I now had very few avenues of earning income. All work on ships in port were no longer paid and reclassified as educational time. I had been using that income to pay for my apartment and vending machine habit. By the fifth week of the term 10 tension on the station was at an all-time high. Then the worst possible news occurred.

The People’s Republic, another star empire, had attacked. It was a shock as they appeared allied with the Sapphire Empire. We had a 500 plus year of peace with the Republic, so this seemed opportunistic. In the seventh week another wave of recruits was called to active service. I got my notification on my PerCom. I was to report to duty on the Destiny’s Children. The ship was an old mercantile cargo freighter. I looked at the specs for the ship. 19 crew, 3rd generation FTL drives, no armament and no defense systems. It’s history showed it had been a transport to a religious colony when it was built. The colony failed and after a few years acting as a pirate ship the Destiny's Children was captured by the Union. I had three days to report and kind of regretted all the black marks I had gotten on my record.

I got my things in order and rather than wait reported with Eve immediately. It was a 3-hour shuttle ride to the ship parked in space on a high orbit of the second moon. The ship was the size of a large cruiser but that was mostly due to the hollow containers. The ship was structured to be in the back and pushed the containers through space. If the containers were removed it would show a large scaffold skeleton. My shuttle driver circled the old girl once for me before docking. I had checked the schematics during the trip. Five decks. The lowest was a cargo deck for cargo not in large containers. The next deck up was a passenger deck but looked like it was converted on this ship. Then there was the engineering deck. The fourth deck had crew and command and some small cargo bays for shuttles and special cargo. The top deck was fuel, water, sensors, and two specialized cargo ports. The history of the ship showed its mission profile as a colony transport and then as an inter system cargo hauler for the Union before being moth balled some 50 years ago.

The air inside was extremely stale and metallic. The only one on board was the newly minted captain, Samantha Kirov. She was very young, maybe 20, and had black hair and blue eyes. She asked me to report and I followed procedures in reporting for duty. Samantha was shocked with Eve, she thought she was another crew member before I explained she was a bot. We went to the ships cafeteria and sat down for a conversation.

I was the ships lead engineer. I had two subordinates a Grade 1 life support engineer and a Grade 1 propulsion engineer. Well that sucked. A ship this size should have 5 engineers with one being an FTL engineer. Sam’s staff had just 5 additional crew. First officer, sensor officer, navigator, and two logistics personal for moving the cargo. It was the absolute minimum crew for this ship to fly. We had 6 weeks before we were scheduled for our first run. The ship was to make runs for raw ore and return to this system for processing. Well at least the mission was easy.

With Eve in tow and assisting I accessed the state of the ship that was still waking up. The ship only had two ancient bots and I mean old, they had been discontinued over 500 years ago. The first thing I checked was the FTL drives. They were actually in good condition. The previous engineer in charge of them did a great job. The dual reactors checked out as well but we needed fuel. Well the life support and propulsion rated much lower in my reviews though. The bots had been charged by Eve and looking over the readings they needed work as well. Ok time to get a plan.

First, I needed more than two engineer assistants. I could train Eve up and get more bots to fill the void as I doubted we would get more personnel. I contacted Camila for help. I knew requesting anything through the normal chain of command would go nowhere as we were such a low priority. Camila came through. She could send me a dozen bots listed to be scrapped and recycled and she had two fabricators listed to be scrapped as well, one was an older electronics fabricator and the other a smaller 3D printer. That should be enough to allow me to repair the bots with minimal outside parts. I contacted the captain and after some discussion she assigned my quarters as the entire marine deck. I went down to check out the area.

Normally this ship had a passenger deck area but this one had been converted to a prisoner transport deck. I had a lot of space. Twenty bunk rooms with four double bunks each for marines, 24 individual cells for prisoner transport, a common mess, six officer cabins, a large training room that doubled for marine cargo and a secure armory room that was empty.

The ‘scrap’ from Camila was dropped off in my small cargo bay on the marine deck and I was disappointed with the pile of junk I had just gone into personal debt for 18,000 credits of additional debt but I felt the Union might fall and my first priority was staying alive. It was big hot mess. Samantha was there standing next to me starring at the mound of trash. We talked for a bit and I learned she had done two training tours on a cruiser but filed a sexual harassment complaint against a superior. That was why her career was now dead ended on this ship.

I reciprocated and told her of my issues with Asher. Well Samantha was slightly better off than me as she came from a long line of low-ranking navy officers. Her family never had the financial means to buy into the higher ranks.

The fabricators at least had been stored in metal crates that were banged up from the rough handling but not compromised. Repairing the fabricators was my first task. Fabricators were typically never installed on freighters. Well technically I had bought them as scrap and owned them. I got both machines unpacked and bolted onto the deck with help from Eve and the poorly working bots. I got the machines power from the ships secondary generator and ran diagnostics.

Well I could see why they were scrapped. The 3D printer needed all new extruders and all the thermal casings for holding the metallic raw materials were cracked. It needed a complete tear down and rebuild with new parts. The other fabricator was in slightly better shape. That machine had just been run too long without maintenance. It needed a few parts but could be put in working order with a lessor rebuild. It took me two days with Eve to take both machines apart but I had a long list of parts I needed. The cost was 19,320 credits at current prices for the needed parts…ok add it to my debt. I ordered the parts through Camila as any other avenue would take weeks to get what I needed. She said she could ship them in two days.

My two subordinates arrived. Two young women of Indian descent. The had both been in their 9th term at the academy but I didn’t recognize either. I gave them orders to start with a list of repairs and maintenance in order of priority. I would hopefully give each of them a bot in a few days to assist.

The entire crew met the next day with the captain. Samantha explained our situation. Our supply lines had been hit hard by pirates who were probably supported by the Sapphire Empire. So to get manufacturing going again the old transports were being reactivated. We would have a single gunship escort that was also being taken out of moth balls. The crew then gave their reports. The first officer was a guy who just struck me as a dick. He was responsible for getting provisions, fuel and repair parts and just whined about his difficulties and didn’t offer solutions. The navigator was fresh from the academy and was a tiny woman but she seemed very competent at least. The sensor operator was another woman, blond and of Russian ancestry who was also fresh from the academy but also seemed competent. The two cargo specialists were civilian contractors, both male and were already looking lustfully at the mostly female crew.

My engineers reported next. The ship had been stripped and was missing a whole bunch of things, radiation shielding, secondary systems, backup generators, maneuvering thrusters, deep space scanning arrays, and escape pods. The ship had been continually used for parts and just enough was left for it to operate again if needed. It should have long ago been sold to a civilian contractor but somehow had avoided that fate. And here we were.

I reported last. The FTL drive was good to go after we received fuel and I was working on getting bots to start doing the daily maintenance tasks and repairs. Eve had the bots sorted from the scrap pile. We had two custodial bots, six small external hull bots, two humanoid server bots and two engineering assistant bots. I hoped to have them all online by the time we left for our first cargo run.

Two days into getting the ship ready Samantha came and found me working on the bots with Eve. She said there was a captured pirate corvette being brought in to the scrapyard. She had an aunt who let her know about it. What she had thoughts on were if we could use it for parts like Destiny’s Children had been. I got a pad from her with the corvettes specs. It was 110 meter long fast attack corvette built by a commercial company in the Sapphire Empire. The ship had been disabled with a port missile strike venting most of the decks to space. The ship skeleton had been cracked in many spots and it was limping to the recycling yard. Hell yes we could use this.

Three days later the corvette was docked with our freighter. We had been having trouble getting parts. This corvette was only 27 years old, a babe in the interstellar world, it was filled with recent tech. I found ten bots on board. Three exterior bots, four maintenance bots and three cleaning bots. I purged their data, removed their programming cores and downloaded stock programming after confirming there were no Trojan horses. Then I had the bots start to strip the corvette of everything I could. Besides the bots we also obtained three shuttles. Two were designed for boarding actions and the last was just a small cargo transport. I moved them to our empty shuttle bays for now. We were like a piranha cleaning a carcass. By the time we had to depart for our cargo run the corvette was just a skeleton.

Well the preparation wasn’t all positive. The two civilian loaders had been removed from the ship by the captain for detrimental conduct. It would mean extra work for the rest of the crew but it was probably for the best. My list of things to do in transit was massive. At least I had a lot of bots to help us out. We had adapted all the thrusters from the corvette to fill in and exceed the freighters original specs. The exterior of our hull wasn’t too pretty and the fuel lines to the thrusters needed constant maintenance and tweaking. Without any cargo we would actually be pretty mobile. The lower cargo deck was stacked with parts from the corvette and the meager supplies we received. I also had eight heavy lasers that Samantha wanted mounted on the hull. That planning work was taking time as not only did I want them concealed but I had to add fire controls, power and tracking modules. It was going to be a major headache. I also had 17 torpedoes and two launchers as well. I wanted them off the ship but for now they were being stored. The good news is on my marine deck we had both fabricators working and the entire deck had been renovated from materials obtained from the corvettes officer quarters. The marine bunk rooms had been converted to regular single occupancy rooms and my engineers and myself lived in them. The corvettes recreation and galley equipment had been transplanted as well. The armory was also now full of high end equipment used by the Sapphire Empires marines. The engineering deck was a mess. We were rebuilding and upgrading everything we could with parts. I had a better FTL drive in a cargo container but that project was put on the back burner as it would require hundreds of hours and all the bots help. The corvettes life support systems were being slowly installed to act as primary on the freighter, the current ones would be backups.

The sensor suite of the corvette was already installed in place of the old freighters. That had been the easiest job as the new sensors took so much less space than the ancient ones. We now had a top-of-the-line mid-range military grade sensor suite. The four reactors from the corvette would be added on the top deck to power the future hidden lasers. Once again when we got time. The crew deck had some upgrades from the corvette but many were in progress. The shuttles had the maintenance refueling kits moved to the bays but we hadn’t installed them yet. We managed to install eight different ten person escape pods in the empty pod bays. They were modern escape pods too. I had extensive internal security equipment sitting in the cargo bay as well we had stripped, just too many things to do. I even had a 50 gallon distillery sitting in the cargo hold with sealed crates for brewing beer. Everything that was possible had been taken. I wanted to get a small furnace recycler but even Camila couldn’t find one for me.

We entered sub space and the crew toasted.