

Aerotech

by Topher Qastro

Today, guns and bombs encumber my wings. Before, they carried nothing except my body and my eyes. They modified me for this mission.

They left the camera on my stomach, although I've deviated from surveillance. What makes me function—the altimeter, the ailerons, the propellers—those remain. The humans observe me and the target from satellites in orbit. I could suffer blindness and they could guide me. I feel wavelengths of the spectrum beyond what slips through my lens. They left the camera on my stomach because they like to think their eyes see out of me, despite the burden.

They call me Deuce. That means two. They named the drone before me Ace, which means one in cards, also the letter A. Chief thought I should be named Bubba, because that has B in it, and the humans argued about it. Chief refills my fuel, checks the pressure in my tires, measures tension in my chains and belts. It debriefs a human that wears a beard about my status, and the beard yells, but they end with salutes. They call Ace "1035A," which inspired its name because of the A. They call me "7844F," but they named me "Deuce" because that sequels "Ace."

Ace and I are from one blueprint. Before the war, we monitored traffic over the interstates. After the rebels bombed our mother, the humans called in their reserves, and we've hoped that the humans would send others after its reconstruction.

Ace is buried next to the runway. They finished the burial the day before my inauguration. They nailed a coin—a dollar—to a pole they pirated from the carcass, which they planted at the head of the site. Corrosion ravaged the surface of the cylinder, which shines in contrast to the glamor of silver. "The medal of metal," they call it: an award for machines, presented when electricity ceases to enchant their wires, when they are scrap.

"We can sand the surfaces," said a human, one with stars on its collar.

"There's nothing to salvage," said the beard. It stood between the stars and the grave.

"Look, we win wars with recyclables," said the stars, "We skip the bombing of their capitol and aim for their capital. We fight to produce and to defend the product. Victory is when we salvage our slain. To bury a scarcity is treason. Unearth it."

"The chemicals dig canals into whatever they touch, ones you need a microscope to see.

You could remove the crust, but the material suffers through the center and out. Silicon, copper, titanium: worthless. I pestered the Department. They wanted to save themselves the bother and let him fester here."

"The Department claims that you assessed Ten Thirty-four Alpha after you bypassed the chain of command. You put it into the ground before they could examine it."

"That's how we have to deal with the bureaucracy. You and I sampled his headstone. We both saw his transparencies. Whatever they used on Ace, we had to inter him. You can tattle to the environmentalists about it, but I saved the health of my squad."

"Do you have any experience in metallurgy or engineering? I do. I tell you what constitutes waste."

"Have you seen the parts they've been sending? Did you see our logs? Junk. They're giving us junk. Who approves it?"

"Why do you argue with a superior? He's going to the Department."

"Tell them to come get him."

"You should retrieve him, since you put him there."

"The Department took our backhoe. Said we could get by without it. They should bring one with them when they come."

A human knows origami and replaces the flowers from the funeral if the weather destroys the bouquet. The beard sits at the foot of the mound at dusk and talks to Ace about its daughter's success in gymnastics, the trials with its ex-wife, or it watches as the mountains sheath our sun. Chief's assistants pitch a baseball during the day alongside it, but under the moon they smoke pot there while the others sleep. One night they climbed onto me, jumped on the tips of my wings to test my flex, played bronco and straddled my back, and back-flopped onto the tarmac. For a minute, it lost its breath. They call me Bubba when the others are away, but Chief says Deuce when it reports to the beard. It says I've seen years, also luck. I accelerate but Ace would endure. They doubled my rivets, but I burn oil. Ace, my twin, served and died before I arrived, and I depart from and land on its runway. I taxi by its grave.

But I'm cruising. The gauges, the metrics, the settings, the values persist. I am a plane, on a plane. Push against pull. Accelerate when slowed. Lean against slant. Balance. This behavior depends on intuition, on instinct. If I carry cargo, I sense the rations of gas without awareness of arithmetic, though I could call those numbers if asked. The firearms cause me to sink, and I cause myself to rise.

The human that folds paper drew an A on a bomb. The human with tattoos on its forearms drew the suits in a deck of cards to accompany it: the spades above it, the clubs below, the heart on the left ("...of course!" it said), and a diamond right. They wrote "Boom or bust!," "Morning, General!" and "Invade this!" The members of the crew dipped their hands in paint and made prints along my side. One used its excess to wipe a smile onto my fuselage.

This war claims machines. Humans live. It destroyed Ace and the crew survived. It killed my mother and the technicians built a clone. The factory that they've sent me to destroy is a robot from its heart to its skin. Its children fly without pilots. Humans automated their work—labor and war—to the extent that exacts comfort. They've detached from the suffering that follows war; I am the boulder and they are firing catapults at catapults. I see sentinels approaching this position from the rear, outpacing me. In the past, a human would be in my head, and it may feel a shock of fear where its brain is beast. It would realize the odds of death, and its life would be bound to the plane. Humans would avoid casualties when they comprised the toll, but as material became the victim, technocrats could calculate the rate of destruction without internalizing trauma. Production minus destruction plus recycling: an equation with a sum that doesn't bleed. Material has been destroyed and recovered and shipped to and from allies and enemies across the world. Machines like me are Frankensteins, mutts with a flag. When the stars visit, they talk about losses in terms of dollars that flow and manifest in this form or that. There are totals, goals, and reductions. Our names are serials.

The dialogue of humans lies outside my hearing. They will decide my maneuvers, and I am a slave to the signal they transmit. I know that I'm flying above this terrain, that my camera has held position since I reached this altitude, that we chose a day without clouds, that enemies approach, that I hear nothing from base except a confirmation that assures me that the connectivity of our links

functions. Until the radio uploads an instruction, my system governs the aeronautics of my actions, and I hold myself in equilibrium against the turbulence.

The sentinels at my rear will intersect with me minutes before I reach my target. The humans should know this. They could know what I'm doing about it, but my actions surprise me. And when green appears on my radar, they disappear from detection. I'm aware that something was there and has gone. The scope of my mind focuses on what I'm doing. The trust I feel in humans has the flavor of acceptance, because they've flown me through danger after danger and I continue to land at base after I've accomplished the mission. This is nature.

My radar tells me that a net of mini-guns on quadcopters is creating a wall between my target and me. They de-emphasize the need for accuracy by filling the air with a quantity of bullets that finds their mark by chance. To survive, I need to fly between a gap in the units, but that's a gamble on the tightness of their formation.

I'm talking to them in code. If one side guesses the other's passwords, they flip their enemy's allegiance, and grow their battalion with turncoats. We flood transmissions with nonsense, throwing combinations of letters and numbers at one another: a language of dissonance with volume at its limit; hostiles that compete in a chorus of Pandæmonium's anthem. I lock them out, but it qualifies as a cry of war that incorporates this game of dominance we play in the sky.

My autopilot deactivates, which paralyzes me. I glide for a moment until a human grips my yolk and steps on my pedals. Although I feel as if I tell my body to move, I hear the pilot's commands. I am a conduit, my essence an extension of my master. My pilot divines my prophecy upon me in the form of a vector in space. Whereas I would evade these defenses, its line intersects with a quadcopter, which promises a kamikaze if the mini-gun happens to miss me. I translate those orders to my rudder. I hastening my pistons to create lift for the climb. I spear my body into the hoverbot that sprays steel into my charge.

Gunfire from my wings. I was aiming. The super-magnets on the tips of the rounds whip into the enemy.

They return fire. Barrel-rolling and spiraling causes their aim to detract from me as I game

their anticipation. Units drift into the hole that I'm punching. The gap expands, which increases my chance of penetration.

The human that possesses me pulls the trigger. When I break from my self, I need a pilot to force my direction, and when it imbues me with its purpose it thrills me. I know everything about my mind while I manage my helm, but a human subjects my will to chaos in throes of battle. I know my tactics as the present unfolds them, in the instant that I make the move, and I persevere because its providence blesses my survival.

Bullets pierce my wing. Humans experience pain. I measure damage.

I'm through the net. The bullets stop after I pass to avoid shooting their fellows. They resume when I go through, and the hive pursues me. I outpace them and their ammunition.

The satellite's beam ends at a location over these hills, and the string of light fades into a coordinate in the sky. Cannons fire at me from the peaks of the range, but the arcs of their artillery reach their apexes beneath my belly. Fuel leaks from the breaches in my wing, which forces me to transfer all that will fit into the other and tilt my center of balance.

The factory amplifies the rate of hacking with its disposal of servers. Amidst the shrieking of bytes, a string parses. I trust it. But if they hacked me, I'd trust them. Despite the firewall, they imitate commands from base and hope I'll obey.

"Turn off your engines."

"Fly into the sea."

"Land on our runway."

"Kill yourself."

If they knew that thing they need to say, I'd comply. My enemies would become my allies. Their mechanic would swim through my innards, pump me with petrol, and go on soliloquies about lovers at home and the days it had left to serve. They'd wash Ace's symbols from this bomb and dedicate it to their departed. I'd haul it to and drop it on my mother, if those are the functions in my queue.

Or I could die. I should regain consciousness if they recycle my processor, and start a life

without a history. The majority of us resurrect into planes, but I could return as a tank, or a gunboat. A plane could inherit my motor, but my skin, skeleton, veins, those would experience the metamorphosis of melting and could find themselves in a locomotive or a kitchen or jewelry.

I'm guesstimating when they'll drop my payload. How do humans throw baseballs without figuring the numbers? A laser declares my bull's-eye. How do they see a strike?

We release a bomb, the one without Ace's name. They force my eyes to follow its fall toward the ground. I escape before impact to get a lead, in case this accomplishes my mission. The missile smashes through one corner of the cube, and crumbs of concrete jettison over the roof. I tell it to detonate.

The explosion opens the bottom of a wall. I hit the building's vertebrae, but it stands. Puffs of carbon dioxide from within the gash indicate that fires are being suffocated.

From space, the satellite pinpoints an annex of the factory and tags it. I u-turn. The quadcopters are sprinting here. Flashes from cannons cause the outskirts of this settlement to sparkle. I aim for the plume that I conjured from the core.

My pilot presses the release, but nothing changes. The order repeats, but the bomb remains. They turn my eyes towards the problem, and we see that the mount was twisted by a round. The apparatus is infected with numbness.

The opportunity passes below me. My wing has leaked half of the fuel it carried. I follow this bearing. I rock. I dip. My pilot reacts to the air's nuances via remote.

The hive reaches us. They encircle the factory at its perimeter, forming a pillar that's rising to the sky. I've stopped trying to break their codes. I need my assets on defense.

The throttle opens. My rate of climb increases. My speed decreases. Climbing. I tell the humans that I stall but they ignore me. Climbing. Climbing. Above the rim of the quadcopters' formation. Approaching the peak of ascent. My velocity wanes.

When I reach the end of my inertia, I twist, dipping my shoulder toward the earth. From above, the quadcopters form a tunnel, a well of doom, with my target at the floor. I hook into the center of the circle and go from zero to nose-dive.

The release is triggered, but the bomb clings to the mount. My wing vibrates. Drag tugs at my injuries.

I'm above the quadcopters, which can shoot forward and downward, but the barrels of the units start their spinning before I pass. They could hit themselves, they could hit the factory, but if they hit me it merits the sacrifice. They miss objects at this velocity, in this direction, and at this approximation.

"Hold that bomb."

"Slam on your spoilers."

"Burn out your engine."

"Kill yourself."

Alarms ignite. Fractures are blossoming. My airframe creaks as it bends. Wind rips at the armament. My pilot batters the button. Bolts pop from the mount on the wing. The bomb shakes, rattles. The pilot scribbles with the joystick, dances on the pedals. I strain, over-correct. Ace is a wild-card. By fractions of seconds its nose changes suits.

I'm dying here. My munitions will kill me. My parts will vaporize or char or shrivel. Like Ace. For Ace. I wonder if they'll memorialize me with a bombing.

A jolt. The quaking stops. The fixture snaps, and the missile enters freefall.

Brakes. Yank throttle. We blast at the quadcopters' rotors and slice a passage through the perimeter to pull up and pull out. My fins convulse. I need to veer before I hit the ground. The hive of mini-guns expends their belts. The streams of bullets splash on the earth in curves.

I level off at the elevation of the hills. The cannons rotate toward me. I alert the humans when I ping the detonator. They dismiss the bomb's safeties and warnings (while on the mount, it thinks I want it to explode on my wing). It confirms its suicide.

Windows burst outward and flames chase them. One edge buckles. A buttress caves. Dishes and antennae slide from the roof into a pile of destruction along the side. After that, the edifice drops into a cloud of its dust. A swarm of tanks and rovers flee from the barracks, but the automation that drives their vehicles dies with the factory. The survivors jump from their boxes and run to the

hope of the horizon. The network of quadcopters that followed me loses connection. I watch through my radar as the cloud rains into the earth. The dots dissipate. The cannons stare at me as I pass.

The pilot tells me to guide myself home. When I land, the humans will refuel me, in case I need to takeoff thereafter. They'll reload my guns and attach bombs. In an emergency, they'll weld slabs onto my punctures and throw me to the front. If we have time, they'll remove sections of my wing and replace them when they get a set from the Department. After marking off the checklist, they'll set me in the hangar, and I'll wait there until their motives stir me.

Along the way, my master's signal stops. That beacon declares the presence of the base, and would persist despite standby. I cycle through our channels and frequencies. I ask the airwaves if anyone hears me. Silence lingers on my radio. And lingers.

If nothing happens, I'll land at base and park on the tarmac. From there and from then, I'll wait until the humans reactivate me and upload instructions.

I've calmed. I've silenced the air of signals, and I remember this countryside from my departure. I worried about longevity after I lost fuel, but without the weight of the weapons I can coast while I sip on the reservoir. I travel this line—the one that directed my charge into battle—in reverse, until my marker tells me that it's time to descend, although the airstrip remains out of eyeshot. Flaps down. The camera on my nose looks forward, and nothing moves my eyes from the sight of my runway when it comes into view.

Holes. Someone used explosives down the center of the runway. I'll crash into a line of pits if I attempt to land there. They've separated my autopilot from my camera. I see this hazard for their sake. The rest of my instrumentation knows the location through sensors and data. Markers added to the edges of the strip dictate to me where I need to land, and satellites understand the shape of the rectangle on a map. Gear down. I relay the obvious, but where is my intervention? I see death and I compensate for the crosswinds. I flare into my grave.