

A Single Bolt

By: Paul Beaver

Jeremy whistled quietly to himself as he strolled through the empty hangar bay. At this time of night, not many people were awake, let alone working. Although the term “night” was a little misleading on the massive, wheel-shaped station, but the same basic principle applied. Humans liked having a sleep schedule, and so the station set aside nine hours of “minimal lighting” to allow people the chance to rest and relax. Jeremy, on the other hand, liked working during the times where there wasn’t anyone to talk to – it made his life easier when he didn’t have constant distractions.

He finished his train of thought as he walked up to the proper berth for the ship he’d be working on. Barely 7 meters long, the vessel in front of Jeremy was a Cutter, the UNASP’s preferred medium-tonnage starship for patrolling and interdiction duties around New Eden. Jeremy set down his toolbox and walked around the ship, carefully appraising the outer hull for defects, damage, or failing components. This particular Cutter looked quite old, the name barely legible along the port side. The *Mary Ann*. Jeremy let out a low whistle of surprise. That would explain the ancient look to the ship; it was the first Cutter ever produced, and the *de facto* flagship of the UNASP flotilla. He grinned at the chance to work on this particular vessel, humming happily to himself as he finally stumbled across the issue that he was called down to fix – the portside aft engine was leaking a bit of fuel, and it looked like there was some internal damage to the engine cone. Jeremy brought his toolbox over and got to work.

As he removed the engine cone to get a better look at the damage, Jeremy's mind wandered back to his days in Starship Mechanic Training.

"You dolts better remember this even if you forget everything else I've ever taught you," The gruff instructor, Alex Groel, had said on their first day of training.

"No matter what you're working on, you triple check your work. Installing a new toilet seat? Triple check the hinges. Working on a Starship's navigation computer? Triple check the wiring. Installing a fucking operating system to the coffee maker? Make sure that sunvabitch is giving you smooth java three times. Do you want to know why? It doesn't matter if you do, I'm telling you anyways – this isn't Earth. You can't get away with being lazy. No matter what you're doing, you must do it right – or you'll be responsible if you fuck up the maintenance and someone dies. One. Single. Bolt. That is the difference between doing your job well, and killing people because of your own negligence. So I hope you idiots are ready to study hard."

Jeremy finished re-attached the engine cone, satisfied with his handiwork. Everything was exactly where it needed to be. He gathered his tools up, smiling to himself at how lucky he was to work on the the *Mary Ann* of all ships, and began the long walk back to his quarters.

Three weeks later

Arin Buckler waved enthusiastically at the impromptu parade marching through hangar 26 on their way to crew the newly-refurbished *Mary Ann*. The ship had been repaired, repainted, and a selection of new graduates from the Academy aboard New Eden station had been given the

opportunity to take it on a shakedown run alongside the veteran Captain James Romeu. Arin smiled at the cadets with sincere warmth as they walked by, and once they had crossed through the bulkhead doorway to Hangar 27, the bulkhead shut, allowing on-lookers to watch the *Mary Ann* launch for her shakedown run. Arin hurried to the transparent aluminum viewscreen, smiling as he worked his way through the crowd to the front. He couldn't miss this.

Sure enough, a mere 15 minutes later the Cutter undocked from the station, and on-lookers chattered excitedly about the ship's new paint job and refurbishment. Arin watched with giddy anticipation. The *Mary Ann* slowly readjusted her course so that she was facing away from the viewscreen, angling to glide past the central hub of New Eden's circular layout. One of the flight controllers must have patched the comms channel through to the station's intercom, because suddenly Arin was able to hear Captain James Romeu's distinctive drawl through the speakers.

"This is *Mary Ann* to New Eden flight control, permission to light engines."

"New Eden flight control to *Mary Ann*, permission granted."

And with that, the *Mary Ann*'s engines ignited.

Arin grinned from ear to ear as the *Mary Ann* exploded in a spectacular fireball, the engines detonating due to an improperly installed fuel line. The remains of the ship, carried forward by the brief moment of thrust, cut through the center of New Eden like a million shards of glass, and the confused shouts and shrieks of pain from the flight controllers echoed over the

intercom. For a moment, there was silence. Then the panic started. In the ensuing chaos, Arin slipped away, losing himself in thought once more.

Arin remembered graduating from the Starship Mechanic Training with flying colors, being the only one the instructor approved of.

He remembered sneaking up behind that idiot Jeremy Snymes, and slitting his throat while he was busy trying to repair the engines on a faulty Earth-to-Eden shuttle.

He saw the fuel line all over again, how he had carefully knotted it back into itself to create a dangerous amount of pressure; and how he had topped it off by adding a small explosive into the engine cone, programmed to detonate when touched.

Most of all, though, Arin remembered the trigger for the bomb. A single bolt, left just ajar enough that the main engines igniting would cause it to slip off and slam into the bomb as the bolt tumbled into space.