

Flame Race

Posted on March 20th, 2011
Author: Marco Carag

Flame Race: Cold Aftermath

GTA Front Line Relief Outpost

Avery Naffer gently pulsed the front-dorsal thrusters to slowly stop his repair craft a meter away from the scarred hull of the Insurmountable. As he began repairs, he scanned the empty space around him. Only the dark, endless wall of the GTD Insurmountable's starboard-ventral hull seemed to be keeping him company, even though a hundred other similar repair craft were serving the Insurmountable at the same time. Occasionally, a small fighter squadron, or even a cruiser or missile frigate would speed past a hundred meters away, adding what Command hoped was a sense of security for the hundreds of workers at the outpost. But for a majority of the hours Avery spent whizzing across the seven-square-kilometer expanse of the relief outpost in his GTS Centaur-class craft, such security detail was left to the distant perimeter defense batteries - sentry guns boasting an arsenal that should make any enemy fighter think twice about leveling guns with the outpost.

Although Avery spent most of his time spanning dry docks in his cramped support ship, he felt like he was subject to the worst of the war. Every day, some battered destroyer, cruiser, freighter, or fighter squadron would limp their way into the comforting umbilicals of this relief station. Avery thought he could see the Shivan ship that had unloaded its payload and had rendered the damage to which he examined and attempted to repair close up. But he was tens, or hundreds of light years away from where the action was - an hours-worth at least of subspace travel to reach the nearest system where the Shivan terror was wreaking their horrifying havoc.

In fact, he had never seen a real live Shivan craft. During all of the twenty months he had been serving the GTA, and the six months he skittered about the outpost, the only Shivan ships he had seen were those projected in all their horrific proportions on news transmissions, their tools of terror described with ferocity by a GTA news anchor.

He would someday be promoted off of repair duty and into the cockpit of a fighter serving a destroyer on the front lines. But in the meantime, the face of the war was left for his imagination to comprehend, and from what he's seen and heard, his imagination seems to be pretty damn accurate, and the face must be damn, damn ugly.

The console in front of him beeped when the various tools branching from the belly of his small craft had completed whatever repairs they could do. He sighed deeply with boredom as he scrolled down a list of tasks displayed on a computer screen before him that he had to complete. "Main port thruster cone repair...bummer," he said silently to himself as he unclamped his Centaur from the side of the Insurmountable and pushed ten meters away with the versatile ship's retroes. His next task could not be left to the limited automation systems of his ship - he would have to go EVA and work on the cones manually. He never liked going EVA, much less to do complex repairs on thruster cones by hand, but a job's a job, and if he wanted off this God-forsaken mess of umbilicals, fuel tanks, and Centaur hangars, he'd have to start liking it. The good news was that he had completed his previous repair task much ahead of schedule. The young mechanic decided to "reward" himself with a more scenic route to his next destination. He swerved his ship around and fired up to full speed to begin his circle around the entire station.

If there was one thing he liked about his job, it was the piloting of a Centaur. It may not be like dogfighting a Shivan Dragon while in a Valkyrie or one of those new Ulysses fighters, but Centaur class ships are amongst the fastest and most maneuverable craft the GTA has ever conceived. Their small size permitted for tight maneuvers through, under, around, and between

spots too tight for most other ships. Avery once enjoyed freaking out the station's flight control officer by performing slaloms in, out, and around the dozens of long utility arms used for clamping onto big ships. It was especially fun when there actually were big ships docked there. Flight control has long since given up trying to get Avery to stop, and have probably punished him by silently denying him promotion. But they did acknowledge Avery's skills as a pilot and as a competent mechanic and no longer fussed about how much extra fuel he wasted in all those crazy maneuvers. He was now left to pull his stunts in peace.

He slowed his Centaur as he passed three cruisers docked at the same port. "Must be the Insurmountable's GTCES," he noted to himself. "Or what's left of it, at least." They looked pretty battered, even from five hundred meters out. One of the cruisers' main towers had been torn completely off - not just the big, long-range transmitter dish, but the whole tower, bridge and all. Avery winced as he imagined a Shivan fighter, dying and desperate to make a difference, plummet full speed into the terrified bridge crew.

Avery passed around several empty docks before finally reaching the port side of the Insurmountable. Awash in the nourishing golden glow of the distant Vegan sun, the ship looked as glorious as ever from a click out. But as his Centaur drew closer, Vega's rays revealed the ship's scars and wrinkles. Deep gashes and holes were carved out all over the ship. Avery, having only seen the mighty destroyer while cast in the big ship's own shadow and in colored representations back in the station's operation's room, was taken aback by the painful sight. "My God, what do they put you guys through?" he asked himself. Avery wasn't sure if the whether the "guys" were the Shivans or GTA Command. His only answer was the reverberating sound of his Centaur clamping onto the side of the Insurmountable.

He unstrapped himself from his seat, lowered his pressure suit's visor, and pushed himself to the airlock hatch on the floor of the small ship. Making sure his tether was attached safely to his Centaur, he tapped a sequence of buttons on a nearby panel, and the hatch opened. His suit briefly compressed as he pushed his way slowly through the atmosphere-preserving shield of his ship, and then expanded again as he drifted outside of the craft.

The view of the damage from outside the cramped confines of his Centaur was even more breathtaking. He watched as a repair crew, also going EVA, disappeared into a large hole blown in the side of the Insurmountable, and then turned to the gaping four-meter-diameter thrust cone in front of him and grabbed a hold of the side. A few meters to the right of him, he could see the socket from which one of the Insurmountable's turrets had been blown clean off. He hesitated, imagining the frightening few seconds the gunner must have experienced before a strafing Shivan fighter sliced him out of existence with a volley of cannon fire. He then shook the thought away and drew out his portable tool case. "This damn war will be the end of me," he thought gravely to himself as he began work on the thruster cone. "I can tell it will..."