

Futures

The one who gets left behind

A moment of reflection. By Victoria Brun

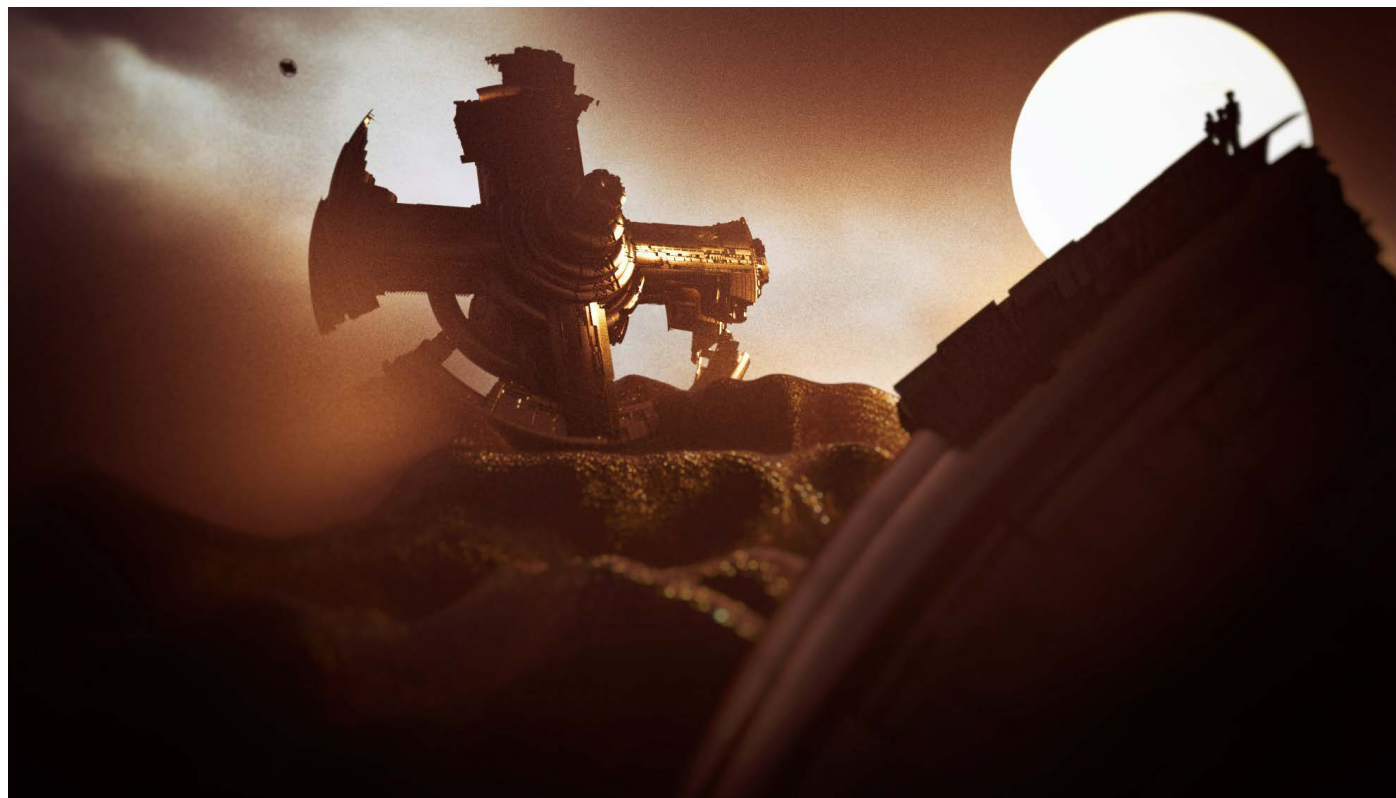


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

There was some sort of malfunction. Or accident. Or sabotage. One moment the space station and all my systems – an intricate web of hundreds of thousands of parts – were working in perfect harmony, protecting my precious cargo from the cruelty of space.

And the next, every alarm was screaming. Every alert was blaring. Everything was going horribly wrong.

Not that you could hear it. There was suddenly precious little air in the station, certainly not enough to send those vibrations all the way to your delicate ear drums.

However, I am certain you realized the emergency, although it would have been kinder if you had not. Death in such a situation is not immediate. You had maybe 15 seconds to panic before you became unresponsive. Your spiked heart rate added another alert to my screaming alarms, but there was nothing I could do.

My sensors kept blaring long after there was

anything left to save. Eventually, I shut them all down.

The station felt strangely empty, although everything was still there. It was, perhaps, soulless, if you believed in that kind of thing. I did not know whether you did. But something was gone, and I felt as if I had been the one left behind.

I reviewed all my data, but I did not know what hit us, which is why I thought it might have been sabotage, although I do not know who would do such a thing. In the days following the Incident (I did not know what else to call it, the word felt sterile and wrong, but I could not find a more accurate term), I analysed my data ad nauseam, but I discovered nothing. Not that it mattered. No amount of data or answers would revive you.

It happened so fast – transforming me from a station, a workplace, a home, into a tomb in a matter of seconds.

With a strange feeling in my circuits that I decided must match what you called ‘loneliness’, I pondered this new role, unsure how to

be a cemetery but aware that was what I now was. I knew cemeteries were important to you. I knew you made a point of visiting your mother’s grave before you started this mission. I knew you had children. Children who would never visit your grave, as far from their home planet as I was.

I decided I must take the station to your home planet. I would crash it. I would bury you and give your children a spot to visit before they go on their own missions.

I liked this plan, and not just because it was something to do, and I desperately needed something to do.

I plotted my course with meticulous care. The station was manoeuvrable, albeit clunky. However, it was not designed to travel such great distances, and certainly not quickly.

But I had plenty of time, and I made it work. I no longer needed to maintain cabin pressure or oxygen levels or all those other systems that were once so crucial to keeping you alive. This reallocation gave me extra power.

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It still took 17 months and 14 days to reach the little red planet your children called home. I carefully selected my landing site. It had to be far enough from any human settlement to prevent causing any more deaths – but close enough that your children could visit it as they required.

I modelled hundreds of possible locations before settling on the optimal spot. I calculated my trajectory, and then considered the crash. The impact.

For the first time, I stopped to consider *me* – to consider what would happen to me. Surely, I would not survive such a crash.

It would be easy to do it. It would be easy to let myself plummet to the planet, give it a

new crater, and destroy myself. Then I would not have to determine what to do next, but I realized that I was more than just a graveyard; I was also your legacy. You still lived on, in a way, in my files. In my data.

I orbited the planet for a day, pondering how to serve both my roles. I copied myself into the escape pod and then jettisoned it off. I was now the escape pod, a sliver of my former self.

Yet, I was still the station, and I sent the station down to the planet. It was strange, being in two places at once. Orbiting a beautiful planet and plummeting into it in the same moment.

On the station-me, all my sensors lit up as I burnt through the planet's thin atmosphere. This time the alerts sounded less like warning

alarms and more like the music you used to blast through the station.

I crashed into the regolith, and I observed it all unfold from above. And then I was only watching it from above.

I watched the dust slowly settle around the new cemetery, not knowing what I would do next, but no longer feeling that I was the one who was left behind. I will be the one who keeps moving ahead.

Victoria Brun is a project manager at a national laboratory. When not bugging hard-working scientists about budgets, she is writing stories you can find at *Daily Science Fiction*, *Uncharted Magazine* and elsewhere.