

THERE'S A DUCK ON MY TAIL

“No,” he pushed my feet off his console with an irritated gesture, “I need men. Unfortunately, I haven’t got any to spare. So, you’ll have to do. How many of your kind can you assemble?”

David Woodruff

There is nothing like standing in line with a bunch of humans. They always pretend not to notice you. A creepy looking guy with an RAF uniform pulled up next to me, old-style clipboard in hand. “You Buster?” He asked.

I yanked the cigar out of my mouth. “Who wants to know?”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he swaggered. “If you’ll follow me.”

“Sorry boys, duty calls.” I waved my hat at the poor suckers who were still in line. No one was pretending now. They completely refused to take any notice of a mere cartoon. Cheeky humans. They showed me into a little office. A console, two chairs, nothing more. The man behind it was the very caricature of an RAF officer. White hair above the ears. A bald spot that could easily be mistaken for a landing strip. A mustache in need of a curling iron. Behind him stood a thin officer who appeared to be vulnerable to paper cuts.

My escorting officer gave them both a snappy salute. “Flight Lieutenant Bulldog, sir.”

“Very well, sergeant. That will be all.” He looked me over. Disapproval was written all over his face. I chomped on my cigar as he gave me the eye. I pulled up a chair, slammed my butt in it and put my feet on the back of mustache guy’s console.

“I suppose you know what’s going on here?” He snapped.

“You need a bigger office?”

“No,” he pushed my feet off his console with an irritated gesture, “I need men. Unfortunately, I haven’t got any to spare. So, you’ll have to do. How many of your kind can you assemble?”

“My kind?”

“You know ... cartoons. Bloody drawings.”

The officer’s adjutant shifted uncomfortably. “Sir, you can’t be serious. They’re a joke.”

“Shut up, Meigs.” He looked over his spectacles at me. “How many?”

I chomped up my cigar and gave the adjutant a brutal stare. “Oh. I’m sure I can draw up a few here and there. Call them to the colors so to speak.”

“Fleet’s desperate. Have you seen the causality figures? Not the ones they put in the press. No, I mean the real ones. In less than six weeks, we’ll need to train parakeets to fly our fighters. I need 145 pilots and I need them by tomorrow. Am I clear?”

I stood up, snapping my heels. I gave him a crisp salute. “Ja vole” I shouted, and give him a Nazi salute.

“Get out,” he demanded.

I paused at the door, leaving it open just a jar. On the other side, an argument burst out almost at once. “Sir, we’ll be a disgrace. The laughing stock of every fighter wing in the fleet.”

“I haven’t a choice, Meigs. They can fly. But more importantly, they don’t breathe air. We’re losing too many crews we can’t recover.”

“But sir!”

“Shut up and damn your eyes, Meigs. Do you want the blobbies landing in Piccadilly?”

“No, sir.”

“Then get on with it. Find them some fighters.”

“I simply can’t believe it, sir...”

“What? The fact cartoon characters are real?”

“No, sir. I can’t believe we’ve sunk this low.”

I walked away from the door, a jaunty step and a crisp swagger, my hand flying over the crease in my trousers. I can’t help it. I was drawn this way. But we’ll show those humans. And we’ll teach the Blobs a lesson or two as well.



The war wasn’t going well, as you might have noticed. At first, the galaxy seemed empty. Resources ripe for the plucking. They came out of nowhere. No one is even sure if their homeworld is even in the Milky Way. We call them Blobs. They’re formless creatures without out any permanent appendages. They don’t build their own technology, they grow it. Their fighters look like evil crawfish and manta rays. It’s the weirdest thing you’ve ever seen ... and I’m a toon. I’ve seen a few things.

They started in by attacking the outlying districts. You know, the ones which had just started to get things up and running. With not a thought given over to defense against an alien predator. The Blobs left them smoking holes. The diplomats had gone into high gear. Seems there was this general feeling advanced beings with a sense of interspecies cooperation would be open to negotiation. Boy, they were wrong. The Blobs don’t even have a language. At least not one we can identify at any rate. There’s a whole placket of scientists who insist they communicate like Earth bees. through smell and dancing. In any case, they don’t seem to have any interest in talking to us.

They cleaned up a few more planets with bigger settlements and Earth Command started to get the idea. Conflict always drives spurts of intense activity. Earth went from nothing but a few unarmed freighters to space navies almost overnight. They sent out the fleet. 60,000 men and women with more armaments than a May Day rally outside the Kremlin. There were twelve survivors.

So, the war dragged on. More planets became smoking ruins. More fleets spread their broken, useless parts over the emptiness of space. We were like the litterbugs of the galaxy. And people kept dying. In the press, they started talking about the battle of the Somme and the 1940 defense of France as some of your better military operations. The only problem was, it was good news. The press didn’t know the half of it.

So now, after years of denying we exist, we’d get to join the front lines.

If you ask me, I don’t know what took you humans so long.



Buster entered the hall. A line of recruits snapped to attention. Most were cartoons, but a few were moody, bedraggled humans. "What the devil is this, Halvorson?"

Aleksander Halvorson was a Norwegian, the actual unit commander. One of the last survivors of the North Sea Spacefighter Group. Earth Central Command refused to let a bunch of rag-tag cartoons run their own operation. I had made it clear to him he could sit around behind any desk he wanted, but I was running the show. "What are these meat-bag humans doing in my fighter wing?"

Halvorson grunted. "The Warner toons are forming their own wing with the Americans. These men are volunteers to fill out our numbers. They have flying experience with the North Sea Spacefighter Group, we could use some of their knowledge."

I marched up and down the line like a parade sergeant. "Felin, nice to see the French here ... even though you are a cat," I growled. Felin simply snapped her well-drawn tail as if it were a whip. "Who the devil are you?"

"Szymon Kohanski," the human replied with a thick Polish accent.

I twisted my cigar. "Polack, aye?"

"Polish fighter ace," he smiled, "I already have 16 Blob kills."

"Yea well, stow it, flyboy. Everybody here starts fresh." I climbed on a pile of poorly sketched soapboxes. "You hear me?" I shouted. "The only kills I'm counting are the ones you kill for this unit. Right now, everybody's a rookie." There was some grumbling in the crowd. Nick, a Dutch version of Disney's famous duck, shifted uncomfortably on his oversized webbed feet. "Yea, that goes double for you Nick. You make any trouble in this wing and I'll start you out with negative numbers."

The group came to attention and the grumbling died away. I raised my voice. "Let me be clear. This is going to be the best performing wing in the fleet. Screw up and I'll shoot you myself. In case any of you are wondering, my bite is much worse than my bark ... and don't you forget it." I glanced over a Belgian cartoon bird. "Oiseau, you're with me. As of now, you are the wing's adjutant."

The small Belgian bird toon tweeted an unhappy tune. "I'd rather be flying."

I spit out my cigar. "Did I ask?"

Oiseau hesitated and then flew over to my shoulder. I put my cigar back in my mouth. "You couldn't reach the controls anyway, you bird brain." I turned my attention back to the group. "Get familiar with the 814's behind you. They're your fighters. Use your time wisely. We become operational tomorrow. I want each and every one of these birds painted with the wings emblem, Daffy Duck in his Air Force Uniform."

"But, Buster," Oiseau protested in a French accent, "He's copywritten. You can't use him."

"Let the lawyers sue me after the war. If I'm still alive." I growled. "Warner's toons want their own wing, that's fine with me, but I get the duck logo. Let them eat cake. Right, Felin?"

The cartoon cat purred.

The 814 was a scientific probe which had the instruments ripped out of its guts. The looked like a fat pen. You know, the kind with three different color inks? Humans had to lay down to fly it. It was the only way they could fit over the weapons module which filled the lower half. I had the oxygen tanks torn out of mine so there would be room for a seat. I like my comfort.

I gave them the evil eye as the boys ran around, most of the toons tripping over there own two feet. Not counting Slim the Spider. He was tripping over at least four of his. It was not your usual Stellar Fleet force. No, this wasn't even the bottom of the barrel. This was the sludge you found under the barrel.

Halvorson gave me a glance. "It would be fitting to throw them a party tonight," he suggested.

"You ever saw a toon drunk, Halvorson?"

"No, I wasn't much for Saturday morning cartoons."

"These guys have a silly streak in them bigger than a gag fair at a clown convention," I explained. "Get them drunk and ... well, it's not a pretty sight."

"Still."

"Yea, I know." I sank my teeth into my cigar.

"When are you going to give up smoking?" Halvorson asked.

"Toons don't get sick, like you humans," I replied. "I was drawn in the '40s. My artist was a Havana man through and through. You humans can change. I'm a toon. I gotta stick with my ink. It's a thing."



The party was a blowout. Some of the humans brought in a few of the local medical staff from sickbay. They'd even managed to bring in a few toons. I don't know what they thought they the toons in Med Bay were going to do. You couldn't do much to a toon. Except erase them. And once a toon was erased, well it was over. It's not like you can put an erased toon back together with ink line scars and a few strategically spaced paper clips. Still, these toons knew how to cut a rug. Most of the humans hung out on the fringes, nearly hugging the walls. The toons did most of the bobbing and the weaving. Until one of the petty young girls started to dance with one of the toons.

All hell broke loose. There were punches flying through the air. Humans can throw powerful punches. Much harder than I can swing a fist. I wouldn't want to be caught by one. Trouble is, I'm a toon. We Cartoons have a knack for ducking. Especially if the human's fist would end up impacting a wall when it misses you. Of course, such things tend to infuriate the human throwing the punch ... unless it ends up breaking their hand.

Drools, who is always drawn as a big, hairy St. Bernard was busy ducking the punches of a Czech pilot. He'd casually avoid a roundhouse punch and then lick his opponent's face with a tongue so big it would lift him off the floor. It was hard to tell which was the more intensive, the dance, or the fight. Slim lifted six of his legs and then clung to the ceiling to avoid a table being thrown across the room. Fortunately, both starship tables and bulkheads are resilient, especially on board a fighting ship. Nothing broke. Still, the cleaning crews were going to have their hands full removing the mark.

Another human tried to head-butt Drools. Funny thing is when you try to hit someone hard with your head and they end up not being on the receiving end, you tend to end up on the floor. Several of the toons picked him up. He shook his head and then started to throw even more wild punches. Security started piling into the room, whistles screaming. You think with all the high tech on a starship they'd have invented something else besides a piece of tin that makes a shrill sound, but no. Unfortunately, human security just can't handle toons. They'd reach out to grab one by the arm and find themselves holding a crudely rendered sign reading, "sucker."

This might have continued for some time, but the alert sirens went off. Enemy contact. The ship's loudspeakers then joined the general din, "Set condition one. Set condition one. All crew to stations. All pilots make ready for launch."

It was nice to see the group act as one. Humans and toons were picking each other off the floor. I was proud. There was a look of determination on everyone's face. Well, except of course for Drool. He only had one expression; panting with his tongue hanging out of one side of his mouth. I chomped down on my cigar and started barking orders. "Alright, you guys. Look alive. I want everyone in the hanger bay yesterday."

The hanger bay was a huge cavernous space with virtually no room in it. Every available millimeter was given over to stacks of fighters. The carrier literally drops a rack of eight fighters. Once in space, the rack falls away and the fighters are left to fly free. Technically, there was a procedure to recover all the fighters and put them in new racks, but the process hadn't been used much.

I waved everyone to their fighters. Halvorson was climbing into the fighter just below mine in the rack. "Alex, what do you think you are doing?"

"Getting ready to fly."

I practically ripped the cigar out of my mouth. "I thought we discussed this. You do the paperwork and I do the running around commanding."

"Yes, well," he replied sheepishly, "I agreed. But nothing was said about flying."

"You sit behind a desk, not a stick," I barked.

"Not today." He gritted his teeth angrily. "I was with the First Fleet. I've listened to most of my colleagues die as they ran out of air after the carrier was gone. Now I'm going to get some payback or I'm going to join them. One or the other."

"You're a stubborn jerk, do you know that?" I complained.

He smiled. "Do you want to know how to say in Norwegian?"

"No."

"Then you're a *sta jerk* too."

"Actually, I'm a dog. But who's counting." I pulled the cockpit glass closed over my head. The hatch pulled itself down and I could hear the seals hiss. I flipped on the radio. "Hey, Slim. How many buttons can you press at once?"

The device cracked to life. "Oh, a few."

Radio operational, check. "Slim, I want you out in front."

"Got you, boss. I'll leave you all a nice silk trail to follow."

"333 Wing," I announced chewing on the cigar, "I want all toons backing up the humans." There was a fair amount of muttering on the intercom. I had to belt out my next order. "Hey, his is my Wing, I set the flight assignments. As of right now, each man has a toon for a wingman. Get used to it. Toons, it's your job to keep your leader safe. I know you all think you have something to prove. Well, prove to me you can fly. You read me?" There was still some bellyaching, but I got my message across. "Halvorson your ass is mine. Don't go flying off like a deranged Viking, OK?"

Next thing I know, I'm dropping like a rock and the sky is full of stars. You kind of feel like a bomb load being released from a giant plane. The rack fell away, and we were free. The engines cut on instantly. I don't know what felt worse, dropping out of the carrier or being slammed forward by the engine.

I peeled myself off the front window, but Oiseau remained stuck to the glass. "What are you doing in here?" I screamed. "This isn't a two-seater."

"You don't think I was going to miss the show, did you?" The little bird stretched his wings and flew back to my shoulder. "Fleet message coming in," he chirped.

I checked the display. The fleet was assigning us to the far right. If I didn't know better, I say they didn't trust us to keep up our end. The Blobs always fly straight on. They weren't much for finesse. This way, fleet must have figured, we'd be out of the way. "This is Toon Leader. Repeat, this is Toon Leader. Heading zero niner zero, come left 50,000 K." I barked.

It seemed so quiet. Silent as the night. I could see my rack group and the carrier behind me, but everything else was stars. I was like we were all alone. maybe it was a training drill or something.

Bright flashes started ripping across the sky. So much for the drill. The Blobs were showing their usual tactical style. Heading straight down the middle, right for the carrier. The sky started looking like the end of a Fourth of July show. But there was nothing going on at our end. That's when I saw Slim's fighter pod streak off to the left.

"What are you doing?" I screamed.

"Blobs, sir."

My face must have been turning red. "I can see them. Get back in formation, we have our orders. Slim. Slim! SLIM!" He didn't respond. All I could see was the glow from his engine.

Another fighter pod pulled out after him. It looked like Marcek, the Czech pilot. Before I could wink an eye, it was mutiny. Everyone was following Slim. "Blast you," I shouted. I banked my 814 to the left and pulled in behind Halvorson. My engines roared as I put the thing in gear.

The flashing streaks of light were starting to get brighter and longer. We were getting close. Then, just like a mist parting, one of the manta ray things appeared before me. Black against the night sky, I could

only make it out as his buddy's shots disappeared behind him. I pulled the trigger and let loose a flash of my own. It ripped into the side of one of his wings.

These creatures carried bags of pure oxygen inside their wings, so they can breathe in the vacuum of space. My fire caused one of his bags to explode, tearing off a wing. before I knew it, the Blob pilot was swimming around in space, pseudopods shooting everywhere. It was like he was trying to grab onto something which wasn't there. I had to swerve hard to the right to avoid hitting him. They can make a mess on your cockpit window.

Nick passed me like I was standing still. Light blasted from his nose and then another alien fighter exploded in a mass of flame. But there was yet another fighter closing on Nick's tale. The duck weaved, banked and threw his machine into a spin. The Blob flowed him down, diving at him as he continued to spin. The alien let loose a burst of fire directly at the duck's engine.

If it had been a human pilot, the resulting blast would have been short but magnificent. But the duck was a toon. His 814 split up as if it was an exploded diagram, the parts spreading across the inky black sky. Flashes from the alien's guns burned through empty space and then the Duck's fighter reassembled. Nick pulled up next to the Blob fighter, opened his cockpit window and hit the craft with a cartoon hammer. It split apart like a dropped china vase.

I fired some short bursts riddling another manta ray from nose to tail, inflicting substantial damage. Realizing he was in over his head, he threw his craft into a desperate dive in an attempt to shake me off. But I stuck to him like glue. There are some who think the blobbies are mindless drones, but this is probably because they don't have any discernable heads. And people think a bulldog is ugly. No, this one when how to think and he was desperate.

I mirrored the Blob's every move. One of his friends picked up my tail and closed to an uncomfortable distance. He fired several bursts, but it was completely ineffective. It took the two of them a few minutes to realize they had met their match. I flipped around and placed my ship behind both of them. I could feel their panic. The blobbies tend to be amazing cooperative for a species without a language. But in this case, it didn't work quite as well. They tried bravely to split, but they turned directly into each other's flight path. I barely managed to miss the resulting explosion.

I returned to the fray as soon as I could. I found another one and started to close in on one of the crawfish-like ones. These babies are armor-plated. My blasts reflected off their skin as if they were flies bouncing off a windshield. Only then did I notice the two birds on my tail. Well, if truth be told, I didn't see them at all. Only the blinding glow of their fire whizzing past my canopy.

I whipped around and spun my craft behind the two of them. They lit up the sky like an instant nova ... helped, of course, by the fire I spread across their fuselage. It was now a bit more of an even fight. Several million of them versus a few thousand of us. Personally, I think the Blobs should have brought more of their friends. What happened next was a bit confusing. They came in from above. A Manta banked and attacked from the right as another swooped in from the left. Two more blobbies followed them in a line like lemmings to the sea. They came in behind me and began firing as they streaked past. I noticed two others hovering over the engagement. They were waiting to drop in if some of their buddies had some troubles. I was proud to know they were paying so much attention to little old me. OK, maybe

there weren't. There was a lot of traffic in the way, not to mention the anti-ship fire from the carrier. There wasn't sufficient room to join in.

So, it was only four to one. I turned inwards, in for what to them must have been a most disconcerting and rapid manner. Good thing I was a toon. It allowed me to fire at all four almost simultaneously. I'm telling you, it was a sight to behold. I'd never seen four Blobs run away so fast. Although they did their level best. I gave each one of them a chance to get in behind me. I wanted them to feel they were doing well. But I didn't let them stay there for more than a few seconds.

I performed a sort of flat half spin on the last one. Not a turn mind you but more of a direct reverse jump. We were now nose to nose. Sadly, the Blobs don't have any faces to show surprise. From my end, all I let him see was the flash of my guns. In less than a second, there were more holes in his wings than an old screen door during a hurricane. It was followed by the red-yellow flashes of his exploding fuel and a small but expanding, dust cloud.

I went after the next one. The Blobs have a sort of off-white, almost pink color. This one should have been red ... with horns. He flew like the devil himself. I spun around him and began shooting. He desperately tried to shake me off. He showed me some expert zooms and lightning fast turns which you don't commonly see in your average Blob pilot. Funny how much we have in common. Two creatures, each controlling their own destiny by successfully operating a piece of equipment in a hostile environment. I mean, the Blobs could have grown sentient fighters. But no, here were both were; pilot to pilot, facing each other in mortal combat.

We closed with each other, both holding our fire until the last possible moment. Neither one of us wanted to miss. It was the ultimate game of chicken. If he'd been fighting Henny, it would have been a real chicken. In the end, I fired first. What was once a perfect union of pilot and craft was now an expanding ball of burning gases. I swear I could smell gunpowder in the cockpit. Then I realized it was only my cigar. So much for Blob number two.

The other two had almost gotten lost trying to follow my trail. They had to work hard not to get embroiled with another group of 814's which practically pasted in front of them. To keep their attention on me, and not the rest of 33 Wing, I opened my cockpit and let a sign up in space which read, "Blob seed this way." Geez, I hope the blobbies can read. I drifted slightly east and allowed the two to dive on me. Time for a little flying mayhem.

I banked, zoomed, rolled, and dived between the two of them. Firing at both alien craft as they passed my gun sights. One of them tried to play bait as his buddy climbed up to get behind me. Dumb move. I gave the first one my attention my riddling his craft with holes until it disintegrated in space. I turned so I could single out the other one for the same treatment. It didn't deter the Blob from greeting my turn with a round of fire. His craft seemed to have a much greater rate of turn than my 814, so he pulled up to get behind me again. This only resulted in his exposing his craft's belly to my guns. A dark, oily gas was now trailing from his fighter. I don't know if it was fuel or part of his breathing supply. Personally, I couldn't care less. I had now accounted for three alien antagonists and I was anxious to pick up a fourth.

But his craft exploded before I could get behind it. I guess I'll only be able to paint three Blob flags under my canopy. Although I have to say, the symbol the Space Force used seemed like someone had thrown

rotten unions at you. I suppose they do seem like undifferentiated blobs. Undaunted, I headed back into the fray. I don't like odd numbers, never have.

The wing had its hands full. According to the radar, there were 170 targets in the area. Target rich environment fleet calls it. The pilots call this type of fight one in which you are completely screwed. I saw one of the blobbies get on the duck's tail. He was forced to perform a climbing turn to try to shake some of them off. He was smartly attacked by at least two of the buggers. Nick dived and they followed and started shooting. A stream of fire streaked through the night sky, trying to engulf the duck and anyone who might get in the way. The Duck quickly recovered and caused the two blobbies to follow along, sticking to Nick's tail like glue. Jarmil Marcek and the Danish pilot, Casper Nissen, shot the two aliens off their friend's backside.

Szymon Kohanski weapons were damaged and inoperable. One alien manta took note and dived on the helpless 814. Drools passed right over Szymon's head and headed straight at the ray. The Blob was taken by surprise and Drool fed him a full round of fire, reducing the fighter to drifting debris. What I saw of 33 Wing next was a display of daring and skill. Humans saved toons and toons rescued humans. There were dives and rolls, turns and splits. It's hard to describe the rest of the battle in terms which make sense. I can tell you, nothing made any kind of sense out here.

It was a mess of flashing lights and explosions. It was so bright, it made it difficult to see. You couldn't tell an 814 from an alien ship. Radar was also pointless. Once you have so many blips on the screen, it looks more like a cloud than any collection of individual targets. By this time, everyone was firing wildly. Blasts appearing right and left. Explosions lighting the sky like so many Roman candles. But the blobbies weren't getting through. They were evaporating like a mist hitting a hot plate.

Once they were gone, our problems had only just begun. Like I said, no one had yet landed a group of fighters back on a carrier. All the previous encounters had been a mostly one-way journey. The few survivors had been picked up my smaller craft. Usually by the pilot ejecting and crawling into an escape hatch.

The force field went down over the landing bay and the first of the fighters started their landing run. As he approached, I got the impression he made the realization the 814 lacked any form of landing gear. And the deck approaching him was made of the hardest steel to fend off alien attacks. But it also produced a surface which was sure to preclude a soft landing. The pilots only chance was to slide across the deck in some manner as to slow the fighter to a stop.

I could see the fighter spin in a desperate attempt to place his engines in such a position to reduce his speed. It was a smart move ... almost. The engine, which was in the back, meant the pilot could no longer see or manage his approach. I didn't see the results, only the flash at the end of it. I'll bet the landing left quite a mark on the deck's surface.

To make a long story short, the fighter group lost more craft landing than we took fighting off the blobbies. I think Slim had the most effective landing. He jumped out of the 814 and let the remains scrape across the deck under his legs. Sparks rained across the floor as the empty ship dragged itself to a stop, smashing into a bulkhead wall. The pilots got better at landing as the time when on. It was without a doubt a case of trial and error. And there was a whole lot of error. In the end, the landing deck appeared to be lit by bonfires marking the sides of a primitive runway. So, its edges might easily be

discerned by the landing pilots. Hopefully, they were recording the event, in order to make adjustments in the design of the 815.



I was staring up at Slim. The spider was a bit taller than me. “What did you think you were doing?”

His mandibles shook and trembled. “Well, there were Blobs, sir.”

“How many would you say?”

“A few, sir.”

“A few!” Oiseau was flying around my head. He was like an annoying fly buzzing around my scalp.

“Well, quite a few, sir.” Slim replied.

I chomped down on the cigar. “Let’s get something straight. This is a group ... a wing. Which means there are more than one of us. It’s not single fighter number twelve. It’s 33 *Wing*.” I gave him a look right down the length of my nose. “I know you think you have something to prove. But prove it to someone else. This is not your own private revenge machine. You’re not here for glory or even victories. We ... all of us ... are here for survival. Our continued existence as artistic expressions of the people we share our planet with. If they go, then we go.”

Oiseau flew right into the spider face. He beat his wings slightly faster than the eye could see, even a spider’s. “Reckless flying doesn’t do anyone any good.” He snapped in his distinctive French accent.

“Like you hiding in Buster’s cockpit?”

“Oiseau, shut up.” I barked. “Slim,” I chewed on the cigar. “You’re never going to do that again. Or I’m going to erase your ass personally. All eight legs of it.”

“Got you, boss.”

“Here take these and pass them around. You’ve got enough arms for it.” I handed Slim a big box.

“What’s this?”

“Scarfs,” I told him, “red scarfs.”

Slim blinked more eyes than I care to count. “I thought the traditional color of scarfs for pilots was white?”

“True,” I spat out my cigar, “But I want you mugs to be able to recognize the other members of this wing, even from behind.”

Slim looked as about as shocked as a spider can look. Especially for a carton spider. Oiseau flew over to my ear. “Nice touch boss.”

“Thanks.”

I was amazed fleet had come up with a whole new set of 814s for us to fly. Of course, it was made easier by the fact there were a lot fewer pilots to supply with fighters. Although I was hoping for some 815s with tires, unfortunately, design section doesn't work as fast as most of us pilots would like. To my amazement, Oiseau was already working on the problem. He was busy drawing in wheels on the sides of the wing's 814s. Do you know the great thing about cartoon wheels? They don't weigh anything, so they don't use up extra fuel. On top of this, they don't change the flight characteristics of the 814 at all. Not that a flying pencil has much in the way of flight characteristics in the first place, but you get my drift.

Only Oiseau could have completed such a task. It helps when you can fly around from fighter to fighter like you have your own personal teleporter. It was impressive work. Even though the humans saw it as a joke. I guess humans simply can't help but laugh in the face of danger. Or in the face of anything done by a toon, to put it bluntly.

It seems the Blobs have a one-track mind. They are not happy with failure. They didn't simply go away and lick their wounds. They went off and collected more of their buddies for a second try. Of course, this meant there were much more of them and far less of us. In any case, the klaxons were blaring, and the red lights were flashing. Now it was a rush to the fighters. I still wasn't thrilled with the idea of being dropped out of the carrier like so much garbage.

The night sky was still as dark as ever. This time the fleet put us right up front. Either they were impressed with our performance, or they were running out of pilots. I'd like to say it was the first, but I'm pretty sure it was the former. I was proud of my boys. Although the toons were pretending to fly with impunity. If a fighter blows up then the pilot, human or toon, was nothing more than droplets of pointless liquid. Black ink or red blood, it didn't matter. It was still only a cloud of meaningless liquid.

Before my rack pieces were even fully cast off into space, one of the Blobs took a crack at me. It was a bit too soon. I kicked the RCS system, and without banking, pulled up my nose and gave the Blob a burst while skidding sideways. Another Blob fired a long burst at me from the other flank. This had no result, except for one Blob blasting another Blob out of the sky. Another one appeared and held down his firing key at me until his weapons were burned out. It was a brave ... if pointless act. I gave him a burst and he returned the gift with a beautiful display of explosive light and smoke.

Nick the Duck passed right in front of me. I think with was the first time I'd ever seen the toon fly in a straight line. It was unusual for Nick, who previously had thrown the fighter into wild jigs and dangerous spins. I had to turn away to avoid hitting his 814 and bringing us both to an ignoble end. Two blobbies were still behind Nick and closing. Only now we were both heading right for each other. I fired off the complete capacitor bank of the starboard gun mount. The result emptied its entire contents, but I only got one of the buggers. The second one flew slightly above my head and raced for the duck. Nick had made two classic mistakes. The first was flying for too long in a straight line and the second was not paying attention to his attackers.

Over my head, I could see the Blob fire several hundred short bursts. I couldn't be certain any of the fire had hit Nick as he was behind me. By the time I got turned around, Nick's 814 was a mass of flame and debris. Toons are resilient, but splattered ink is splattered ink. In any case, there was nothing I could have done, my weapon's bank was still recharging.

I had to pull up to avoid a collision with another Blob manta. I turned and tried to reacquire the fighter who had erased Nick, but the sky was full of targets. I found one who was gliding off to the left and managed to catch him napping. My next shots were directed at a crawfish fighter which was having trouble with its engine. I dived on it, but only got a single shot out of my weapons. But it was enough, the alien went up in a cherry red explosion which I found most satisfying. I overshot a few more and rammed one head-on as my weapons banks continued to recharge.

My canopy was cracked, and the front of the fighter was seriously dented. If there had been a human on board, he would have been dead. You know, without any air and all. But toons don't breathe. Although I do find the vacuum of space a little itchy.

"You okay, Oiseau?"

"Couldn't be better," the little songbird chirped delightedly. Yea, I know *you* can't hear things in a vacuum. I'm not stupid. But I am a toon, okay? We operate a little differently.

Aleksander Halvorson shot past the two of us, blowing aliens out of the sky. I counted 42 holes in Halvorson's 814 as it zoomed past. Fuel was leaking from several of them, leaving a trail of black smoke and ionized droplets. It seemed only a quirk of fate his fighter hadn't broken up. The Norwegian seemed to be holding down the firing key on his guns. They wouldn't last very long at this rate of fire. Aliens were blowing up right and left in front of his assault. Several of the more gravely wounded machines flew off in irregular directions, causing a collision with still other Blob fighters. It was a mess. It was about this time Halvorson's ship began to show some highly erratic movements. It began to shudder, and I could see all sorts of wiring escaping from the rear of the craft. Besides these few details, everything seemed okay, until the Norwegian's 814 evaporated into a cloud of sparks and flame.

I think I got a little mad at this point. It would explain why both my weapons systems were burnt out by the end of the fight. Frankly, my mind was a blur for the rest of the fight and I really don't remember too much about what happened next. All I knew was the sky was full of Blobs ... and I was going to fix it. Personally.

We lost a total of eight more in the second engagement. Five humans and three toons. Although we took out 126. As I mentioned before, when they came back there were a lot more of them than the first time. They didn't want to make it easy for us. I have to hand it to them, they did their job well. But in the end, there weren't any Blobs left to go back and return with more friends. It was Earth's first victory.

From my point of view, the only thing which worked well was Oiseau's hand-drawn wheels. We were actually able to land back on the carrier, rather than simply crash into the deck. Even the human pilots managed to land ... despite the fact, they didn't believe the tires would work. An inspector of the returning fighters, however, would have been hard-pressed to distinguish them from a pile of junk waiting to be thrown overboard. Although for me, I couldn't have been prouder of the ducks painted on their sides.

The rest of the war went better. We won a few and we lost a few. The 815 replaced the 814 and Oiseau didn't have to draw in the tires any more. In due time, these were replaced by the 816 and then the 817s. Then without warning, in the same way they had once appeared from nowhere, the Blobs simply

vanished. After a year without any sightings, Earth Central declared the war won. Maybe they are still out there somewhere, who knows? We'll be ready if they come back.

The 33 Wing ended the war as the highest-scoring 814 wing of the conflict, with 2,965 victories. Admiral Hoynes made the claim that without the 33 Wing, the outcome of the war would have been vastly different. Yet, within less than ten months, toons were once again relegated to the backwater of entertainment. Vids on Saturday morning. And the occasional movie. United Earth still refused to recognize they existed. Any mention of their performance or participation in Earth's first Interstellar war was met with a quiet smirk and sometimes an actual outright snicker.

Which would have pleased Nick the Duck to no end.