



SKETCHING THE VOID

Lights flashed across the battle screen, greens and reds zipping from one side to the other, blinking other lights out of existence on the opposing side. Chains of red and green dots whipped back and forth, antimatter pellets coaxing ships into firing lanes for missiles or lasers. I was more interested in the numbers scrolling along the side of the screen. The lights were just there for the humans - it was a convenient visualization of the really good stuff. Unfortunately, the numbers were telling me we weren't doing so hot.

Captain Trivedi's voice, deep and sure, came through the intercom clear as vacuum. "Gunnery, another flight of Bodkins, if you would." Interminable time passed and finally a cloud of small green triangles appeared on the screen. How she could remain so calm in the middle of a battle was beyond me. I didn't even have a heart and I could feel it pounding.

Our Bodkins scattered, better to avoid our opponent's defensive batteries. They were long-range light missiles designed to overwhelm a ship with numbers. Lieutenant Gremy had spread them too wide though. You wanted to focus on area of the target, then bring the ordinance together at *just* the last minute. It was Gunnery 101. Or Intro to Gunnery. The other ship would be able to bring all its defense to bear on this one flight — if I was on the other ship, I'd knock

those suckers down faster than the Lieutenant could sneeze in that gross way he has. How do you even get allergies on a spaceship?

I focused back on my screen. The gunnery team on the other ship knew what they were doing. Their latest flight was still half a minute and 2,500 kilometers out. Looked like Bodkins too, but they were moving a little slower than usual. Conserving fuel, or momentum for a quick vector change? My metallic fingers clicked on the screen to the rhythm of a fire solution. Once they were in range — only a few more seconds — the ship’s laser battery would take over and knock them out of the sky in a very pretty light show.

I risked a glance at Gremy’s missiles. Sure enough, the other ship was plucking them one by one. It was leisurely. I could picture the Captain’s glare on the back of his neck, and my shoulders crunched up involuntarily.

My screen turned red and an alarm blared. The enemy missiles broke formation, most of the Bodkins swarming into a massive clump just like ours should have. My screen showed a trio apart, however. It took an infuriating ten milliseconds for the computer to identify them as Broadblades. Nasty devils. They were slower than Bodkins but had a thick shell. A single one could disable a ship our size. There was only one chance to save The Harpy.

Whole seconds remained, but the firing solution needed to be delicate, the best I’d ever done. In a flash I slaved Gremy’s console to my own — he’d lost his missile privileges. With one hand I launched a missile of my own at the cluster of Bodkins and rerouted all the lasers to the trio of larger rockets. I’d detonate my missile right in the middle of the Bodkins, just as my lasers burned through the rest.

Nothing happened.

The ship’s lasers diligently burned through the enemy Bodkins instead of launching a missile into their midst. Too late, the defenses refocused on the Broadblades as I looked on. They managed to burn one into a hunk of inert slag, but the other two hit fore and aft.

The Harpy went dark.

The lights came back on, consoles all blinking the message “YOU HAVE BEEN DESTROYED” in blocky, red letters.

“Thanks,” I muttered, standing up. “Couldn’t have figured that one out on my own.” The combat bridge was as empty as when I entered at the start of the mock battle. Located on the engineering deck, it was a refuge for the Harpy’s command if something happened to the main bridge during a battle. The stations were squeezed together so close the humans operating them would need to sit shoulder to shoulder. Engineering was next door, so the combat bridge was hard-wired to every vital ship system.

Now though, it was vacant but for my own shiny presence. I slung my bag across my shoulder, easily hefting what would give most unaugmented humans a hernia. Inside were the tools too bulky to clip on my waist, mostly specialty arm modules. It only took a few moments to swap my current rig for my fanciest, most human-like dress hands. Have to look your best, you know.

A voice rang in my head, slow and bored. “DORT-3, calling DORT-3. You receiving?”

It was Warrant Officer Pennt, the Deck 3 maintenance supervisor. Just what I needed. “Receiving,” I transmitted in my best robot voice.

“Knock it off, Three. What’s the status of that air regulator?”

Damn. I’d been halfway through the repair when Captain Trivedi announced the combat drill. The panel was still disassembled, a single screw holding the access plate on so curious primates wouldn’t stick their fingers in and fry.

“Giving me some trouble, sir, but another half hour should do it.”

“Well belay that. Engineering can live with their quarters a degree too hot. Get to Deck 1. They’ve got a problem with the waste recyclers.”

“You mean the heads?”

“That’s what I said. DORT-1 needs a hand and you have some to spare.”

“Har har, sir.”

“Just take care of it,” Pennt sighed. “None of us want the officers using the lower decks, especially after today. Don’t forget to mark in the system when you finish the regulator. You know engineers - they’ll try to fix it themselves. Pennt, out.”

I was already strolling to the lifts. Crew passed along the way, most subdued from the recent loss. Many of them passed without a second glance, but a few shouted out greetings of “Hey, D3” or “Hi, Three.” I wish they’d call me Dorte. Chief Engineer Rocha gets to be called CHENG, so what’s the difference? Other than him being an officer. And human, I mean.

I showed each crewmember in the hall a different happy face and waved every time. It’s the little details. Crewmember Ling even gave me a high-five when he passed. My smile for him was easy.

The Harpy had been trailing the fleet this entire shakedown cruise. It shouldn’t have been a surprise, considering we were the D-Team of the C-Fleet. Our destroyer was brand new but built in a rush out of third-grade parts. The Sol Commonwealth’s Admiralty needed ships and bodies for the Maaketer Conflict, and at this point I guess it needed quantity more than quality.

Everything was in a constant state of disrepair even though it was new. I’d already found and fixed plenty of cut corners that would make Pennt spit out his orange juice substitute. Just two days ago I’d come across a bad seal on the reactor’s bulkhead. Someone had installed it backwards — if the ship ever had to rely on that seal we would have gone up in a very colorful, very uncontrolled fusion reaction.

I fixed it all of course, as flawlessly as I was designed. But it was so boring. I wasn’t made for this kind of work. I mean, I literally *was* made for it, but still. I’m a DORT, a Destroyer-class Omni Repair Technician. I can fix almost anything on a Paladin-class destroyer like the Harpy but am specialized for Deck 3 engineering work.

That’s a good thing, because the Harpy was a shiny piece of shit. She had neither grace nor beauty, and not a nanogram of style. She could move through vacuum about as well as a manatee runs and could fly in atmosphere exactly as well as a manatee.

I arrived at the nearest lift, a plain silver door set into the end of the corridor. I told the ship where I wanted to go, and it opened the door for me — buttons are for suckers.

At least I’d be on Deck 1. I didn’t often get there. DORT-1 - she actually liked to be called DORT-1, the nerd — didn’t like competition and filed a complaint every time she found me there

without an invitation. I had orders today though. DORT-1 didn't like to get her servos dirty, so there was no way she would handle a backed-up head alone.

A few minutes elbow-deep in crap was well worth it for a chance to hobnob with the denizens of my Mt. Olympus. If I was lucky, maybe I'd impress one of the executive officers and they'd recommend I switch places with DORT-1. Unlike her, I'm very charming and a pleasure to have around.

The doors closed and the elevator hummed as it ascended. Who was I kidding? A DORT-3 wouldn't replace a DORT-1 and, even if I did, there was no way they'd let me sit at point defense. Not for the first time I cursed whatever AI had generated my personality. Couldn't it just as easily have made me content to fiddle with the ship's engines?



We found out the shakedown cruise was over when the first real missiles flew. Our orders were to rendezvous with the 13th fleet to bolster their numbers. Our assigned position along the defensive line seemed custom-fit to keep us out of trouble. We would be flanked by much stronger forces, and it was in an area that hadn't seen a Maaketor ship in three standard months. Until now, at least.

The lights turned red and a klaxon blared. I was knocked sideways into the maneuvering thruster I'd been cleaning. It had gotten gummed up, probably with some leftover residue from the orbital construction facility, and I'd taken it into one of the maintenance bays. Even in the red light I could see where my head left a gleaming scratch in the still-pristine metal plating. Great. And now I'd have to buff my own head too. If this was another drill, I'd be pissed.

But this didn't seem like a drill. Nothing should have knocked me over. I have impeccable balance for one thing, but more importantly that meant the grav drive hadn't switched to combat-mode. Had we hit something? With Cortez at the helm I wouldn't be surprised. I accessed every system I could. The hull was intact and the engineering systems, including the reactor, were still online and green.

The klaxon continued to ring the combat alarm. The grav system kicked into combat mode, drawing more power from the plant.

"Combat stations, combat stations," Captain Trivedi's voice interrupted. "This is not a drill. Combat stations, combat stations."

Quickly, I secured the thruster with magnetic clamps and headed for my station near the reactor, crouched low and speeding on my ankle wheels. I didn't usually like to travel this way — it's not like humans have wheels on their feet — but I needed to get there fast.

The combat bridge was along my way — cutting through it would actually shave a few seconds off my trip. Seconds I could use to peek at the combat readouts, if I happened to look that way.

Crew scurried through Deck 3's corridors, all with serious faces and purpose in their steps. I displayed one to match as I zoomed by, trying for 'heroic determination'. I don't really have a face, but I do have a glass plate that can display vector graphics. I thought the knit brows were a nice

touch, but I got rid of my dueler's scar when Crewmember Danvers walked into a door when she turned to look at me.

I arrived at the combat bridge. A quick check with life support told me the room was unoccupied — even though it was a shortcut I didn't think anyone would appreciate me barging in. The room was just as I'd left it, screens automatically displaying whatever was on their sibling computers on the primary bridge. The large status screen on the wall was on, but for the moment displayed power systems.

That was old news, so I rushed to my station. Missiles. A lot of them. And far in the distance was an enemy ship, speeding away. The computer indicated where the first barrage had hit us. No serious damage, but the strike had taken out a few of our laser batteries. Our sister ship hadn't fared so well. The Goshawk was tumbling. There was a lot of debris. An expanding cloud of gossamer matter centered on her as well. Her air.

The missiles were rapidly approaching. The Harpy didn't know exactly what they were yet, but they moved like our Broadheads. Maybe a bit slower. No other enemy ships were nearby. This one must have been lying in wait, hidden within one of the several asteroid clusters in this sector. The escaping ship was far too small to have carried all this ordinance, however. Another Maaketor ship must have dropped the missiles off, leaving this small scout to trigger them before escaping.

My self-allotted seconds had passed, but I couldn't tear my sight from the screen. I had to move, but I was rooted in place. I could feel my servos vibrating, nonsense energy negating itself without conscious direction.

The missiles drew nearer like we were a black hole they couldn't escape from. Why were they all coming for us? Sure, the Goshawk and Harpy were on the outer edge of our mini-fleet, but it just didn't seem fair.

They were aiming for our engines. Maybe trying for a disabling shot, or perhaps hoping a chain reaction would kill the ship. I forced myself to take in the scrolling numbers along the side of the screen. If I didn't focus there was an equal chance I would either roll up to the bridge and shove Robinson out of the way, or flee to the exact center of the ship, away from the incoming warheads.

I didn't see how we were going to survive the barrage. For all my bluster there was every chance I wouldn't be able to crew the gunnery position any better than Robinson. Certainly not in my current state. The spread of missiles was too wide. Some were going to get through, probably enough to sink us.

A flight of green triangles zipped past the Harpy. I actually cheered, startling myself when the echo of my own voice hit my audio sensors. The Federico II had launched a wing of autonomous combat drones. She was a Falkner-class carrier, the matriarch of our miniature fleet. It was slow as hell but had a belly full of drones and fighters that were desperately needed on the front. The Harpy was supposed to be her escort, but it looked like we were the ones being saved today.

The drones spat a curtain of laser fire that cut a swathe through the incoming swarm. A few of the missiles even mistook drones for their target and detonated, further depleting their numbers.

Then the drones were past, moving far too quickly to turn around and rejoin the fight. At least before the current flight hit. The Federico II would pick them up afterward, hopefully with our help, assuming we weren't a scattered navigation hazard at that point.

Instead of looping around, the drones actually sped up, routing to intercept the enemy ship. Given how far away the target was, I didn't know if they'd reach it before the enemy warped.

It was time for the Harpy's gunners. The missiles started to coalesce, vectoring in on our engines. Robinson fired on them as soon as they came within range, lasers flashing from every turret with a line of sight. They sped closer and closer. How many of the damn things were there? The gunner performed admirably, shooting down the missiles almost faster than I could keep track.

Despite the drones, despite the laser fire, it still wasn't enough. Two missiles impacted, striking near our port engine.

The ship rocked and went dark.



"Why the hell weren't you at your station?"

"I was on my wa-

Pennt stood, pacing around his small workstation. There was something dark on his uniform. I hoped it was ash, or oil. "I heard you the first time. What I don't understand is why it took you so long. You've got those wheels, don't you? Some problem with them?"

"No, sir." I stood straight in Pennt's office, trying to emulate the way the crew stands, but not so well my commander would think I was mocking the concept. A look of contrition projected onto my faceplate. It didn't have to be forced.

"Everyone else was where they were supposed to be. Everyone else did their job. If you were there, you could have helped contain the fire. It's what you were built for. Crewmember Ling might still be alive."

"I know. I'm sorry sir. I'll do better next time, I promise."

"That's not going to bring back Ling." Pennt looked me up and down, taking everything in. "This is a waste of time," he muttered, stooping to rearrange the items on his desk. He'd already done it twice before. "Can't chew out a DORT like a real person. Might as well punish a vac-bot. We should just plug you in and have the Harpy's computer add some grief to your circuits. Get out of here and clean something."

I walked through the ship with purpose, executing my duties flawlessly for the rest of the day. There was a lot to do on Deck 3, enough that DORT-1 was sent to assist me. Her presence was weirdly comforting. I donned a neutral expression as we patched the hull and replaced the Harpy's burned circuits. When it came time to clean and repair the access shaft where Ling died, DORT-1 went in first and told me to run another diagnostic on the drive instead. I knew how much she hated to get her hands dirty.

For the first time since we left the orbital shipyard, I hid my hands. It was easier to be a robot today, a piece of machinery that, while advanced, could still glitch from time to time. Pennt was right: you can't blame a machine the same way you can a person. I couldn't bear the thought of the crew hating me. I could feel their gaze though, see the burns and the red eyes. I wished I could join them.

That night I worked until my battery drained and my movement slowed. I wasn't supposed to wait that long to charge, but I didn't care. Axillary power barely got me to my charging bay, located next to the reactor.

It was so small I had to fold in order to fit, but it's not like I get stiff knees. I backed into it on my wheels, the little hatch iris closed behind me. For the first time that day I stopped controlling my expression and let my system cycle through whatever was there.

The cubby was dark, save for the green glow from my face. It was enough to illuminate my drawings though. I'd scratched them into every flat surface I could reach. Portions of the wall to my right were buffed clean, erasing earlier sketches. It wasn't a great loss - they'd been little more than reproductions of images.

My newest mattered a lot more. They weren't good, but I was still learning. And these weren't some line-for-line reproduction like any printer could do. These came from me. Most of the drawings were portraits, crude doodles that only vaguely resembled their subjects. A lot of them were of the Captain, but there were some of Pennt — I'd even added an evil mustache to him — and other crewmembers.

Eventually my vision landed on the portrait of Ling. I couldn't help it. The drawing showed him smiling — I had been trying to get mouths right. He'd always been kind to me, treated me like anyone else in the crew. He probably didn't even know how much that meant.

For a time, I displayed tears on my faceplate. For all the difference it made I could have been displaying a grin, or the picture of a dolphin. How did humans deal with this? I needed to move but was literally drained of power. And besides, the thought of seeing other crew without DORT-1 around made me want to stay hidden in my cubby forever. I couldn't understand it.

I'd clipped on my drilling and driving arm before I realized what was happening. Fine, silvery lines appeared on the wall under my touch. I would draw Ling, and this time I would get his smile right.



We took on new crew after the incident. There weren't many survivors from the Goshawk, but those that were picked from the wreckage were split amongst the Harpy and our other flank's destroyer pair. They were broken people, their physical injuries only a part of it. They'd lost their ship, almost everyone they'd known for the past year, and then been split from the rest. One of the crew, a stringy woman who looked no older than sixteen, was assigned to take Ling's post as an engine tech. Her name was Ganim. I tried to make her feel welcome by telling little jokes when we passed each other in the corridor.

The Harpy's crew mourned for Ling, but they moved on. Human brains are malleable, and they're all so good at distracting themselves. I didn't have the luxury and didn't have any real friends to help me try. It wasn't that the crew necessarily blamed me for Ling's death — even if I'd been at my station there was every chance Ling would have died anyway — but the more I acted like a robot to deflect blame, the more they treated me like one. I told myself that it was just temporary, that I would get back to my old self any cycle now.

It was hard to take that step. My drawing helped though, and every night when I retired to charge, I would try something new. I was getting better, but it was frustratingly slow. I'd try drawing Ling in different poses, with different expressions. My memory's infallible, and he grinned a lot, so I had a lot to work with. I'd just call up a moment when we interacted and adjust his expression so I wasn't simply printing an image.

I felt like I knew him now better than I had in life. It was strange, but the drawings I etched night after night seemed more real than the recordings etched in my memorybanks. I liked drawing him happy best.

Soon I would have to swap out the wall plate that doubled as my canvas. The constant sanding, polishing, etching, sanding was starting to wear through. We'd been en route to the front lines for three months now: three months of jumping with endless bouts of tedium between while our jump capacitors charged. There was no sign of the enemy, but we often ran drills and wargames with the other ships in the carrier group.

We got better, but it was clear we were still the rookie even though we were as experienced as the rest. What cred we'd gained from being fired upon and surviving dissipated after our first few losses and people remembered we weren't actually that good. Captain Trivedi's tone after these exercises became more and more clipped, demanding why her orders were not carried out with the kind of speed and accuracy she required. I saw how the crew worked though. They were doing their best. And while I still admired the Captain more than anyone else on the ship, occasionally even I could see how some of her orders tripped over themselves.

I stayed away from the combat bridge — at first. I made it about a month, but a surprise drill caught me already in the room, so I kind of stayed. It wasn't like there was any real danger. The blips and lines on the tactical screens were just simulated. Being back was intoxicating, or at least what I imagine intoxicated feels like. The screen was all that mattered. I pretended the input was coming from my own hands and not Gremy's or Robinson's two decks away.

Ling's face even left my awareness for the first time since the battle. We were atomized that fight, as we'd been almost every time, but Robinson had done an okay job, better than before. It made me feel like I'd performed well, though in my gyros I knew I could sit in her chair and keep the Harpy safe.

That night, I felt just as I had after the real battle. What jubilation I'd experienced during and immediately after the exercise evaporated quicker than an exotic particle. How could I have been so reckless as to desert my post again, even if the engagement had been fake? How could I have forgotten Ling's face, if only for a few moments? The next day I didn't wear my human hands. I didn't return to the combat bridge for a while after that.

Eventually its gravity proved too strong, however. Two weeks later, I was back. Other than when I was drawing, it was the only place I felt at home with myself.

We arrived at the front after five full months of travel. The mood on the ship turned grim the closer we got, not helped by our poor showings in the mock battles. Our strike group was assigned to a position on the spinward front, where absolutely nothing was happening.

Thousands of ships comprised the fleet, each carrier or battle group spread out half a jump from the next. Interdiction buoys formed a wall of distorted space along the front. If they tried to

get past us, they'd be yanked from their warp and up to five strike groups could converge on the threat. I'd hate to be on the other end of that kind of power. It was a good system, and one that had served us well in the hundred or so years the Sol Commonwealth had been at war with the Maaketor Ascendancy. Our enemy didn't field massive fleets, so this kind of net caught most incursions. Occasionally, the Admiralty would order our front line to jump. At this rate, in another twenty years we'd have them surrounded.

The Maaketor Ascendancy was a nasty piece of work. Its silicone-based lifeforms weren't just extremely tough; they were extremely mean. They had a nasty religion of sorts that told them any non-silicon-based life was an abomination. The Maaketor had killed three colonies before the Admiralty had gotten its act together and started pushing back. Earth was no longer in immediate danger, but the Admiralty said they ignored every peace offer, so we couldn't rest until the Maaketor were wiped out.

Now that I thought about it, I was probably safe from the Maaketor, since I had a silicon chip for a brain. Still, that didn't change the fact they were genocidal assholes.

The Harpy's position on the line was a dead zone. I should have been happy for the quiet, but boredom had me almost wishing for a fight. I couldn't reconcile my excitement to be a part of the war with the feelings I'd experienced when we were in that first engagement. I think it was fear, or at least my nearest equivalent. That fear and excitement could be warring in my chips like the Sol Commonwealth was with the Maaketor seemed like a gross oversight of the AI that designed me.

I wasn't the only one who was bored. After the initial flurry of excitement that spread through the ship like fever, everyone settled into the routine we'd gotten used to on the journey. Drills, maintenance, waiting, and more drills. The captain was often in a foul mood, no doubt wanting a better position on the line. She pushed us, hard. We'd drill against AI opponents when the Fredrico II wasn't leading an exercise. The call to battle stations seemed as common as the watch change.

I suppose we should have been grateful. Our group did improve, if slowly. We even won a couple of mock engagements against our neighbors. Those moments filled me with joy, as I wheeled around the deck, high-fiving everyone I could. That's when I felt most like crew, a bit of their collateral victory splashing onto me.

At night I would draw the battles as if they'd been real, ships firing waves of Bodkins, PDC chains glinting in the sun, and lasers flashing through clouds of screening chaff. My sketches tended toward the heroic — I never liked drawing the ships exploding.

Once, after a particularly pleasing victory, I accessed footage of Engineering Control and sketched the crew mid-battle. Chief Engineer Rocha was surprised when I showed him the drawing on a small, polished sheet of aluminum. He was quiet at first, and I knew if I looked at my system data I'd see my processors spiking. He hated it. It was just some crude imitation of what a human could do. Or maybe I'd drawn him a few kilos too heavy. Or maybe he found the concept of a DORT producing any kind of art, no matter how amateur, grotesque.

I called up my internal clock and saw that it had only been 2.8 seconds since he'd taken the drawing, not actually six years. A broad smile appeared under his bristly mustache. "Hey, this is pretty good, Dorte! You do this yourself?"

I nodded slightly, still unsure. Was he making fun of me? Or, worse, pitying?

“Hey, Ganim, get over here. Look what Dorte did.”

The second engineer stood, groaning like her joints might crack into dust. She’d made a home for herself quickly, fitting in with an ease I could barely grasp but tried to emulate. Ganim joined us and took a moment to squint at the piece of scrap metal. “What’s this?”

Rust. She hates it too.

“It’s okay,” I said, reaching for it. “I’ll toss it in the recycler. Sorry to bother you.”

“Hang on,” Ganim said. She tapped the metal, allowing the light to reflect off the etched lines. I could see every flaw in the drawing, and I knew they could too. Everything was comprised of straight lines. Curves were difficult for me. Straight lines made etching easier and besides, I liked the look of it. Hundreds of little dashes formed each curve of Ganim’s face, with deeper scoring and cross-hatching meant to show an estimation of shadow in the folds of her hijab.

Up close, I could see the illusion crumble. It was a dumb idea to begin with. Why would the crew want a picture of them, let alone an amateur scribble by a DORT? If they wanted a picture, they’d just take one with a datapad.

Ganim traced the lines of the drawing. Her face lit up, and she turned to me. “You did this?”

I nodded. “Really you-”

“It’s great!” she exclaimed. “Hey everyone, look what Dorte made for us.”

Those moments of camaraderie were short-lived though. No one would tell me what was going on - I was just a DORT, and what happened outside of Deck-3 wasn’t any of my business. I wasn’t even part of the ship’s hierarchy, since officially I was more akin to a vac-bot than a crewmember. A pet or quirky mascot at best. But if I just kept at it, kept wearing my hands, eventually they’d see my faceplate as actual expression, not just a simulacrum.



Word was there was heavy fighting on the anti-spinward flank. After a few months on the front - a wholly boring, painfully dull front - I was finally making some progress with the crew. Even Pennt was calling me Dorte more often than not. Almost every division on Deck-3 had requested a drawing. The reactor crew had asked for several - there were over a dozen members, and each wanted a portrait. They hung the sheets of metal on the wall of the reactor in an ever-growing collage. My best work hung in Engineering Control’s meeting room.

We drilled so often there was almost no time to keep the Harpy in fighting condition. Her makers had built her quick rather than sturdy, and I was always fixing one overloaded circuit or other. The reactor spat out plenty of power, but sometimes the regulators weren’t able to handle the excess.

Captain Trivedi would order stress tests to simulate the conditions of battle. The only problem was, her stress tests eclipsed actual combat requirements on the systems. She’d fire all lasers, have our grav generator max out, and steer the ship in what were probably devilishly evasive maneuvers. Invariably something would break, and the Captain would fly into a rage, ordering our deck to fix whatever had busted and ensure it didn’t happen again. The grumbling I heard echoed my own

thoughts: if she didn't want the ship to break, she should stop breaking it. I got really good at quick fixes and am pretty sure I knew my way around a Destroyer better than any other DORT.

I'd catch snippets of rumor from the crew. We were holding the line against the Maaketor Ascendancy, but the attacks were ceaseless, chipping away at our resolve and resources. It was unlike anything we'd experienced in forty years. I thought we should take the fight to them, but I guess there's a reason I'm just a DORT and not an admiral. The fighting never seemed to come near our carrier group, until one day it did.

Klaxons blared, but not simply the alarm of battle. It was the combat jump alarm. My arms flung out of the tangle of cables they were buried in so fast a bundle of sparking wire came with it. "Shit!" I released the electronics from my claw and switched off my soldering finger. The crew would have to do without their external view monitors for the time being. It's not like they'd need them anyway - by the time a human eye registered a missile it would have already hit the ship. I had an extra couple milliseconds, but if we were going to die, I'd just as soon not watch.

I had to get to the manufactory. Our last 'stress test' had burnt out the jump drive controller. The systems aren't directly connected, so how a power surge had reached the drive was beyond me. Maybe a software issue. The excess load had melted the controller, leaving us without a jump drive. Since that wasn't something a ship was usually expected to break, we didn't have a spare on hand. The printers in the manufactory wouldn't be done for another seven hours. If I diverted the entire capacity of the plant, I might be able to cut a few hours off that — better than nothing.

CHENG Rocha was already there, speaking with Captain Trivedi on a viewscreen. His face was scrunched up with worry, the tips of his ears red and mustache twitching. "I understand, Captain, but the manufactory only works so fast. There is nothing I can do to speed it up." He turned at the sound of the automatic door whooshing open and gave me a nod. "It should be complete by the end of shift."

"And meanwhile, the Federico II and the rest of our group is converging on the threat, at risk because we are not there. We're the only ship that didn't make the jump."

"As you say, Captain. In the meantime, we'll harden our systems so when we make the jump we'll come in hot."

"Make sure you do." The screen went dark.

CHENG Rocha rubbed his face with his hands. It was an unguarded moment, perhaps one he wouldn't have showed me if I was a regular part of the crew. He exhaled in a great puff, stood, and slapped his thighs. "We need to speed this up, Dorte. I got it down an hour by diverting the Deck-2 pump replacements — we'll have to start those over when all this is done, but they can wait."

"Good thinking, CHENG. I was on my way to do just that."

"It's not enough. By the time we finish the parts and install it, the battle will be over, won or lost."

"We should still try, CHENG."

"Of course. Think you can help me eek a few more minutes out of these pieces of crap?"

Twenty minutes later we'd shaved another hour off the completion time. It would still take two hours to complete the parts, but I could save time on the install by prepping the system for repair.

I headed to the core of Deck-3 so I could help Engineer Ganim shut down the reactor. The controller, when complete, was very delicate. CHENG Rocha and I concurred that we shouldn't risk another power surge, as unlikely as it was, until the module was installed and tested. As long as it didn't need to move or shoot, the Harpy could run on battery power for days. All the shooting was happening a jump away. We would be fine for an hour.

That was when a Maaketor Ascendancy fleet jumped into our system. The Harpy went on an even higher alert than before. Lights pulsed red, the klaxon sounded again, and Engineer Ganim's eyes went very wide, their whites shining in the strange light. "We're fucked," she whispered.



Death didn't come immediately, much to my surprise. It turns out having our power systems shut down saved us, at least for the moment. Modern ship hulls emit almost no infrared radiation. When you're in a fight you want to present as few data points to the enemy as possible — a big, hot chunk of metal is a sure-fire way of making sure someone lobs a missile at you. Without either our drive or the reactor online, we probably looked like an asteroid.

At first, no one dared move. It was like they could hear us if we so much as whispered. I wanted to scream at the klaxon to shut the hell up before it got us killed. Sense returned to us at once, and a flurry of activity overtook the ship.

I, of course, found myself in the combat bridge, pouring over the readouts from our passive sensors. This wasn't some scouting group, or even a strike force. This was a full-on battle fleet. And they'd jumped in right on top of us. The first thing they'd done is launch a missile at our interdiction buoy, destroying the thing that had pulled them out of warp and clearing the path for them to continue.

I'd never even heard of an enemy fleet this size. The Maaketor Ascendancy were better known for ambushes, or hit-and-run strikes, like the one we had experienced. They were dispersed chaos, never cooperating in large groups. A proper fleet was a troubling development.

The attack that lured the rest of our carrier group away must have been a ruse. It would have drawn strike groups from the surrounding zones, leaving a gap in our line big enough for this fleet to get through unopposed. Ganim was right - we were fucked.

The mood on Deck-3 was grim. While we weren't privy to all the information the Bridge had, we were the next best thing. We knew the Harpy's systems and could see where power was being drawn and which systems were either brought online or shut down to preserve battery. If the Captain wasn't damning the torpedoes it meant we didn't have a comet's chance in a supernova.

I helped Engineering Control adjust systems as requested by the Bridge, and then we moved to our stations. I raised my head to the wall of drawings, just visible through the open hatch of the meeting room. Red light caught the etchings, making my art feel darker and more urgent. Smiles turned into grimaces, laughing turned to screams. I wanted to take them down, but everyone else was focused on the conversation. I let it be.

“We don’t have to fight them all,” Engineer Ganim said. “We just have to delay them until the rest of the fleet can get here to help.” There were a few nods around the room, but they were hesitant.

“How do you think we’re going to do anything but fight them all?” Nguyen, a systems tech said. “It’s not like they’ll come at us one at a time. One ship can’t stop a fleet of this size.”

“All we need to do is keep disrupting their warp bubble,” Ganim said. “If we’re causing trouble in the system, they won’t risk a warp. If we hold long enough the rest of our ships might get here.”

“We’ll never last that long!”

CHENG Rocha stood, quieting the room. “As soon as the Harpy registered enemy contact it sent a jump drone. Their wake would have kept their sensors garbled enough to miss it. We’ll have backup soon.”

“Not soon enough,” Engineer Ganim said. “We need to act. The Maaketor are faster than us. If they get this fleet past our line, what will stop them from punching all the way to Karlinta City? And after that, Earth?”

She was right. If their dives are the same as their other ships, they’d finish forming a warp bubble in six hours. The Maaketor used different faster-than-light technology than we did. No matter how you cut it, a tremendous amount of energy needed to be spent to travel between stars. We liked to rip through it, storing power in massive capacitors before discharging it all at once. It was imprecise, and occasionally explodey, but cheap to produce and quicker to charge. The Maaketor, on the other hand, preferred to warp space itself. It took a long time to build a gravitational bubble, and it was very delicate, but once you did you could travel further and faster than our jump drives. Only our numbers and line of interdiction buoys had kept them contained.

“We need to slow them down.” Everyone turned to look at me, which was when I realized I was the one who spoke. Shit. Me and my big speaker. I had to think fast. Thankfully one of my strong suits. “You’re right, Nguyen, we can’t win in a straight fight. I don’t think anyone thinks that. But I have an idea.”

“So, you’ve joined us at your station this time,” a voice sounded from behind me. It was Pennt.

I turned my head 180 degrees, keeping my torso facing forward. He hated that. “Of course, sir. We’re in a combat situation.”

Pennt scoffed. Sir, this is the first time Dorte’s been at her station proper in a month. I’ll even bet she swung through the Combat Bridge on her way here just to take a peek at what’s going on.”

“It’s all right,” CHENG Rocha said. “She’s here now.”

He defended me. And hadn’t called me ‘it’. And he had sounded so natural. Just for a moment, the shock of his words made me forget the danger just outside our hull.

“Sir, I don’t believe we should be taking combat advice from a maintenance DORT. Respectfully, it’s not even our place to be discussing this. We need to let the Bridge-”

“What we need to do, Warrant Officer Pennt, is think of some creative solutions. The Captain may not require our guidance, but we should anticipate that we may be asked for an opinion. I for one, would like to hear what Dorte has to say.”

“CHENG, I just think-”

“You are dismissed, Warrant Officer Pennt. See to your own post.”

He gave me one more glare before he left. I gave him a wink, allowing a tiny bit of static to cross my face so he couldn't be sure. His face turned the color of a red dwarf star and he stormed out. The maintenance bay was a pretty dull place during a fight.

“Go ahead, Dorte. This had better be good, for all our sakes.”



CHENG Rocha liked my idea — no surprise there. When I finished describing it, they set to quickly fine tuning the details. The CHENG then brought it to the XO, who in turn brought it to Captain Trivedi. Before we knew it, we had once again diverted the printers in the manufactory to creating something new. Or some *things* new. The jump controller wouldn't do us much good.

Launching live missiles would give away our position, so that was out. We couldn't count on hitting an enemy ship at this range with our railgun either. The rounds were almost the size of me and not much more than a hunk of ferrous metal. All their power came from their velocity. One of those rounds could punch clean through a starship faster than even my sensors could register. That was the scalpel of our armament.

I figured we'd take that scalpel and turn it into a shotgun. We were only one ship, but we had the element of surprise. Even at the speed of a railgun shot, it would be an hour between the time of launch and contact. We could shoot off a few dozen rounds before our batteries gave out and before the enemy even knew something was coming their way. Gremy's missiles had given me the idea. If we adjusted the power of the shots, we could not only squeeze a few extra rounds in there, but we could time it so they all arrived simultaneously. It would take a little longer, but the more we delayed the battle the greater chance our allies would arrive.

Even then, I wasn't convinced we would do much damage. One or two shots might hit, but only if we were lucky. The enemy was in a defensive formation, but they were still a small target in the grand scheme of things, and individual ships even more so. That's where the genius of my plan came into it.

Two hours later, we waited with bated breath — at least some of us — while the Harpy shuddered with every railgun discharge. The captain had us cruising at a low speed using only our maneuvering thrusters. They weren't likely to show up on the enemy's sensors, but the movement would change the vectors of our incoming fire, hopefully leading to more confusion. When things started exploding, the Maaketor wouldn't know which way to look.

As we went along, the Captain also seeded our trail with missiles, taking a play out of the Maaketor's own strategy. She left them floating, scattering as best they could, ready to activate at the Harpy's command. She sent most of them tumbling toward the fleet, but kept a couple back, just in case.

I wanted so badly to go to the combat bridge. I longed to see the little shapes cross the system toward the unknowing Maaketor. I wanted to see those numbers scroll along the side of the screen, telling me in detail where each round of my Franken-shots was.

Most of all, I wanted to watch the railgun shots split open, unleashing a hailstorm of antimatter point defense rounds in a cloud big enough to swamp the enemy that had killed Ling.

My processors aren't powerful enough to compute all those trajectories and how the gravities of each ship would affect the rounds. Only the Harpy could do that. And here I was, in Engineering Control, standing against a wall with my hand clamped around a grab-bar at the back of the room. There wasn't anything to do. Even if the enemy somehow spotted us in the next few minutes, it'd be an eternity before they, or any of their ordinance, came within range.

By my best guess, there were about two minutes before contact with our little surprise. Plenty of time to sneak a peek. I glanced around the room, careful to maintain a neutral projection on my faceplate. Professional curiosity, just making sure nothing needed my attention. Everyone was engrossed in their own work, checking their stations and making little adjustments. It'd be so much easier if I had a job right now. My metal brain isn't meant to sit still.

I jerked my head slightly to the side, as if hearing something. That was ridiculous, of course — if anyone wanted to reach me, they'd just transmit straight to my antenna. But I've found humans are more comfortable around you if you mimic their body language. Putting my hand to the side of my head, I nodded once for the sake of anyone watching and unclipped my hand from the wall.

No one made an issue of my departure. Ganim slid me a look, but her little smile gave me confidence to keep going.

Before I knew it, I was on the combat bridge, empty as always. I rushed to my console and peered at the information scrolling across the screen. Ho. Ly. Shit. The Maaketer Ascendancy fleet looked even bigger than it had when I first saw it. They loomed, *right there*, a great blob sitting in the middle of my display, only 180,000 kilometers off our starboard side, gathering energy for the warp that would take them beyond the reach of our front line.

We had to burst those bubbles. If we disrupted them violently enough, it could damage their warp engine, buying more time for backup to arrive.

Thirty-eight nearly invisible green dots were rushing toward the enemy from slightly varied angles. We'd moved perhaps five hundred kilometers since starting, basically not at all. There was no way the Maaketer wouldn't know which direction they'd come from. Instead of hiding our position, as I'd expected was the Captain's goal, she had moved us simply to offer our railguns a wider spread. They were going to know just where to look for us.

And that's when the rounds arrived at their break point. Thirty-eight railgun Franken-rounds split down the middle of their ferrous shell and unleashed several thousand antimatter PDC rounds.

My screen filled with a wonderful, beautiful green cloud. It was almost the size of the enemy fleet, though I cautioned myself that this was simply a visualization. Mass-wise, the shots were just a rounding error. But that little bit would pack a punch.

With seconds to react, just one of the enemy ships was able to cancel its bubble and bring its drives online. It hardly moved before the green cloud slammed into the wall of alloy, ripping through anything it touched like it was no thicker than one of my sketches.

One enemy ship instantly died — a cruiser. Then a destroyer roughly the same size as the Harpy. Each time a PDC round made contact the antimatter inside annihilated whatever it touched, leading to a massive release of energy. Armor plating was torn from hulls and wounded ships vented atmosphere into the cold of space. The ship that managed to start its drive had one of

its engines sheered clean off, sending it careening on an uncontrolled vector and eventually into the path of another ship.

It was gorgeous chaos, like nothing I'd ever seen. I wished Ling was here to see it.

Don't get me wrong, we were still fucked. The Maaketor Ascendancy fleet was massive, and while we'd inflicted far more damage than should have been possible, at first glance it looked like we'd disabled only about fifteen percent of their fleet. The rest, amongst them the massive battleship, were powering up their engines and scattering. Another barrage of our rail-shotgun wouldn't work, even if we had the power.

I needed to get back to my post. Just as I entered the control room, the klaxon started blaring again, drowning out all sound and thought as I was transported back to that day. I forced the memory to retreat.

CHENG Rocha was already turning toward Ganim as his console lit up with a priority message from the bridge. "Bring our engines online and do it quick. Dorte, get behind the plant and make sure the boot runs smoothly. Do it now."

Ganim and I shared a look as we rushed to our tasks.

The Maaketor had spotted us.



"Hurry it up, Dorte," Ganim said.

"I'm going as fast as I can," I transmitted back in a tone calmer than a Lagrange point. One of the benefits of being a robot is that I didn't have to worry about stress or a lack of breath strangling my voice. We could be moments from exploding and no one would know any different.

Which was pretty much what was happening.

I muttered a curse through my speakers and dug my arm deeper into the crevice behind the reactor's starboard bulkhead. The view from my hand wrench's cam showed carbon scoring around a cluster of components. The exchanger was bad again — it had blown when Ganim went through the engine boot. It was always breaking, but now was *not* the time.

With a few quick *zziiipps* of my wrench I had the component loose. It clattered in the gap before landing on the floor. I tossed in a replacement, snatched it out of the air, and secured it before Ganim had a chance to ask me for another update. "Done," I transmitted. "Be gentle with it."

"Like we have time," came the reply. Still, my own readout showed the power levels increase no faster than protocol allowed. When it was fully powered on, I let my faceplate project a smile.

The mood was tense in Engineering Control. Now that the reactor was back online, they were just finishing the startup sequence for the engines. Measurements and indicators scrolled along the screens ringing the stations. As soon as it was ready, CHENG Rocha himself activated the main drives.

The Harpy leapt, her gravity generator needing a moment to compensate for our sudden change in velocity. We burned at maximum power directly away from the Maaketor, buying what little time we could.

The ship shuddered again and again as the captain released a swarm of Bodkins from the hold. It must have been almost all we had left. It wouldn't be enough.

We were fast, but they were faster. It took all my in-board programming to keep the ship's power systems running. Even though we maintained our plant, the simple fact was the Harpy had been built in a rush out of cheap parts. The time for jumping was past, so I had the printers in the manufactory running overtime to produce replacement reactor components.

The power readouts showed each staccato laser blast as our gunners shot down creeping missiles. I could tell the size of each flight by the amount of power they were drawing. They were firing everything available, not just from one sector of the hull, but from all over. They routinely maxed out the power our plant could give, cutting deeper and deeper into our batteries.

The first missile hit us port-side aft, right near the spot Ling died. The reinforced armor plating we'd welded in place after that hit probably saved us.

The second missile didn't actually detonate. The ship rocked as it slammed into our port bow. Warning lights and breeches flashed on my status readout. Two maneuvering thrusters blinked out. Air bled through half a dozen cracks on Deck 1. Robinson must have burned out the warhead, but the kinetic impact might have still killed us.

CHENG Rocha's voice cut through the noise. "Danvers, Nguyen, assist damage control on Deck 1. Guo, get the Combat Bridge prepped. Dorte and Ganim, keep that engine running no matter what. Get me more Delta-V."

That wasn't a good idea, but it wasn't like we had many options left. With our jump drones dispatched, help was on the way — hopefully when they got here when we weren't just a cloud of hot metal. We already should have seen reinforcements from the spinward flank, which told me either they'd decided not to throw themselves into a losing battle, or they were already engaged with a fight of their own. The Maaketor must have sent distracting forces to either side of our position in order to create the gap. By my internal clock, there was just over an hour before we could expect major assistance, and that was if our side had won.

Systems were failing all over the ship, despite my best efforts. Power was draining through life support, so I shut it down. Some of us would be a little chilly, but an hour or two of stale air — assuming we didn't get hit with another missile — wouldn't kill anyone.

The connection between the reactor and engines was green for once. So was the power energizing our defenses. Our biggest immediate problem was that the missiles had damaged our maneuvering thrusters, making any kind of meaningful evasive action impossible. With that out of the picture, there was just one option: go *fast*.

A door opened somewhere, the sound muted as it passed through the corridors and bulkheads. I usually tune out ambient ship noise, but I couldn't this time. There was groaning. A clatter, and someone screamed. "Everyone to your post," the captain barked. Her voice was strained, as if she too was in pain. "DORT-1," she called, "find a route to the medbay for the injured — I can't have them on the bridge."

"Yes, Ma'am." I transmitted to her what I knew of the ship's damage so she could find a way to Deck-2 that wasn't blocked by vacuum or fire.

I heard another door *whoosh*, and the sounds of the wounded grew louder as they entered Engineering Control. I turned from my position at the plant — I couldn't help it. Miller was being helped into the meeting room, which was about to become a makeshift infirmary. Gremy dragged Reynolds, the navigation officer, behind. There was something wrong with her leg. A piece of her calf was missing, torn off from some piece of shrapnel. Blood, dark against the pristine white deck, trailed a path behind her.

As they entered the room, I saw a flash of light against my sketches hanging on the wall. I looked away.

I needed to make the Harpy go faster. There was only one thing I could think of, and it was a terrible idea. I clipped on a new arm and with a few jolts of my solder gun I bypassed the reactor's safety regulator. Energy flooded the system, well past its design parameters. The fact that the plant often needed to be shut down before even reaching its designed limit wasn't lost on me. I just hoped the emergency shutdown would still work when the time came. Although, maybe our eventual fusion explosion would take a few of the Maaketor with us.

"You've got your Delta-V, CHENG," I transmitted. "Burn it up."

No reply came, but I did see the reactor's readings spike as CHENG Rocha sucked more juice for the engines. The Harpy's engines flared, and we bolted ahead of our pursuers.

Keeping half my attention on the plant readings, I returned to Engineering Control, now connected by an open hatch to the Combat Bridge. Captain Trivedi stormed into view, coordinating the different stations. Blood was smeared across her face and her right sleeve was burned through, red flesh appearing beneath. She held onto a grab bar to steady herself, not because of her injuries, but because the artificial gravity generators weren't meant to keep up with this kind of thrust.

The Captain turned to look at the wall screen, and I positioned myself so I could see as well. The battle was arrayed clear as space. It was even worse than I'd expected, but at least it was worse for both sides. Our first strike had inflicted more damage than I thought. The majority of their fleet had formed a protective corral around their battleship. There was a lot of small ship activity — repair drones and shuttlecraft transferring personnel from the dead ships to the living. They hadn't yet formed new warp bubbles, but that'd be coming soon.

We were being pursued by a sizable detachment: a cruiser escorted by a pair of frigates and half a dozen corvettes. There must have been more, because a trail of derelict Maaketor ships led back to their main fleet. Still, the cruiser alone would have been more than a match for us in a fair fight. That was the one that had been chucking all those missiles.

The enemy was just now passing the area where we'd begun this fight. Another swarm of missiles was riding us, five minutes from impact. In the brief respite the captain was conferring with the Gremy and the missile crew. Robinson was at her post but slumped over. Blood had trickled down her chair and pooled on the floor.

"Shit, Robinson," I said, rushing to help. "Captain, Gunner Robinson is injured."

"Damn." She looked up at us. "Take her to the others."

"Yes, Captain."

She turned back to the missile crew. “Shove something explosive down their tailpipes.” Grim smiles spread around the crew. She patted the top of Gremy’s console and returned to her position in front of the screen. Gremy executed a short command. The cache of Broadblades we’d dropped earlier roared to life and hurtled toward the pursuing enemy.

Robinson was still alive, all but unconscious. Something had pierced her side. Her wound oozed blood, dark and cruel. She felt as light as hydrogen and just as ephemeral.

She muttered as I rushed her to the makeshift medbay, but even I couldn’t make out her words. I recorded it anyway, just in case they were her last. I placed her next to Reynolds and told the medic what I could.

I made it back to the control room just in time to see the show. Our Broadblades caught up to the pursuing ships. Most of the flight had been shot down during their brief journey, but the remaining warheads made up for it. Two reached a frigate, and one each reached a pair of corvettes. Their red ovals blipped off the screen. The cruiser, having split its defenses in order to aid its companions, died when the three remaining missiles simultaneously struck it aft, initiating a chain reaction that sent explosions up its length and left nothing but a hollowed-out skeleton of a ship.

Captain Trivedi allowed the bridge to cheer for a moment before cutting it off. We were still in dire straits, and now we were out of tricks.

The death of their companions only seemed to galvanize our pursuers. They continued their attack, firing a steady stream of PDC rounds to corral us down a straight path. The joke was on them — we couldn’t dodge anyway.

Yet more missiles. Fast ones.

“Where’s my defense,” the Captain called. She looked at Robinson’s station. “Why hasn’t someone taken over point defense? Where’s Okamoto?”

“Dead, Captain,” someone called. “The fire, Captain.”

“Shit. DORT-3, switch Lieutenant Robinson’s station to auto-control. It’ll have to do.”

I didn’t even care that she didn’t use my name. She needed my help. During a battle! I only wished I’d be able to enjoy the moment for a few minutes before exploding.

I wiped blood from Robinson’s screen, wincing inside as I did so. I didn’t want my chance to come at the cost of her dying. Enthusiasm drained, I forced myself to focus. The situation was even more dire than the big screen showed. According to the numbers, a dozen missiles were inbound. The ship’s automatic defenses were already active - Robinson had managed to do that before passing out. But only half of the laser banks were tracking correctly, the rest were off by a parsec. They’d have to be aimed manually.

Clipped to my side were my human hands. I swapped my utility wrench for the hands in half a second and cleared the screen again, letting Robinson’s blood drip off my forearm onto the seat. The missiles were only a minute from impact. One disappeared from the screen as the auto-defenses took it out. Eleven left.

I took control. I estimated I could destroy eight in the remaining time. They were still out of range for any single laser, but if I combined them it might be enough power to burn through their shell. I redirected the lasers to converge on the lead missile, coaxing the damaged banks into

alignment. Twenty percent of the lasers still didn't respond, but I couldn't tell if they'd been destroyed or if there was something else wrong. There wasn't enough time to reboot.

Steering the aim was more difficult than it looked — I had to give Robinson credit. I had the advantage of a computerized brain though. It took me a precious two seconds to finally zero-in on my target. Five seconds after that, the combined power of the lasers burned through its armor and the missile detonated.

I moved on to the next, more seconds wasted trying to center the aim. Then the next. And the next. Red triangles vanished. I could scream it was so slow. They remaining targets split, two going for our starboard side and one for the already-damaged port. My defenses were almost non-existent there. Seven seconds until impact. Not nearly enough time.

“Take the port side. Aim well.”

I jumped, not expecting the captain's voice to come from behind me. She was leaning over my screen. I'd been so engrossed in my own battle I hadn't been paying attention to anything else on the bridge. “Captain, I don't have a shot.”

“You will. Helmsman, initiate.”

I shifted my aim faster than I'd done the entire battle. At this range it would only take a moment to destroy the missile, but none of the lasers could reach. What the hell was the Captain thinking?

The ships engines cut out.

We were thrown forward in our seats as the grav generator overcompensated. Just as I was about to curse the assholes who'd built our ship, every starboard-forward thruster on the Harpy fired at once, flinging the ship sideways as it barrel-rolled 180 degrees.

It was all I could do to shift my aim to follow. I did it though, and just as the laser turned my target to a heap of slag, the engines reactivated.

The Harpy's exhaust plume, a hundred-meter long tail of fire as hot as a pulsar, scythed through the remaining two missiles, leaving nothing behind but vapor.

The shift in momentum was so intense the grav generator popped. Anything not strapped down, including the Captain shot across the room with enough force to dent walls. Every human in the room blacked out. Gremy's chair ripped from its mount careened left until it lodged in the port hatch.

Power spiked across the ship. Even my own system strained, a gyro cracking and throwing my world into further chaos.

It didn't last long though, because then the Harpy split in half.



We were dead in the vacuum. If there was a bright side, at least our pursuers thought we were dead too. They made a quick pass, looping around in case we made any sudden movements. Any detailed scanning would show our reactor offline and the few remaining systems running on battery power alone. They didn't bother wasting a missile — they had use for later.

I unstrapped myself, almost falling when my gyroscope malfunctioned. There were only seconds until the two ship halves tumbled out of range of my antennae. Bulkheads would have already been closed during the fight, so the only air we lost would have been in cabins and corridors split by the break. I was afraid to look at the ship's roster.

The DORTs were probably the only ones awake - the humans would have passed out from the G's. I sent a data burst to the others containing a status update. DORT-2 sent one back to us with information on how to stabilize the crew. I also sent them some rudimentary information on the Harpy's power systems. With the reactor dark and most of the ship not attached to it besides, they'd need to carefully manage their batteries. Hopefully rescue was coming.

I spent the next ten minutes triaging crew. A few woke up, including the Captain, but they were groggy and injured. She had a dislocated shoulder but didn't seem hurt beyond that. Pretty amazing, considering how hard she fell. I popped it back into place and worked up a sling.

The damage was horrendous. I located far fewer crew than I'd hoped for, gathering them in the makeshift medbay now that my piece of the Harpy didn't have a Deck 2.

When they were all gathered and some awake enough to care for the rest, I found myself back on the combat bridge. It was empty, save for Captain Trivedi. The lights were red, dimmed even further than usual to preserve charge. She stared up at the status screen, the only readout still alive.

She turned as she heard me come in. "I hear you like to be called Dorte."

"Captain. Is everything okay?"

A small laugh that could have been a sob escaped her and she turned back to the screen. "You tell me," she said, gesturing. The red dots had gathered together near their jump point. With nothing left in the system to disrupt their bubble, they would be free to jump out of the area and past our line.

"We hurt them badly," I said.

"Not enough." On the screen, a sphere of exotic energy started to form around the Maaketor Fleet. In an hour they'd be gone. A fleet of our own would try to pursue, always playing catch-up. Earth had plenty of defenses, but it wouldn't send its patrol fleet after these ships. After all, what if this was a feint within a feint?

The colonies wouldn't be so lucky. The Maaketor would jump into orbit, lasso an asteroid, and then hurl it at a world. They lived underground, so they didn't care much if the surface of a world was reduced to molten soup for a time. Maybe one or two colonies would put up a fight, but they were counting on us.

I spent the next forty-five minutes working between the combat bridge and the reactor, trying to repair vital systems and stop leaking power wherever I could find it. I was about ready to cannibalize the vacbot power cells. The Captain never left the bridge, just stared up at the status screen, occasionally making notes on her datapad. Was she writing a battle report? As tenacious as she was, I couldn't believe she was devising yet another plan. Our laser banks weren't powerful enough to do damage at this range, even if we could power them. By the time anything else reached the Maaketor they'd be long gone.

The screen flickered and went out. "Damn it," the Captain said. Her voice was dull, lacking the snap I'd grown so used to. "Dorte, can you get this back online? I want to watch."

“Yes, Captain.” I shuffled to the screen, careful not to lose my balance. The screen wasn’t broken – some of the connections at the back were just loose. I fitted my wrench-hand. Most of the digits were still functional.

“That was good shooting.”

Can robots blush? I felt uncomfortable with the complement. “Thank you, Captain.” I wiggled each cable, keeping an eye on the screen for any changes.

“You shouldn’t have done it though. I can’t have my crew choosing when to follow orders and when they’d rather choose their own.”

“Crew, Captain? I’m not-”

“Consider this a warning,” she said. “When will you have the screen up?”

Her words were still ringing in my sensors when I found the bad cable. Its socket had been bent during the battle, so I held it in place and just welded the damn thing.

The screen blinked mostly back to life, dead pixels obscuring spots here and there. There was something wrong with the color as well. All it should have shown was black and red. Instead, there was a cloud of green obscuring the red. “Sorry, Captain,” I said. “Must be something with the settings. I’ll see if I can fix it.”

“Dorte. Look again.”

Something in her voice gave me pause. I peered up at the screen, stepping back to get a better angle. There was, indeed, a lot of green. It was moving too, in formation. Our fleet. They’d made it.



Just a few more minutes and The Maaketor would have jumped out of the system, beyond our reach. It ended up a bloody battle despite the damage we inflicted on the fleet, but we still won.

I’ve been on the Federico II for a few weeks now. It’s not the same as the Harpy, but at least many of the Harpy’s crew are here too. The rest were scattered around the fleet, posted to whatever ship needed them most. Like the Goshawk.

The Captain’s here too, at least while she waits for a replacement ship. They say one’s coming with the next wave of reinforcements.

I’m proud of my crew. They all got medals after the fight – the Harpy was the toast of the fleet. I’m just a DORT though, so it was back to work for me. The Federico II suffered damage slugging it out with the Maaketor battleship, so there’s still plenty of cleanup. I haven’t even been able to draw – it’s driving me nutty. And you’d think the cubbys would be bigger on a carrier. But then, you might also think the Hero of the Harpy wouldn’t have to hot-bunk with a CORT.

A notice pops into my awareness, a message from Captain Trivedi. She wants to see me in her quarters on Deck 1. With relief, I detach my new scrubber arm, factory polish already stained with machine effluent. There’s not much interesting work for a DORT on a carrier, but things can always be scrubbed just a little more. Humans make sure of that.

CORT-3b looks up from his workbench, a bushy, vector-green eyebrow rising over a grizzled artificial face. He really leans into photorealism. I find it a little uncanny. I'd rather evoke than replicate.

A quick twist and a *click*. I wiggle my human fingers. "You've got to look good if you're going to Deck 1." I try out a couple new faces, even CORT-3b's. Doesn't feel right.

CORT-3b shrugs and gets back to tinkering with the Federico II's drone fleet. "Don't know why anyone would want to go there."

I've never been on the Federico II's command deck. My paint's still in the Harpy's livery, and I do my best to hide the dent in my leg whenever I pass an officer or one of the resident CORTs. Their gazes last an average of 1.2 seconds longer than I'm comfortable with. Twice I'm asked to produce credentials. I can only imagine what they think of a beat-up, paint-chipped DORT-3 on the command deck of a Falkner carrier.

I reach the hatch to her cabin and take a second to look over myself. I'm not perfect but will have to do. The Captain is inside her officer's suite but not alone. Everyone else from the Harpy's contingent is here too. Smiles mark every face, though they all bear the same undercurrent of sorrow. That look wouldn't be going anywhere for a while. Still, their arms pull me in, slapping my metal plates like I'm one of them.

Someone grabs my hand and waggles it up and down. In the cluster I can't tell who it is. I just concentrate on not crushing it. What's my face doing? It's not stuck as CORT-3b's, is it? No, I must have changed it. I don't know what kind of face I'm projecting, but I hope it's a good one.

There's so much going on. I can't be quite sure where to turn, so I shuffle in a circle while my head rotates in the opposite direction, greeting people and grinning.

Someone eventually makes up my mind for me. A pair of hands — Engineer Ganim's — take hold of my shoulders and spin me to face the wall.

"Look, Dorte."

I swivel my head. Arrayed on the wall before me, decorating the Captain's private quarters like a Pompeiian mural are my sketches. Some are scorched and bent, stained by smoke, but they're here. My focus shifts as fast as it did during the fight. Even my portrait of Ling is here — the one where I finally got his smile right.

"I insisted they be recovered from the Harpy," the Captain says. "This is what we could find."

I'll have to stop by the Federico II's CORT repair facility, because my speech processor isn't working. Words fly through my head, fragments of sentences trying to fit together. But then I see something I missed during my first survey. And then all the words fled.

"Do you like it?" Ganim asks, concern mingling with amusement in her voice.

I just stared. Hung on the wall next to my art is the official crew portrait of Harpy, taken before we shipped out to the front line. Someone had taken an image of me from who knows where and spliced it into the image. That's me. With the crew. A part of the crew.

Eventually I'm able to squeak something out. "I love it. Why did you do this?"

"That's not all," the Captain said, stepping forward. Her arm is still in a sling, but she's dressed for the occasion. "CHENG Rocha?"

The Chief Engineer of the Harpy stepped forward, a small box in his non-bandaged hand. “We stole a little time from the Federico II’s manufactory, put this together for you.” He hands me the box. “It didn’t seem right, the Hero of the Harpy not getting a medal while the rest of us did.”

“I’m just a DORT though,” I mutter. The medal gleams, a golden image of the Harpy inside the Sol Commonwealth’s emblem. It’s a perfect replica of the medal everyone else received at last week’s ceremony. They even fitted the back with a little magnet.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the Captain scoffs. She takes the medal from my unresponsive fingers and snaps it to my chestplate. “You’re one of us. Now enjoy yourself. Our new ship is arriving tomorrow.”

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Artwork by Madeline Jacobus, a Portland based comic and storyboard artist. She mostly makes jokes about anxiety, but she also makes time to joke about her dog and action figure collection.

You can find her artwork here: <https://www.madelinejacobusart.com/>