

The Earth Fighter

James remembered the days when lunch was a good time. When the canteen was crowded and loud, filled with the self assurance that they were fighting on the winning side of the war. Now it was silent. The only remnant of the old days was the clink of four spoons on four scratched metal bowls. Four people left in the canteen. And James.

He hardly knew the four other men who sat at the table with him. They chose, by silent agreement, the table next to the large windows at the far side of the room that gave them a view of the stars outside. They would file in to the canteen, get their food, acknowledge each other by way of silent nods, then walk to their designated table, sit down, and look outside.

The war had been going on for many years now. The details of how it started, who they were fighting against, and even who they were fighting for, had blurred in James' mind. He was a pilot for the Earth Fighter's Front, but he didn't know the people he was fighting for. Each step of the war had felt logical at the time, like something important to be remembered. But now the big events were the only events that stuck in his mind: the destruction of the first planet, the loss of the first fleet of EFF space fighters, and the introduction of the humanoid drones to fight in place of dead humans.

He glanced at his dining companions. They never spoke much at lunch, except to exchange a few pleasantries. He couldn't remember their names.

James looked out the window at the tiny lights that shone in the darkness. He wondered how far away they were, and how long it took for the light to come to his eyes from those planets. Maybe they were planets long dead, destroyed by the endless conquest of the Earth Fighter's Front, and were now shining the million light year old light of a dead planet.

How much longer would this go on? He looked at the men sitting at the table with him. How long before they each disappeared, one by one, blown to bits by an enemy they couldn't even name? How long ago had it been since there had been a hundred men in the canteen? Then fifty, then thirty, then twenty, fifteen, ten, five.

They were all replaced by the drones. Faceless emotionless robots, designed to kill their enemies efficiently and without question. How long, James wondered, until he was the last one there, a lone human fighting alongside an army of robots?

The bell rang, announcing lunch's end and the group disbanded, without even a goodbye, to their various missions.

James watched them leave the canteen, him still sitting.

How long until one of them didn't return? One by one, the moment would come when the canteen had one more empty seat, a short memorial played on the overhead speakers, and a new drone was built to take his place.

It wouldn't be him next. As his four dining companions left, James decided he was done fighting in this pointless war. He was going to leave.

*Drone 586 has gone renegade. All drones are dispatched to find and locate Drone 586.
Drone 586 has gone renegade.*

The metallic buzz of a voice echoed through the canteen, bringing welcome news to James' ears. There were still a few defects in the drone system, which led to some of them 'going renegade', going missing from the stations where they were plugged in. James had heard rumors that they were working on fixing the drones through tests, but evidently they hadn't

worked out all the issues yet. With all the drones being dispatched to find Drone 586, it would be easy for him to slip away.

James threw his bowl into the washer and left the canteen in a rush, hoping to avoid the rush of drones looking for the renegade.

Deserting wasn't something he had considered before, but as if he had always had the plan prepared, he knew exactly what to do. The shuttle bay was his responsibility to monitor after lunch, and the shuttles in there were always charged and ready to launch. He had never been inside one of them, but he was confident they wouldn't be any harder than the ships he was used to flying.

The hallway outside the canteen had low ceilings and cold metallic walls. James spotted a pack of drones up ahead, marching towards him, in their eerie synchronized way. The drones were vaguely humanoid, beige, and exact replicas of each other with expressionless faces. He was surprised at how quick they had gotten here, since the canteen and the drones' holding bay were at opposite ends of the ship. Hopefully their search for the renegade drone would leave them distracted from him.

He hurried down the opposite direction wondering if he really was about to be free. Questions he had failed to consider earlier started popping up in his mind. Where would he go? Where was he from? Could he return to his family? Was there a family out there, somewhere, missing him? He could no longer hear the march of drones behind them, they must have turned down another hallway.

He turned left down another hallway, which, instead of feeling like another enclosed metal box, had a glass dome-like ceiling going down the entire hallway, giving him a view of the stars above.

He could almost see his reflection in the window, but it was too murky, and all his features meshed together into a beige blur.

What *did* he look like?

James stopped suddenly, frozen with panic. How could he not remember what he looked like? He tried to remember the last time he had seen his reflection, but the memory failed to appear.

How could he have forgotten where he came from too? And his family? Did he even know his own name?

James.

But James what?

The thump of the drones feet started to get louder again.

James calmed himself. Whatever was happening to him now, was due to stress. This existential crisis could be dealt with later.

He hurried down the hallway back to another metal-walled hall, feeling slightly claustrophobic, but comforted at the thought that he would soon be free and flying away.

The shuttle bay was down the next hallway. If there was something he hadn't forgotten, it was how to navigate himself around this ship.

He got to the end of the hallway and punched in the keycode.

The door to the shuttle bay slid open. He ducked in and spotted his getaway vehicle at the end of the bay. He was so close to freedom.

A hard rubbery hand clasped itself over his mouth, and another on the back of his neck. The shuttle bay tipped towards the ceiling and the floor flew towards his face as everything went black.

“Impressive. You took some liberties with the subject’s route to the shuttle bay, and the lack of personal history nearly crashed the system. But impressive nonetheless.”

A voice. A human voice. James wondered how long it had been since he had heard a human voice. He and the men at the canteen rarely spoke, and he never spoke when he was alone. This voice was unfamiliar, and James realized that besides the men he saw at the canteen and himself, there were no other humans onboard the ship. All their orders came through text form on message boards. Had this person been on board the ship the entire time? Or was this the voice of one of his dining companions? He tried to open his eyes but they felt like they were glued shut.

“We got some very interesting readings from it, and I assure you, we gained a lot of valuable information from this experiment.”

Another voice. James tried to force his eyes open again. Finally they slide open gently.

“It even wakes on its own. Doesn’t need to be turned on manually.” It was the first voice again, they sounded pleased. “If we had known this earlier we could have left it alone in the canteen to wake on its own.” There was a pause. “Yes, Anton, you have done very well. You can disconnect it now.”

James tried to speak but his throat felt empty, like there was nothing there. He opened his mouth and the sound of crunching metal broke out.

“Haven’t quite worked out the speech yet.” The second voice was apologetic.

“Oh, that’s fine. You’ve done very well. Now, wipe this experiment out of the memory base and return it to the holding bay.”

James felt a cold metal hand clamp down on his arm. He jerked it away, hitting something soft that cried out in pain. He looked at his arm, suddenly horrified. It looked human enough at first, but in the sudden sharp movement up into the light, he could see the words *DRONE 586* tattooed in black ink on his forearm.