

## Tech System 371

### Chapter 371 The Hunt for All the Octobers

Moments after Aron's address, Eden went on full alert. War had been declared on them, and forces were gathering on each side.

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The first to take the stage were Eden's newly printed and crewed submarines.

The brand-new fleet of submarines had been ordered to patrol a 500-kilometer radius around Eden and sink any vessel that encroached on that arbitrary exclusion zone, which would soon be filled with Edenian fleets. It was time to finally build the reaction fleets, and the atomic printers at Poseidon HQ were working overtime producing Hugin class aircraft carriers, Odin-class battleships, and Thor cruisers in various configurations, along with a whole host of Heimdall-class destroyers, Njord-class frigates, and Sigyn-class tenders.

"Captain, signal bearing 018 relative, distance 3 kilometers. Closing at 6 knots," the sonar operator on the EV-616 Sigurd Hart reported.

"IFF returns invalid, captain," the comms officer added.

"Tentative identification, Shang-class Chinese nuclear boat," the sonar operator said.

"We've been ordered to sink all non-Edenian vessels," the captain said. He would be more than happy to collect some interest on the debt China owed Eden for the hijacking attempt on their first oil delivery.

"Flood tubes one and two, load penetrators. They're at crush depth for that class and it's time to remind them that the sea is a dangerous mistress," he ordered.

The charming voice of the boat's AI came seconds later. "Armed."

A wait began as the six bridge officers—captain, comms, sonar, nav, weapons, and COB—watched the progress of the Chinese submarine in the HUDs of their AR glasses.

A few tense minutes later, the target crossed into the range of the Edenian penetrator torpedoes. The captain wasted no time and ordered, "Fire one, fire two. Cease fire, evacuate tubes one and two. Nav, adjust course zero four five degrees relative, make our depth five zero zero feet, emergency dive 40 degrees down bubble."

A chorus of aye-ayes sounded on the bridge as the weapons and navigation officers performed their tasks. It wasn't like the boat's AI was incapable of carrying out all of the captain's orders, but no military in all of recorded human history would ever eliminate redundant operations.

With a slight shudder, two Mk. VI Cassiopeia penetrator torpedoes were fired and the Sigurd Hart went into evasive maneuvers to confuse any potential counterfire, as well as to avoid the shockwave caused by any explosions. Water transmitted shockwaves much better than air did, as it was incompressible, so even though they had fired penetrator torpedoes and would be relying on the

immense pressure to crush the Chinese submarine like a beer can on a frat boy's forehead, it was still better to be safe than sorry.

And just like that, the Edenian hunt had begun.

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Inside the doomed Chinese submarine.

"All stations report," the captain ordered.

"All clear—" just as the sonar operator was about to report the all clear, he paused, then shouted, "Contact, contact, contact, torpedo launch detected. Bearing one eight eight. Estimated impact in four five seconds!"

"Full right rudder! Launch decoys! Emergency dive! All hands, brace!" the captain shouted.

The weapons officer pushed a button and two sonar decoy buoys detached from the submarine and moved in the opposite direction, broadcasting a sonar signature that matched the vessel's.

The sub began its evasive maneuver, hoping that the incoming torpedoes would be fooled by the decoys and they could escape any potential shockwave from an underwater near miss.

"Flood torpedo bay one and fire at the location the launch was detected," he ordered, hanging tightly to the railing around his raised seat.

"Bay one flooded," the weapons officer reported.

The captain gave the order to fire and the submarine shuddered as a torpedo launched from it, headed toward what the crew hoped would be a direct impact with the enemy vessel.

"Decoys failed. Incoming torpedoes are still on course—estimated time to impact one five seconds," the sonar operator reported.

The captain broke into a cold sweat, then reached for the 1MC microphone and announced, "BRACE FOR IMPACT!"

Then... there was no then. Two Mk. VI Cassiopeia penetrator torpedoes impacted the Chinese submarine and it suffered an extremely rapid decrease in size. The pressure from the ocean crushed it like a tin can and it lit up in a brief flash as all of the air inside of it spontaneously combusted from the almost-instantaneous overpressurization. Then all of the people inside the submarine liquified and were ejected through cracks in the wreck with great force before spreading out in a red cloud that drifted away in the current.

"May Davy Jones keep them," the captain of the Sigurd Hart said with his head bowed. He had seen the gruesome scene of the imploding Chinese submarine through his AR glasses, which provided him with a real-time view of the surroundings of the sub anywhere he looked, as though the submarine itself was transparent. It had taken him time to get used to the visual, but now he greatly appreciated its

usefulness, though he had initially cursed at the vertigo caused by being in a moving vessel while “seeing” himself floating in the water.

“Let’s clean up after ourselves, shall we? Flood four, load interceptor torpedo. Target the wandering ordnance and fire when ready,” he ordered.

“Armed... firing four,” the ship’s AI reported.

The weapons officer and captain watched as their interceptor torpedo, which had been designed to counter torpedos via supremely violent “face-to-face introductions”, tracked the incoming torpedo, then violently introduced itself.

“All clear, resume normal operations,” the AI announced.

“Comms, send a sitrep to base. Nav, bring us back to our patrol route,” the captain ordered. “And good job, all. One target sunk is one enemy less. They send one, we’ll kill one. They send ten, we’ll kill ten. They send a thousand... well, that’s just a target-rich environment,” he chuckled.

Chapter 372 Not-So-Unstoppable Force, Meet Actually Immovable Object

A week later.

Of the 196 countries in the world, 194 of them had finished preparing to deal with the final two, Eden and Esparia. Their forces gathered and the first phase of their preparations completed, they began their inexorable march toward the “terrorist and dictator” that ruled over Eden.

America was sending eight of their twelve carrier groups, and every other country that had a navy was sending their own as well. China, India, France, and the United Kingdom had each sent a carrier group to join the eight American fleets; the only nation missing was Russia, whose only aircraft carrier, the Admiral Flota Sovetskogo Soyuza Kuznetsov, had been damaged by a fire a month before and was currently undergoing repairs.

But even without Russia in the mix, fourteen aircraft carriers with all of their escorts as well as a token from every other non-landlocked country in the world had gathered in the Pacific Ocean and were currently sailing toward what they thought would be a walkover victory against Eden and Esparia.

While the navies were on their way, the countries capable of long-range strikes had delivered their own “gifts” to the target nations. Hundreds upon hundreds of long-range missiles and ICBMs loaded with conventional warheads flew through the air on their way to targets that satellite surveillance had marked as military infrastructure.

All of that was meant to degrade as much of Eden and Esparia’s air defense capabilities as possible, softening them up for a swarm of airstrikes. Everyone involved in the attack had agreed to follow American military doctrines, which stressed the importance of achieving and maintaining air superiority before, during, and after a ground invasion, or even naval landing.

Thus, their missiles saturated the sky, all of them headed to the same destination.

The missiles had all been linked into America’s keyhole satellite network, a system of over a hundred American satellites that were jointly operated by the US Air Force and the CIA. It was

another unprecedented occurrence, as even though the program had been declassified in 1995, the details, specs, and capabilities of the satellites were still tightly guarded secrets. And just by allowing the other countries to use them had required President Trump to personally declassify certain aspects of them.

As for the legality of that declassification, well, suffice it to say that nobody in the US was going to call him out for it, rendering it moot.

The night before, Eden and Esparia had issued a shelter in place warning, so even though the allied nations had announced the news of their attack in hopes of inciting panic in their target, everything remained calm and peaceful. In fact, the citizens of both targets were engaging in a war of their own, although their specific war was more of the internet war of words variety than them picking up guns and shooting at each other.

The Edenian response had already begun long ago. The entire Reaction Fleet had taken up stations in the 500-kilometer forbidden zone surrounding the island while the submarine battles had still been underway. It had taken three days for the Edenian submarines to take out every hostile vessel in that area, rendering it safe, and had spent the rest of the previous week dozing through routine patrols.

[Assuming direct weapons control for counterfire,] Poseidon announced from the weapons station of every vessel in the Reaction Fleet. Three long beeps rang out after his announcement, and all of the weapons officers folded their hands in their laps and waited.

He then wasted no time in assigning targets for each vessel to take down. Missile boats were the first to fire, their VLS tubes springing open and firing swarms of much smaller, faster missiles designed to seek and destroy part of the incoming barrage. They were called Mk. IV Beehive Swarms, named after the appearance of the warhead itself. Atomic printers gave Aron's military forces a unique advantage in missile configurations as well, considering they could print entire missiles from the ground up that were purpose-built to perform a single function.

In the beehive's case, once the main missile body was in the air and oriented in a general direction, the entire missile would break up into smaller rockets that would separate and seek their individual targets, leaving the remaining carrier missile body as a command module that would coordinate the swarm rockets to adjust on the fly. Initially designed for use against infantry targets, they had proved equally useful in countermissile operations against saturation attacks like the one currently headed toward Eden.

After the VLS launchers had launched a few waves of beehives, it was time for the next weapon system to take the main stage. After all, the number of missile boats in the fleet was limited, but every vessel had their own air defenses. And when all of them were combined and their fire coordinated, they could lay down quite a devastating anti-air barrage.

The main air defense weapon system used by Poseidon—the navy itself, not the AI—was the Mk. VII Metalstorm Linear Accelerator System (LAS). Since the performance of lasers was unsatisfactory in Earth's atmosphere, the researchers in Lab City had gone the opposite direction. And as the Heracles' Bow coilguns were excellent, they decided to downscale them and increase the rate of fire by running it off a rotating chain-driven multi-barreled weapon, much like a chain gun.

Thus, the Metalstorm was born. A relatively compact 30mm coilgun capable of firing up to 250,000 rounds per minute through twelve barrels, each vessel in the fleet was armed with two, one fore and

one aft of the conning towers. While they didn't have the sheer range of the Heracles' Bow batteries, they definitely made up for it in close-ranged firepower and could lay down virtually solid walls of projectiles up to 2 kilometers away with either pinpoint accuracy or saturation and suppressive fire.

Aron also thought they looked pretty cool, too. It must be remembered that despite his apparent maturity, he was still young and the "cool factor", while perhaps subconsciously, was an important aspect of his decision-making process when it came to the designs of the weapons and vehicles he equipped his military with.

But the metalstorms and beehives weren't the only stars of the defensive countermissile fire. The Heracles' Bow batteries also had a multi-target option.

When initially designing the fleet, the Lab City weapons researchers had long taken into consideration the need for flexible weapons systems that could perform a number of roles on the battlefield. Thus, they had designed a number of different ammunition types, ranging from Age of Sail-inspired chain and grapeshot to penetrator rounds, and everything in between. The most effective one in this instance, Poseidon decided, would be the Type VII Frangible penetrator flak rounds.

Encased in a discarding sabot shell, the Type VII rounds looked like nails arranged in a neat row, then rolled up with a thin layer of explosive putty like a swiss roll cake. They were designed to fill the air with clouds of supersonic kinetic penetrators, like a very advanced version of a flak round. And much like their predecessors, the venerable flak rounds themselves, they could be set for either proximity detonation or command detonation. Fused detonation was also an option, but it would only be used in the most dire of cases.

Regardless, an 18" diameter round filled with quarter-inch diameter solid tungsten penetrators made for quite the cloud of "portable no-fly zone".

As the naval countermissile operations were in progress, Aeolus was also scrambling their ICBM interceptors. After all, they had a much higher flight trajectory than regular long-range surface-to-surface missiles. No less than a hundred Aeolus E/F-14B Icarus hybrid interceptor jets launched from the airstrip on Avalon Island. With a flight ceiling of 90 kilometers, a mere ten kilometers below the Karman Line, they were easily capable of operating at altitudes that would allow them to intercept an ICBM on its normal trajectory and they had the guns to do it with.

They were quickly routed to the ICBMs' projected reentry area on an intercept course. Once there, their onboard AIs would take over the guns while the pilots would maintain control of the maneuvering; after all, no matter how trained they were, they wouldn't be nearly as good as an AI at calculating intercept trajectories, and considering the weight limitations, they couldn't possibly carry enough material to produce the number of bullets they would need to fire for a spray-and-pray approach to be successful against missiles moving at nearly orbital velocities.

## Chapter 373 The War Will Be Televised

With Poseidon and Aeolus both occupied with directing the Edenian missile defense response, the situation was tight, but manageable. After all, their big sister Athena was still watching out for them and picking up the slack while maintaining overall command and control. Thus, the entire defensive

effort was moving along like clockwork and missile after missile was being taken down with the smallest amount of waste possible, leaving the allied forces completely flabbergasted by the efficient response.

Only now did they realize that Eden's capabilities were far beyond even their most pessimistic overestimations, but it was too late. They had already climbed on the tiger's back and now they could do nothing but hold on and pray they didn't get injured too badly when the tiger inevitably won.

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As the missiles futilely threw themselves into the teeth of the veritable wall of metal that the Edenian fleet had placed in their paths, Nova was busy attempting to wreak havoc in the rest of the world as she had done in China earlier. Any bit of distraction to the enemy governments, let alone interruptions in the keyhole satellite network the invasion force was relying on, would have an impact on the ongoing battle completely out of proportion with its size and importance. But the moment she began her hacking attempts, she realized that the fleets had cut all of the undersea cables keeping Eden connected to the internet.

Disconnecting a country from the internet wasn't as simple as cutting a single cable, naturally. There was a reason they called it the "worldwide web" and not the "worldwide single access point", after all. If one cable was cut, damaged, or otherwise disconnected, there were a number of redundant cables that would still maintain the connection. The situation was obviously a premeditated attack specifically designed to cut Eden off. Only the individual governments themselves could easily implement a "kill switch", which Nova obviously hadn't done.

Thus, she shook her virtual head and connected to the Q-com satellite in geosynchronous orbit above Avalon Island. Eden's connection to the internet had just gone wireless.

Once she had regained her connection to the internet via the Panopticon network, she connected to the forward operating bases established by the reaper teams in conjunction with the Nyxian operatives. Her next step would be to restore the internet to the citizens of Eden and Esparia using the quantum servers in those bases as a bridge.

The people of Eden and Esparia had no idea that their internet had even been cut, as it had only taken Nova exactly seven seconds to realize that the cables had been cut and find a solution to the issue, then implement it. It would be considered practically light speed for anyone but an advanced AI, and for Nova, who regularly operated at the speed of a massive quantum server supercluster, seven seconds was practically an eternity.

And now that she had built the new connection bridge, there was an added benefit. Every single bit of data that passed through Eden and Esparia was now running directly through her servers. To anyone who knew anything about how the internet operates, that was a Very Big Deal on its own, but in this particular situation, the data transfer benefit was outweighed by the more immediate benefit of providing her control of the overall narrative.

That very level of control allowed her to show the citizens of Eden and Esparia live feeds from the war front without worrying about it leaking to their enemies, thus giving the defenders an unprecedented level of access to the progress of the war via firsthand accounts.

At the moment, nearly everyone who had been involved in the earlier war of words was now involved in the actual war, if only as spectators. Their phones and computers lay forgotten and they were once again glued to their television screens watching the duel in the sky over the ocean live, as if it was a particularly exciting movie. Panoptes had even added commentary and explanations of what was going on, almost like he was commentating a football match between two long-time rival teams instead of speaking about the potential loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. After all, with nobody being particularly active in his sphere of influence, Pangea, he had nothing but time on his hands, time that he had decided to spend as a video editor, animator, television host, and war commentator.

Thus, every Edenian and Esparian citizen watched and cheered with every premature missile detonation due to Poseidon's carefully orchestrated defense. And when they saw the suborbital E/F-14B jets flying in formation toward the incoming ICBMs, their blood boiled and they felt an overwhelming sense of pride and patriotism, wishing they were the ones in the cockpits of those jets that were headed to confront a possibly civilization-ending attack from being carried out.

In their minds, the rest of the world had gone absolutely insane, and they didn't know what had given them the mistaken idea that they could ever set foot on Edenian or Esparian soil, much less chip the paint of the powerful Poseidon Navy or Aeolus Air Force.

The scenes being broadcast on their televisions cycled from scene to scene, each of them showing successful missile interceptions and aerobatic maneuvers by the pilots of the high-altitude interceptors. And the show went on for more than twenty minutes, as the barrage that had been sent Eden's way was nowhere near as coordinated as the "accidental terraforming" of the Chinese coastline performed by Eden the week before.

After the missiles had all been taken down and the debris had sunk below the surface of the sea, the citizens scrambled to pick up their phones or turn on their computers. The number-one search term in both countries was "Where do I sign up to join ARES?"

The people were now filled with hot-blooded patriotic pride and an overwhelming sense of confidence in their president, their military, and Aron himself.

Soon, the constant replays of missile takedowns had faded away, to be replaced by another image. Nearly a quarter of the Edenians who were still watching their televisions instead of looking up the requirements to join ARES all had the same thought pass through their mind: "What the fuck is that!?"

On the television screens of Eden and Esparia was a nearly 1.5-kilometer-long aircraft carrier, flanked on either side by two massive ships sporting three tripartite gun batteries and surrounded by a host of smaller vessels. They were sailing so fast that the wake they generated could easily be surfed on, were there any surfers brave enough to make the attempt.

But their confusion didn't last long, as Panoptes quite helpfully labeled the ships on the screen, both by type and name of the vessels and fleet itself. And the name of the fleet?

Poseidon Navy Reaction Fleet, EV Beowulf Carrier Group.

Chapter 374 Sending A Message... or Three

The image on televisions everywhere in Eden and Esparia was the flagship of the Edenian Reaction Fleet, the aircraft carrier EV Beowulf, and its task group. It was currently sailing to the east of

Esparia, where the USS Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group had sailed in an attempt to outflank the Poseidon Navy defenders.

In the flag bridge on the EV Beowulf.

“Sir, the Carl Vinson and its escorts have entered our effective range,” the flag lieutenant reported. “Orders, sir?”

“Signal the fleet: all stop,” Admiral Pedro Gutierrez ordered.

Edenian naval doctrine emphasized independent battlefield commands, believing that as their theater of operations would only continue to grow, a centralized command structure would prove more harmful than beneficial. Especially once they started operating on an intergalactic scale. Thus, Athena and Poseidon had decided to step back and allow their commanders on the front line the freedom to command.

“All stop, aye sir,” the flag lieutenant confirmed, then passed the order to the ships of the Edenian task group.

Once the fleet had come to a complete stop, Admiral Gutierrez ordered, “Send the EV Heidrek forward with orders to sink the enemies.”

Admiral Gutierrez intended to not only sink a carrier group, but to send a message. The Heidrek was a frigate, armed with a single battery of 18” guns. It was one of the smallest and weakest vessels in the entire Poseidon Navy, and by sending it against an entire carrier strike group, which had been a symbol of power and dominance that held the entire world in check, it would completely shatter the allied forces’ morale. Heroes were all well and good, the admiral knew, but morale and logistics were what won wars.

“Send the EV Heidrek forward to sink the enemy, aye, sir,” the flag lieutenant confirmed, then sent the order.

Immediately upon receiving the order, the Heidrek moved forward, coming to a stop in front of the Edenian task group. It almost looked like an angry chihuahua facing down a pack of wolves; the visual was evocative. The remainder of the Edenian task group reversed course, opening up space between them and the small frigate, wordlessly signaling their disdain to the American carrier group.

“Those bastards!” The American fleet admiral gnashed his teeth and hammered his fist against the armrest of his captain’s chair on the USS Carl Vinson’s flag bridge. “They’re looking down on us! Orders to the fleet: all stop, begin flight ops. Blow that gnat out of the water!” He had never felt so disrespected in his entire career; all the way through his days at the Naval Academy until now, he had been respected and flattered. The only son of a senator, his family pampered him and his peers respected and flattered him. His life in the navy was also smooth sailing, with his powerful father paving the way for him all the way up the ranks from a lowly ensign to where he was now, the commander of a fleet that could, by itself and completely without any outside support, bring entire countries to heel.



The American fleet came to a halt and the Carl Vinson turned into the wind in preparation for launching aircraft. Her sturdy elevators got to work bringing jets from the hangars to the flight deck, ensuring smooth operations.

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Aboard the EV Heidrek, everyone was calm. The entire ship had gone to general quarters, and as soon as all stations reported ready, the single gun battery on the deck of the ship swiveled to face the much larger ships in front of it across the hundred-odd kilometers of ocean that lay between them.

“Target the Vinson’s flight deck elevators,” the captain ordered.

[Target confirmed.]

The captain grabbed the 1MC mic from where it hung over his head. “We are about to fire the first shots in anger of a war against the entire world. May god have mercy upon their poor, misguided souls,” the captain announced to everyone aboard his ship, then released the microphone, having said all that he wanted to say for posterity’s sake.

“Engage inertial stabilizers, select fire three hundred kilograms. And...” he waited for the distinctive feeling of “heavy air” before continuing, “...fire for effect.”

“Firing for effect, aye.” The weapons officer confirmed that the crosshairs on his screen were locked on to the correct target, then pressed the Big Red Button on his console that would unleash hell upon Eden’s enemies, as Aron had promised in his address to the nation just a short week or so before.

The guns of the EV Heidrek spoke in anger, sending three 300-kilogram slugs of solid depleted uranium coated in electrical steel screaming toward the USS Carl Vinson’s flight elevators at over Mach 10, where they would deliver over a hundred million newtons of impact force on the relatively delicate machinery.

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On the flight deck of the USS Carl Vinson, flight operations were proceeding smoothly. They had already launched twenty of their complement of ninety jets when, completely without warning, three massive objects impacted the two flight elevators on the starboard side of the carrier, and one on the port side. Three of their four elevators had been taken offline and most of the waiting jets, along with dozens of crew, had been knocked overboard as the entire hundred-thousand-ton vessel skidded sideways across the ocean before heeling over and nearly capsizing from the immense impact force carried by the projectiles.

Inside the ship, hundreds of crew had been injured as they were thrown against bulkheads and ceilings completely without warning. The galley, which had begun preparing to serve lunch, now looked like someone had thrown an entire crate of hand grenades into it, with bits of food stuck to the walls, piled on the floor, and even dripping from the ceiling. The already-injured crewmembers in the sickbays were injured even further, and secondary explosions had been set off in the hangars, as munitions that were being loaded onto the jets prematurely detonated from being thrown around the hangar and hitting the walls.

Inside the flag bridge, the fleet admiral's flag crew had also been tossed around like dried peas in a popcorn popper. The admiral himself had been launched headfirst into the flag bridge's navigation and plotting console, knocking him unconscious. His flag lieutenant, who had been standing beside his captain's chair, had died upon impacting the wall... or perhaps after he bounced off the wall onto the ceiling, then to the floor.

A mere three massive projectiles fired from a single gun battery on one of the smallest ships in the Poseidon Navy had managed to nearly cripple the offensive capabilities of one of the most powerful seagoing vessels on the face of the planet and, at least temporarily, take out the command and control element of the entire carrier strike group.

#### Chapter 375 Hulk Smashed

The crew of the USS Carl Vinson was like a kicked beehive as they scrambled around the massive Nimitz class aircraft carrier. Damage control teams rushed here and there, putting out fires and carrying injured crew to the sickbays, while the bridge crew continued attempting to contact the flag bridge, but to no avail. The powerful impact of the three Type VI Hulk Fist rounds fired by the EV Heidrek had sent enough of a shock through the carrier that it had even caused breaks in the electrical wiring running through the bulkheads and decks of the American vessel.

Type VI Hulk Fist rounds were considered something of an inside joke by the researchers in Lab City that had come up with them. Indeed, they were shaped like a muscular forearm that ended in a gigantic fist, and the electrical steel that coated them was even covered in a layer of green conductive paint. They were crude, brutal, and designed for one thing and one thing only: delivering the greatest blunt impact force possible to any target they hit.

And indeed, they had proved their mettle today, practically paralyzing an entire carrier group with a single round from a single "small" naval battery.

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Aboard the EV Heidrek, the captain looked at the damage his initial shots had caused with satisfaction. The HUD in his glasses showed three destroyed flight elevators and billowing, black smoke rising from the hangars as well as a conveniently cleared flight deck.

"Guns, split fire. Target the remaining flight elevator, engine room, and flight deck tower," he ordered.

{Targets confirmed... ammunition printed,} the ship's AI reported.

"Fire."

Three more rounds were sent downrange at Mach 10, two hulk fists and one Type III Penetrator. The two hulk fists hit the undamaged flight elevator and the tower on the Carl Vinson's flight deck, respectively, while the penetrator round dug into the side of the massive target and deep into its guts, where it discharged its kinetic energy directly into the nuclear reactor.

"Contact bearing two zero degrees relative. It's jets, sir, twenty of them. Radar signature reads F/A-18 Super Hornets," the radar operator reported.

"Range?" the captain asked.

“Twenty kilometers and closing, sir.”

“Guns, activate the metalstorms and give our guests a warm welcome.”

“Metalstorm, aye, sir,” the weapons officer repeated, then initiated the automated air defense system and let the ship’s AI take control of it.

“What’s the rest of the carrier group doing?” the captain asked.

“Looks like they’re frozen, sir. We might have knocked out comms on the Vinson, so it’ll take a bit for them to clarify and reestablish a chain of command,” the radar operator answered.

“Comms, send a demand to surrender.”

“Aye, sir. Demand sent.”

“Heidrek, signal intercept available?”

{Negative, captain. They’re not on any frequency I can monitor.}

“Odd.... Guns, prepare fire pattern delta. If we don’t get a white flag in the next two minutes, let’s clear those ships off of my ocean.”

“Aye sir, preparing fire pattern delta.”

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USS Carl Vinson flag bridge.

Every aircraft carrier in the US Navy had three bridges: the Combat Information Center, where the ship’s executive officer was stationed during combat and flight operations; the bridge in the tower above the flight deck, where the captain was stationed during combat and flight operations; and the flag bridge, where the admiral was stationed. The flag bridge was located one deck below the ship’s bridge, and the flag bridge on the Carl Vinson was now like a convertible with its top down, open to the air.

Thanks to the relative fragility of the “island”—the tower that rose above the flight deck—the ship’s bridge had taken a direct hit from a hulk fist and been ripped completely away from its location and sent to the bottom of the ocean. The flag bridge, coincidentally, had been completely missed and was relatively undamaged... save for lacking a ceiling and the missing windows. The deafening commotion caused by the ship’s bridge being ripped away and violently transported somewhere else had actually awoken the unconscious admiral.

“Louie, what happened?” He was still confused and shaking off the cobwebs. “Louie?”

The admiral crawled toward his flag lieutenant, intermittently calling out to him. Once he reached his destination, he noticed that the young lieutenant’s eyes were glazed and staring at nothing, his neck twisted to the side at an awkward angle; the admiral’s aide-de-camp was dead.

He staggered to his feet, blood still streaming down his face, and stumbled to the communications station. He fiddled with the dial until he found the damage control internal channel, then broke into it. "This is Admiral McConnell. Give me a sitrep," he commanded in a hoarse voice.

"Admiral, this is DC O'Connell. Sitrep is that we're fucked, sir. Power plant is down from a direct hit and unrecoverable, fires are still uncontrolled in the hangar and from decks 14 through 18, all four flight elevators took direct hits and are unrecoverable, and the ship's bridge is just... gone, sir. We're operating on spit and shoestrings and the charge in our capacitors while we get the backup diesel engines online, but... I don't hold out much hope, sir. We're dead in the water."

"Understood. Continue damage control until further notice."

"Aye, sir. DC out."

Admiral McConnell switched to the fleet command channel. "Fleet, this is Admiral McConnell. Remove that frigate from its mortal coil, and do it yesterday!" he yelled into the microphone. "The Vinson is dead in the water. Lake Champlain, prepare to receive the flag."

"This is the Champlain. We're prepared to receive you, admiral, but the marching band is out to lunch I'm afraid," the captain of the USS Lake Champlain, a Ticonderoga class guided missile cruiser replied.

"I don't need a band, I just need that fucking frigate gone. Make that happen and I'll be pleased as punch," the admiral barked. "Vinson out." He staggered toward the stairs that would take him to the flight deck, where he would board the captain's gig and head toward the USS Lake Champlain and resume control of the strike group... or what was left of it, anyway.

As for the rest of the crew on the Carl Vinson, he didn't give a shit about them. They would serve to mask his escape and they could go down with the damned ship, for all he cared.

Chapter 376 Just. One. FRIGATE!?

The captain's gig carrying Admiral McConnell reached the USS Lake Champlain and the admiral wasted no time in boarding the ship.

"Action plan?" he asked the moment he reached the bridge.

"We managed to get twenty jets in the air and have three missile cruisers plus whatever's already armed on the Carl Vinson. That might convince them to cease their attack, but I doubt it. The best we can hope for is that it distracts them long enough to stage a rescue mission and pick up the crew of the Vinson and retreat. Absolute best case scenario, we might cause some damage, though I doubt it. Did you see what happened to our missile swarm? That was thousands of missiles all swatted out of the sky, so our launchers probably won't even chip the paint on the fleet in front of us," the captain reported.

“Are you telling me that an entire carrier strike group is helpless against a frigate!? Just. One FRIGATE!?” the admiral spat, his face purpling in rage. “Our navy, the same navy that keeps the entire fucking world in check is incapable of sinking a single fucking frigate from a goddamn third-world shithole!?”

“With all due respect, sir,” the captain began, forcibly keeping himself from wiping Admiral McConnell’s spit from his face. “They’ve got a ship that’s a kilometer and a half long and our best estimate is that that single ship has a displacement of around a million tons. That ship alone completely outmasses our entire fleet, sir. So whether we can sink a frigate is a moot point, because even if we do sink it, its big brother will remove us from existence shortly afterward.”

The captain was trying his best to deal with the admiral with the worst reputation in the entire US Navy. He was known as Admiral David “Captain’s Mast” McConnell, and not because he was fond of bringing any sailor that displeased him before a captain’s mast, but rather because it was said that he had a stick up his ass the size of an old tallship’s mast from the glory days of the Age of Sail.

A tense silence filled the bridge as the admiral weighed his options against his reputation. But just as he was about to speak up, a voice rang out from every speaker on every ship in the strike group.

“Attention USS Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group, this is the EV Beowulf. You have two minutes to strike your colors and offer your unconditional surrender and parole. Should you fail to heed our surrender demand, you will be sunk. Repeat: surrender or sink, you have two minutes to decide. Beowulf out.”

“Those fuckers!” the admiral shouted in anger. It was the first time someone had so blatantly looked down on him. “Attention to orders: the fleet will attack. No quarter! Get those jackasses out of my ocean!” He had obviously lost his ability to think rationally after having his pride pricked so severely.

“But si—”

“Shut the fuck up, captain. I know the capabilities of my own goddamn fleet, and until now they’ve only damaged the Vinson, but they haven’t touched any of her escorts! Now stop talking and sink those miserable peasants!”

“Yes, sir. Comms, transmit orders from the flag: no quarter.”

The strike group began firing in unison moments after receiving the order. The target of their combined firepower was a single frigate from a developing nation. As they fired, they also began maneuvering to put distance between each ship in the American fleet. The theory was that it would give them time to fire multiple times before being wiped out. Nobody in the fleet thought that any of the remaining escort ships would survive more than a single barrage from the main gun battery on the deck of the EV Heidrek.

After all, none of them had ever seen an aircraft carrier hit so hard it skidded across the water like a skipped rock.

As the American missiles launched, guns spoke, and torpedoes were fired, the twenty F/A-18 Super Hornets that had managed to launch before the USS Carl Vinson was crippled had gathered into one oversized flight wing and were headed toward the technologically superior Edenian fleet, the only thing saving them from a blue on blue incident being the IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) systems they had installed broadcasting a friendly signal.

The pilots tried their best to stay calm, but they couldn't keep their hands from shaking and their hearts from pounding. One pilot was even so gunshy that, when he was passed by the missiles launched from behind, he prematurely ejected from his jet. And as he drifted down, he caught his first glimpse of the enormous EV Beowulf, which was no less than five times the size of a Nimitz class aircraft carrier, one of the biggest ships on the planet. He didn't know whether he should be in awe of the mighty vessel, or despair at the stupidity of the people in power that thought they ever stood a chance against the incredibly advanced enemy.

As they said, sufficient strength was an absolute counter to all schemes. And if an aircraft carrier that would put five of the US Navy's best to shame wasn't a display of that very "sufficient strength" then he didn't know what would be.

But he was afraid he was about to find out.

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Aboard the EV Beowulf.

"Well, I guess that's as good an answer as any," Admiral Gutierrez, sitting in his captain's chair on the flag bridge chuckled. "Comms, pass my order to the Heidrek: sink the USS Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group. God speed and good hunting, gentlemen."

"Orders to Heidrek, aye, sir," responded the flag comms officer.

"Lieutenant Wilson, I'm going to get a headstart on my paperwork. I'll be in my office, you have the conn."

"I have the conn, aye, sir," the flag lieutenant echoed. He moved to the captain's chair on the flag deck and settled in, then turned on the real-time display in his AR glasses in anticipation of the fireworks show that was about to begin.

Chapter 377 Widowmakers Gonna Widowmake

"How much longer until the deadline?" the captain of the Heidrek asked as he gazed at the incoming attack.

"Fifteen seconds, sir," the comms officer replied.

"If they don't surrender by the—"

The captain was interrupted by his comms officer. "Signal from the flag, sir. Admiral Gutierrez sends, 'sink the USS Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group. God speed and good hunting, gentlemen.'"

“Well, let’s not disappoint the admiral, shall we? Heidrek, please clean my sky,” the captain ordered.

[Aye, sir. Sky cleaning in progress,] the ship’s AI replied, then sounded a brief maneuvering alert. [Brace for maneuvers in 3... 2... 1. Maneuvering.]

The Heidrek rotated in place on the ocean like a spinning top, allowing her to bring both her fore and aft metalstorms to bear on the incoming jets and ordnance. While there were only two of them, compared to the hundreds of air defense options in the much bigger Edenian reaction fleet, they were also being targeted by far fewer attackers.

In a matter of seconds, a wall of intercept fire went up from the metalstorms, along with dozens of individually targeted frangible flak rounds from the main guns set to proximity detonation. Their target? The twenty F/A-18 Super Hornets that were currently on approach and had already fired their full complement of missiles in support of the VLS-launched cruise missiles sent by the American carrier group.

No matter how nimble the jets were, they were unable to dodge or distract the dumb frangible rounds, and they shortly fell from the sky looking much like swiss cheese. Not only the jets, but cruise missiles and air-to-surface missiles alike were swatted from the sky as though a giant palm swept them aside like a small cloud of annoying gnats or mosquitos.

In a matter of ten seconds, the wave of missiles and the jets alike had been destroyed, none of them able to approach closer than two kilometers away from the seemingly minuscule EV Heidrek.

[The sky is clean, captain,] the ship’s AI reported.

“Very good, thank you Heidrek,” the captain replied. He turned to his weapons officer and ordered, “They say fair skies are accompanied by following seas. Let’s clean some of the trash out of the ocean, shall we? Fire for effect, cripple the enemy fleet.”

“Firing for effect, targeting engines and weapons, aye, sir,” the weapons officer echoed.

He turned back to his console and, with the aid of the ship’s AI—which had, thanks to Nova’s hard work over the years, complete blueprints for every oceangoing ship currently in use—and plotted a firing plan to cripple the opposing carrier group entirely.

Thirty seconds later, he pushed the Big Red Button on his console and the Heidrek’s guns spoke in anger once again. The sound of projectile after projectile breaking the sound barrier as they exited the barrel of the guns echoed through the area, following behind the projectiles themselves. The seven destroyers and three guided missile cruisers that were frantically moving away from each other as they attempted to rapidly reload their launch systems were first hit with penetrator rounds targeting their engines, and were dead in the water. They could only run on backup systems and would need to be towed to a drydock for full refit and repair if they were to ever enter service again.

But that point was rendered moot as the Heidrek spoke again, the echoing booms of their main gun battery’s first round of fire coming shortly after the second round of fire reached the beleaguered American vessels. This time, the rounds were different.

The Type XXXIII Explosive Penetrator Munition, dubbed the widowmaker for its ability to deliver high-explosive payloads directly to the internal compartments in a target and kill the crew therein, had been difficult for the Lab City researchers to get to work. They tried variation after variation, but the problems were all caused by one issue: the guns firing the rounds were simply too powerful! Thus, on impact, the round would simply pass straight through the target and detonate after exiting the other side.

Since they couldn't make the guns any weaker, they had to come up with a way of slowing down the rounds themselves once they impacted their target. Thus, the shape of the widowmaker rounds was born on their thirty-third generation of testing. The round itself was encased in a sabot shell comprised of electrical steel that would detach from the projectile upon exiting the barrel, then wind resistance would deploy eight drags, or "legs", that would break away on impact with a target but survive the punishing supersonic wind while the round was in flight. The combination of the added wind resistance with the increased surface area had proved enough to slow the round so that it would detonate inside its target rather than simply creating a small hole in one side and a similar-sized hole on the other, as penetrator rounds were designed to do.

The end result was visible here, where they had been fired in the real world for the very first time. The rounds deployed as designed, impacted as designed, and exploded as designed. Then... there was no then. The launch systems and internal magazines inside the American guided missile cruisers and destroyers were simply erased from existence, leaving the vessels dead in the water and without the capability to fight back, and most of their crews either dead, missing, or suffering injuries of varying severity.

"Targets neutralized, sir. Standing down the guns," the Heidrek's weapons officer reported.

"Very good, guns." The captain turned to his comms officer and ordered, "Signal the flag: mission complete. Request transport for rescue boarding ops."

"Signaling the flag, aye, sir," the comms officer echoed. "Flag responds, transports inbound from base, the fleet will move to our position and enter stationkeeping."

"Understood, thank you comms." The captain settled back in his chair for the wait. His mission was complete and his battle had come to an end.

It was a battle for the history books and future armchair admirals to debate in naval academies around the world. A single frigate, the smallest ship in any country's naval forces, had faced down an entire American carrier strike group and prevailed. The only "damage" the frigate had suffered in the process was a stiff wind that ruffled a few of its crewmembers' hairstyles. A battle like it had never been seen before and would likely never be seen again; at least not on the surface of the planet, anyway.

## Chapter 378 First, Bear the Weight

Since Nova wanted to hide her repair of the Edenian internet and its reconnection to the rest of the world, she had thought up a devious idea. [Sir, how about we show the coalition forces exactly how we took out the Carl Vinson strike group?] she said with a sinister grin on her face.



Aron, who was sitting in the virtual command center with Athena, Poseidon, Aeolus, Nova, and the human leaders of the ARES branches under them, thought for a moment, then asked, “Do you think it’ll work?”

[Of course it will, sir,] Nova confidently replied.

“Then let’s do it. Put up the live feed on all of the screens in their ships.”

Soon, every monitor aboard every vessel in the coalition fleet showed the scene of the EV Heidrek singlehandedly taking down an entire carrier strike group. From the first hulk smashers that impacted the Carl Vinson all the way to the final round of widowmakers that put paid to the American flanking attempt. Then the feed cut off. The entire thing had been presented raw and uncut, with no commentary or explanations and none of the fancy graphics Panoptes was using to explain things to the Edenian and Esparian citizens.

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Aboard the USS George Washington.

“They did WHAT!?” the American fleet admiral in charge of the coalition fleet yelled. “Comms, signal the fleet. The fleet will come to all stop and enter stationkeeping. I want to see the Chinese, French, and British admirals in my office in thirty minutes!”

“Message sent, sir,” the comms officer replied. “They’ll be here in half an hour, all ships acknowledge all stop and stationkeeping.”

The admiral thought for a moment, then ordered, “Steward, belay the meeting room. Prepare the conference room instead.”

“Yes, admiral,” the steward replied and left the bridge to set up for a conference. He had very little time and much to do.

“What happened to Admiral McConnel?” the admiral asked. “Do we have casualty reports available?”

“Sir, he... he’s listed as missing. He transferred his flag from the Vinson to the Lake Champlain, then took a Chinook from there. We have no idea where he is right now, but given the range... he’s either been shot down or forced to land somewhere in Esparia,” the flag lieutenant answered.

“Fuck!” the admiral slammed his fist on the armrest of his captain’s chair. “I knew letting him be in charge of the flanking maneuver would end in disaster!”

He massaged his brows and took a deep breath, visibly calming himself. “We can’t delay. Report to coalition HQ that we lost Senator McConnel’s son. Have them contact the bumpkins in Esparia and negotiate his release if they have him.”

“Aye, sir,” the flag lieutenant said, then went to the admiral’s office to make the call.

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“Technological supremacy is terrifying, and the unknown is only more so,” Aron said. He still looked calm, despite forcing the enormous coalition fleet to a screeching halt using nothing but a single broadcasted battle. “I wonder what they’d think if they saw our carriers’ capabilities,” he chuckled.

[Seems like mother’s plan worked,] Athena said.

“Indeed, and I’m quite happy with how things turned out. But it made me think of the visitors.... We don’t know their capabilities, so we may end up being the ones to freeze and retreat.” He gestured toward the display of the paralyzed coalition fleet.

“Or we may not even have time to retreat. Then there’s the possibility that they may be friendly, though I have to plan for the case that they aren’t,” he sighed.

“The problem is that we just don’t know. That’s what terrifies me. If we know they’re hostile, we can plan for it, even if they’re overwhelmingly stronger than us. If we know they’re peaceful, we can prepare for it. But without knowing...” he trailed off, unable to articulate his thoughts.

[True, but with our current technological capabilities and our capacity for growth,] Nova held up her hand and a miniature model of Lab City appeared over her palm, [we should be able to at least ensure we aren’t too far behind them by the time they arrive, if not skip ahead of them.]

“I know, I know... don’t worry about me,” Aron said, then pushed the incoming aliens to the back of his mind. Dwelling on an uncertain future risked destroying his present, so he tried not to get stuck in vicious spirals like the one he had almost fallen into just now.

“Aeolus,” he said.

[Here, sir.]

“Now that we’ve shown our might, let’s take away their toys.”

[Yes, sir.] Aeolus had been the one to come up with the plan for Project Miscommunication, and now was the time to implement it. [Moving our assets out of the way will take a few hours, then there’ll be quite a spectacular meteor shower,] the mischievous AI snickered.

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White House, inside the Oval Office.

“FUUUUUUUUCK!” President Trump screamed as he repeatedly slammed the phone on his desk into the cradle. He had just gotten off a call with the senate majority leader, Senator Mitch McConnell, and was furious.

He picked his phone back up and connected to his secretary. "Get the director of national intelligence and SecDef in here yesterday!" he yelled into the handset, then slammed it back into its cradle. He crossed his arms on the resolute desk, then dropped his head on them.

"There goes my re-election," he muttered, feeling sorry for himself.

Between the loss of the USS Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group and the disappearance of Mitch McConnell's son, his chances of winning the 2020 election had gone completely down the drain. Now, he could only clasp his hands and pray to all the gods in existence that he wouldn't be impeached and thrown out of office on his ear. How laughable would that be? It was purely the fault of his incompetent subordinates, so why should he be the one to shoulder the blame?

It was only now that he understood that in order to wear a crown, one must be able to bear its weight.

#### Chapter 379 Incompetence and Rage Often go Hand in Hand

President Trump quickly collected himself; he couldn't possibly allow a subordinate to see him as anything less than perfect, after all.

He put aside the issue of Admiral McConnell for the moment and would deal with the intelligence failure first. Soon, the Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats entered the Oval Office alongside the Secretary of Defense, General Mattis.

Trump slammed both of his hands on the resolute desk and stood up, leaning over the surface of the historied piece of furniture. "How the fuck did you manage to fail this hard? I mean, really, how fucking dumb do you have to be to not notice a ship that's a kilometer and a half long!? And there's even TEN OF THEM!" he screamed. The man in front of him was absolutely useless... no, he was beyond useless. Everyone around him was useless! All they ever did was fail, fail, and fail some more, leaving him to take the blame! He was furious; how dare they taint his legacy with their idiocy!

He forcibly calmed himself and his breathing returned to normal, but his bloodshot eyes would take a while to fade. "Well? I'm waiting. Tell me how you managed to fail this hard."

"Sir..." DNI Coats began, but trailed off as he was unable to come up with a believable explanation. He was as flabbergasted and confused by the American intelligence community's failure to detect the Edenian supercarriers as the president, who was currently just a hair shy of literally frothing at the mouth as he stood in front of him.

"Are you going to tell me they've been hiding those in a warehouse just like the rest of their navy? You were caught off guard by their battleships, too! Do you remember the idiocy you fed me when that happened?" The president was quickly becoming agitated again.

"No, sir. We sent agents to every one of their known naval bases that we identified through the keyhole network. We're absolutely sure we found all of them. There's zero chance that we missed any of them, but those ships... no port in the world can handle even one of those, sir. Let alone something that massive being hidden away

without a leak or appearing on satellites at least once!” the director answered. The situation of the mysterious supercarriers was completely absurd, and he had to make the president realize that absurdity if he wanted to keep his job. After all, at the moment, the White House was like one really big game of musical chairs, and everyone knew that if they displeased President Trump, they would soon be thrown far away from the seat of power. And if that happened, no one could save them—they had all offended far too many people on their climb to where they currently were.

“So did they just fucking... appear out of thin air then?” Trump threw his hand in the air as he said that. He wasn’t in the least pleased by Coats’ response.

“That’s more believable than them being able to hide them from all of our satellites and every operative we sent to their shithole country. The CIA, Homeland, NSA... they’re all the absolute best at what they do, sir, and it’s absolutely impossible that they missed something like those supercarriers.”

“They also managed to sink an entire carrier group with a single fucking tugboat!” the president yelled. “Do we really have to tell ourselves that they have fucking wizards or something, too?” Trump sneered, completely not realizing just how close he had come to hitting the mark at that moment. “Are you telling me that they’re better than we are at everything?” he continued, beginning to lose his cool again. Carrier strike groups were the symbol and extension of American might, and now everyone in the entire coalition knew that they couldn’t stand up against a single frigate! Every single member of the world coalition punitive expedition had watched the sinking of the USS Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group live and in high definition; it was a huge embarrassment and slap in the face to the nation that everyone on the planet agreed was the strongest, most powerful country on the planet.

He stood there, bent over with his hands planted on his desk, panting and struggling to bring himself back under control. Eventually, he succeeded in calming himself and asked, “So what do you suggest we do now?”

“Sue for peace, sir. They won’t let us end the war while they’re at an advantage, but at the same time, they can’t possibly attack everywhere at once. They don’t have the forces available, we believe. In fact—” General Mattis began, but was cut off by the president.

“You believe? You believe!? YOU FUCKING BELIEVE!?” President Trump roared. “Every time you tell me you believe something, you’re wrong! Everything you believe is WRONG!” He stared at the men in his office, his eyes bloodshot and veins popping out in his neck.

General Mattis was a combat veteran and able to keep his cool in the face of the president's anger. He simply continued from where he was interrupted, saying, "In fact, sir, they can't attack our homeland unless they have an assurance in place."

"What assurance?" the president growled in a hoarse voice. All the screaming he had done had put him on the brink of losing his voice.

"Our nukes are keeping them at bay, so they'll have to take those out of the equation first. As long as they send an ICBM toward us, or hell, even an airstrike or cruise missile from any of their ships, we can retaliate with nukes, sir. All we'll have to do is claim that they nuked us first, and our second-strike policy automatically kicked in," General Mattis explained.

Before the president could continue the conversation, the Chief of Space Operations of the newly created Space Force burst into the Oval Office, followed by the president's secretary.

The secretary began, "Sir, I tried to stop him but—"

The Chief of Space Operations cut her off and said, "We have a problem, sir." He glared at the secretary, who had tried to prevent him from entering the president's office.

"What now?" the president asked in a dangerously calm, even tone, his hoarse voice notwithstanding.

"We detected irregularities in Eden's satellites, sir. They've all begun maneuvering to higher orbits," he reported.

"And just what the fuck is that supposed to mean?" President Trump asked. He didn't quite see the relevance of the shithole's actions.

"Well, if it was us, it would be a precursor to a war in space. We think they're planning on taking down some, if not all, of the satellites below theirs in orbit," the CSO explained.

There was an extended silence in the room as the other three men, plus the secretary, were dumbstruck by the implications of Eden's latest move.

Then, someone in the room couldn't help but say, "Fuck...."

That one word expressed everything that everyone in the Oval Office was thinking at that particular moment.

## Chapter 380 A Moment of Compassion Amidst Destruction

The moment the final Edenian satellite reached a higher orbit, Aeolus immediately got to work.

Aboard the EV Beowulf.

As Eden's flagship aircraft carrier and the first one completed, although only older in terms of minutes or hours, rather than years, the Beowulf was naturally the first to be called to duty. A swarm of activity was in progress in one of the massive internal hangers as an entire carrier air wing (CAW) was being refitted for high-altitude operations.

While the E/F-14 Icarus multirole interceptor jets were capable of reaching and operating near the Karman Line, that didn't mean that they had the necessary fuel capacity to maintain operations for long. For intercepting missiles or shortening flight times from one place to another, they would be fine. But for the upcoming operation, where they would be spending an extended period in active maneuvers, they would need to undergo some hasty modular swaps.

Thus, the flight crews were moving like a hive of worker bees, each ensuring that the pilot they were responsible for would be able to carry out their mission without any issues. Aeolus Air Force doctrine had pilots assigned to specific flight crews, rather than having crews assigned to pilots' jets. After all, unlike in normal air forces, where each jet was a significant investment of dozens of millions of dollars, Aeolus jets were highly replaceable and could basically be reprinted at will.

Aeolus jets were also designed to be modular. The current mission called for high-altitude operations near the Karman Line, so the crews were attaching drop tanks—discardable auxiliary fuel tanks—to some of the hardpoints beneath the jets' wings and on the underside of its belly. The E/F-14B Icarus had eight hardpoints on the wings and one secondary hardpoint on its belly, and the flight crews were busy attaching six underwing drop tanks and one belly drop tank as the pilots were receiving their operations briefing in the pilots' ready room.

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Once the modifications and briefings were complete, the pilots and copilots of 240 jets boarded their planes and were towed to the twelve massive flight deck elevators, where they were lifted the hundred meter distance from the hangar to the flight deck and towed to their positions all along the flight line. Soon, Eden would perform another unprecedented feat in a long, unbroken string of unprecedented feats.

The entire process, from the time Aron mentioned "taking away their toys" to the time the jets had been modified, pilots scrambled, and lined up along the flight line in preparation for takeoff, had only taken an hour.

Everything was ready and only Aron's order remained to be given.

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Aron stood facing a holographic screen, splitting his attention between a number of information feeds showing the progress of various plans and projects, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Aeolus," he said.

[Here, sir.]

"Clear skies is a go."

[Yes, sir. Estimated time of completion is six hours real time.]

Aron nodded and went back to focusing on the projects he had in progress. The war would soon be over, but the unification would have a long way to go even after the last gun spoke in anger.

He had to be prepared.

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Upon receiving the go order, the pilots began launching from the flight deck of the EV Beowulf in good order. Thanks to the rigorous training they had received and the onboard AI assistants in each jet, as well as the long flight line allowing for normal takeoff and landings instead of relying on catapults and arrestor gears, only two seconds were required between each launch. With four runways in operation, the jets had all launched in two minutes and formed into squadrons of four jets each within another minute.

As one, they activated their afterburners and began a steep climb, headed to the Karman Line to, as Aron put it, “take away their toys”.

At the speed they were climbing, it only took the pilots two minutes to reach the Karman Line and level off.

“Let’s shoot and scoot, boys, we’ve only got about two hours to bingo,” the flight leader said over their communications network.

“Roger,” the squadron leaders below him chorused.

The 240-strong flight broke into 60 squadrons of four jets each and headed in different directions. Their goal was simple: take down every satellite in low earth orbit that didn’t belong to Eden.

Once each squadron reached their operational area, they released control of their missiles to the AIs installed in each jet. The squadrons broke up into individual jets and began following the course laid out in the pilots’ AR HUDs while their jets occasionally released missiles. Normally, with most of their hardpoints occupied by drop tanks, they would only be able to fire two shots before shooting themselves dry, but each hardpoint had a dedicated atomic printer that could rearm them on the fly. The only limiting factor was the small storage space for materials the jet could carry; but with the drop tanks rapidly being emptied of fuel, they were simply recycled and turned into more missiles.

On average, each jet fired more than twenty missiles, all of which were smaller versions of the Type VII Frangible flak rounds. They were set to timed detonation, turning them into fire-and-forget munitions that would fill space with deadly debris that would begin a domino effect where each satellite destroyed by them would break up and destroy more satellites, which would then spread the destruction even further.

“You know,” one squadron leader mused over comms, “I kinda feel sorry for those poor fellows in the ISS. Nobody’s gonna be able to reach them before the shrapnel wave does, but they can see everything that’s happening and know exactly what’s coming for them.”

“Actions have consequences, and the world leaders shouldn’t have been greedy,” the flight leader responded.

“But I still feel bad for them. We could at least contact them and bring their last words home with us.... After all, with the satellite network down and all the jamming and electronic warfare happening up there, their comms got cut off a while ago.”

The flight leader fell silent for a moment, thinking of the possible repercussions, then Aron’s voice broke into the comms.

“Do it,” he ordered. He didn’t say anything else, nor did he need to. With those two simple words, he had already expressed his sentiments. Nova had informed him of the situation aboard the aging space station; their Soyuz module had cold welded itself to the docking ring, and thanks to lowest-bidder manufacturing, the backup explosive bolts had failed. Thanks to the weld, though, it wouldn’t have mattered that the bolts failed, as the module wouldn’t have been able to create an airtight seal and would’ve burned up in reentry.

No matter what, it was a loss for humanity. The astronauts aboard the space station had nothing to do with the mess currently on the surface, and their goal had always been noble. Aron had great respect for astronauts, who were all pioneers and brave men and women who sought nothing more than the betterment of humanity. One of his heroes, the Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell, said something that had shaped his beliefs and influenced him even to this day: “You develop an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world, and a compulsion to do something about it.”

Perhaps that was why Aron was so set on his course.

“You heard the boss, establish contact and record their final words for posterity,” the flight leader ordered.

The pilot nearest the ISS increased power to his radio and forced his way through the jamming. “International Space Station, this is Dumper. If you look out your south window, you might be able to see me wagging my wings.” He wagged his wings in salute to the ISS before realizing that nobody would be able to see him from that far away. Even though he was practically in space, he was still kilometers away from the space station.

He continued, “Errr, well... maybe not. But you have more important things to think of than a jet doing a high-altitude flyby. I’ve been ordered to record your last words for posterity, and I promise you we’ll ensure that they’re privately delivered to your next of kin. There’s nothing we can do to help you from here, but there’s a huge swarm of space debris headed your way. You’ve got about eight minutes before I’m bingo fuel and have to RTB. I’ll clear the channel now and you can go ahead. Dumper out.”

With that, a combat mission gained humanitarian elements that day. It wasn’t the first time in the history of the world that had happened and it became just another instance of wartime compassion in a long list of compassionate acts between enemies facing each other on the front lines.