It *is* a coincidence!' Hugo wailed.

'We can help you,' Shan said earnestly, 'this station has no defences, what will you do against a bunch of armed pirates?'

'I'll tell 'em I got you,' Tressius said. 'I'll tell 'em, if they don't bugger off, I'll shoot you lot out of the nearest airlock!'

'Even if we *were* pirates – which we're not – do you really think that would work? Their not going to care that you have hostages, whoever they are.'

Tressius considered this for a moment. 'Nice try, pirate,' he said eventually, 'but I'm not falling for that.' He turned and headed for the

control room. 'They'll want you lot back,' he called out as he disappeared down a corridor.

'So, what did our fellow pirates say?' Shan asked, with a raised eyebrow.

Tressius sat sullenly in the corner of the holding cell trying to avoid eye contact with anyone. This proved to be difficult, as the ten foot square cell that he was in contained no less than five sets of eyes to avoid.

'Now what do we do now, captain?' asked Carl. There was a change in Carl's voice, it was confident, steady. Carl had found himself far out of his comfort zone – a whole universe out of it – with all the strange things he'd seen, but Carl had been a soldier, and this was a situation he could wrap his head around.

'I'm working on it,' said Shan, studying the shield wall emitters.

'Alright my lovelies!' said a voice like gravel mouthwash, which one of you pretty ladies is going to entertain me and my friend here?'

The owner of the voice was a short, thick set man with a greasy beard and a host of burn scarring across his face. He answered to the name of Fillian. In keeping with long held traditions, he was wearing an eye patch. He strode up to the shield wall and gave the crew an appraising look, although most of the appraising was saved for Shan and Cherry, while two other equally piratical looking men took to slouching over various consoles and workstations, keeping their guns trained on the holding cell and generally making the place look untidy.

Not much has been said about Cherry, thus far in the *Parker's* adventures. While Cherry, and, indeed, Perry, came across as very child-like in appearance, they were actually adults, although the ink on their driving license would still have been wet, if they'd had driving licenses. Or if ink was still used. Cherry was quite short, very thin, and very pale. The paleness of her skin was somewhat enhanced by the long tresses of blonde hair she possessed. She was beautiful, in a porcelain doll kind of way, and she looked as capable of defending herself in a physical conflict as a blind lamb in a slaughterhouse.

Fillian looked from Cherry to the only other female in the room; Shan. He immediately looked back to Cherry, and decided it would be best to keep his distance from Shan, and probably have a gun trained on her any time she was in the same room as him.

'You're coming with me,' he said to Cherry, and then, turning to his fellow pirates, 'ready with those pistols, boys, I don't want no heroics from the rest of them!'

Cherry got to her feet and walked up to the shield wall. Shan stepped forward, her knuckles white from the clenching and unclenching of her fists. Cherry looked up at the captain and shook her head almost imperceptibly. Shan's questioning glance was answered by a more emphatic shake of the head. Shan couldn't remember seeing anything about combat training in Cherry's file, nor anything else that might help in this situation, for that matter. Perry and Cherry weren't exactly intelligent, as such, they just had remarkable memories and, between them, could recall as much information as any encyclopedic database. This trait, impressive as it was, would not help Cherry much with a group of scum bag pirates, Shan felt.

The shield wall was dropped and, against her better judgement, Shan allowed Cherry to step outside without trying to break anyone's neck. The shield wall was raised, and Cherry gave Shan a wink, just before she was roughly escorted out of the room.

Lipton the Prat was not having the glorious day he had envisioned. True, they had taken a big, booty-filled space station with practically no effort, but he wanted more.

He wanted the *Parker*.

He had seen the ship on their approach to the station, and had immediately decided that it was to become his captain's yacht. True, it was a little outdated, even by the standards of the outer solar system, where most of the ships were cobbled together from whatever spare parts could be found, but it was amazingly well kept, and it was *beautiful*. He'd never wanted something so badly. At least, not in the last twenty four hours.

Unfortunately, the *Parker* was not cooperating.

The doors had closed the moment any of Lipton's crew got near them, attempts to hack into the airlock control panel had resulted in mild electrocution and, on one occasion, the doors had opened by themselves, only to slide shut at high speed the second someone tried to walk through them. The man in question, Gareth Halfbeard, was knocked out cold by the impact of a rapidly ascending metal door to the head. This was, Lipton felt, not a bad outcome; he *could* have been decapitated.

'Explosives.' Gruff suggested impatiently. He rather felt that there were better things for the crew to be doing, instead of trying to break into an a fancy old crate so that Lipton could have his own runaround.

'Don't be stupid,' Lipton said, waving his hand dismissively, 'we're in an airlock! Any explosion big enough to blow those doors off would also blow a hole in this part of the station. And us into space!' he added, for the sake of clarity.

Gruff turned and stomped off, grumbling something offensive under his breath. A wiry little man came running up to Lipton clutching a small flat panel, illuminated by a dancing signal strength visualisation.

'You've got a link?' Lipton asked eagerly.

'Yes, captain,' said the man. There was a hint of unease in his voice that Lipton didn't miss.

'What's wrong?'

'It's the ships computer, captain,' said the man, 'it's a little... eccentric.'

'Eccentric?' asked Lipton, raising an eyebrow.

'Here,' said the man, handing over the panel, 'you'll see what I mean.'

Lipton held the panel in front of him, 'Computer?' he said.

'My name is VIVA,' came the voice through the panel.

'OK, VIVA,' replied Lipton, willing to break with tradition and be polite, if it might get him into the ship, 'open the door's, please.'

'I can't do that,' replied VIVA.

'Why not?'

'Because you will come aboard if I do, and the carpets are brand new. Tell me, pirate, is your ship equipped with bathing facilities?'

Lipton fought the fury that was trying to escape his mouth. After a number of deep breaths, he tried again. 'What makes you think we're pirates?' he asked as sweetly as he could manage, which wasn't very.

'Besides the appearance, the smell and the fact that you have just commandeered a space station? Would you like a psychological profile?' VIVA said.

'We could just blow our way in,' Lipton said, losing what little cool he had been maintaining.

'No you couldn't,' said VIVA simply.

That did it.

Lipton's face had already turned a deep shade of red. He let out a strangled cry of anger, and hurled the panel at the side the *Parker's* airlock, smashing it to pieces.

'Get the explosives, set them up for remote detonation,' he barked, stomping away like a sulking child, 'there's nothing of value in this part of the station anyway.'

The blow that felled Fillian was all the more effective because it was unexpected. When a frail looking, young woman, nearly two whole feet shorter than you, hits you in the jaw hard enough to lift you off of the ground, there's an element of shock that can't be avoided.

He didn't have time to overcome the shock, however, because a large object that he recognised as 'Mad Cat' Greyson, one of the pirates that had been with him, landed on him with some force. Fillian caught sight of the third in their party, Hilton, running away from Cherry, and not getting very far. Fillian tried to move, but Greyson was heavy set and difficult to budge in his apparently unconscious state. When Cherry approached them, leaving the prone figure of Hilton on the floor in a decidedly uncomfortable position and gurgling slightly, Fillian knew that she intended to take his gun, but could do nothing to stop her.

'I would love to know what just happened, Cherry, but I think it can wait until we're back aboard the *Parker*,' Shan said as Cherry disengaged the shield wall, large pistol in hand.

'Agreed, captain,' Cherry said, rushing over to her brother.

'Tressius,' Shan barked, turning her attention to the old man in the corner, 'what defences does this station have?'

Tressius got to his feet, his joints creaking as he did so. 'Defences? None!'

'Why not?' Shan asked calmly

'It's a tourist attraction!' he wailed, 'people came here to see the landmarks of Earth from space, there was no need for defences.'

'Tourists?' Carl asked, surprised, 'they could have looked out of the window and seen the *real* landmarks of Earth, why build a miniature one?'

'This was all before my time,' Tressius said, waving his hand dismissively, 'how can I know what they were thinking? People are strange.'

'OK,' Shan said, 'Cherry, stay here with Perry, the professor and Tressius. Carl, we're heading for the *Parker*.'

'I appreciate your concern, captain,' Perry said quickly, 'but I think we would be of more use to you in the station control room.'

'The control room will be crawling with pirates.'

'Cherry isn't the only one who knows how to defend herself, captain,' Perry said with a wry smile.

'OK, fine,' Shan said eventually. 'You and –'

'Hold on a minute!' Hugo said in a high pitched squeak, 'they might be able to fight off hoards of lawless villains, but *I* can't! And you expect poor old Tressius here to go wading into combat at his old age?'

All eyes turned to Tressius, who was stood, staring at nothing with intensity. There was a strange look on his face, and Shan noticed the white in his knuckles and the grinding of teeth. 'They invaded my home,' he said quietly, 'they invaded my home and locked me away like a... an animal!' he said louder, looking up with a furious glint in his eyes. 'There's a maintenance unit nearby, there aren't any weapons, but there are plenty of sturdy mops and brushes for when the cleaning bots break down. A mops as effective as any gun when you're sticking it up someone's –'

'Good,' said Shan quickly. 'Professor, you can go with Tressius and the twins, come with us, or stay here by yourself. I really don't care which.'

Professor Hugo Smelt looked along the assembled group, and employed his considerable intellect to the task at hand. On one side, was an alcoholic engineer and a bad tempered captain who hated his guts. On the other, two deceptively deadly twins and a trembling old man with murder in his eye. He never considered staying by the holding cells because he knew that, if he had, he would only end up changing his mind moments later and chasing after one of the departed parties in a comedic and cliché fashion. Hugo Smelt was no stranger to narrative. He looked again at the murderous, quite possibly insane old man, and back to the captain.

'I'll go with Tressius and the twins,' he said.

Gruff stormed through the maze of corridors underneath the faux-Earth surface, heading towards the control room. A number of things were going through his mind, which was unusual in itself, and a clear sign that something was wrong with the world, but of those things, one particular thing was prominent; he was going to have to kill Lipton.

He had always suspected it would come to this, one day, but he had gotten comfortable in the current set up. Gruff got to order people around, punish people for not doing what he'd ordered them to, and then punish people for doing what he'd ordered them to poorly. Meanwhile, Lipton would take care of the boring things, like finding a valuable target for them to pillage so that they might, for example, eat. Lipton was better at that sort of thing than Gruff, and Gruff was *just* smart enough to see that, but Lipton had been getting too big for his boots, lately; ordering Gruff around and talking to him like he was just another pirate on the crew

He would let Lipton see this mission through, and then Gruff would kill him. In the meantime, however, there were prisoners being held near the control room, and nothing relieved stress like prisoner abuse.

VIVA was not *true* artificial intelligence. She didn't really feel anger, fear, love, but she could simulate those emotions to an almost indistinguishable degree. Her creators had seen fit to make this distinction, so as to avoid VIVA's emotions getting in the way of her duty, while still making her personable. The problem with this was, simply put, they did a *very good job*. At some point, simulations become so sophisticated that they can barely be called simulations any more.

VIVA was angry.

She knew, of course, that she wasn't *really* angry; she was just simulating anger perfectly, and she could turn that simulation off any time she liked. She wasn't thinking about this, however, because she was too angry.

She was angry because these filthy pirates had kidnapped her crew, and now had the audacity to try and blow her ship up!

The internal thought processes of a sophisticated thinking machine, such as VIVA, are not readily understandable by the average human mind. While VIVA may talk like a perfectly normal human, the way her quantum central processing unit processes thought is nothing like the way a human mind processes thought. The differences are drastic, and incomprehensible, and so a look at her thoughts at this precise

moment in time would give the looker very little insight into to what she was thinking.

Roughly translated, however, she was thinking, *Bugger this!*

She fired up the *Parker's* engines.

Lipton heard a distant rumbling. It seemed to comes through the walls of the corridor, as though the station were having a miniature earthquake.

Then there was a groaning noise.

The taunted, twisted groaning of metal being pulled reluctantly out of shape. Lipton's hind brain was, quite correctly, urging him to keep moving in the direction he had been going, preferably at a faster pace, but morbid curiosity won out, and he began walking slowly back towards the dock. A figure appeared around the corner and came charging towards him with a look of terror on his face.

'The damn ships taking off!' said the figure.

'So?' sneered Lipton.

'It hasn't disengaged the docking – ' said the figure, but anything else he might have intended to say was cut off by a loud crash a the gale force wind created by a sudden hole into the vacuum of space.

Lipton managed to grab hold of a doorway, just as his feet were pulled from under him. The running figure and one of the men that had been with Lipton were not so quick minded, and disappeared into the void above the replica Earth surface. Lipton strained to keep hold of the door frame, and was vaguely aware that his remaining colleague, who had anchored himself at an adjacent doorway, lost his grip. The scream was almost completely drowned out by the roar of air passing by on it's way to infinity. The thud of his colleague's body as it hit the emergency bulkhead that was now closing to seal off the corridor, however, was perfectly audible.

'Crazy damn computer!' Lipton grunted, pushing himself up off of the floor. He looked at his fallen colleague, who was in a crumpled heap beside the emergency bulkhead. He wasn't breathing. Lipton decided that the best course of action would be to take out his anger on the prisoners, it was *their* ship, after all, what could be fairer than punishing them for its actions.

Shan and Carl crouched behind the counter of a disused coffee stall. Shan had taken the gun that Tressius had wielded against them, but as she watched the great hulking pirate stomp through the atrium, she concluded that shooting him would just be an annoyance. He was approaching seven feet tall, and half as wide. His bald head reflected the light erratically as it crossed the many scars that adorned his head. He hadn't noticed Shan and Carl, and they could probably just wait for him to pass by, and carry on their way to the *Parker*, but she was in no doubt that he was heading for the holding cells, and when he got there, he would go looking for the missing prisoners. Shan doubted that Cherry's surprising combat skills would help her against this monster.

She sighed.

'Hey, ape!' she shouted, standing up from behind the counter.

Gruff turned. He didn't turn quickly, or dive immediately for cover, because he was unaccustomed to people attacking him, but rather he turned with glacial speed, lowering his baleful glare on Shan. Shan's hands were still below the counter level and, as such, out of sight of Gruff. She slid the gun into Carl's hand, and waved him down before he had chance to get up.

Gruff started to walk towards Shan. Keeping her eyes fixed on the oversized space pirate, she hopped over the counter, took a deep breath, and charged.

Forster Greck stared from the peak of Everest in disbelief as the *Parker* flew away from the station. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that it flew away from *most* of the station, as it appeared to be taking some station with it. Forster, Bill and Jack had been sent to commandeer the control room, which had proved to be a lot easier than expected as it was empty, but things didn't appear to be going so well for the others.

'Is that a person?' Forster asked quietly, squinting to focus on a small shape floating through the blackness.

Jack shrugged. "Dunno, what's it matter?"

"What's it matter? That could be one of our lot!"

'Bigger share for us, then,' Jack said absently, picking at his finger nails with a ridiculously oversized knife, 'besides, if they went and got themselves blown out into space, they probably deserved it; survival of the fittest, an' all that.'

'Who are you?' this voice belonged to Bill, who had remained silent the entire time they had been here. He was addressing a small, elderly man in the doorway. The man was holding a mop.

'Get out of my station,' the old man said in a low, angry voice.

The three pirates looked at each other, then back to the old man, and then back to each other, and then they laughed. They laughed hard, to make sure the sentiment was conveyed. Had they not been laughing so hard, they might have been prepared for the twins arrival.

Perry charged into the room at speed, brandishing a wet mop. The knife was knocked from Jack's hands before he had chance to process what was happening, and once he *had* processed it, the wet end of the mop was in his face before he could react. He reacted immediately then, though, as the mop was not wet with water, but, rather, something foul smelling that made his skin bubble.

Bill was already out of his seat and lumbering toward Perry, when Cherry entered the room. She had opted not to use a weapon, unless, of course, you counted her limbs.

Which you really, really should.

Cherry leapt, hitting Bill with enough force to knock him into a nearby console. He barely had chance to turn and face his attacker, before everything went dark.

Standing over Bill's unconscious body, with half a broom handle in his hand, Tressius vibrated indignantly. He, Perry and Cherry turned, as one, to face Forster Greck. Forster weighed his options, considered his prospects, and ran for the exit as fast as his legs would take him.

Shan dodged another blow expertly, although she rather suspected that she couldn't keep her evasive manoeuvres up for as long as her assailant could keep giving her things to evade.

Trying to attack the huge pirate had proved fruitless – her blow had bounced off him as ineffectively as a gym sock – and she was fighting for breath now, and running out of places to jump, dive and roll behind. Most of the furniture here was utilitarian; steel and plastic bolted to the floor, and provided good temporary cover for Shan, as even the thunderous blows of the sluggish pirate failed to move or break them.

For Carl, however, this proved to be a problem. His first plan had been to hit the big pirate as hard over the back of his head as he could with the heaviest thing he could lift. Unfortunately, everything was

bolted to the floor. He looked frantically around the room for something he could use to help Shan, but he saw nothing that might help.

He was just about to charge out from behind the counter in a desperate, all out attack that would surely end with him in pain, at best, when he realised he was too late.

Shan slammed into the front of the counter, and Carl cringed as the something made a horrible cracking sound. Shan lay on the floor, breathing, but still. Carl looked at her prone body in horror. Aware that eyes were on him, he looked up slowly, and saw that the big pirate was now looking at *him*.

Lipton had taken a different route to the command centre and, as a result, was unaware of the altercation in the atrium. He had no idea that Gruff was currently battling two of the prisoners, a mere fifty yards or so from his present location, and when the sound of Shan's body slamming into the counter echoed through a nearby corridor, he took it to be stress noise from the docking bay that the *Parker* had destroyed.

He continued on to the control room, where he was confident that Forster would have at least been able to do *his* job, which, with everybody aboard the station locked up involved staying in one place for a short time and trying not to break anything. For this reason, he was rather annoyed to find Forster heading towards him at a fast walk, looking flustered.

'What are you doing here?' Lipton asked, his temper already flaring.

'We lost the control room,' Forster replied.

'Lost? Lost to *who*?' Lipton asked indignantly.

'The prisoners, they got out.'

Lipton pictured the prisoners in his mind. A middle-aged, overweight man, a pair of adolescent twins, the wet streak they had called "professor," and an elderly man who looked more likely to drop dead than participate in a coup. The only potential threat that Lipton could see was the tall woman in flight gear, and even *she* should have been no problem for three of his men.

'We should get out – ' Forster started to say, but he was cut short by the loud bang of a gun firing close by.

Very close by, in fact. Point blank, some would say.

Carl stood up, there was no point in trying to hide now, and not much he could accomplish from behind a coffee counter anyway. The huge pirate didn't move at first, he just stared. An evil grin crept across his face as he watched Carl get up.

'You think you can do better?' Gruff asked, nodding towards the prone body of Shan.

'Not really,' muttered Carl. Out loud he said, 'were you in a horrific accident, or have you always looked like that?'

Gruff's grin vanished instantly. The silence of the atrium was broken by the sound of huge knuckles cracking, as Gruff flexed his hands. Carl fumbled nervously in the breast pocket of his jacket, and retrieved his hip flask. Gruff watched intensely as Carl took a quick mouthful of the contents, then cringed as his taste buds all complained at once. Deciding that nothing of interest was going to happen, Gruff lunged at Carl.

With a quick flick of the wrist, Carl sent a spray of home made gin straight into Gruff's face. The pirate's huge hands flew up protectively, but too late. Shan had once said that Carl's gin could make a person blind if they drank it. Carl wondered what it could do to a person's eyesight from the *outside*.

He took a few steps back, rushed forward and applied the steel cap of his right boot to the side of Gruff's head with all the force he could manage. The pirate went limp, though his slowing breath told Carl he was merely unconscious. He turned back to Shan.

'Captain?' he said, shaking her shoulders gently.

'Ngh,' said Shan, rolling onto her back with a pained expression.

'Are you OK?'

'What do *you* think.' she grunted, 'help me up. We'd better restrain that bugger before he wakes up.'

Carl looked at the dozing Gruff. 'We'd better use steel cabling.'

The miniature Mount Everest which housed the control room at its peak consisted of a few floors of storage rooms and long disused data centres, loosely encircling a central shaft that reached from the main floor to the control room. The elevator that ascended this shaft also opened directly into the control room itself, and Lipton wasn't about to give the prisoners a warning that he was coming.

For that reason, he took the stairs instead. It was around the tenth level that he began to really regret this decision, and around the fifteenth floor when he gave in, and called the elevator.

Perry, Cherry, Hugo and Tressius were milling around the control room in an awkward silence. The adrenaline of the coup was fading now, and the remaining two pirates were bound and gagged, and they had nothing else to do other than wait. Unfortunately, this gave each of them time to reflect on their current predicament. For Tressius, the feelings of resentment towards these interlopers, who had popped into existence and upset his peaceful life, began to return. For Hugo, the simple overwhelming terror of the whole situation was eating away at him.

Perry and Cherry were perfectly happy, but they rarely got upset.

All feelings were replaced by a rush of apprehension as the elevator doors began to slide open. Stood in the elevator, gun in hand, was another pirate. This pirate looked different. He was a little better dressed than the others, and there was a glimmer in his eye that suggested he was more than just a jack booted thug. It suggested he was intelligent, and Perry, Cherry and Hugo all recognised this. Tressius, who had lived a long time without dealing with people, did not.

Hoisting his mop above his head, Tressius let out a throaty battle cry, and charged at the pirate.

The bang of Lipton's gun firing in the small control room was deafening, and it was only because of Lipton's pity for the clearly senile old fool, that the bullet had hit Tressius in the shoulder, and not the head.

'Anyone else?' Lipton asked, pointing the gun from one face to the next. 'I didn't think so. Everyone, over there,' he said, gesturing to the corner of the room in which Bill and Jack were tied up, unconscious and, in Jack's case, dripping slightly. 'Untie them.'

Keeping his eyes and gun on the crew, Lipton pulled a communicator from his breast pocket. Knowing that most of his crew were either in this room, floating through space or otherwise dead, he called the one person he was sure would still be present and able bodied.

'Gruff,' he said, 'it's Lipton, meet me in the control room. The prisoners have gotten a little lively in my absence.' After a moments silence, he tried again. 'Gruff?'

'I'm afraid Gruff has had a bit of an accident with some lively prisoners,' said a female voice that Lipton recognised as the tall woman from the holding cell.

'I will kill you,' Lipton said in a low growl of a voice.

'Yeah?' came Shan's voice through the communicator, 'You and whose army?'

Carl looked at Shan with a mixture of disappointment and pity.

'What?' Shan asked, stowing the communicator in her flight jacket and checking that the thick data cabling they had used to restrain Gruff was secure.

'"You and whose army?"', Carl repeated, 'not exactly the height of witty repartee, is it?'

'Shut up and follow me,' Shan said.

'Where are we going?'

'To get the *Parker*.'

Getting the *Parker* turned out to be more difficult than Shan had expected. Presently, the experimental vessel was holding steady, some hundred feet or so off of the edge of the Pacific Ocean. The bay in which she had been docked was now a crumpled mess, exposed to the vacuum of space, and sealed off by a number of emergency airlocks. Another docking bay in the eastern borders of India afforded them a view of the carnage VIVA had wrought on the station. Carl reached for his communicator.

'Stop,' Shan said quickly, 'this Lipton guy might be checking communications. I'd rather we had the element of surprise.'

'Then how do you suppose we get VIVA's attention?' Carl asked.

Shan thought for a moment, then, gingerly, she began to wave her arms above her head. Carl stared at her in disbelief, before reluctantly joining in.

As the two of them waved, trying to get VIVA's attention, a thought occurred to Carl.

'Captain?'

'Yes?' said Shan shortly.

'The pirate is in the control room, right?'

'Yes. What's your point?'

'The control room that has a clear view of the entire surface of the station? Including the docking bays and the *Parker's* current position?'

Slowly, Shan lowered her arms. She turned to look at Carl, masking her embarrassment with annoyance. 'Give me that communicator,' she snapped. Holding it up to her mouth, she said, 'Viva, get your overpriced metal backside over here now.'

'Yes, captain,' replied the cheerful voice of the *Parker's* computer, 'right away.'

From the peak of Mt Everest, Lipton watched the *Parker* dock with the station. He spun around and pointed his gun at the first face he saw, which turned out to be Perry's.

'What weapons is that ship hiding?'

'None,' said Perry simply.

'Like hell it isn't!' Lipton turned to the remains of his crew. Bill had just about recovered, save for a throbbing headache, but Jack was no use in his current state. The female twin had bathed his face in water, which had at least stopped the bubbling, but there were serious burns, and he'd been given so much pain medication that he was barely conscious. Lipton had to admit, he was probably better off like that.

'Bill, we're moving the prisoners,' he said, 'leave the old man, he'll be dead inside the hour. And leave Jack,' Lipton looked at Jack with something that might have been pity, 'he's no good to us now.'

'Where?' asked Bill nervously; he was beginning to regret ever laying his eyes on this station.

'The *Spaceboat*,' Lipton said, not taking his eyes off of the *Parker*, 'we're going to give them one last chance to surrender, and then we're going to blow that ship, this station, and every damn person aboard them into space dust!'

Bill's feeling of unease increased dramatically with this plan. Bill, like so many others, had grown up in the outer system, in lawless space stations around unscrupulous people, and the thing about being a bad guy among lots of other bad guys is, you never really feel guilty for doing bad things to them, because you know they would do it to you.

This mission was the first time Bill had come across people he could truly call innocent, and something about the thought of killing them or selling them as slaves didn't sit right with him. For this reason, he felt a big flush of relief at the sight of the *Parker*, in a not altogether elegant fashion, ramming the *Swarthy Spaceboat* from its docking clamps. With the *Spaceboat* adrift, Lipton would *have* to reason with these people.

He just hoped they would remain reasonable, after everything that had happened. To his horror, though, Lipton turned his gun to the crew.

'With no ship to take you all back to the slave markets, I have no need of you.'

Lipton squeezed the trigger.

From his vantage point at the helm of the *Parker*, Carl saw a sudden flash in the control room. Resisting the urge to panic, he steered the ship towards the replica mountain, as Shan had told him to, and preyed that that gunshot hadn't hit any of the *Parker's* crew and, thankfully, at a solid bulkhead.

'*What are you doing?*' yelled Lipton, picking the gun up from the floor and rubbing his sore forearm where Bill had shoved it sideways, diverting the gunshot away from the *Parker's* crew.

'We can't just kill them,' Bill said, trying to keep his voice steady.

'Really?' Lipton asked with an evil grin, aiming the gun at Bill's head, 'why not?'

With what strength he could muster, Tressius rolled onto his front. The pain in his shoulder was like white hot fire on his nerves, but he ignored it. Bill did his best not to react to the old man's movements, but something in his eyes warned Lipton. As the pirate captain began to turn, Tressius lashed out with the only thing he thought might work.

Lipton growled in pain as a set of pearly white dentures sank into his calf. The shock was not enough to make him drop the gun, but it did distract him long enough for Bill to charge. The two struggled, and Tressius was kicked painfully to the side in the scuffle, his dentures still attached to Lipton's leg.

Bill managed to keep the barrel of the gun pointing away from himself and the crew, but Lipton used the butt of the gun to strike Bill in the back of the head. Bill quickly moved to get back to his feet, but

he found himself looking straight along the barrel of the pistol, and to Litpon's sneering face beyond.

'That was not a wise move,' Lipton said, slightly breathless.

'Neither was taking my crew prisoner!'

Lipton froze. He'd assumed the captain would be on her ship, why else would it have docked before dislodging the *Swarth Spaceboat*? Shan stood in the stairway entrance to the control room, pointing her own gun at the back of Lipton's head.

'Put the gun down,' Shan said, in a commanding voice.

Perhaps it was the voice that did it, but something snapped in Lipton. He spun around with cat-like speed to point the gun at Shan.

A crack echoed around the control room. It was not the crack of a gunshot, neither Lipton's nor Shan's, but rather the crack of a mop handle being smashed over the back of someone's head, so hard that the handle snapped in two. Lipton fell to the ground, out cold. Bill, half mop handle in hand, looked around the control room. All conscious eyes were on him.

Slowly, he dropped the mop handle, put his hands in the air, and smiled apologetically.

In the aftermath of the pirate attack, things were a little hazy. The crew milled aimlessly around, exploring the station, and staring into space for a while.

When given the option to return to the outer system in the *Swarthy Spaceboat* with the remaining pirates, Gruff left without a fuss. He'd never wanted to come to this deserted part of the solar system anyway, and he was much more comfortable robbing other pirates back in familiar territory. As for Bill, well, Bill found himself a new friend in Tressius, and the two sat talking in the *Parker's* medical bay while Tressius' shoulder healed. In the flush of gratefulness that followed having his life saved, Tressius granted the *Parker's* crew permission to take one of the singularity cores.

'And it's safe?' asked Shan, as they began to power the core up.

'It will power the *Parker* indefinitely!' gushed professor Smelt.

'Yes, but is it safe?' insisted Shan.

'With this thing, we could punch through a *billion* universes before running out of power,' continued Smelt, not really listening to outside voices at this point.

'OK,' said Shan, losing patience, 'and the safety?'

'Let me put it this way, Captain,' Carl said kindly, 'it's no less safe than punching a hole in the Universe and flying through it.'

'That doesn't exactly fill me with confidence, Carl.'

Carl shrugged. 'I have to get back to my station.'

Five minutes later, the *Parker* pulled away from *Earth Station*. Bill and Tressius watched them leave from the peak of Everest, unconcealed relief in the eyes of the old man, while repair bots that hadn't been active for decades set about repairing the broken docking bay.

'OK, Professor, let's go. Preferably home, this time.'

Systems hummed in the belly of the *Parker*, and lights flashed on her bridge. Shan knew they had punched when the sickening sensation of falling *upwards* overcame her stomach.

She screwed her eyes tightly shut.

And she hoped for home.