

## Tech System 311

### Chapter 311 He Should be a Fortune Teller or Something

Tim Cook's third idea elicited a wave of nods from the rest of the board. Cooperating with a competitor was never a good idea; it was just giving others a handle by which to exert control over them. And ruining their own hard work over the past decades of building up a specific brand identity for Apple was equally distasteful, if not more. So even if the anti-GAIA coalition was distasteful, and even if it wasn't effective, it was still the only viable option of the three they had been presented with.

Besides, even if they did want to cooperate with GAIA, Sarah had been adamant about not selling the chips they would need, no matter how much they'd offered or how sincere their offers had been.

"We can also claim they're a tech monopoly. It's bullshit and would never stand up, but the more things we throw at them, the more flustered they'll be and the more likely they'll be to submit." That generated a bit of a buzz of chuckles in the meeting room.

"So which idea are we going forward with? Let's vote," Tim said. The minutes secretary took over and issued the voting order, which was soon completed. The result of the vote was shown on the screen behind Tim.

"Looks like many of you liked the coalition idea, with cooperation coming in second. So let's do it like this: while we're setting up our lobbying coalition, we can contact GAIA and muscle them into 'selling' us their chips and the tech behind them. We can promise not to support the coalition as long as they agree to our demands. If they don't, then they'll be kicked out of the richest market in the world, and all of our political allies around the globe would definitely follow suit. Then they'll only be able to cry on their bankruptcy filings," he said. He would immediately throw the rest of the coalition under the bus if Apple got hold of the tech they wanted from GAIA. He knew that the late, great Steve Jobs would hate that decision, but, well... not only was Steve dead and gone, but even before he had died, he'd been forced out of management for being too soft.

Tim's words garnered nods of approval from the board. Any one of them would have no problem abandoning their temporary allies and becoming the sole beneficiary of GAIA's inevitable downfall and demise.

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The following day, Wang Yi and Gabriel de los Estrada continued their negotiations. They were scheduled to attend a few diplomatic ceremonies that day, but the plans were abruptly changed when Minister Wang received news of the decision Apple had made regarding the anti-GAIA coalition through the members of the Ministry of State Security in his entourage.

"This is an opportunity for us! We should ensure that Apple is successful," a high ranking member of the CCP said moments after being briefed by a member of the MSS before the meeting.

"I agree. The American government forcing GAIA to hand over their tech would benefit us, but even if GAIA refuses and ends up being banned in the US, it would still increase the importance of the Chinese market. Then we can threaten to ban them as well, if they don't hand over their tech. But we'll be even more likely to succeed—after all, the overturned cart ahead teaches the cart behind. So we can pay attention to the Americans and learn from their successes and failures, then

use that against GAIA ourselves," Minister Wang said. He had been forced to cut his meeting with the Edenian delegation short to attend the meeting with the CCP and MSS and was still irritated when he was reminded of the Edenian minister's attitude after the joint chip venture was brought up.

"Good plan," said the highest-ranked person in the room. He turned to the MSS representative and said, "Make sure it happens, and help the coalition as much as possible. We need it to happen. It would greatly benefit our Made in China 2025 initiative to have one of its goals accomplished so soon after the initiative was started. So if we succeed, everyone here will be greatly rewarded." The meeting continued as the MSS agent briefed the politicians on the other topics he had on his agenda.

Just like that, movement had started in secret without the world suspecting that an upcoming turmoil would shake the giants.

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"Now this is bad," Sarah muttered to herself as she read about the meetings that had been taking place between their competitors. She was sure that, since they were being blatant and in the open about their actions, it meant that GAIA's competitors were in their final buildup phase before they undertook a major action.

[Miss, you have a new email from Tim Cook,] Sarah's AI secretary informed her. She had intercepted the email that was supposed to go to the business department and directly reported it to her.

"Show it to me." The email appeared on a screen in front of her and she carefully read it. She knew that if it was just another offer, like the previous emails, she would have been told so by her secretary.

As she read, a frown grew on her face. It was written in very dense legalese and filled with subtle threats that couldn't be used against the sender, but were obvious enough for the reader to understand what they were.

"Looks like the discussion I had with Aron as a joke is going to become real," she sighed when she finished reading the email. She remembered joking with Aron about who was going to attend the congressional hearing if they were subpoenaed to testify about the risk their devices posed to American national security.

Still, there was no worry in her face at all. The only thing that could be seen on it was excitement, since she was finally facing a challenge for the first time in a long while. In fact, everything had been going inconceivably smoothly ever since Aron had invented the always-helpful AI secretaries.

"Forward it to Aron and add that he should be a fortune teller or something," she said to her assistant, then started brainstorming on how to deal with the nascent anti-GAIA coalition with the aid of her assistant.

## Chapter 312 The Merchant Marine

The Edenian-China oil transfer agreement was signed within a week, after all the kinks in the clauses had been ironed out. During that time, the Edenian Minister of the Exterior, Gabriel de los Estrada, had toured the country and presented his diplomatic credentials to Chinese President Xi Jinping, officially opening an Edenian embassy in Beijing. He had also opened new topics of

discussion, setting a foundation for future cooperation between the two nations. The Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, had done the same, but his interests differed from Gabriel's.

Where Gabriel was interested in raw materials, especially wanting to tap into China's extensive deposits of minerals that, to his knowledge, were lacking in Eden and Esparia, Wang Yi was more interested in buying a batch of weapons and technology transfers. But Gabriel countered that by using ARES and GAIA as shields; he couldn't make the call on behalf of the government, since the things China wanted were property, intellectual and otherwise, of privately owned companies.

Thus, he merely promised that he would do his best in order to facilitate the Chinese requests. Both men knew it was an empty promise, because Gabriel had neither the authority nor the power to make the decisions on his own.

Immediately after the ink was dry on the agreement, a timer had started on Eden's first oil delivery. It was set to take place in three weeks, so the idling oil pumps were spun up to full capacity and Aron's behemoth industrial chain slowly began moving. It started by printing seven camouflaged ships, which looked like oil supertankers but were submersible—Hephaestus class oil tankers. They had to be submersible, as they were printed at the bottom of the ocean and only surfaced when Nova ensured Aron that there were no satellites with viewing angles covering Eden, giving them a window to hide their activities.

He wasn't completely ready to step out of the shadows yet, after all; there was still groundwork to be laid.

Once the massive supertankers were ready, they moved to the offshore rigs and were filled by the high-capacity high-flow pipes, both from the storage tanks on the oil rigs and directly from the pumps that had been sunk into the seafloor when the platform was built.

Soon after that, Edenian Naval Command in Elysium received orders and went to work printing the Merchant Marine fleet. A Thor flagship class heavy cruiser, two Thor class cruisers—one missile boat and one air defense boat—four Heimdall seek-and-destroy class destroyers, and a dozen Njord interdiction class frigates were soon printed, crewed, and sent to the offshore oil rigs to meet the supertankers they would be escorting. Neither Aron nor Nova would leave anything to chance with this first, and most important, oil transit.

Although three weeks was a very short time for pumping oil and delivering it, the Edenians had still agreed to China's demand. Gabriel had tried negotiating for a longer time frame for the first delivery, but Minister Wang had grown somewhat cold and took a hard line stance, leading the Edenian minister somewhat confused. They had started out getting along quite well, and he didn't understand what could have caused the sudden cooling of their working relationship.

He turned to one of his female staffers, who only he knew was actually a Nyx agent, and in a low voice, said, "Find out what happened. Someone's trying to ruin this deal for us, and I need to know who."

If Eden was delayed in their delivery, they would have to pay compensation in the amount that China would have paid for on-time delivery of the crude. The oil would also be given to China for free in that case; the terms of the agreement were clear on that clause.

The undercover Nyx agent nodded and her expression went blank for a moment as she tasked her assistant AI with the investigation. It would be best if she didn't have to make a move personally, but if it came to that, she would be ready.

After all, a deal worth 130 billion USD absolutely needed to go smoothly; she understood that fact very well.

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"Are you going to do something about it?" Rina said as she read the email that Sarah had forwarded to Aron and her.

"No, I'm going to let them do it. I want to see exactly what they have up their sleeves," Aron said. His hand slipped into Rina's bra through the neck of her t-shirt and began massaging her generous chest.

"You really like to let people build up to their highest point before you throw them down, don't you?" Rina said as she tried to slap Aron's playful hand away and failed. She barely stopped herself from moaning.

"No, this time it isn't just due to that. It's more that they might be doing something that'll be beneficial to me in the future. As they say, 'You meet your fate on the way to avoid it'. So I hope their attempt to survive will lead to something beneficial for me. And who knows? It might even expedite some of my plans," he said as he pinched Rina's rapidly hardening nipple.

"Why not just send your agents to investigate what they're doing, or even have Nova hack them so she can listen to them. Ahh...." she moaned before she could finish her question.

"Nyx agents aren't infinite in number, and most are already tasked with other important tasks. So I don't have any to send right now. As for Nova hacking them, they're tech companies and very well know that anything they have that's important absolutely must be kept air gapped to avoid hackers. Nobody knows better than people in the tech sector that there is no such thing as a truly secure network." He smirked and slid his other hand under the hem of Rina's shirt, teasing her bellybutton. "Except for mine, that is," he finished.

"Besides, all we have to do is just wait for them to make their move and respond. If I can't win a fight with them with all of this at my fingertips, then I don't deserve what I already have."

He tilted his head and captured Rina's lips with his, kissing her hard and deep. She returned the kiss and her hands began wandering as well; his teasing had already riled her up and she was dripping and ready to go.

## Chapter 313 Intercept Course

It didn't take long for the tech companies' secret coalition to be formed. They had already come to a surface-level agreement and had begun spending money for their plan, but on the outside it seemed like different companies just coincidentally had the same idea. They had all gone to different lobbying firms with different complaints, but the money they were spending was ten times the usual amount. And that was just the beginning.

Tim Cook was feeling very satisfied and putting his wholehearted effort into lobbying. He was infuriated that GAIA had ignored his threatening email, leaving him with no other option than to go

all out. For the sake of his career and his company, he had to ensure that GAIA was removed from competition and their tech in his hands.

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Just like that, three days passed and the tankers full of oil undocked and headed out toward China on the shortest route. Their escort ships, two destroyers and six frigates, remained for twelve hours, then followed them at a sedate speed. Though, that was only considering the normal cruising speed of the advanced naval vessels; the two-thirds speed they were sailing at would be comparable to flank speed in any other navy's vessel.

A week passed and the supertankers slowed further as they approached the pirate-infested waters of Indonesia. With over 17,000 islands in the Indonesian archipelago, stamping out the plague of pirates had been a headache for centuries, and the current day was no exception. If there was going to be an attack, it would happen that day.

"Captain, our radar is picking up some weird movements on approach at zero six zero knots bearing two four zero relative to our heading, zero five four nautical miles and closing. Ten pings on the doppler, and sonar's picking up what sounds like outboard motors. I suspect they're pirates, sir," said the comms officer on the bridge of the lead tanker in the convoy.

"Comms, confidence?" the captain snapped. The shorthand communication between him and his crew and the ease with which they worked together showed the effectiveness of their Athena-designed VR training program.

"90%, sir. We should have visual confirmation in approximately ten minutes, and they'll overtake us in thirty-seven minutes assuming our course remains steady," the comms officer reported. "I don't remember us having any scheduled inspections along our route," the captain said. He knew there was a possibility that the radar signatures may be local patrol boats engaged in a search for pirates or smugglers, but if that was the case, they wouldn't be on an intercept heading with his convoy.

"From the pattern and their number, it's impossible for them to be a patrol. Patrols don't come in waves of a hundred speedboats..." the comms officer mused.

"Pirates!" the captain exclaimed. Based on the details, that was the only possible conclusion. He turned to his comms officer and ordered, "Report it to our escort."

The comms officer picked up his radio and began his report. "Mayday, mayday, mayday, this is the EV Pacific Voyager. We are currently located at 3°07'55.5"N 124°59'35.2"E, bearing three four niner. Radar indicates high probability of a pirate threat, intercept estimated in three seven minutes. Message repeats." He set the radio back in its cradle and flipped a switch to cause their distress signal to repeat. The announcement was repeated for a second, then a third time as they waited for a response.

But even after waiting for a minute, no response was received and the atmosphere in the bridge of the supertanker grew slightly tense.

The captain had a suspicion of what was happening. He took the radio from his hip and said, "This is the EV Pacific Voyager. We suspect we have pirates on an intercept course and will have visual confirmation in about six minutes. Our distress signal received no response and I suspect signal jamming is at play. Please respond."

His short-ranged radio signal was met with silence from the other tankers in the convoy.

"Comms, signal flash 'change heading zero two zero flank speed'. Helm, in three zero seconds, hard astarboard, come about to new heading zero two zero and all ahead flank. Let's buy our boys some time to peel these barnacles." The captain sat back in his chair and muttered to himself, "It's time to phone home."

The comms officer ordered a radioman to use the 'flasher'—a high-intensity floodlight—to signal the second ship in the convoy with the new heading and orders. The signal would be repeated down the line, and the evasive maneuver would be simultaneously carried out by all seven tankers in the convoy.

Twenty seconds later, the helmsman took control of the 1MC and announced, "Ten seconds to maneuver. Brace, brace, brace!" Exactly ten seconds after that, he said, "Coming about."

The massive supertanker heeled over to port as it made an almost impossibly sharp turn toward its starboard beam and the engine spun up to emergency levels, pushing the insanely huge ship to its flank speed, roughly 125 knots.

"Although this will buy us some time, the speedboats are probably still going to catch up, eventually. If they can't, then slow us to three quarters in ten minutes. Let's bait the fox to catch the hunter. Comms, continue the mayday on frequency cycling, maybe there's a frequency they missed jamming. XO, you have the conn." The captain left the bridge and headed to his ready room.

After closing and locking the door, he took his special edition Zeus One out of his desk drawer and said, "Phone home."

The phone's assistant immediately connected to the Q-comms satellite that had been tasked with tracking the convoy and connected directly to Naval Command in Elysium. That wasn't a feature available to the commercial edition of the phone, which were limited to a Q-com connection range of 250 meters in order to prevent the batteries from being immediately drained.

The moment the call connected, he said, "We're being intercepted by what we believe are pirates. Radio is jammed and I've taken evasive action. We're baiting them out, so there are a few hours, but \_\_\_"

He was interrupted by the phone powering down. Even in the military version of the phone, pushing a quantum signal into low Earth orbit was beyond what its battery could bear after a few short seconds.

But despite being cut off in the middle of his report, he wasn't worried at all anymore. He left his ready room and returned to the bridge to continue his work as captain of the lead ship in the convoy.

## Chapter 314 Nowhere to Call Home Anymore

Eden, Northwest airbase.

An alarm started blaring, signaling a general scramble among the base personnel. They immediately dropped whatever they were doing and headed to their assigned locations like an anthill that had been kicked over.

Pilots were urgently putting on their gear according to a strict checklist procedure. And within five minutes, they were headed to the duty hangar, where they would receive their mission briefing and launch. As they crossed the hangar on their way to the briefing room, they passed a virtual hive of technicians scrambling over the parked jets and giving them last-minute checks and fueling them.

The pilots reached the briefing room and received their briefing, then boarded their jets and taxied out of the hangar.

Soon, with the screaming sound of jet engines spinning up, four planes were lined up on the runway access lane, ready for takeoff as soon as they received final clearance from the tower.

"Tower, this is SU-37, call sign Alpha One. Requesting immediate clearance for emergency intercept take-off. Please advise."

"Alpha One, this is Tower Control. Roger that. Emergency intercept take-off is approved. Proceed to Runway 27 Hotel for immediate departure. We'll alert civilian air traffic control and provide you with updated vectors to intercept. Keep us informed of the situation.

"Tower, Alpha One. Copy that. Taxiing to Runway 27 Hotel. Will update you on the situation once in the air. Alpha One out."

The squadron leader taxied onto the runway and brought his jet to a complete halt. Then he pushed his throttle to the stops, kicked on his afterburners, and released the brakes on his landing gear. His jet screamed through a short takeoff and into the sky at a 60 degree angle. Short takeoffs like those were designed for aircraft carrier runways and active combat scenarios, where pilots needed to be in the sky and mobile in the least time possible in order to avoid being intercepted by the enemy.

After the four planes had completed their takeoffs and assembled in formation, they moved to the heading they were supposed to head out on, afterburners still flaring and leaving a trail of exhaust plumes behind them. Once they were over open water, they went supersonic and the exhaust trails ended where the jets broke the sound barrier.

Minutes after the interceptor launch a fully fuelled and highly advanced version of a KC-135 Stratotanker also launched on the same heading as the intercept squadron. The interceptors would be flying their entire mission with their afterburners active, so no matter how awe-inspiring their fuel efficiency was, they would reach bingo fuel just a few minutes after they hit the halfway point toward their destination.

A few minutes before the interceptors were scrambled, Aeolus, the Air Force AI Command, and Freyja, the ARES Military Intelligence Command, had tasked the overwatch satellite following the oil convoy with tracking the pirate speedboats back to their base. While the trailing naval escort was absolutely more than enough to handle the attack, the standard operating procedure (SOP) for unprovoked attacks on any of Aron's military or civilian shipping was ensuring that the attackers had nowhere to retreat to.

A few That Direction Removers launched with great prejudice was the most effective method of achieving that goal.

As the four jets screamed on their way to remove a certain direction, a hundred and eighty nautical miles (333 kilometers) away from the oil convoy and well behind the horizon, six Heracles' Bow batteries, fondly referred to as "Hello, Beautiful" by the sailors assigned to man the vessels they were on, simultaneously swiveled around as the frigates and destroyers of the Merchant Marine

Escort Task Group Oscar Seven tracked invisible targets from beyond the horizon with the aid of the Panopticon satellite array high in the sky above them. Soon, the massive, eighteen-inch-diameter coilguns roared to life in sequence, the battery itself rapidly adjusting between shots and cycling through the three barrels in each battery.

The overpressure wave caused by projectiles going from a dead standstill to more than ten times the speed of sound kicked up waves around each firing vessel, and the ships themselves heeled over with the recoil. But where a normal vessel would take a hit to their accuracy for those reasons, the VIs (Virtual Intelligences) in the tracking computer were more than capable of using the zero-latency satellite connection to ensure that the designated, locked targets were hit with a hundred percent accuracy.

Even though using what was basically battleship weaponry to destroy small two- to four-person speedboats was like using a nuclear missile to swat a gnat, Athena had drilled her motto into her subordinate AIs: there is no such thing as "overkill". There is only "open fire" and "reload".

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"They really want to use our failure to deliver as leverage to get us to compromise on the tech sharing, don't they."

Rachael Richardson, the president of Hermes, was sitting next to Elizabeth Oppliger, the president of Helios Energy & Utility, in a virtual mission command center. They had been informed as soon as the pirates were confirmed by the Panopticon satellite, even before the convoy ships themselves had received visual confirmation. They were being kept in the loop during the small skirmish, as they were the titular heads of the companies responsible for the convoy—Elizabeth for the contents of the ships and Rachael for the ships themselves.

What Rachael said was prompted by an image displayed on one of the sections of the main screen in mission control. It was a zoomed-in satellite image of a submarine with an occlusion outline to highlight it against the dark seawater. The radio jamming signal was coming from an antenna raised above the sub's conning tower, meaning they were the ones responsible for ensuring that the convoy's distress call would go unheard.

"Yep, since the contract had no force majeure clause or piracy exclusion, it was pretty blatantly obvious what they wanted to do by sending a pirate 'fleet' after our convoy. They don't care about our oil, I suppose. We'll have to hammer them in our next negotiation—after all, they need us, not the other way around. There are plenty of countries we could sell our oil to, China was just one of the better options," Elizabeth replied. She wasn't worried about the pathetic attack on their convoy at all, as she had an inkling of the capability of the Poseidon branch of ARES.

Rachael sighed in disappointment as she said, "They really chose the wrong country to fuck with, didn't they."

## Chapter 315 Naval Combat in the New Era

A few seconds after the frigates and destroyers of the Poseidon Navy ceased fire, exactly one hundred waterspouts bloomed where speedboats had once existed. The boats had never even entered visual range of the oil convoy... but the waterspouts certainly did. The impact of thirty kilograms of depleted uranium wrapped in electrical steel traveling at ten times the speed of sound



imparted over 166 million newtons of force, enough to evaporate thousands of cubic meters of seawater, along with any hapless object that happened to be within that area. The resulting waterspouts reached hundreds of meters into the air and were clearly visible over the horizon, where both the supertanker convoy and the "hidden" submarine could see them.

The tripartite batteries of 18" guns on each vessel were capable of firing rounds massing up to, or in excess of, 300 kilograms, but 30 kilograms was the smallest round they could fire. Anything bigger than that and they would have to come to a full stop and engage their inertial dampening system anyway, so 30 kilograms was deemed enough to make a statement without impacting the speed of the task group. They had places to go, after all.

Hundreds of kilometers away, the frigates and destroyers that'd fired the devastating salvo had yet to come back to an even keel that was displaced by a few millimeters before their targets had simply vanished from existence.

The captain of the EV Pacific Voyager dusted his hands and ordered, "Helmsman, bring us to one third speed and come about to our original heading in thirty seconds from my mark. Comms, flash the course and speed change to the rest of the convoy." He raised his hand, feeling somewhat grandiose, then dropped it and said, "Mark."

Precisely thirty seconds later, the supertanker convoy came about in a synchronized movement and resumed their original course and speed. The entire incident had only caused about a fifteen-minute delay in their schedule, and they could easily make that fifteen minutes up during the rest of the journey.

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"Well, there's something you don't see every day. I never thought I'd see a stage magician perform a vanishing act hundreds of nautical miles away from anything." The commander of the submarine responsible for jamming the radio communications in the area around the supertankers could only make a bleak, sarcastic joke after witnessing the result of the beyond-the-horizon strike against the pirate speedboats through the submarine's periscope.

"Did you see what exactly happened, captain?" his chief officer asked. Just like the speedboats, the submarine was an entire horizon away and far outside the range at which they could detect the convoy escort, given that they were currently running silent and relying solely on passive detection systems.

"I have no idea. But what I'd really like to know is how they managed to get a distress call out when we're jamming every possible radio frequency. What that strike was, exactly, is secondary to that." The captain had naturally seen the results of the That Direction Remover that had been fired during the short Eden-Esparia War, so he assumed the strike was something like those missiles.

"If I were to hazard a guess, my bet is on them having a system set up to 'phone home' at regular intervals, and as soon as one, or at most two, scheduled calls is missed, Eden will respond with overwhelming force," the chief officer mused. "Either that or they could have tasked their satellite system with tracking the convoy and acted as soon as the pirates were discovered by the eye in the sky." He gestured to an area vaguely above his head.

"Leave the thinking to the brains at HQ, COB. Flood the ballast tanks and make our depth one five zero meters, fifteen degree down bubble," the captain ordered. "Sonar, continue tracking the convoy, helm, continue pursuit. Maintain silent running and wait for a signal from HQ."

"Aye aye, sir," the crew in the Combat Information Center chorused and got to work.

After more than twelve hours passed with the tankers at one-third speed, the commanding officer asked himself, "What the fuck are they doing?" The convoy had barely moved even a few kilometers from where they had been during the attack more than twelve hours ago.

But before his COB could even give him his hypothesis, the sonar tech announced, "Contact bearing one niner five degrees. It's a destroyer, sir, and I'm getting active pings on the sonar."

The captain immediately paled; active sonar meant they had likely been discovered and were now being hunted by a destroyer.

As red emergency lights began flashing through the sub, the captain grabbed the 1MC handset and announced, "Emergency dive, emergency dive, emergency dive. Prepare for 30 degrees down bubble." He hung the handset back in its cradle and ordered, "Helm, down bubble 30 degrees, make our depth four zero zero and come about to zero nine zero true. Maintain silent running, let's make ourselves scarce. Mission is a fail, calling no-go at," he checked his watch, "1928 hours zulu time."

No one in the sub stopped to think about anything but the consequences. Just like during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, two nations were now on the brink of war. And whether or not that war began depended on this specific submarine's ability to escape its hunter. Either they survived, and peace would continue for the near future, or they sank, and a war broke out; there was no third option. Thus, their reaction to the hunt was understandable.

Nobody wanted to die, after all.

And with that assumption in mind, whether they could survive or not would rely on his actions over the course of the next few hours. A cold sweat beaded on his brow and down his spine; all he could do now was pray.

The helmsman wasted no time and immediately started the emergency dive sequence, bringing the submarine about in an attempt to get as far away from the convoy as possible to avoid being detected in the area.

What they didn't know was that no one planned on attacking them; the active sonar pings were just a warning to them and the country behind them that they were suspected of foul play for today's incident. They also didn't know that a submarine that'd been attached to the Poseidon Merchant Marine had been tailing them for more than eight hours, using them as a real-life training scenario while collecting evidence for future use.

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After the escort fleet caught up with the convoy, they increased their speed to two-thirds, or "normal cruising speed" and sped away. The supertankers' role as bait had come to an end, and now it was time for them to do their primary job: delivering their load of crude oil to China. While the escort could only go to the border of Chinese territorial waters, anything that happened there would be entirely China's fault, so the convoy itself would have its safety assured once they reached that line.

Somewhere over the ocean on approach to a nameless island in the Indonesian archipelago.

Four Edenian fighter jets were screaming through the air at supersonic speed, trailing flame from their engines. They had been flying with their afterburners on for over an hour and were about halfway to their destination, a pirate base on an unnamed island in the Indian Ocean near Indonesia.

The pilots were relaxed, trading jokes back and forth and hyping each other up for their first combat mission. They had just graduated their training a few weeks before and, like many soldiers, sailors, and airmen, were feeling invincible after having been broken down and rebuilt into new versions of themselves through the tried and true method of basic training.

The difference was, the members of ARES—whether they be in the Army, under the command of the AI, Mars; the Navy, under the command of the AI, Poseidon; or the Air Force, under the command of the AI, Aeolus—actually were nearly as invincible as they felt. Their genes had been enhanced, their weapons and equipment were dozens, if not hundreds of generations advanced compared to so-called "modern" militaries, and their training methods were straight out of a science fiction webnovel about an advanced technological society.

By any standard known to man or otherwise, each member of ARES was an entire military force unto themselves. And they all knew it.

The briefing had been quick and detailed. Satellite images showed the pirate base, which was practically primitive. The buildings in the base were little better than mud huts or built from bamboo, much like some of the villages in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. There was a small dock that would perhaps allow a fishing boat or two to dock, a few boats docked there, and some medium-sized warehouses. There were also a few blocks of residential buildings, but the thermal imaging showed them either empty or containing one, maybe two people in each, tops.

The base sat in a valley that opened up onto an east-facing beach, and on the hills to the north and south of the buildings were a few old Vietnam-era flak guns and even some old eight- and twelve-pounder muzzle-loading cannons, the type that were popular during the Age of Sail. Certainly none of it could do much more than scratch the paint on the advanced jets of the Aeolus Air Force, so the pilots considered their current mission to be something of a "gimme", where the in-air refueling process would be more difficult and fraught with risk than their attack itself.

They would fly in, release a few That Direction Removers, then turn around and return to base. Easy peasy lemon squeezy, good game all.

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On an unnamed island somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

Kirana Sekali was toiling under the hot tropical sun, a woven bamboo basket on her back as she trekked into the hills to the north of her small village in search of wild vegetables and medicinal herbs. Things hadn't been the same since the bajak laut (pirates) had landed and forced their menfolk to join them or die. Those who'd joined them had become them, and those who'd died had been tossed in the hills for the wild beasts to feast upon.

Her father had fought them, but her brother had joined them. Now, she was the sole support for her mother, and—she patted her abdomen—her unborn child. She used to picture herself finding a good man, somehow, and creating a loving family. But after the kapten bajak laut sialan (fucking pirate

captain) had... attacked her, those dreams had been replaced by nightmares. But she still had hope for the life growing within her.

'That's a good name for my baby,' she thought. 'Nadya Sekali.' Nadya meant 'hope' in the Slavic roots of the Indonesian language.

She looked around for wild vegetables and checked the snares she had set the day before. She and her mother had to eat, and with her mother toiling in the field, it fell to her to provide food for the two... no, three of them, now. After an hour of searching with nothing to show for it, she straightened and rubbed the small of her back. Looking to the east, she saw four small black dots off in the distant sky, rapidly growing larger as they approached her village.

Soon, she could see exactly what they were: jets! Her villagers, as backward as they might seem, weren't complete luddites, and they certainly knew what aircraft were... and what they might be doing at their small village.

Kirana dropped her basket and ran to the mud hut her village chief's wife lived in. The chief's bones were scattered somewhere on the hill behind her, but his wife had taken over his position and was now the leader of the old, the young, and the women of the village.

"Chief! Chief! There's jets!" she shouted as she ran, frantically pointing to the east. In her heart, she prayed she could make it in time for the chief to use the village's HAM radio to contact the incoming jets. To her, they symbolized hope; the hope that her small village could return to the peace they'd known before the *bajak laut* had arrived.

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As the jets were on their final approach to the "pirate base", a crackling transmission was received by the squadron leader, Alpha One.

"Hello to the approaching jets. We desperately require your assistance. Our village was taken by pirates and we wish to be free. Please respond," a quavering, aged female voice spoke through the crackle, hiss, and pops of the aged HAM radio. It was translated in real time from an obscure Indonesian dialect, but there was no delay in the transmission because of that.

Alpha One's AI assistant broke into the radio transmission and said, [Hold for confirmation.] Then she ordered the squadron to fly a holding pattern around the island while she contacted Aeolus for further instructions.

The squadron turned off their afterburners and entered a holding pattern, flying circles around the island while they waited for a go or no-go order from home base. Alpha One, otherwise known as Derek Santiago, hoped that the transmission could be verified and he could be a liberator instead of a destroyer. While destroying things was definitely fun, he wouldn't be happy if he had to slaughter the innocent to punish the guilty.

But they were ten minutes away from bingo fuel, so whatever the decision would be, it would have to be made soon, lest an abort be called on the mission entirely.

Soon, the order came through: the interceptor squadron was to abort the mission and the villagers would receive a temporary assist from the Poseidon Merchant Marine. A frigate would be detached from the convoy escort and temporarily assigned to patrol the island until the Indonesian armed forces could take over, just in case there were any pirates that escaped the earlier bombardment.

"Control, Alpha One copies, abort, abort, abort. RTB," Derek said, then tipped his wings in salute to the villagers and headed toward the Stratotanker to refuel on the way back to Eden. His mood was bright; he hadn't been ordered to be the villain today, but the savior instead, and he whistled a jaunty tune as he flew with the setting sun to his back.

## Chapter 317 Wise Fishermen

Aron sat up in bed and stretched, then glanced at the sleeping beauty beside him. He decided to let her continue sleeping; their exercise had been particularly intense the night before. He slid out of bed and got dressed, then headed to his office for an update on the situation in the Indian Ocean.

"Looks like there's no need for our diplomats to do anything else," he said in response to the report. The escort was one frigate lighter and the interceptors had returned without making a mess, so everything had been handled satisfactorily. Though the airstrike had been aborted, it was fine; there was still a frigate on patrol to catch any returning pirates and a message had still been sent. As a bonus, the interceptors hadn't been picked up by any radar systems, so the long-distance strike capability of the Aeolus Air Force was still hidden from greedy eyes..

"Has all of the collected evidence been compiled?" he asked Athena, the AI in overall charge of his private military force.

[Yes, sir. We've got everything from footage of the submarine to their radio communications. We even got their jamming attempts—the only missing part is a confession from the pirates, since we couldn't find any intact pieces of them to question. That was quite a message we sent, sir. We do still have a financial trail linking them to their masters, though, which should be a sufficiently sharp knife.]

"Okay, send it to Gabriel and I'm sure he'll know what to do with it," Aron said, effectively lobbing the hot potato over to the minister in question.

[What should we do with the money the pirates were paid, now that they're all dead?] Athena asked.

"Give it to the villagers on the island as compensation for the hard times they survived," Aron said, then immediately logged out from his VR-generated office space. A new idea had occurred to him and he needed to concentrate on fine tuning it.

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Meanwhile, the submarine that was still being tailed by one of the Poseidon Navy subs had reported home about the situation and was on its way to return to base. They were still unaware that they were bringing guests along with them.

The report, on the other hand, had caused quite a bit of turmoil in the higher levels of the communist party, who were responsible for overseeing the situation.

"Looks like they suspected some foul play would take place," said one of the people responsible for overseeing the Eden-China oil deal.

"It was pretty obvious, but still they have no evidence that we're the ones who did it. So we need to consider investing in our backup plans while we come up with new ones," Minister Wang said as he shelved his disappointment. As disappointed as he was in the plan's failure, he was still relieved that their sub hadn't been discovered. If it had, it would have caused quite the loss of face in the

international community, as well as reinforcing the already poor reputation they had among other nations.

"By the way, is there really no one of Chinese ancestry in their company's upper management? There should be at least one," he added. He couldn't believe a huge company like GAIA wouldn't have a single Chinese person in their research department.

"The thing is, we don't even know who the people in the research department are. And it's not only us, but nobody at all knows. Hell, nobody even knows where their lab is! But we're still looking for them and we'll send MSS agents to sweep every inch of land on the planet if we have to. Our next step is to look for our countrymen from the construction crews working on their new company HQ and city—it's the likeliest spot for their research lab, after all," the minister of state security replied.

Wang Yi turned to the admiral of the People's Liberation Army Navy. "What do you think caused the massive waterspouts mentioned in the report?" he asked.

"They were likely caused by cruise missiles from the destroyer the sub reported was actively searching for them. Since they had a trailing escort behind them, it shows they knew something was coming, but they didn't know exactly what. There's no reason they would use their trade convoy as bait otherwise. Wise fishermen cast long lines," the admiral replied. Even if he thought with ten brains, he would never credit a naval gun bombardment from that far away or striking with that much power; that would be a situation straight out of a webnovel, and he didn't have time to read those.

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A few days later, the Edenian supertanker convoy left its escort ships outside China's territorial border and steamed into Beihai Port. And with the first oil delivery to China marked as an official success, the trade agreement had been completed.

That didn't mean there were no issues arising from the pirate attack, though. One of Gabriel's aides had been put in charge of negotiating with the Indonesian government regarding the sinking of the pirates, and under pressure from the Chinese Communist Party, they had failed to reach a consensus with the Edenian negotiator. Not only that, the CCP had instructed Indonesia to create a diplomatic incident over the entire affair by claiming that the pirate ships were actually a fishing fleet from a rural island village and their sinking was a war crime.

The Indonesian ambassador to the United Nations had already been informed of his task and had immediately set to work upon receiving his orders. With China maintaining a seat on the UN Permanent Security Council, his hearing before them was fast-tracked and set for two days later.

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Somewhere off the coast of an unnamed island in the Indian Ocean.

The Poseidon Navy frigate, PNS-248, call named "Pandion" was still patrolling the water, circling the island in wait for potential returning pirates. The past few days had been quiet, with nothing but the sun and waves to keep them company. The ship was operating with a minimal crew standing watches, with most of its members idling in VR games between their shifts.

Suddenly, on the bridge, the radar operator called out, "Contact bearing two one five true on approach at 25 knots. Radar signature suggests a Clurit class fast missile boat.... AI confirms, it's the Indonesian Navy, captain."

"Helm, full stop. Bring the ship to general quarters," the captain ordered.

A siren sounded and the idling crew of the Pandion were forcefully logged out of VR to the sound of a pleasant female voice announcing, "General quarters, general quarters, general quarters. This is not a drill. I repeat, general quarters, general...."

The crew moved with a purpose and the frigate was combat ready with all departments reporting green in one minute and twenty-seven seconds. Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) allowed for a minute and a half to bring a ship from standby to general quarters, so the ship's AI noted it for the record and it would be considered when the crew was up for promotion review.

"Comms, any signal from the incoming vessel?" the captain asked.

"None so far, sir. No electronic warfare interference detected either."

"Helm, move to stationkeeping. Engineering, prepare for full military power. Guns, run pre-fire checks and calculate firing solutions.

"Comms, hail the incoming vessel. Let's see what they're here for," the captain ordered. He expected that the incoming Indonesian vessel was there to take over his temporary patrol duty, but it was always better to be safe than sorry and he would prepare for any circumstances to the best of his ability.

It was his duty, after all.

## Chapter 318 How Did They DO It?

"Is that a simulation of one of our classified projects?"

President Trump was in his office receiving his daily briefing. Currently, he was looking at a satellite image of what almost looked like an alien naval fleet.

The tablet he was using for his briefing switched to recorded satellite footage of the ships sailing at a rather fast speed. But the idyllic image didn't last long as the ships' batteries turned in unison and fired repeatedly, kicking up enormous waves on the surface of the water near the ships from the overpressure. The recoil from the guns caused the ships to heel over and shift on the ocean's surface, as well as slowed them down a bit.

The room fell into silence as the president was stunned into speechlessness by the sheer violence of the gun batteries' barrage.

"Care to explain what that footage was?" he asked.

"That was footage our surveillance satellites caught of the Edenian fleet firing yesterday," Reince Priebus, his Chief of Staff said. He was the one in charge of gathering and sorting material for the vice presidential daily briefing, along with an analyst from the CIA and the Secretary of Defense.

"We'd been keeping an eye on the tanker convoy, as there was actionable intel about the Chinese sabotaging them," the analyst said. "What we didn't expect was that they would have their escort following them twelve hours behind. It wasn't until later when we used a Keyhole satellite we had

passing over the Philippines on a routine orbit that we saw the escort. And this is what we saw when we went through the recording.

"Up until we found them, we didn't expect the speedboat fleet to have been taken out by naval guns. We were looking for missile launches at first, but when we found this...." He shook his head.

"Nobody could believe it at first, but it's been verified. Somehow, those guns fired from over 300 kilometers away and still managed to hit their targets with 100% accuracy."

The footage switched back to that from the original satellite tasked to follow the convoy and displayed the impact of the barrage.

"They hit that accurately from that far away and you're saying it was guns, not missiles?" Trump clarified.

"Unfortunately, yes. It seems they've managed a breakthrough in their tech," said the Secretary of Defense.

"Why'd you say 'seems'?" the president asked.

"Because we can't be sure what those guns actually are. They outrange our longest-ranged railgun, so our think tank at DARPA said they should either have had a breakthrough in material or a breakthrough in capacitors. Otherwise they wouldn't have been able to get that range, or that many shots out of each gun. They hit all hundred speedboats simultaneously, so their targeting system is a probable breakthrough point as well.

"So we just don't know what they broke through on. And unfortunately we can't figure it out because all we have is satellite footage. We do, however, know their battery tech is good—just look at the laptops and cellphones that GAIA produces. They're an Edenian company, so I'll be damned if I believe they aren't sharing their tech with the government," General Mattis, the Secretary of Defense, said. "But looking at those ships heeling over and skidding like that, those guns have to put a lot of stress on their hulls. So I don't think they can fire too often, especially like that. I expect they knew they were being watched and wanted to send a message. A very expensive message. But still, they're just paper tigers from a third-world shithole so they're bound to make mistakes like that." General Mattis didn't seem too concerned by the naval weaponry displayed by the Edenian escort fleet.

"We should also consider that they probably won't need to fire that many rounds, looking at the actual damage they did. We sent a fast attack boat down from our observation fleet in the South China Sea and they dropped divers in the water. There was nothing there. No debris pattern at all—those speedboats just vanished like they were never there," the CIA analyst interjected.

General Mattis glanced at the analyst and sneered, "Well maybe we should start putting more research into our naval guns. Or you spooks should come up with countermeasures for it... isn't that what you're supposed to be for?"

"But haven't we been doing research on it for more than ten years now?" Trump asked. "Why haven't we already deployed weapons like that? We have the best soldiers and the best weapons, so how is a pathetic little Eden showing us up here?" He was wracking his brains trying to figure out a way to include a defense spending increase in his upcoming budget proposal, then decided to leave it to the expert and said, "Mattis, get with the DARPA eggheads and come up with a research proposal that Congress will approve."



He pointed at the CIA analyst. "And you, figure out how those backwards rubes made it. I don't care how you do it, just get it done."

President Trump considered himself nothing if not a master of delegating tasks. Otherwise, he would have so much to do that it would cut into the time he spent on the golf course and ranting on social media.

"Why do we even have spies if not for exactly that. Go beg, borrow, or steal what they have, because they don't deserve to have it!"

"We're already on it. Our estimate is that we'll have people inside the Edenian government as soon as six months from now, or a year at most, sir" the analyst replied.

The briefing continued and covered the political ramifications in case the video leaked. The general consensus was that they would have the press secretary announce that they were "investigating" and would follow up when they had more information.

"What're we going to do about the UNSC hearing in two days? What should be our decision there? Should we side with the Indonesians and vote in their favor?"

"We already know what the Edenians will argue. They illegally violated the territorial waters of Indonesia, a sovereign nation, and could be considered an occupation force. We should back the Chinese on this one, but only if they agree to share whatever they get from the Edenians," Chief of Staff Priebus said. "I'm sure the Edenians will argue that it was a counterpiracy operation and they were invited to be there by those peasants, but who cares? We're still the leader of the free world, so what we say is the truth, even if it wasn't before we said it.

"Still, since China's behind the Indonesians, they'll definitely be voting that way. But what does it have to do with us? Best of all, we can contact the Edenian ambassador before the hearing and make a deal where they give us tech and we stand on their side against the 'patently false arguments from thieving Chinese scum'. Then we wouldn't have to share anything, or count on the Chinese to share anything with us."

"This is an opportunity to see what they've got," Trump gravely said. His goofy public persona was nowhere to be seen.

Everyone in the room turned to him and looked at him with the face of someone wanting an explanation.

"Think of it this way. Let's say we back China, so how many security council votes do you think Indonesia will win?" he sighed.

"Four," the others in the room chorused. Whatever America voted for, France and the UK were likely to vote for as well, and they all knew that.

"What happens when all the permanent members vote in favor of the Indonesians?" Trump continued.

"We can apply broad UN-backed general economic sanctions and demand access for 'inspection teams' to find out whether those weapons they have violate any treaties. And they won't be able to reject them, either, since wars of aggression are a gross violation of accepted international law. So that's two things we can pin on them: WMDs and starting a war of aggression. If they refuse to allow our investigators in, the security council can send in troops as a 'peacekeeping' force and

forcibly occupy Eden, though it'll take a long time to convince our European 'friends' to form a coalition force for it like we did during the Iraq war. We can even take down Romero for being a dictator," the Chief of Staff said with a creepy grin on his face. He firmly believed that there would be no way out for Eden if that happened.

"Good, that's exactly what I was saying," Trump chuckled.

"But there's a problem with the plan, sir," General Mattis interjected.

"What's the problem?" Trump asked.

"Will Russia vote in our favor?"

"They will. I'll make sure of it," Trump promised. "Besides, I don't think I'll have to do much to make it happen, since it's in Putin's best interest to ensure Eden gets the short end of the stick. But either way, Russia's gonna win—if Eden refuses the investigation, we can apply economic sanctions and stop their oil sales for Russia to pick up the slack, and if Eden allows the investigation, Russia will get their hands on the tech.

"But like I said, we should work on a deal with Eden first, since I don't want anyone but us to have those weapons."

## Chapter 319 The Hearing

Wednesday March 1st, New York UN headquarters.

The day of the hearing had arrived, and the fifteen member nations of this year's UN Security Council, including the member nations with permanent seats, were assembled for a meeting with many items on the agenda. But the main one was the hearing that would determine the fate of the newly revitalized Eden.

One by one, the representatives of Bolivia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Senegal, Sweden, Ukraine, and Uruguay arrived with solemn expressions on their faces and took their seats. Then the five members of the United Nations Permanent Security Council began arriving.

The first to arrive was the United Kingdom's representative. He was closely followed by the gentleman from France, who was holding a conversation with the UK rep and didn't consider it necessary, or a breach of protocol, to continue talking as they walked. Following them, the Russian and Chinese representatives arrived, and finally, the representative of the United States, who was this month's president of the UNSC.

Once the American took her seat, the secretary called the meeting to order and listed the items on the agenda. The meeting was rapid, as everyone in the room knew they were there for one reason and one reason alone: the airing of Indonesia's grievances against Eden.

As each item on the agenda was introduced, it was rapidly voted on and either resolved or tabled to be examined in more detail later; the member nations still had to do their jobs, after all.

Soon, it was time for the hearing.

Ambassador Jennifer Walker of the United States began with opening remarks. "Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed ambassadors, we stand charged with a grave duty. The International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg once remarked that 'War is essentially an evil thing. Its consequences are not confined to the belligerent states alone, but affect the whole world. To initiate a war of aggression,

therefore, is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.'

"And as a result of that finding, the members of the United Nations created Article 39 of the United Nations Charter. According to that resolution, we have the solemn duty to maintain or restore international peace and security in concordance with Articles 41 and 42 of the UN Charter." She paused and gazed at the people seated at the tables before her. To her right was the complainant, Ambassador Arief Wibowo of Indonesia, and to her left was the defendant, Ambassador Olivia Walker of the Republic of Eden.

"One of our newest member nations, the Republic of Eden, stands before us charged with initiating a war of aggression in violation of the Charter of the United Nations, Article 39, and it now falls to the members of the United Nations Security Council to determine the facts and how we can restore peace to the world.

"Ambassador Wibowo, I yield the floor to you," she finished and took her seat.

Ambassador Wibowo stood from his seat, proudly and confidently, and began his address.

"Madame President, esteemed members of the security council, I bring before you a matter of great concern, one that threatens not only the sovereignty of my nation, but also the stability of our region...."

He proceeded to spend the next twenty minutes providing a detailed account of the incident that had brought the world to this critical juncture. Indonesia claimed that a vessel of the Edenian Navy had illegally entered their territorial waters and spent more than six hours there, until the Indonesian Navy arrived at the island they were patrolling and forced them to leave. He presented videos taken by their navy vessels when they reached the island and found the frigate there, as well as naval records that seemingly supported their claims. What he failed to provide, however, was just as crucial: documentation of the negotiations between Eden and Indonesia that could have led to a less contentious resolution of the entire affair.

"Furthermore," Ambassador Wibowo continued, "Eden sank a hundred civilian fishing vessels that were merely moving to their fishing grounds as a group. It was a grave violation of international law and human rights, an affront to our sovereignty, and a threat to regional peace," he added, but without presenting any evidence backing his claims.

"I yield the floor to Madame President," he finished, then took his seat and waited for the hearing to continue.

"Next to address the Council is Ambassador Olivia Foster of the Republic of Eden," the UNSC President declared.

"Madame President, distinguished members of the security council, I stand before you in all sincerity to address these specious allegations with full transparency...." Olivia explained the incident from the Edenian point of view, along with all of the evidence they had collected to back it up.

The first piece of evidence was video footage from the bridge of the EV Pacific Voyager, taken during the incident. Unlike most recordings of sensitive equipment, the radar screen in the footage wasn't censored at all and everyone could clearly see the radar operator and the display on the screen from over his shoulder. The laypeople on the security council didn't think anything was

particularly strange with it, but the Russian ambassador, Mr. Vasily Shevchenko, knew otherwise, having served in the Russian Navy himself. He was surprised by the clarity of the display and the information it provided, and knew that not even their most advanced naval ship had a radar that could compare to the civilian radar on the Pacific Voyager.

The footage continued, flipping from camera viewpoint to camera viewpoint as the incident played out for the members of the UNSC, with occasional censoring of sensitive equipment. But the censorship was soon thrown to the back of the members' minds as the distress signal was played back for them and the broad spectrum jamming became obvious. The civilian ship was broadcasting a distress message on every possible frequency, but received no response at all regardless of how much time passed.

"As many of you have seen, we were being jammed by the pirates on every frequency we tried using to call for help. During that time, since we had failed to report our status to the convoy escort, who'd been delayed by some technical issues discovered as they were about to depart with the convoy they'd been assigned to guard, they connected to our Overwatch satellite and discovered the pirates on an intercept course with the convoy."

The display changed to still images taken by the Overwatch satellite showing the so-called "fishing boats", which were actually speedboats with a lot of armed men in them and no fishing equipment in sight. Unless they were planning on fishing using rocket launchers, that is; it was clear that the fleet had nothing in common with "innocent fishing boats".

"After three warnings on every radio frequency that our navy could use, no response was received. Thus, the escort commander made the decision to engage the suspected pirates and detach a frigate to track them back to their base as a counterpiracy operation. Everything was done in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1918, as well as relevant guidelines implemented by the International Maritime Organization. At the same time as the frigate, PNS-248 was dispatched to track the pirates back to their base, the Edenian Ambassador to Indonesia opened a diplomatic dialogue with the Indonesian authorities, informing them of the attack and the resolution, including our efforts to discover the pirate base in their territorial waters. Due to the exigency of the circumstances, the mission was carried out while the negotiations were still ongoing.

"When PNS-248 arrived at the suspected pirate base, they discovered that it was actually a fishing village with a population of approximately 65 souls, all of whom were survivors of a vicious pirate occupation that had either killed or coopted the majority of their village. After establishing contact with our frigate, the villagers requested that they remain on station until the Indonesian Navy arrived to take over guarding the innocents left in the village against the possibility of returning pirates or another pirate raid."

On the display screen, an overwhelming amount of evidence was displayed as Ambassador Foster spoke. Then the presentation came to an end and she said, "Unfortunately, we cannot provide more survivor accounts as evidence, as after the Indonesian Navy arrived, they prohibited us from contacting the villagers and demanded our immediate withdrawal, to which we complied."

## Chapter 320 The Resolution

"The Republic of Eden remains open to the prospect of peaceful dialogue and cooperation with Indonesia to resolve this dispute through diplomatic means. We have already withdrawn our vessel

from their territorial waters and have already attempted to negotiate a peaceful settlement to this whole affair. But so long as their specious allegations against us remain unwithdrawn, our stance remains firm: we will not tolerate their slander, nor will we remain quiet as they tarnish our reputation in the international community.

"Thank you for your time, Madame President and other distinguished members of the security council. I yield the floor," Ambassador Foster finished, then sat back down in her seat. She had presented nearly all of the evidence Eden had, choosing only to withhold the information about the submarine that was responsible for the jamming to begin with.

The back-and-forth continued, with impassioned pleas, rigorous arguments, and tense exchanges between the two nations' representatives. Other members of the security council, including the permanent members, listened intently, with the expressions of people who were trying to discern who was telling the truth and who was just trying to benefit from the chaos.

After a few hours of that, there came a period for deliberations, or rather a break before the hearing resumed and the security council would vote.

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The council filed back into the room after the break, much like the first time, with grave expressions on their faces.

The secretary called the hearing back to order and Ambassador Walker began the proceedings.

"Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed ambassadors, we have listened to the arguments presented by both parties involved." Her words carried through the chamber, silencing the ongoing conversations and drawing the collective attention of those present.

"It's now time for us to take decisive action and fulfill our mandate as the United Nations Security Council, tasked with maintaining international peace and security," she continued. "I call upon each member state to cast their vote on the matter at hand, as proposed by Indonesia, regarding the dispute with the Republic of Eden."

With her call to vote, Ambassador Walker set in motion the final phase of the UNSC meeting, a momentous occasion that would determine a resolution to the dispute between Indonesia and the Eden.

The electronic voting system silently collected the decisions; as the results were tabulated, a palpable tension filled the chamber. Whispers and murmurs among the diplomats added to the sense of suspense. The vote tally would determine whether the UNSC would take action and, if so, what that action would entail.

It wasn't long before the display screen tallied and revealed the votes.

United States of America: in favor

Russia: in favor

People's Republic of China: in favor

United Kingdom: in favor

France: in favor

The unanimous support from the five permanent members was a rare sight, underscoring the gravity of the situation and the unified stance of the council, which rarely ever unanimously agreed on anything. The factionalism in the UNSC had resulted in many beneficial proposals being brought to a screeching halt as one or the other of the five used their veto power. It was also one of the arguments people used in opposition to the existence of the UN, calling it a "toothless organization" with "no real power or ability of enforcement".

The screen mercilessly continued displaying the voting results.

Ethiopia: in favor

Kazakhstan: in favor

Japan: in favor

Ukraine: opposed

A murmur ran through the spectators in the hall. Everyone knew that China was backing the Indonesian complaint; it couldn't even be considered an open secret, let alone a secret at all. And with China being the main recipient of Ukrainian grain exports, that vote was the first surprise of the entire hearing. The Chinese ambassador's face turned black when he read the result and he came to the determination that Ukraine would pay a price for their hasty decision.

The tally continued.

Bolivia: abstained

Egypt: opposed

Italy: in favor

Senegal: opposed

Sweden: abstained

Uruguay: opposed

With a tally of nine member nations in favor, four opposed, and two abstentions, the fate of the Republic of Eden was sealed... or so everyone thought.

Ambassador Walker took a deep breath; the UNSC had made its decision, and now it was time to move forward.

"The results are in," she announced, her voice steady but filled with a sense of gravitas. "The United Nations Security Council hereby issues United Nations Security Council Resolution 2344, 'Concerning the Ongoing Dispute Between Indonesia and the Republic of Eden'."

She continued, "The next step will be to convene special investigation teams to determine exactly what happened before we move to a final decision based on their findings. We urge both Indonesia and Eden to cooperate fully with the process and engage in constructive negotiations while we do our investigation.

"And if either of you fails to allow unimpeded access to the investigation team, we will immediately find you responsible and move forward with economic sanctions until investigators are allowed free, open, and unimpeded access." Although it might seem like her statement was a warning to both Eden and Indonesia, everyone in the room understood it was being directed to Eden. After all,

they were the ones that would lose the most if they allowed the investigation teams to "inspect" the vessels accused of provoking a war of aggression against Indonesia by violating their territorial waters to sink "innocent fishing boats".

Following the announcement, the meeting was brought to a conclusion and a followup deadline was set to form the investigation team.

The hearing marked the first controversy and was a fuckup on a colossal scale for the fledgling Republic of Eden. Ever since their nation's founding, they had been almost completely absent from the entire international scene, even when they were still being run by a dictatorship.

The world, or rather the people interested in international affairs, were now waiting with bated breath to see how Eden would react. Would they agree with the verdict and allow some of their secrets to be laid bare to other nations? Or would they deny entry and take the chance of facing the might of the UNSC, risking becoming the next North Korea or Cuba? Or would the worst-case scenario come to fruition and they risk "peacekeeping" forces coming to knock on their doors?

Only time would tell.

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Aron hadn't watched the hearing, due to an emergency situation that had arisen just as the UNSC meeting was about to start. Instead, he had taken full advantage of the time dilation in the universal simulation and spent the last two days of subjective time in close discussion with Nova.

"Although it's just speculation at the moment, we still have to prepare," he said, his eyes focused on a screen that displayed such a massive amount of data that he could only shake his head.

"It's time to clean up some loose ends."