

Final Approach

Miles Way

Lieutenant Colonel Robin Hart settled into the seat of his staff car, Toyota's latest self-driving hybrid, and left the door ajar, staring up at the tacky white trim above him, a document labeled "Honorary Discharge" rolled firmly in his hand. Even climbing into the car was a sore reminder of where the world was heading. Once people began to trust machines' automation and so-called intelligence, it was inevitable that the military would follow suit.

On his last sortie, a Red Flag mission (something he'd requested to stay on for), he'd flown top cover above the Air Force's largest training area alongside a squadron of computers: drones. There, soaring through the cloudless blue desert, he'd had an epiphany, an almost divine revelation: humans in the pilot seat would soon be a thing of the past. Flesh and blood was becoming obsolete. It was both humbling and terrifying knowing that fewer than two hundred foot away on either side of him, he was flanked by unmanned hunks of metal, held aloft by electrical and aerodynamic witchcraft. He recalled back to when the Air Force had debuted its Raptor fighter jet in the early 1990s. It was becoming clear that development would eventually reach a plateau, a point where pilots would be pushed to their physical limits before reaching the point of self-destruction. Drones were the answer; fast, nimble, and devoid of human needs and functions, they could also carry a larger payload than any manned fighter. They would surpass these human limitations, providing the perfect solution to a specifically sentient problem. A problem he was a part of.

He shivered as the thought crossed his mind once again as he sat in his car. That was some dystopian-level bullshit, something he'd rather not think about. Yet despite his best efforts, the images remained unshakeable, and he gave up resisting. His hands relaxed at his sides as the wheel moved by itself, letting his mind wander as he transposed the metallic, half-skeletal face of Arnold Schwarzenegger on every pedestrian he saw. He chuckled to himself. He still

had enough faith left in humanity that he doubted Skynet would ever become a reality. Then he allowed himself to consider whether this would even be a bad thing. At least a fictitious hostile robot takeover would affect everyone. At least existence as we knew it would end swiftly, a sharp bang rather than the long, whimpering cry that he imagined down his own road. As it seemed to him, few actually stood to lose anything from this transition. His personal disadvantage stemmed from the fact that he put himself in a position of potential eradication to begin with. The public loved the idea. No more soldiers in harm's way, no human error leading to headline-causing disasters. Technically, he should have been right on board with them. But for whatever reason, he wasn't.

Pulling into his garage, Hart wasted no time plugging the Toyota into its wall outlet. Beside the staff car sat a much different vehicle: a dark green 1968 Mustang crouched low on its haunches in a predatory stance. He eyed the car longingly, but his thoughts were cut short when he saw the white sticker in the corner of the windshield: HEV or High-Emissions Vehicle. The Mustang was a pollutant-belching dinosaur, one that required registration to drive, and he had yet to renew his tags. To be caught on the road without them would result in a significant fine, and a mark on his record, something he couldn't afford moving into the post-military job market. With a sigh, he turned away from the car and headed inside.

The garage door opened into a small, marginally tidy kitchen with a small bar-height counter and all the basic necessities of a single man's life: can and bottle openers, a few wrinkled dishcloths, a set of knives, anything to make cooking and eating alone a little more enjoyable. A tin sign hung above the kitchen sink: "See the world, fly Adler!" it advertised in blazing red letters just below the image of a sleek Lockheed Electra. He'd never heard of "Adler" before, aside from the fact that it meant "eagle" in German, a language he'd devoted less than a year to in high school, but he loved the image anyway. It was a relic dating back to a time when one didn't need to carry a brick-sized regulation book, pages of checklists, and a bag of electronics aboard a plane. He felt wistful gazing at it, almost painfully so. He turned away after

washing his hands, snatching a little black tablet off the bar top before collapsing into his couch on the other side. He powered it on and flicked through his emails, sifting the useful stuff from the junk. Only one caught his eye, a message addressed to him from Horizon Aerospace, a firm that he'd submitted a "why the hell not" application to a few weeks back. Intrigued, he read through it, skimming over the usual fluff until something stopped him, a single phrase that seemed to stick out from the rest.

"As we march towards the future, we hope to pioneer systems that better integrate automated functions with human ingenuity and creativity."

Hart immediately closed the message and tossed the electronic tablet aside, disgusted. If that was Horizon's vision, they could kiss his ass. He hadn't left the military just to go do the same exact thing in the civilian market. There was still hope, he thought. He hadn't heard anything back from the crop-dusting business in North Dakota, or the aerial firefighting unit in Oregon but he had his doubts about those, too. He suspected automation would be the "magic pill" for both of those jobs in the near future as well.

The whole thing was a joke. There were no such things as pioneers anymore. Every improvement in flight technology was being methodically tested by detached scientists growing old in the artificial light of a lab, never having experienced the feeling of a well-trimmed elevator, or a smooth throttle response. It was all numbers now; even before the onset of drones, it had been numbers in the military, too. "Try flying an F-15 Eagle by the feel of it alone," he remembered telling a journalist once. "You can't. There's too much going on, too many computers working to keep the plane in the air. It's why workload is stressed so heavily in pilot training. We have to multitask all the time."

At the time, the quote had felt more than a little badass, possibly even a lure dropped in the hopes of attracting a prospective love interest, but now he saw it for what it really was: a confession, thinly veiled as praise for his fellow pilots; an admittance that it was the aircraft flying him, not the other way around.

He found his eyes returning to the tin sign, to the gleaming silver plane sketched and then painted with

just enough artistic exaggeration to make it appear as if it were leaping headlong into the sky, eagerly throwing itself toward the clouds as it climbed onward to its next adventure. He thought of himself in that seat, leather jacket wrapped around his torso to fight off the cold, red scarf around his neck, maybe a cigar clamped between his teeth because who the hell cared? We all knew we were going to die one day, why not live a little?

Why not live a little?

Though he felt like an archaic monster for admitting it, safety was the norm now. It was inevitable, really. With flying as mainstream as it was these days, it could not be left to the hands of crazy daredevils and daring aces. It had to be chopped up, restructured, regulated, and then dispersed back to the public in a tamer, less intimidating form. He was reminded of a favorite book of his, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. There was a force in that story, a dark, formless thing lurking behind the scenes known only as the Combine. It swept across the land, chewing up America and sorting it out into little identical houses with cookie cutter families all working bland, similar jobs. If the last few years were anything to go by, then Kesey had been right: the Combine was real, and it had won. Unsatisfied, in his case, with just transforming, chewing up, and processing the life of the common man, it was now coming for his job, the primary reason for his personal existence. The harvest of his livelihood was inevitable.

Hart stood slowly and made his way over to a drawer beneath the sign. He opened it, selecting a pair of shiny, brass-colored keys from inside. It was a simple keyring, no fancy remote starters or fobs, just two keys and a blue rubber oval hanging between them, a logo older than he was: Ford, written out in flowing, white cursive, the same logo that had bedecked the wings and fuselages of the Trimotors, some of the greatest planes of the "golden age of flight." He smiled as he pocketed them. Then he selected a worn leather jacket from the coat hook by his door, looked one more time up at the tin sign, and re-entered the garage, where the Mustang sat waiting.

The engine turned over on the third try with an almost prehistoric roar, the likes of which few heard

anymore. He enjoyed that the neighbors knew what he was up to, just by the sound of things. He was in another world now. His steering wheel had become a stick, his dashboard: an array of gauges, switches, and dials. His shifter: a throttle, and the world beyond his garage, cheering crowds. He took all of this in from his vantage point of control, an eagle, roosted so its majesty might be experienced by all. He glimpsed into his audience, knowing that a simple wink or a smile could inspire a lifetime of achievement. The throaty bellow of the V-8 had become for him the cyclical purr of an enormous rotary engine. He stood now at the threshold of a time where there was a place for him. A golden age of manned flight called to him, beckoning for him to take the next step.

No computers, no electronics, just me and the airplane.

Hart shifted into reverse.

He felt a tug from the back of the aircraft; two young, overall-wearing men were pulling him backwards, away from the crowd and out onto the flight line. The freshly-painted stripes below his wheels welcomed a new era of travel and adventure. He rolled his window down, acknowledged his spectator's, saluted, and then returned to his minimal preflight tasks. In a crate like this, there wasn't much to monitor. He ran through the checklists, most of which he knew by heart, mentally checking off every item in rapid succession.

He paused for a moment when he noticed, once again, the sticker in the top left corner of his windshield. It once held some significance in another time or place, but here it meant nothing. He shrugged it off just as the boys finished tugging him into position.

Hart put his foot down.

He ran up the engine, its throaty roar sending a shiver down his spine before he let off the pressure. Everything was in order. He throttled up again, and released the brakes.

The craft leapt forward eagerly, clawing at the asphalt as it lunged towards the sky.

Hart shifted.

With a bone-shaking lurch, he felt the wheels leave the ground, reluctantly at first, then eagerly as he built up speed.

The Mustang barreled through the neighborhood's entrance, its old tires leaving strips of rubber coating the ground where it slid. As it merged onto the road, Hart opened the throttle wide. Then it was gone, leaving only the rapidly-fading sound of its victory roar in its wake.

No more propellers. Now the sound came from behind Hart, a rumbling, bone-shaking sound like thunder in a can. Everything around him was shuddering, protesting against him as he edged his machine closer and closer to the threshold of its peak performance. He could hear radio chatter in his ears, but the words were garbled and nonsensical, unimportant compared to the Mach meter in front of him, a simple dial that counted up to one. He pushed harder on the throttle. What would happen at one? Would his tiny craft shake to pieces, or would he open the gateway to a new era of aviation? Unsure, he pinned the throttle and hoped for the best. The needle edged closer to Mach one, a simple fabrication of fluorescent plastic between him and the coveted sound barrier, the holy grail of all jet jockeys...

Behind the Mustang, a white and black police interceptor accelerated, leaping towards the fleeing muscle car, a predatory cat on the hunt, but Hart paid it no heed as he now found himself back in the familiar cockpit of his F-15, cruising steadily at supersonic speeds above some nondescript, sandy location. This was familiar turf for him; he'd flown these skies many times in his life. Lights, red and blue, lit up the sky behind him. Missile warning tones blared in his ears, and he pushed harder on the throttle, coaxing his metal bird to go faster, to pour every ounce of its power into fleeing.

But he couldn't do it. His pursuer was gaining. He rolled the aircraft to the right, hoping the abrupt maneuver might throw the aggressor off, but escape was impossible. No matter what maneuvers Hart flung his Eagle through, nothing would shake his pursuer. Alone and outmatched, he finally decelerated, the mighty jet engines behind him spooling down as he awaited the inevitable.

"License and registration, please," the officer said as he approached, bending down and leaning his elbow up against the car's low roofline. The driver

turned toward him slowly, fishing his wallet out of his back pocket and passing him the requested documentation. The officer marked down what he needed on the little notepad he carried around with him, then stopped.

"Robin Hart? Aren't you the guy that shot down that satellite last year?"

The man behind the wheel nodded.

"Well hey, I s'pose you're human too," he remarked, handing back the documents and a speeding ticket. Hart didn't say a word. It took only a moment for the officer to register why. The car was an HEV, and driving an unregistered one without the appropriate documentation was a serious crime. In his former profession, something like that could undoubtedly land the pilot in hot water.

Hart could see him thinking things over, his eyes darting between the windshield and the pilot. Hart tried to remain calm, but his fingers shook, tapping Lilliputian drum-beats on the surface of his steering wheel. Both of them knew why.

But in that moment, the officer did something that only could have happened on a quiet dirt road between the rows of gently waving corn under an orange sky. He smiled, nodded to the pilot, and said, "might want to make sure all your papers are up to date if you plan on driving this thing," before returning to his police cruiser.

As the officer pulled away, Hart sat silently behind the steering wheel, the warm afternoon light washing over him as he tried to comprehend what just happened. The cheers had vanished, as had the clouds, the wings, the images. Yet something remained. He comprehended then what he'd seen on his tail in that last dogfight, the thing that had overtaken him. It wasn't the police car, or a fictional missile. It was a squadron of drones, his squadron. Progress, the future; it had caught up with him, stripped him of his wings, and set him back on the ground to make his living in a dull, adventure-free world. And yet it had not changed him; it hadn't chewed him up and spat him back out as a carbon copy. His interaction with the officer hadn't been artificial, it had been real, one human being to another. Perhaps, he thought as he twisted the key in its recess and started the car,

there remained room for the human spirit here, in a world that felt as cold and mechanical as the machines that drove it.

Hart shifted into reverse, pulling back onto the road in the direction he'd come from.