

FICTION

Grounded

The endless deep blue sky was clear and empty. The radar detected nothing, the same as yesterday, the day before, and the day before that. The 40 million dollar jet patrolled the vast nowhere, doing nothing, defending against nobody. To the right, a patch of small mountains stood while a forest blanketed the surrounding area. A few miles away sat a small sleepy town and some roads leading into hostile territory. For hours, the pilot loitered above the world until it was time to return. After completing the day's objective, he descended back to the airbase and stood back on the ground.

"Hey Edward, anything new today?" asked his friend Todd. He had much more experience than the rest and had flown in previous conflicts. He didn't talk a lot, but he had his peers' respect.

"Nope, just the usual. Did I miss anything down here on the ground?" Edward replied.

"Not really, but it's been too quiet for too long."

The pilot's objective was to provide close air support if and when a ground invasion began. He longed for something, anything, to happen. Fortunately, it wouldn't take long for that dark forest in the distance to finally give him a task.

Edward listened to a news broadcast on the radio the next day announcing that an ultimatum was given. Within 12 days, if neither side stood down, there would be no turning back.

"There it is! Now we're getting somewhere! We're finally gonna do something!" he exclaimed to Todd.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course! In 2 weeks, we're gonna curb-stomp those guys, do our job, and come back as champions. Aren't you at least a bit excited?" However, this didn't seem to convince him. His expression was stern and unphased. After a few seconds, he spoke again, "No, I can't say I am. I'm not here to be a hero, get promoted, win a medal, or prove anything. I'm here because I enjoy what I do, and that's all that matters in the end." Edward had nothing to say to that, so they sat and listened to the radio for a while.

12 days is a long time, but it seemed to fly by. Every day felt identical and too short, but nothing was happening yet. The more time passed, the more real the future became. The mission kept feeling more dangerous, and the task more critical. Edward and his fellow pilots anxiously counted down the days as the mission dawned on them.

Eventually, responsibility had arrived and it was time to answer. Everything had been planned out tediously over the past weeks. First, known enemy air defenses in the area would be destroyed, clearing a trail for aircraft to maraud into. Edward's flight would watch overhead as ground forces called on them to obliterate whoever they needed, like a god summoning lightning bolts from a storm. Finally, by the end of the day, the battle should be over, the enemy should be subdued, and the operation should be a success.

The pilots woke up that day before the sun had come up and lit the sky, so they'd be hidden. They took off, and once they were close to the border, there was already a pristine twilight. They were surrounded by a dark blue abyss, but where the earth met the sky at the horizon, a purple-orange glow pierced through and emanated. The first location was a town that was being secured by friendly forces that were encountering much more resistance than anticipated. As the pilots flew over the border, the relative calm was interrupted by a beeping warning, and suddenly a white streak from the ground cut through the sky in the distance. A

surface-to-air missile (SAM) had launched, and in Edward's aircraft, alarms triggered that pierced the pilot's ears. The radio frequency erupted with voices as the pilots dove away.

"We got a missile launch! Break left!"

The pilot banked left, tore away, and pulled hard. The g-forces were crushing.

"Eagle 3 defending!" the pilot announced.

Half a second later, he heard the chilling hiss as the missile flew past.

"Eagle 4 evading", another declared.

The warnings continued to beep incessantly but-

"2 SAM launches 12 o'clock low!"

Rolling upside down, the pilot pulled back, diving downwards toward the-

"Another launch! Eagle 1 defending!"

Another missile screamed as it passed below the pilot.

"Where's the other missile? I only saw two!" the pilot called.

He fought to take in as many breaths of air as he could as the g-forces continued to squeeze him into his seat.

"Can we still make it to the target? We've got friendlies about to be overrun any second now!", the pilot croaked.

"This is Eagle 4, I've already jettisoned my ordinance."

The beeping restarted, signaling another missile launch.

"Eagle 3 egressing west!" The pilot shouted as he ripped towards the right, and rolled right side up. The other pilots continued to call out.

"We need to get out of here! Another launch! Break left! Brea-Another launch!"

"Get low!"

"Eagle 4 defending!"

The beeping continued still.

"We're still a few miles from the border! Where's Eagle 2?" the pilot hollered.

"Eagle 2, status!" another shouted.

"I'm okay, I'm low on fuel"

The sky was covered with a lattice of curving streaks of white smoke from the missiles.

"Where is everyone? How far?" the pilot asked.

"Bad news, I think the friendlies are gone. They must've been overrun, I can't get ahold of them." another pilot stated.

Suddenly, the radio channel went quiet.

"We've got another SAM!"

"Eagle 3 BREAK LEFT! Break! Get-"

Another hiss started but a second later, a deafening boom detonated from behind the pilot. Suddenly, the aircraft lurched down and he realized he lost control. He felt the heat on his neck as the enormous wings and jet engines bled fire. He fumbled around, reached down, and pulled the ejection handle. A few seconds is a short time, but it felt infinite. The seat punched the pilot out into the cold and furious air. The force of the wind and ejection were punishing. Finally, his parachute pulled and yanked him back until he was slowly falling towards the ground like a leaf. Ahead, the jet tumbled in the air like a meteor until it crashed into the ground and ignited in a fireball.

But then, it was quiet. There was no more beeping, frantic speaking, or the roar of the engine. Edward slowly drifted down and landed on the solid ground again. By now, it was midday and the sky was a brilliant light blue and sunny, scarred with streaks. "What happened?"

he pondered to himself. To the right, was a large rock, and he decided to sit and rest there for a long time. "This couldn't have happened, all the SAMs were supposed to have been gone! How is it even possible that there were so many? How did it go *this* badly?"

After some time, it became apparent what went wrong. The initial plan had seriously underestimated the difficulty and strength of what they were going up against. They thought they were too far above everything, and that they couldn't be brought down. The truth is though, before they even left the ground, the result had already been decided.

The more he thought, it seemed all that fighting, diving, and struggling seemed to be in vain. The mission wasn't completed, but they had to run, there was no other option. Then he remembered the friendlies they were supposed to protect. Disappointment rained down in his mind as he realized he had let them down and they had paid the price. Defeat had snatched him out of the sky, and dragged him to the ground.

By now, the sky was black as it was nighttime. He needed to get to a clear spot where a search and rescue helicopter could find and take him out of the forest. But defeat had drained his energy too. Edward sat on the ground until the peaceful breeze and dark sky were interrupted by the drone of rotor blades. A searchlight's beam pierced through the darkness and scanned the forest. He needed to make it to a clearing, but his legs didn't seem to want to move after all that had happened. He wanted to stay there for some more time and continue thinking, wandering back through all the mistakes that led him to the ground.

The pilot was alone and defeated, but still had a job to do. He rose from the ground and stumbled towards the nearby clearing. Now that he was visible in an open spot, the helicopter circled back to him, slowed, and gently touched down.

Many hours later, Edward was finally back at base. When he saw Todd again, the two

looked at each other, amazed that they were both still alive. "What happened?" Todd asked.

"Sometimes it just isn't your day."

Todd nodded. "What's your plan now?"

"Keep moving forward." the pilot responded.