

40

this job is a sore cock

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Jacob came blowing into the U-Tau system with forty-seven fighters and two Warthog gunships in tow all-the-while thinking in jest, *things couldn't get much worse*—and all of a sudden, right before his eyes, things get shit serious real fast.

Upsilon-Tarui is a strikingly beautiful three-star system with all of sixty-seven planets and twelve-hundred moons whirling about in a grand-Viennese orbital waltz...via poetic license that is. An alternate view, when one considers the astronomical timeframe, is that this system is in actuality an explosively-violent demolition derby wherein maybe a third of the current orbital objects may make it through the next half-a-billion years in one form or another.

The third planet of the third dim-and-distant star happens to be the solitary habitable one of the bunch and barely habitable at best. Arrakis is a Venus sized world with an eccentric inclination of 37° from the orbital plane, in retrograde, making it both a captured body and not a proper planet by the current 2,112 IAU classifications.

This TCRE35-H body has been going through a reawakening of sorts. With water percolating up from long-dormant underground fault lines what life that did survive the eons of cold/deep space have since exploded onto the scene in dozens of oasis like zones. Because of their size, location and dense flora these oasis' have been named after the islands of the Hawaiian archipelago.

The irony being surrounded by desert instead of ocean.

Arrakis, in spite of its name and desert terrain, is a botanist's fantasyland when it comes to these islands. As for the fauna nothing here is larger than an amoeba so the Darwinian science geeks are gonna have to wait maybe a million years or so before they queue up.

The Annex has enjoyed a wonderful working relationship with Arrakis and once every quarter a lucky platoon gets to participate in training maneuvers with the indigenous reserve force. Usually it goes to a platoon permanently assigned to one of the five battle stations but it was just by the luck of the draw that Anthony Gudici's platoon got picked for this coveted assignment. His regiment's six month tour on the Carrie Nation actually paid off for once.

In passing it was suggested to Guidici that he keep his two dropships planet-side but Bill Nguyen did not have the authority to explain why. Thumbing one's nose at SOP defeats the whole purpose of this training regimen so, according to standard procedure, Gudici parked the empty slicks into geocentric orbit where they belonged.

If the two ships would have been on the deck then Gudici's platoon would have made a quick getaway but, as tough breaks go, the dropships got blasted seconds after the Zodiac missiles blotted out SA27—the venerated battle platform known as Devil Anise.

The six dropships that launched from SA27 were filled to the gills with ops crew so they bugged out immediately, where their eight escort fighters dove down and scooped up twenty-four of the troopers from the platoon. The remaining eighteen scattered into the brush in teams of three while the Thunderbolts start to circle the Moloka'i botanical preserve in a high-speed low-altitude CAP.

At the far end of the ninety-five kilometer island is a satellite Arrakis base affectionately known as the Leper Colony, and where they're on affable terms with the Steel Annex their chain of command meanders up through the ARC (Arrakis Reserve Corps), to the BDF (Base Defense Force) division of the CDF (Co-op Defense Force) which is part of this incarnation of the MAD (Military Alliance Deputation) under the leadership of the Steel Chain Cooperative (SCC) who is openly hostile to the SA so...

So much for maintaining friendly relations.

With eight of the catastrophically lethal 'bisE' models of the Thunderbolt buzzing around Moloka'i, like angry Mach-3 hornets, the ARC didn't feel emboldened to follow new orders calling on them to attack the SA platoon they were supposed to be training with that day. In counterpoint an attached squad of Security Services, the comically aggressive PMC that answers only to the core leadership of the SCC, saw only dollar-\$ign\$ as they commandeered the SAM site at the base and fired a ground based version of the Centipede-Azul missile at the closest Thunderbolt only twenty-nine clicks away.

The pilot of this recently upgraded Thunderbolt kicked in her reverse vector, which is like hitting the breaks, and flipped her fighter up and over the missile as it shrieked by at Mach-6. The beauty of

measure verses countermeasure is demonstrated here by two Co-op micro-missiles released by the centipede being intercepted by SA micropedes launched from the Thunderbolt with an extra one blowing up and spinning the advanced Azul missile into the desert floor.

Dipping under the treetops at high speed the pilot closed the distance to the SAM site and at just under ten kilometers she lobbed three of her 20/20 cluster bombs at the base.

The bombs rocket over the SAM site and, while spinning, each one ejects 40 nuclear bomblets in a crazy-quilt pattern chewing up an area the size of a football pitch. The third one vaulted up and dove into the center of the target area—letting loose with a combined explosive force of 40,000 kilograms. With the SAM site gone and the SS squad genie-blinked out of existence, what troops still combat effective for the ARC elected to *not* stick their necks out.

It was just then that Jacob's crew pops in from Electra.

Pathing the tactical feed, Jacob finds it amusing to see that there is still a use for the oversized cockpit of the Thunderbolt other than him taking friends and family out to space for a quick sight-see. Initially these cockpits were designed a century ago for the old F40 Cottonmouth but the long two-week missions they planned for never did materialize. Early on the WSO seat was substituted with three folding jump seats and this handy little feature allowed for quick troop insertions and extractions and was one of the many sub-assemblies that found their way into the Thunderbolt. Its usefulness ended when the Annex acquired the HWG line of drop ships, but that cockpit still affords Jacob endless opportunities to shag his flame of the day senseless while they weave in-n-out through the rings of Saturn.

Approaching combat many experienced fighter commanders will hand off the lead position of their squad to their wingman. Point being a pilot can only learn to lead by leading. The Annex used to fly Luftwaffe style, in the ragged Schwarm-Rotte formations, but to hide numbers they now fly in tight classic formations. Having jumped in a stacked diamond, to piggy back all four of the squad within Peña's displacement field, when they popped out Peña and Jacob raced ahead for a quick recon as the rest of the force spread out in pairs.

Absorbing the tacnet feed of the AO, quickly realizing that the ARC is hunkered down at the Leper Colony and twelve Cottonmouths from the military airbase on the far side of the planet have at least 25 minutes to get to Moloka'i, Jacob now thinks they can grab-n-go before they do, "This is gonna be too easy."

Peña snaps, ["*A la chingada!* You had to say it!"]

Jacob chuckles, "Ah...might superstitious aren't we?"

["Be puttin' a Captain Obvious hex on our shit here, dude!"] And as Jacob text-broadcasts '*LETS DO THIS*' to the fighters and drop ships, Peña complains further, ["And while I'm bitchin' how about you all find someone else to teach everybody how to fly the Beluga. I had my fill of pounding ground when I was a jar-head."]

Jacob laughs, "Sorry, Peña, you are the resident dog expert so you're stuck with it. How does the three-eighty fly anyway?"

["Fly? Birding aroun' in that thing is tits! Totally outclasses the Bulldog which is a goddamn tragedy because it's so fuckin' ugly."]

"Well, son, now is the time to make suggestions."

["Okay, how 'bout rhinoplasty?"]

Jacob laughs again, "Do you have any idea what it took to get Northrup to work with Sukhoi? Any?"

["It's fucken' ugly and...SHIT!"] That very second six Co-op battle cruisers blow in between them and the planet, with Peña instantly shouting orders, ["Two, bust on three, right!"]

Obviously the cruisers dropped off from their jump far enough away from U-Tau that, when they thought the coast was clear, they raced in unaware that Jacob and his people popped in and scattered out from their jumps only one light second from Arrakis. The cruisers were the old 'Swingline' models that came to a screeching halt right over the planet and started dumping flights of fighters not realizing they were already in trouble. What the Co-op did was the smart thing to do because nobody in their right mind would jump so damned close to their target, but Jacob thought that since they are all quick and nimble fighters and dropships then the element of surprise would work in their favor—and he was right. Many think Jacob's gut feelings and risky choices border on clairvoyance, and they have learned to go with his flow sort of speak, but the six cruisers are unexpected meat on the table when he and Peña each launch three spider missiles after them.

The closest one is only eight-hundred kilometers away and it takes Peña's first spider only 0.07 seconds to reach it at 0.98c. The missile goes right up its ass and the cruiser violently flashes over in a very hot and rapidly expanding plasma ball (that they learn later on counts for five kills which included four F51 fighters that just launched clear—then getting wiped out by that blast). Jacob's first missile hits the second cruiser at 1.25c amidships in the bridging section between flight ops in the forward-half and the habitation and drive sections in the aft-half. The explosion is huge but instead of vaporizing the ship the force blows out in the direction the missile was traveling which spins the two halves away. Peña's second missile doesn't exactly hit the third cruiser but the displacement field grazes the bridging section

at 1.5c and just enough to break its back. This battle cruiser folds up and tumbles off in a slow-lazy head-over-heels spiral.

The remaining cruisers were able to launch two squads of fighters each and evade the spiders inside 6.5 seconds, and between Peña saying 'Shit!' and their evasive jump, Jacob realizes three things: 1.) These are the hand-me-down Swingline battle cruisers and run by Security Services for sure; 2.) The old cruisers can only launch four fighters at a time so they've had to have been drilling their asses off to catapult eight and bug out inside that time; 3.) Because the SS got there so damned quick they were on a tight leash waiting for this.

Peña radios to all, ["We've got thirty Condors up ahead following two IR5...check, one IR5 to the deck. Stand by."]

Of the three spiders that missed the cruisers two stopped to lie in wait and see if those ships were stupid enough to show back up, the third sees an IR5 close by so it races out to bust on it because to the spider AI brain, unless they are told otherwise, they ignore fighters for capital ships and the IR5 is considered a capital target even though it is a fighter-interceptor by definition.

Jacob takes stock in the situation... The cruisers will now launch fighters from a stand-off range once they regroup and that'll start in about five minutes. The Cottonmouths are far enough away that they'll not factor in for at least twenty minutes, and they themselves will probably get battle platform support in about fifteen minutes, but it's those Condors that are the immediate threat.

Jacob broadcasts, "Everybody, set your spiders to M3 mode and dump 'em all. They'll know what to do. Second squad you guys go cock-block Mario Kart and for the rest of you... We got thirty M&Ms racin' for the deck so, for the now, let's go down and play."

01001001-01000111-01000001-01000010-01000110-01000001-01010100

Nufa, the fourth planet orbiting Tura-Tau, was originally named Novyy Ufa by the initial Russian survey teams, but most of the people who settled the planet spoke English so they adopted New Ufa early on. Within a decade that got abridged to Nufa which became official when they joined the Cooperative. Those cosmonauts also gave the star HIP-20842 the name of Tura-Tau which has been somewhat confusing because there is no such designation in any index for the Taurus constellation due to the fact that there is no corresponding Greek Cyrillic character. Tura-Tau was the original name for Ufa.

The northern third of Nufa has its singular ocean and the rest is pretty much an out of control rainforest fed by copious amounts of CO2 from dozens of volcanos that have sprouted up from the ocean

depths in the northern pole. Here precipitation has gone totally haywire and it rains and rains and when you think you've had enough it rains some more. The original trading city, also known as Nufa, is located on a jungle delta on the northern hemisphere in an area called the Bashkir Gardens, but some blockhead jokingly referred to this perpetually damp region as Ferenginar and that stuck.

A gargantuan river, Novyy Belaya, winds back from Nufa on the coast through eight-thousand kilometers of rainforest and down under across the sprawling grasslands of the southern pole through the zero-latitude Nufimsky Metropolitan District. Now, if some architect extraordinaire and a municipal planner shared a crazy vision and unlimited budget then the Nufimsky central core, Net Basha, would be their Emerald City wet-dream. Having grown up instead of out, at a distance this three-mile tall central complex of carbon fiber and glass has the same visual impact as the towers of the Sagrada Família, and with Tura-Tau lapping the horizon in a continual civil/nautical twilight cycle the citizens are about as happy and content as you can expect for a quarter-billion residents whose postal addresses are plus-four coded vertically.

Months ago an SA picket droid reported unusual activity out towards an unpopulated area far from the Nufimsky district on the edge of the rainforest called, Mari Lug. The SA finally got around to sending out three recon teams to get an idea what was going on and that morning, just by chance, one of the squads noticed an old style Dragonfly drop ship settling down on a grassy meadow. Instead of landing per se they watched it slip through a hologram of gently waving grass and vanish from sight. The other two squads beat feet for the AO as the first one conducted a thermal scan and below ground they identified profound heat signatures for 33 ambulatory objects ranging from 60 to 100 kilos in size and another district grouping of 158 fainter signatures ranging from 10 to 30 kilos...oops!

At 11:28zulu they reported on a possible Geisha Hut and this tidbit of info was like pitching a knuckleball at Bill and Scott. Orders given were to stand fast until 12:15 and at that time they were to "secure" the location and hold until Maria and company showed up to evacuate the site. That is, this was the plan until they noticed the small 10 to 30 kilo objects being herded towards the dropship wherein at 12:06 they reported they couldn't wait till 12:15 thus forcing Maria to launch at 12:07—a whole two minutes earlier than expected and totally losing them any element of surprise.

Oh, well, them's the breaks.

Maria's crew exited their jumps right above the Mesosphere of Nufa, and that's not exactly unheard of but it is dangerous as hell to pull off. Coming out of a jump that close, with air density at 0.001mb,

is like having your bell rung with a brick but, with no damage to their ships and without hesitation, they immediately dove for broke.

It was now a race between them and three assault transports with a four fighter escort that just launched from Net Basha, and even though those people were much closer by Maria's calculation she and her team will beat them by 90 seconds. The status from the recon teams was better than expected with no fight, no shots, no casualties, the staff under guard, and the children playing—yet curious as to why they were being put into a drop ship then pulled from that drop ship by complete strangers looking like scary black mechanized ghosts.

Maria clears her throat and broadcasts, "Nufa Control, this is Marshal, Maria Ramirez of the Steel Annex. We are entering your airspace on a humanitarian mission. Pursuant to the standing U.N. resolution twenty-one ninety-eight one-seven-zero-one-eight we have secured an illegal cloning facility at the far west end of the Mari Lug region, and have established an area of operation in a radius of five kilometers for the extraction phase. Please acknowledge."

["This is Nufa Control, please stand by."]

A few seconds later she hears, ["Marshal, Ramirez, this is Minister of State, Brenda Rice, and I'm advising you to turn around and get out of here, like now. The Annex is no longer part of the United Nations and that resolution is not applicable to you."]

Victoria radios to Maria, ["Maria, dear, may I field this?"]

"If it'll avoid a fight then okay!"

["Minister Rice, this is Major, Victoria Wilson with the RAF. We will have you know that those powers afforded to the Annex were not yet rescinded by the United Nations after they joined the FIS. It was held in committee and not voted on so, as it is, Marshal Ramirez retains those powers by default. The RAF was invited to join in this rescue mission and, because the nature of the violation is considered a crime against humanity, it is our duty to see it through together."]

["Is this, *your majesty*, Victoria Wilson?"]

["Yes, we are."]

Rice is clearly pissed, ["Stand by, Major."]

Rice wasn't long, ["Major Wilson, Nufa is part of the Co-op and currently the Cooperative is at war with the Annex. We would like to avoid an international incident but we will fire on you if you push on to the Mari Lug. Please, for your safety, vacate our airspace."]

Victoria smirks, ["Minister Rice, if you wanted to avoid an international incident then we have to say...you failed."]

Kiel asks on a dead pause, ["We're calling their bluff, right?"]

Victory affirms, ["Well, we're not bluffing."]

Kiel says, ["Good to hear!"]

Simmons calls out, ["You're God-damned right!"]

Victoria asks, ["Simmons, doll, you always up for a scuffle?"]

["I live for it, Major!"] Simmons cackles with that.

Nicole adds, ["Major, Angie is a bit of a Berserker."]

Victoria then opens a private link to Maria with a small click, ["Maria, love, are your people for real?"]

Maria laughs, "I tell ya what, Vic. This job is a sore cock and, just like your SAS, my people fall in that category."

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In the two-hundred thousand kilometers between Arrakis and its single rocky moon, Onn, are over four-hundred spider missiles lying in wait—and they didn't have to wait long. Just as Jacob and his team descended to fifteen-thousand meters above Moloka'i a squadron of sixteen F51 Condors came charging in right on time at the five minute mark. The missiles M3 mode has been called the 'jumping spider' mode and for good reason because when the Condors were halfway between Onn and Arrakis the spider missiles make their coordinated attacks. Within seconds all sixteen of the fighters were suddenly a rapidly expanding debris field. Still in motion towards the planet the wreckage quickly starts to incinerate upon reentry and because it's daytime, and everybody on the surface is sort of busy right now, nobody notices the spectacular show overhead.

This didn't go unnoticed by the three follow on squadrons that showed up a minute later and by sheer stupid luck they were able to back off in the nick of time. The new order of business for them is to figure out a work-around the spiders and to link up with the thirty Condors that are now bearing down on Moloka'i. Where exiting a jump in thin atmosphere is dangerous as hell, zipping around in the bubble of a displacement field is not so much. In MDDSH one can travel in up to 0.01mb without too many problems—except when approaching 1.0mb where it's like molasses. With that in mind the Co-op F51's swing halfway around the planet and then plummet to seventy kilometers altitude before the spiders could fully react to the maneuver and well below the spider's operational floor at one-hundred clicks.

The spiders still managed to bag five of them.

Now with forty-three coming in from high altitude, the first

thirty kicking up dust on a low altitude approach, and an IR5 sneaking around the perimeter a hundred kilometers past them, Jacob realizes that both sides are pretty much on equal terms with the high-end centipede air-to-air missiles. Everybody knows that when they start firing volleys of these damned things at each other, with six on-board micropedes of the SA and the four mini-missiles of the Co-op, like Jacob said at mission launch, 'It may get real messy real fast.'

Jacob barks out orders, "Everybody, we're gonna do a Silver Fish with teams two and four going low and one and three going high. Designate your targets on the tactical grid and launch two centipedes each. Silver Fish on my mark in sixty seconds."

With the tactical lighting up with targets being claimed Jacob switches over to the eight fighters from SA27, "You guys down there, as soon as we do our maneuver I want you break off from CAP and go bust on those Cottonmouths."

The flight leader responds, ["Roger that, Buzzard."]

Jacob adds, "Keep 'em busy. I really don't want to shoot them down, but do what you have to do. As soon as you discourage them from pressing on I want you to get our people outta here."

["Understood."]

Jacob then switches over to Gudici on the ground, "Wopper, you watching this?"

Gudici responds, ["Yeppers, Buzzard."]

"I want you to keep your heads down but, knowing you, fat chance, right?"

["If I may make a suggestion?"]

Jacob says, "I'm all ears!"

["Use the HWGs as decoys and pick us up with the escorts."]

Jacob nods, "Ya, that'll work for a few!"

["It's a start? Out!"]

Jacob switches over to the team frequency, "Wopper had a great idea. We use the HWGs as bait and tag one escort for the pickup. We should be able to get away with this three or four times."

With the three squadron leader acknowledgements, Jacob adds, "If you grab—you go! Do not wait and do not look back."

It was just then that Jacob's second squad, the one shadowing the IR5, calls him, ["God damn it, Buzzard! Mario Kart pulled an Immelmann at low Mach and got away from us. The mutherfucker is booming in hard at twelve-thousand!"]

On the master tactical, Jacob notices that the IR5 is now eighty kilometers away at twelve kilometers altitude, and at Mach-8 that means he's only thirty seconds out, "People, we are breaking early! I got eyes on the IR5! Twenty seconds, people!"

Jacob wants that IR5 and he wants it bad.

He remembers the IR1 was like someone grafted an XB70 to the ass-end of an F40 a la Human Centipede and, from the looks of it, this one is a bit more refined. Jacob saw a fuzzy video of the IR5 and its strange double delta configuration with the forward fuselage being a lifting body and the razor like delta wings in the back framing two massive pontoon-like engine nacelles. Where the IR1 actually made aeronautical sense the IR5 looks like some mutant lawn dart incapable of powered flight—but here they are facing an IR5 and the damned machine looks like it's got that flight thing down pretty good.

The Interceptor-Reconnaissance series of fighters from Co-op have proven to be a total bitch to chase after because they are so damned fast. A Thunderbolt has to climb to five thousand meters above one just to keep up with it, and to attack you have to dive down hoping to get lucky enough to gain a firing position. It takes four or more fighters to keep one in check, and if one is fortunate enough to get into position with either cannon or missiles the IR5 pilot can simply jink the ship hundreds or even thousands of meters out of shot in just a fraction of a second with a little twitch of the wrist.

Jacob has always wanted to try his luck with one of these but he has never had the opportunity until now but, as it is, he has to pass on it because the Condors are the greater threat, "Second squad, break off of the IR5 and get in this fight." After the acknowledgement he switches channels over to Peña, "Hey, Dog, paint that IR5 and we'll both launch on it. When we break you chase that fucker away and keep it busy. You have to do this on your own, son. Copy?"

You can almost hear Peña grin, ["Copy! You got it, Boss!"]

Everyone knows that the whole idea of squads and squadrons and coordinated attacks and the very concept of leadership is going to go to hell in a handbag in short order. In just a few seconds the only thing that is going to hold true is the lead and his or her wingman, and anybody in the know knows that the wingman's job is the tougher job. Then, with the sheer number of fighters about to clash, even that tight bond is going to unravel in the worse possible way. With that thought Jacob prays that his people stick to their training and avoid the turn fights with the highly maneuverable Condors.

Something an experienced turn fighter, like Peña, would fall back on since he was a F308 pilot for years.

Jacob sees the IR5 starting to descend quickly and with that he knows he made the right call by sending Peña after it, and now the bastard just launched two centipede-azul missiles at them so Jacob quickly calls out, "Dog, switch target on the azuls and fox-fox!"

Both Jacob and Peña launch a centipede at those missiles while Jacob broadcasts to all, "Silver Fish! Silver Fish! Break!"

All forty-eight Thunderbolts explode into the sky.

They look like they are spiraling out in all kinds of crazy-ass directions but this is misleading—it's a controlled maneuver that holds for only a few seconds. The Thunderbolts maintain tight pairings, that lead and wingman relationship mentioned earlier, and before the Co-op pilots were able to mentally digest this the forty-eight Thunderbolts suddenly launch two centipede missiles apiece.

So now the Co-op is faced with twenty-four pairs of fighters launching a combined total of ninety-six centipede missiles all set for predetermined targets at close range. They in turn scatter in a panic and launch one or two missiles each at the Thunderbolts which messes up their own plan for coordinated targeting. A hundred and twenty fighters are now closing in on one another and ahead of them are over two hundred missiles taking the lead.

From faraway it looked as if three massive firework star-shells went off in quick succession with all the sparkles, instead of twirling off in some random trajectory, turning towards one another to merge into some surrealistic, techno lightning-bug mating frenzy—with Peña and Jacob in the middle of it all.

Peña, noticing the IR5 dropping below the fray, radios Jacob, ["Buzzard, I'm on Speedy Gonzales."]

With a vectored pitch, Peña flips his thunderbolt into a reverse turn and races after the IR5 while in a shallow climb so he can gain some lead and keep it guessing. In the middle of the turn Peña notices the missiles and fighters converging on one other—and all of a sudden the centipedes from both sides sprout micropede and mini-missiles thus tripling the spinning, smoke-trailing death in the sky.

Seeing this Peña thinks to himself, *Oi' Buzzard was right the first time! This is gonna get messy!*