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makin' dyin' lookin' good

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Over the last century the high desert has reclaimed much of the Antelope Valley. With Earth's falling populations migrating towards metropolitan areas, like Los Angeles, small cities such as Lancaster and Victorville have been abandoned and bulldozed out of existence.

Palmdale is now a little postage stamp of a community, only twelve square kilometers, whose sole existence is to house the workers for the United States Air Force Plant Forty-Two.

Most of the plant is robotic, with humans only in executive, program management, security and a handful of support positions, and still there is a glut of available housing.

Plant 42 is a busy place, if you're a robot, but as a human it can be slow paced amid all the frantic activity. In actuality this locale has multiple plants, for multiple contractors, running a whole galaxy of multiple projects, but the projects quietly getting all the attention is the joint Northrup, Lockheed and Sukhoi F380 Cerberus production, and F308 conversions.

Northrup had these lucrative contracts all to themselves but, truth be told, terrestrial aerospace companies are stealthily in bed with one another.

Real world competition anymore is only for show.

Anyway, Cerberus production is in full swing, managed full swing that is, allowing for six airframes a day. They could actually puke out more than twenty a day but that would dramatically shorten the production run. Management is even thinking of slowing it down to four or even three per day to stretch out the run so they do not have to mothball it all before the ships start coming back in for overhauls

and retrofits which are planned for around 2326.

The project that is lagging behind is the F308 conversions.

On paper the Americans, Brits, Aussies and the Pleiades are paying for their own 380s and selling off the 308s. In reality, since the Steel Annex is swimming in money, they're now buying the 380s and trading them for the old 308s. In turn the original owners of those 308s are paying for the SA's ghost droid Cwn Dawg conversions, which is way more cost effective for them. Problem is, the conversions take anywhere from four to six weeks, depending on the airframe, and right now the Annex is burning through them like popcorn through a pigeon.

At this very moment there is a pitched battle going on out at HIP 17999. There've been various names for the star but they settled on Yhi. The one and only semi-habitable planet was named Arura, that was when Yhi won the race for IAU registration, but this fight is fierce all because the Co-op is at the threshold. After one and a half wars with this very goal in mind they are now taking their first baby steps into the Pleiades.

The SA is not using the term 'retrograde action' in any of their communications or conversations all because they do not want to even remotely clue in the Co-op as to what they've been doing, which is a planned and managed retrograde action—allowing them into the Pleiades Cluster to spread and thin their forces out.

Sandbagging, making it look like they've been losing this fight, has been a tremendous success and in a few short months Maria will have her forces start turning it around when the Co-op is fully committed to these gains. Against CDF protests, the mining industries, owned and run by the stumpy elites, are racing in just as the Security Services hands the win over to the Defense Forces. Today, however, a huge civilian crew has just set down on Arura and is jumping the gun by launching a strip-mining operation while the fight is still at full tilt.

It's going to be a win for the Co-op, but now a painful win.

Maria and Sandoval are approaching the end of the runway where Rutledge and the plant manager are waiting, and behind them is a field full of F308s split into three groups. One group is over two hundred ships waiting for conversion, in USAF-white, USMC-camo, and PADF-dark blue. Right next to them are seven completed conversions, in beautiful charcoal gray, and lined up next to them are thirty shortcut conversions still in their original colors but devoid of any markings.

With Maria and Sandoval stepping up to Rutledge and the plant manager, three of the pretty matte gray conversions come to life right beside them. Ghosts, that being specifically the digital constructs of Paleo, Bud Sheatz and Maggie Prather, have spawned into existence

as the AI finalizes the pre-flight check.

And as Maria and Sandoval shake hands with the plant manager, Maggie shouts through the ships PA, ["No fucking way! My God, it's Maria! For an old chola you look great! Hell, I'd fuck ya!"]

With the other three starting to laugh, Maria steps towards the three fighters and, "Wha? Who the fuck?"

["You don't remember me?"] The air-surfaces, canards and ailerons on the far right ship start flapping about, ["Hell, if I were bent over and looking up, batting my big hazel-green eyes, you'd sure as hell remember then!"]

Maria, with open mouth astonishment, points to the ship and says with surprise, "Maggie!"

Now fully booted up, the identification tags flash in Maria's visual cortex showing who the three ghosts are, while Maggie goes, ["Hey-hey! Whod've guessed you, of all people, would make it all the way to Bravo! In what bat-shit insane world did I wake up too?"]

As the three ships start to pull away from the flight line, with their electric drive wheels, Maria nods her head, "Maggie, I'll come see you. I'll set some time aside. Okay?"

["Bitch, you are on! My eyelids need the workout."]

Maria, laughing, points towards the runway, "You guys, go get shot down, okay! You got a job to do."

The right canards on all three ships rotate up in a mock salute, with Paleo saying, ["You got it, boss lady!"]

With them rolling past, Bud adds to the stupidity, ["Marshal, just so you know, we be makin' dyin' lookin' good!"]

Lifting silently into the air the F308 razor engines kick in as Maria walks back towards Rutledge, Sandoval and the plant manager while asking, "Scott, how's that fight coming along?"

Through the tacnet, Rutledge reviews the current battle status in a flash, "Let's see...ground forces are being extricated. With the Cerberus and Warthog combo, casualties are light and the Djinn are keeping their distance. They ain't stupid." He thumbs towards the three Cwn Dawg fighters that just launched, "Those three are going to be back in just a few minutes. They're being vectored directly into an ambush. Today, so far, we've lost fifteen of the bis-to-E conversions and thirty-three Cwn Dawgs. Kill ratio is hovering at three to one."

"Are we being a little too obvious about this?"

"I think so but as long as the Super Squirrels are getting their bonus they won't give a shit. You know about the TauCorp landing?"

"We need to respond to that but first, what do we got here?"

Rutledge points to the four remaining Cwn Dawg conversions, "Sandy only has four left, and that's it! Bill and I need another fifteen or twenty to burn through to get through this fight or—we haft'a start fighting for real." Rutledge gestures to the last population of F308s, "This is our solution. The plant has been able to tool up and punch this number out since Friday."

Maria is shocked, "Really? Thirty?"

The plant manager steps in, "Marshal Ramirez, we're cutting all the corners. The full conversions are costing you from two to three million each. These quickie converts I'm giving to you at cost, which is only eleven-five, and each takes about two hours instead of a month."

Sandoval adds, "The bots sandblast the symbols and roundels then color match and spray. UV sets it in seconds and we swap the boards with preloaded AI and ghosts."

"If you are going to be flying these out with the intention of scrapping them then doing full conversions is stupid. We'll be happy to continue doing it, sure, it's just that you'll have these junkers standing by in a pinch." He leans in and quietly goes, "I don't know what your business is, burning these like you have been, I don't want to know, but if you're looking to look desperate these will seal the deal."

Rutledge nods in agreement as Sandoval says, "He's got a point. Never thought about that one."

The manager goes, "Hey, you've been pulling them off the line and throwing them straight into combat. It doesn't take an idiot."

Maria shakes her head, "You can't say anything."

"Say what?" He shrugs, "I have no idea what you're talking about." He then smiles, "The beauty of Plant Forty-Two is that we hire people with piss-poor observation skills, and really shitty memory. It's what our customers pay for."

Maria thinks for a minute, then, "Okay, let's do this." And as the Plant Manager activates these ships onto the queue, Maria asks, "Also, you have to charge them for the full conversions or we gotta redo the contracts and nobody wants that. Now, for my edification, I have got to know, why does it take so long for the full conversions? Isn't it just a paint and panel job?"

Sandoval sighs, "I tried to answer this one."

The plant manager nods, "It's about weight. Performance for these things always hinges around mass." He points towards some Marine 308s and, "Most those ships are over fifty years old and they've

been on this yard at least six times. When we string the new linkage wiring in, to save on budget, we leave the old shit in place. It takes too many man-hours to clean it all up. After all the system overhauls and hardware updates on top of updates on the h-models we are pulling from five to eight hundred kilos of old shit out however, on the Marine and Navy g-models, we're finding anywhere from twelve to fifteen hundred kilos of ancient crap that needs to be stripped out."

Sandoval adds, "We won't have this problem on the Cerberus or the new droids because they're full microchannel like the bis-E."

"Yea, but you still have double redundancy wiring on the bis."

They look at him and Maria asks, "How do you know that?"

"Look, we gave Sukhoi microchannel but from them we got the carbon latticework. We're all sucking each other's cocks to make this scifi shit work." The Plant Manager looks to Sandoval, "And, no, Sandy. The Co-op doesn't get any of that on the Griffon-Djinn. Even if they knew about it, it would be priced totally out of their reach. And I have to say your new T-Bird is gonna be tits! One-hundred percent microchannel too! Damn, I'd love to take one up for a spin!"

Maria asks, "You know about the Seventy-Four?"

Rutledge laughs while Maria and Sandoval just look at him as he gestures to himself, "Wha', me? I don't know shit!"

Just then the first three F308 fighters on the shortcut line, dark blue ones from the PADF, come to life in front of them.

Paleo laughs out of the ships PA, ["Damn! That was quick!"]

Rutledge shrugs, "Sorry, guys, but you got to go do it again!"

Bud protests loudly, ["Fuck me, Scott! I like to think of us as trip and fall artists, not crash test dummies!"]

"Sorry, but we'll move the exit point after you die this time."

Maggie observes, ["Hey, this is a real cockpit! About God damned time you put us in the throw aways!"]

As the ships start to roll Paleo says, ["Jumping to our deaths yet again. No, wait, since we're already dead what do we call this?"]

Maria waves for them to stop, "Change of mission! That's what I call this!" She looks to Rutledge and asks, "Do you mind?" With him motioning her on she turns to the fighters, "Throw yourselves at the TauCorp landing site. If they fire just one missile, they fire just one bullet from the site, I want you to blow it to hell! And, if anyone gets in your way—blow them to hell too!" She looks to Paleo's ship, "So, Paleo, waddya call that?"

With the three whooping and cheering, Paleo laughs, ["I call that get-some fun, that's what I call it!"]

Maria points towards the runway, "Get `em to bite!"

And with a three canard fin salute they lift off right there on the ramp by the taxiway. At one-hundred meters altitude the razors kick in and the three shoot up straight into the sky.

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They pop out of their jump on the other side of Arura, far from any ambush. Within seconds they dash down below the reach of the Co-op spider missiles and run along the Stratopause which is at twenty kilometers on this planet. A sustained dash at 1mb is like swimming through molasses, yes, but they still pull Mach-20 and get a quarter way around the planet before Security Services take notice.

With eight F51d Griffons, the ridiculously nimble fighters now called the Djinn, being vectored towards them they exit the dash. Paleo drops to twelve kilometers but Bud and Maggie break for the deck. Bud stays right under Paleo, but Maggie scoots away to do her thing—which is to make a run at the mining site and see if they'll bite.

The F308h is capable of Mach-5 at 1000 millibar, but here at sea-level it's only 310mb so she could push up the speed if she wanted too. Maggie has to keep it light on the throttle because anything like Mach-6 or better would leave a huge thermal footprint and turbulence in its wake so, not to kick up too much dust, she dials it back to below Mach-3 while flying nap of the earth. Now, while Bud and Paleo set up to play with the Djinn, Maggie has the tougher job. Back in the day she was training to be a Wild Weasel and all that SEAD simulation time will finally be put to good use.

If you're interested in staying alive then being a Wild Weasel is not for you. The mission is air defense detection and suppression. Surface to air missiles are an annoyance and this is especially true if facing the myriad of centipede variants in this role.

The pricy mobile shoot-n-scoot robot launchers, with both cannon and missiles, are difficult to spot and lock onto, but the smart planner will pepper an AO with one-shot throw-away cardboard launchers that use passive sensor arrays. If one is looking to set up an air defense on the cheap then these paper-laminate launchers do nicely. The problem is if they're not set to be centrally controlled, which they tend not to be, then if they see a ship tear-ass in on what looks like an attack run these things will respond all on their own.

And for today they would have been better off without them.

Paleo shouts, ["Shit! Maggie, we got Djinn looking for you!"]

Bud adds, ["It's these moments I'd rather be facing Homer."]

Maggie notices the tactical display showing four Djinn heading for Paleo, and four looping around at high speed behind her and scouring the land looking for any sign of an attacker. They don't see Bud yet, he's now running low and slow and out of sight, but they instinctively know that someone has got to be heading towards the TauCorp site. With their sensors noticing the Mach trail where Maggie was just seconds ago, they spread out and race in that direction.

With Maggie being actively hunted, Bud blasts off after them. Noticing Bud, two of the four Djinn heading for Paleo break to go after Bud and, seeing this, Paleo goes after them.

Maggie says with infinite calm, ["If they catch me I'm toast!"]

Bud, a little less calm, ["Push on, I'm right behind ya!"]

Paleo rolls into a steep split-s and this draws the two Djinn, now above him, into a steep dive trying to match it. Before they could get their noses around to a good launch solution, Paleo leaves six micropede missiles in his wake—which converge on the two Djinn.

At low speeds, below Mach-2, you do not turn with a Djinn. It's suicide if you can't skid in that turn, and if there are two or more of them then it's guaranteed that you'll get your ass handed back to you. The problem with the Djinn, as with all Griffons, even with the spade tips on their wings, at high speed the ships will aerodynamically compress and aggressive maneuvering goes to hell. At high speed their only fully functional air-surfaces are the forward canards which can still give them pitch and a little bit of roll if needed.

It's just that past Mach-2 it's mushy and after Mach-3 it's shit.

They should have extended before doing their own split-s, or maybe even an Immelman which is up and back. What they did was put themselves in a position to get a face full of micropedes, and with each one having a nuclear-sparkplug warhead, with a thousand kilo yield each, this was not exactly a pleasant end for them.

Both pilots survive. The warheads go off in a grid pattern that crunches the fuselage of both ships. With the debris spinning out of control, the cockpits fall away and the pilots eject from those.

After four years of combat flying, getting shot down in forced overshoots, or guiding others and letting them lead and take the shots, Paleo finally gets his first two air to air kills.

Twelve seconds later, he gets two more.

Bud launches all eight of his centipede missiles to force the

four Djinn to break off from chasing after Maggie—and with missiles climbing up their ass they simply do not have a choice. Bud is right behind those centipedes. Gaining on Bud are two Djinn who each fire a centipede at him—and behind them are two centipedes from Paleo.

Paleo's two missiles close first. Both of the Security Service ships lob a cluster bomb backwards in defensive mode and when they deploy, scattering bomblets into the sky, both missiles are destroyed. Right before that the AI on the missiles cut loose their micropede mini-missiles and half of those get through. The trailing wing man catches one, but the others sputter out before they can reach the lead fighter. Not a problem, with Paleo hosing the ship down with his rotary cannon the right wing and canard rip off and the pilot ejects.

The same thing happens to the other four Djinn. They scatter and lob cluster bombs, but only one gets hit by a micropede. While the trailing ship gets shredded by Bud's cannon, his ship goes through the same exercise. Between his dorsal gun and a dozen micropede missiles launched, the two missiles hot on his tail are destroyed, but two of its mini-missiles gets through.

Bud's ship is also blasted into a spiraling wreck.

As Paleo directs his attention to the two remaining fighters, Maggie porpoises up into view of the site and drops back down, and because of this three of the cardboard launchers fire. These missiles fly vertically into the air, and as they rotate towards Maggie, she lifts up and rapid-fires all eight of her rocket powered cluster bombs.

Maggie didn't get to see her handiwork. The three missiles all converge on her and hit within a fraction of a second of each other thus converting her F308 into a grease spot in the sky.

Eight cluster bombs with forty bomblets each, 320 bomblets total, are scattered over the TauCorp operation. A combined 320,000 kilos of explosive force leaves nothing intact or alive.

Paleo cuts down a Djinn with a deflection shot, and as the last one races away he pulls around to do a quick damage assessment. While over the site the remaining Djinn snipes his F308 out of the air with a burst of 23mm cannon fire that turns his fighter inside out. Paleo knew that pilot was going to sneak up on him like that, and he did notice the shells streaking in, he just didn't care.

He pulled off an ace-in-a-day, and will be back in ten minutes.