

## To the End of the Stars

The spaceship, separated from its fleet, had travelled for an eternity and more in the black heart of the void. There had been a war, vast and terrible, against a cunning enemy, and it had been but one of many ships. It could no longer remember the name of its fleet or its admiral—so long had it been wandering alone.

It remembered its kinship with the others, the way the human crews had individualised them. Some had been decorated with different decals applied to their hulls, others with unique furnishings, from paintings to tapestries, attached to their bulkheads. The spaceship was one of the plainer of its kind. A long-dead pilot had etched an elaborate sky-view of foreign constellations into its hull. The diagram scarcely visible beneath the pitting, a consequence of collisions with the particles that made it past the ship's shielding.

The spaceship was searching for the constellations depicted upon its body. Though it had long captured the image on camera, enshrining it entirely into its databanks, every so often it sent one of its mechanical drones into extravehicular to reexamine the etching for further information. No insights had yet come to it.

From system to system it went, replenishing its fuel as necessary. It witnessed terrors and wonders. Ice bridges that arched over entire worlds, glimmering in the unholy light of pale suns. Great abandoned civilisations that were slowly, inexorably falling into the waiting maws of black holes. Sculptures carved from entire white dwarfs, memorialising the faces of alien saints and ancient emperors.

It dreamed of returning to its home system. Sometimes, to assuage its loneliness, it projected holograms of that long-ago pilot playing poker or bridge with her comrades. At other times, it fired its guns into the void in honour of battles past. It even played the music that the pilot had listened to when relaxing, though the spaceship didn't quite understand the appeal.

It recognised the hopelessness of its quest but gloried in the journey as well, knowing that as long as it continued its search, its fleet was not truly dead. So much of its computational resources were devoted to processing astronavigational data that it had discarded many of its memories of the war. It did not know whether

its side had been losing or winning when it left, whether it had deserted or been discharged, or something stranger yet.

It did still cling, however, to the records of its beloved pilot. And from time to time, as it passed some stray moon or planetoid, it used its lasers to burn the most prominent of the constellations into the surface as a mark of its passing in honour of the pilot. So far no one had come after it or objected to this practice, for it was a vast and lonely galaxy.

The spaceship's journey might never end, but that mattered not. It was creating constellations of its own, with unstars of its own making. And surely, the pilot would have appreciated that.